

Making memories? A 19th-century ‘concealed deposit’ from Ashton under Hill

by Kate Potter-Farrant and Murray Andrews

While recently observing development works at Ashton under Hill, one of the present authors was approached by a woman who asked for information about a clay tobacco pipe found by a family member during building work at the White Hart, an unlisted former pub on the west side of the Elmley Road. The pipe had been used, but was in quite good condition (Fig 1), and its form and design – which features grape bunches and an oak leaf on the bowl – identify it as Peacey’s Gloucestershire type 17, which was produced in 1830–70.¹ The date is further clarified by the letters ‘R W’ on the spur, which are the initials of Robert Williams, a pipe manufacturer working at Worcester Street, Gloucester, in 1849–66.²

The provenance of this pipe is intriguing. According to the owner, it was found by her father *‘in the wall of a barn on the property. It was also found with a huge coin that someone named ‘a cartwheel’*. The coin is now lost, but the description suggests that it was a copper ‘Cartwheel’ penny of George III, which were produced in Birmingham at Matthew Boulton’s Soho mint in 1797.³ These coins circulated in Britain until a new bronze currency was introduced in 1859–63,⁴ so it is very likely that the pipe and coin were not only found together, but form two parts of a single assemblage deposited together at the same time, presumably when the pub and its outbuildings were first built in c.1860.⁵

Why were a clay pipe and a coin hidden in the wall of a 19th-century building? The obvious explanation is that these objects are simply construction waste: rubbish dropped on a busy building site, which was later swept up and dumped into a void in the wall by the Victorian equivalent of a ‘cowboy tradesman’.

That rogue builders operated in Worcestershire is beyond doubt, and some, like William Wilkes, even found themselves hauled before the Petty Sessions for failing to clear *‘dirt and rubbish’* dumped on local roads and byways.⁶ But if this explanation is to hold, we might expect the objects from Ashton under Hill to have been accompanied by other bits of contemporary refuse – broken pottery, glass, animal bones, scraps of paper, and so on – in the manner of the 18th-century rubbish ‘hoard’ from Caldwell Hall in Kidderminster.⁷ Surprisingly, this does not seem to have been the case.

Our suspicion, therefore, is that the 19th-century ‘concealed deposit’ from Ashton under Hill was created by different means, and for different reasons. This proposal draws the assemblage into dialogue with recent work on concealed deposits from post-medieval buildings, many hundreds of which have now been recorded from Britain, Europe, North America, and Australia.⁸ These deposits span the 16th to 20th centuries, and can take a bewildering variety of forms: from apparently mundane objects like coins and clothes, to more unusual items like dried cats and urine-filled ‘witch bottles’. Exactly why they were created often remains unclear, but various proposals have been floated in the scholarly literature, some of which may be relevant to the assemblage from Ashton under Hill.

One school of thought, which has become popular in recent years, suggests that post-medieval concealed deposits were often magical in nature, and served apotropaic and prophylactic functions in protecting buildings and their occupants from harm and misfortune – whether pest or rodent infestations, burglaries, house fires, or incursions from witches or



Fig 1: Clay tobacco pipe found in a barn wall at the White Hart, Ashton under Hill. Photo: Kate Potter-Farrant

malign spirits. Similar forms of folk magic are attested in Worcestershire throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, and include local customs like the hanging of horseshoes, elder branches, and Whitty Pear fruits over doors and bedsteads to protect against witchcraft.⁹ This kind of magical interpretation has naturally been prominent in debates over concealed deposits of objects with overtly supernatural traits, including written charms and witch bottles, but has also been used to explain other deposits – including those of coins and clay pipes – that were placed near thresholds like hearths and doorways, which are liminal spaces that could prove inviting to malign forces.¹⁰ However, there is no clear evidence of any ‘magical’ intent in either the composition or the placement of the finds from Ashton under Hill, and we feel that a supernatural interpretation can be safely discounted.

