

<b>Institution: University of Hertfordshire</b>		
<b>Unit of Assessment: D28 History</b>		
<b>Title of case study: Concealed and Revealed: Working with Museums and the Public to Explore Magic and Magical Thinking in the Post-Medieval Home</b>		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2018</b>		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Owen Davies	Professor of Social History	1999 – present
Ceri Houlbrook	Senior Lecturer in History and Folklore	2015 – present
Ciara Meehan	Reader in History	2013 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020</b>		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N</b>		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p><i>Concealed and Revealed</i> was a collaborative project involving three HEIs, three museum partners, two artists, volunteers, and the public. It contributed to our understanding of the living history of domestic wellbeing, and the material culture of the magical protection of homes over the last three centuries. Engagement with the public through exhibitions attracting over 45,000 visitors, as well as talks, workshops, and media was integral to the project, raising public understanding of the value of the objects that lie hidden in houses, and provoking reflection on the role of magical thinking in people's everyday lives in the past and present. Co-production with museums was integral to the engagement activities and research outputs, enabling them to access new audiences, new resources, forge new partnerships and take different approaches to collections.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p><i>Concealed and Revealed</i> blended historical, archaeological, and ethnographic approaches to understanding the deliberately deposited objects found in post-medieval buildings, from their concealment to their uncovering and curation. This material culture consists of objects that had been placed in wall cavities, chimneys, under thresholds and floors, in roof spaces, and around doors, windows and fireplaces. The most commonly concealed items were cats, shoes, garments, animal hearts, bottles, horse skulls, and written charms, though a range of other items have been found. This approach revealed an ongoing story of the reinvention and re-enchantment of the material past.</p> <p>The project began with Davies as a Co-Investigator on the 2015-2018 collaborative Leverhulme Trust Project, 'Inner Lives: Emotions, Identity and the Supernatural, 1700-1900', led by Professor Malcolm Gaskill (UEA), with fellow Co-Investigator the medievalist Professor Sophie Page (UCL). With the appointment of Dr Ceri Houlbrook, beginning as a postdoctoral researcher on the project, the capacity was achieved to pursue a longer and deeper systematic programme of research on the material culture of post-medieval domestic magic through a series of partnerships with museums, volunteers, object finders, and the general public, which extended beyond the Inner Lives project in scope and time.</p> <p>The research phase of <i>Concealed and Revealed</i> focussed on five methodological tasks. These have helped place the study of post-medieval domestic magic and ritual on a new scholarly footing and given it further contemporary relevance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The creation of a <i>Concealed and Revealed</i> virtual museum collection of known concealments in Britain using the publicly accessible History Pin platform as a research tool. The 2,213 items to date are searchable by date range, geographical distribution, and typology. Members of the public and museums were encouraged either to report finds to Houlbrook and Davies or to pin their own finds. To generate engagement and crowd sourcing of new finds in the first year of the Inner Lives strand, Houlbrook maintained an information and blog site linked to the History Pin collection.</li> </ul>		

- The creation of a digital spreadsheet of the Concealed Shoe Index maintained by Northampton Museum and Gallery. The index was started in the 1960s and consists of c.3,000 handwritten card entries of concealed shoe finds. The digitisation of the data enabled sophisticated analysis of the collection for the first time.
- Working with Nigel Jeffries at Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA), a detailed database of all known seventeenth-century witch bottles was created. This led to an application to the AHRC for further research, successfully funded from 2019-2022.
- Houlbrook conducted a series of video and oral interviews with householders about their thoughts and emotions on revealing concealed objects, and their sense of custodianship. These were made available via YouTube and embedded in the Concealed and Revealed Collection.
- Asylum casebooks and material culture were used to understand the advent of electricity in homes in Ireland and Britain, exploring how wires, plugs, and appliances were initially thought to channel magical harm into the home. The research was further developed in collaboration with Dr Ciara Meehan's Irish 'Modern Wife, Modern Life' project, and led to a shared exhibition in Dublin and Manchester, *Electric Generations* (2017-18).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**3.1** Davies, O., (2015). The Material Culture of Post-Medieval Domestic Magic in Europe: Evidence, Comparisons and Interpretations. In: Boschung, D. & Bremmer, J., eds. *The Materiality of Magic*. Munich: Fink-Verlag. pp. 379-417. ISBN 978-3-7705-5725-7.

**3.2** Houlbrook, C. (2018). The Concealed Revealed: The "afterlives" of apotropaic deposits. *History Workshop Journal*, 85, 195-216. <https://doi.org/fxtw>.

**3.3** Houlbrook, C. and Shawcross, R. (2018). Revealing the Ritually Concealed: Custodians, Conservators, and the Concealed Shoe. *Material Religion*, 14(2) 163-182. <https://doi.org/fxtv>.

**3.4** Davies, O. and Houlbrook, C. (2018). Concealing and Revealing Magic in the Home. In *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* [exhibition catalogue]. Oxford: Ashmolean.

#### Funding

- 2015-2018: 'Inner Lives: Emotions, Identity and the Supernatural, 1700-1900'. Owen Davies (Co-I); Professor Malcolm Gaskill, UEA (PI). Leverhulme Trust, total grant £239,524.
- 2019-2022: 'Bottles concealed and revealed: examining the phenomena of stone and glass 'witch bottles' and their concealment in mid to late 17th-century England'. Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook (Co-Is), Nigel Jeffries, Museum of London Archaeology (PI). AHRC Research Grant, total £246,773.

**Evidence of Quality:** 3.1 & 3.2 submitted to REF2021. All written outputs peer-reviewed. 3.2 awarded Young Scholar Prize by the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF): 'a particularly original contribution to the specific fields and working methods of the subjects represented by SIEF'.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

*Concealed and Revealed* generated three different museum collaborations and two temporary exhibitions that had a national profile. Through these partnerships and activities the project successfully led to four strands of impact:

#### 1] Immediate public impact through exhibitions

*Ashmolean Museum:* The *Spellbound* exhibition (31 August 2018 – 6 January 2019) was the culmination of the *Inner Lives* project. It aimed to get people thinking about the place of magic in their lives today, and to connect this with magical beliefs and emotions in the past. The Ashmolean's Director has stated that "the success of the exhibition was made possible by the research and tireless work" of Davies, Page and Gaskill [5.1]. Best-selling author Phillip Pullman, in a *Guardian* piece exploring the themes of the exhibition, praised it for shining a light on the subject: "I think this exhibition is full of illuminating things, and the mental world it illustrates is an important – no, **an essential part of the life we live**" [5.2].

Page was the lead academic curator (along with the professional curator Professor Marina Wallace), and Davies, Houlbrook, and Gaskill were Associate Curators. It was part-funded by the Wellcome Trust, Leverhulme Trust, the Bagri Foundation and private donors. *Concealed and Revealed* occupied one of three rooms in the exhibition, and featured a selection of the many thousands of items that have been discovered ritually concealed in homes. The visitor target for *Spellbound* was 30,000; this was far exceeded by the final total of 45,585 visitors. The major outdoor advertising campaign had estimated viewing reach of 24,576,000. This helped drive 131,995 unique visits to the exhibition webpage, more than for any other Ashmolean exhibition [5.3].

*Spellbound: General visitor feedback:*

1,583 visitors completed the exhibition exit survey [5.4].

- 46% said the exhibition changed their understanding of the role of magic in the past.
- 54% said the exhibition made them more aware of magical thinking in their own life.
- 70% said they could now think of something in their own lives that they now recognised as magical thinking.

*Sample exit interviews:*

- 'The exhibition helps to reveal the hidden realities of everyday life for a lot of people.'
- 'The exhibition has helped me to realise that ritual and magical thinking is still a daily practice'.
- 'I grew up in Guyana ... It has made me think on the difference between western and non-western cultures' [5.4].