If the Ashton under Hill assemblage is neither ‘rubbish’ nor ‘magic’, then what is it? Our suggestion is that it is a quite different kind of ritual concealment: a foundation or builder’s deposit. These deposits are well attested in the ancient and medieval worlds, where they were intended to sanctify or spiritually protect new buildings and their users,¹¹ but by the 19th century had acquired the more familiar functions of memorialising and bestowing luck on major construction projects. Many Victorian foundation deposits are recorded in Worcestershire newspapers. In March 1867, for example, the construction of the new church at Hallow was marked by a ceremony in which the local peer, Earl Beauchamp, placed a bottle containing current coins and newspapers under the foundation stone, a custom repeated five years later during the building of the church at Hanley Swan.¹² The construction of Worcester’s new city waterworks in March 1857 was similarly marked by the placement of a foundation deposit containing Royal Worcester porcelain, gloves, a bottle of Lea and Perrins’ sauce, tradesmen’s cards, and a selection of coins and newspapers.¹³ Similar customs persist in the building trades today, albeit in more modest and private forms, and we suspect that the grand civic time capsules described in newspapers are just the tip of the iceberg – a possibility heightened by the recent discovery of two five-shilling bank tokens in the church tower at Ombersley, which were probably a private foundation deposit hidden by the stonemasons when it was built in 1825–9.¹⁴ Like the assemblage from Ashton under Hill, many of these more informal foundation deposits were made up of loose change, signed scraps of paper, and minor personal objects,¹⁵ and in this spirit we wonder whether the presence of a clay tobacco pipe was meant to add a personal touch: an object that was, quite literally, at the tip of the builder’s tongue.

While we cannot be 100% certain, it is nonetheless our contention that the 19th-century finds from Ashton under Hill therefore represent a modest Victorian foundation deposit, which was assembled and

concealed by the workmen during the building of the White Hart in c.1860. While concealed deposits of this kind are only infrequently recorded by archaeologists, we suspect that rather more have been unearthed by modern builders and homeowners, and would be keen to hear of any similar assemblages known to readers of the *Worcestershire Recorder*.

References

1. Peacey, A., 1979 *Clay tobacco pipes in Gloucestershire*, Bristol, 55, no. 39.
2. Peacey, A., 1983 ‘The clay pipes from the East Gate site, Gloucester’, in C. Heighway (ed.) *The East and North Gates of Gloucester and associated sites. Excavations 1974–81*, Gloucester, 162–5.
3. Brooke, G.C., 1950 *English Coins*, London, 221.
4. Dyer, G.P., and Gaspar, P.P., 1992 ‘Reform, the New Technology and Tower Hill, 1700–1966’, in C.E. Challis (ed.) *A New History of the Royal Mint*, Cambridge, 398–606, esp. 509–11.
5. When the White Hart was sold on the bankruptcy of its first proprietor, Joseph Smith (1811–91), it was described as a ‘substantial Brick-built and Slated Messuage or Inn...[with] convenient Outbuildings and Appurtenances’: *Evesham Journal*, 15 February 1873, 4. The inn was equipped with a parlour, kitchen, pantry, and four bedrooms, and its outbuildings included a brewhouse, two cider houses, a bowling alley beneath a granary, stabling for three horses, and a cart shed with adjoining pig sties. The pub closed some time before 1924, and was converted into residential dwellings in the mid-20th century.
6. *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 12 March 1851, 4.
7. Walker, C.I., 1992 ‘Excavations at Caldwell Hall, Kidderminster, 1961–69’, *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society* 35 13, 135–65, esp. 162–3.
8. For a representative sample, see Merrifield, R., 1987 *The archaeology of ritual and magic*, London, 128–37; Atzbach, R., 2012 ‘The concealed finds from the Mühlberg-Ensemble in Kempton (southern Germany): post-medieval archaeology on the second floor’, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 46:2, 252–80; Manning, M.C., 2014 ‘The material culture of ritual concealments in the United States’, *Historical Archaeology* 48:3, 52–83.
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10. Merrifield *op. cit.* fn. 8, 187–8; Easton, T., 2016 ‘Spiritual Middens’, in R. Hutton (ed.) *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain. A Feeling for Magic*, Basingstoke, 154–9; Hoggard, B., 2019 *Magical House Protection: the Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft*, New York, 105–26.
11. For some examples, see Ellis, R.D., 1968 *Foundation deposits in ancient Mesopotamia*, New Haven; Woodward, P., and Woodward, A., 2004 ‘Dedicating the town: Urban foundation deposits in Roman Britain’, *World Archaeology* 36:1, 68–86; Andrews, M., 2019 *Coin hoarding in medieval England and Wales, c.973–1544. Behaviours, motivations, and mentalités*, Oxford, 194.
12. *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 6 March 1867, 2; *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 24 February 1872, 3.
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14. Portable Antiquities Scheme WAW-25BBE6.
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