*Sample feedback specific to the Concealed and Revealed room in the exhibition:*

- 'it encourages dialogue and, in my opinion, challenges those who view these objects to think about why, in this day and age, this seems somehow still important, relevant, and "magical"'. *Friends of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic* (4 September 2018).
- "we become aware of the beliefs in the supernatural casually omnipresent in our ancestors' daily lives and, indeed, in our own". *Times Literary Supplement* (26 October 2018).
- This is what struck me the most: how magic is rooted in the domestic, and how much the home is a part of magical thinking'. *The Demented Goddess* (9 October 2018).
- 'gives a truly affective experience of the practices the curators are exploring'. *Folklore Thursday* (1 November 2018) [5.2].

## **2] Learning experiences for museums, volunteers, other organisations, and artists, which influenced creative practice and led to additional public impact**

*Northampton Museum and Gallery (NMAG):* The *Concealed and Revealed* partnership with the Museum was set out in an initial two-year (July 2016-July 2018) legal Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Hertfordshire and Northampton Borough Council [5.5]. Its aims included:

- To develop a strategy for the development of the Concealed Shoe Index that fits with Northampton's New Museum Development, including identifying audiences and profile.
- To create a structured cataloguing process for a fully searchable database.
- To train a team of up to 10 volunteers to input data and update the database according to processes developed.
- To explore how the creation of an Index, and the research it enables, might inform the future display and curation of the Museum and Gallery's concealed shoe collection.

These impactful aims were all achieved. Data entry was conducted by museum volunteers using fields designed by Houlbrook, Davies and the curators. Basic information about each concealed shoe in the index was also mapped on the History Pin *Concealed and Revealed* Collection, making this data available to the general public for the first time [5.6]. The completion of the digitisation, and the analysis of the data by Houlbrook and Davies, was timed so that it would inform the presentation of the concealed shoes display in the new NMAG shoe gallery, which was due for completion in Spring 2020 (delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis). Four accompanying films were created for their new collection website, which includes a section on 'Working with the University of Hertfordshire'. The films explore the concealed shoe index and

inform the public about what to do when finding a concealed shoe, and were designed by and include Houlbrook, Davies, and the museum curators [5.7].

*Spellbound creative collaborations*: The artists below were video interviewed about their experience of collaborating with the project.

Turner-nominated artist Katharine Dowson created *Concealed Shield* for the *Spellbound* exhibition. Based around a giant glass heart representing the concealment of pierced animal hearts up chimneys, the artwork explores the relation between the emotional and the rational worlds. Multiple meetings held between Davies and Dowson, and also with Page and Wallace, defined how the artwork would enhance understanding of the material culture of building magic. In her interview, Dowson states that as a result of the collaboration she is much more aware and has greater understanding of ritual concealment and magical thinking. She has benefitted as an artist having developed a much more rigorous approach to using the language of history; the project also led to her using sound as a significant component in her work for the first time, which she plans to do more [5.8].

*Concealed Shield* aimed to provoke reflection about the body, the home, and the intrusion of the uncanny. Ample evidence confirms this impact was achieved. Reviews included:

- 'evok[es] a contemporary medical understanding of the human body, juxtaposing it with the mysterious forces of the occult'. *Artlyst* (September 2018)
- 'This work makes explicit the sensation already created by the design of the rest of the space: in this room we are invited to explore the magic of the physical home, but also our own psychological reactions to it'. *Museums Journal* (December 2018) [5.2].

Davies and Houlbrook collaborated with the historical cartoonist Hannah Sackett to create *Keepers of the House*, an 8-page comic representing the nature of the items in the *Concealed and Revealed Spellbound* room. In her interview Sackett notes how valuable the *Concealed and Revealed* blogsite was for inspiring her with ideas, and also the benefits of the collaboration more generally, including learning new design skills, and gaining new profiles and markets for her work, particularly in America and Canada [5.8].

*Electric Generations*. Hosted by The Lexlcon, Dún Laoghaire, Dublin (2 October-2 December 2017), and the Irish World Heritage Centre, Manchester (March-June 2018). The free exhibition in the main public library space brought together two organisations who would not have otherwise worked with each other, the Irish Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and The Institution of Engineering and Technology Archives (IET). They shared archival sources with each other and the exhibition team. The Lexlcon attracted over 400,000 visitors per annum in the period concerned [5.9].

*Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA)*: 'Bottles concealed and revealed' was the first collaborative application MOLA had made to the AHRC after attaining Independent Research Organisation status. The bottles included in the *Concealed and Revealed* History Pin Collection were one of the research starting points for developing the application, and new findings from the project will augment the Collection during the project.

### 3] Generation of new audiences for museums and galleries.

*Spellbound* broke new ground for the museum in terms of the nature of visitors [5.3].

- *Spellbound* was attended by more first-time visitors (37%) to the Ashmolean than any of their other exhibitions.
- 35% of visitors were in the 25-34 age bracket – a key, challenging demographic for museums. This was double their exhibition norm.
- *Spellbound* was shortlisted for 'Marketing Campaign of the Year' at the Museums and Heritage Awards.

The info-videos for the new NMAG gallery, included on their website, were designed to inform an international audience, and better promote the concealed shoe collection, which regularly receives queries and reports of finds from around the world [5.7].



**4] Further engagement with research through numerous public talks, social media, and coverage in a wide range of national and local media.**

*Public talks and blogs.* Davies and Houlbrook gave over twenty public talks related to *Concealed and Revealed*, including Houlbrook's *Being Human Festival* 'concealed revealed roadshow' in collaboration with Sherborne Museum (2017). The *Concealed and Revealed* blogsite had over 20,000 visitors from 2015-2020, and the *Concealed and Revealed* History Pin Collection had over 3,500 views. The Electric Generations blogsite attracted 10,931 unique views during the period of the library and Irish World Heritage Centre exhibitions [5.10].

*Media.* *Spellbound* was reviewed by over ninety media platforms (radio, blog, and press), including the *Daily Mail*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Financial Times*, *Economist*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Daily Telegraph*, and was reviewed enthusiastically in hundreds of social media posts (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). As the reviewer in the *Times* stated, "this history of magic is surprisingly moving...fascinating not because it explores fantasies or presents historical facts, but because it treads a richly ambiguous territory between the two. On the surface it may simply be about the beliefs in the supernatural that once flourished violently and vigorously. But on another, more profound level, it **encourages us to think about our imagination, to acknowledge that our minds can produce monsters.**" (31 August 2018) [5.2].

The reception of *Electric Generations* included interviews with the team on national radio stations RTÉ1 and RTÉ2, as well as Tipp FM, and a two-page feature in the *Sunday Business Post Magazine*. John Halligan, Minister of State in the Irish Government, visited the exhibition in Manchester; this visit was publicised on Twitter by the Embassy of Ireland in GB [5.9]. The first year of 'Bottles concealed and revealed' has led to reports and citations by the likes of BBC News online and the *Smithsonian Magazine*, and led to a successful AHRC-BBC Arts Culture in Quarantine Call application. The resulting 5-minute animation, *Animated Thinking: The Life and Times of a Witch Bottle*, has been on BBC arts platforms since November 2020 [5.11].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Letter from Director of the Ashmolean Museum
- 5.2 *Spellbound* Reviews and Social Media
- 5.3 Ashmolean *Spellbound* marketing summary
- 5.4 *Spellbound* exit survey summary and exit interviews
- 5.5 Northampton Borough Council Memorandum of Understanding with UH
- 5.6 Concealed and Revealed Collection: <https://www.historypin.org/en/person/66740>
- 5.7 NMAG Shoe Gallery website: <https://www.northamptonmuseums.com/info/3/collections/61/>
- 5.8 Video interviews with *Spellbound* artists: <https://innerlives.org/2019/02/07/magical-thoughts-the-making-of-spellbound/>
- 5.9 *Electric Generations* Media coverage
- 5.10 Website and blog viewership data
- 5.11 Bottles Concealed: links to BBC *Animated Thinking*, articles, funding and reach data