

Open-air museum seeks 'witch posts' across UK



North Yorkshire, United Kingdom May 23, 2024 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.IssueWire.com)) - Our ancestors marked their homes and buildings in attempts to protect them through magical means. Now, as part of their work on a new exhibition, staff at Ryedale Folk Museum are seeking help to locate carved wooden posts known today as 'witch posts' in homes across the UK.

"We have three of these posts within our collection," explains museum director, Jennifer Smith. "Always located next to a fireplace within 17th century homes, they had practical purposes supporting the bressummer, but it's the carved design that we're very interested in. What makes 'witch posts' different is that they are marked with an X, a known protective mark."

For years, it has been thought that there are fewer than 20 'witch posts' still in existence, clustered geographically around the North York Moors in North Yorkshire. But staff at the open-air museum have reason to believe there might be others across the UK. They've been working with a protective or 'apotropaic' mark specialist this year, Brian Hoggard, author of 'Magical House Protection, The Archaeology of Counter Witchcraft'. With his help, they're uncovering more about the ways that people thought in the past. Mr. Hoggard says: "The fear people had of the supernatural was, by today's standards, all pervasive. They used object and marking as a means of protection. There were old shoes concealed for use as decoys, herbal charms and written incantations used for myriad purposes, and, of course, apotropaic marks for keeping evil at bay."

"The 'witch posts' were part of the range of steps taken by people in their attempts to feel safe," Ms Smith continues. "Be that from intruders or fire, or from more supernatural elements. For years, it has been accepted that the posts were almost all from the North York Moors region, including two which originated in North Yorkshire but are now part of the collection at the Pitt Rivers' Museums in Oxford, and one in Whitby Museum. But there are certainly two other examples in cottages in Lancashire and we now know that other posts are located in the Yorkshire Dales, at the other side of the county."

"For the people of the past," adds Mr Hoggard, "there was a perception that supernatural forces existed all around us and that it was only positive action that could keep us safe. Letting one's guard down was believed to result in illness, misfortune, bewitchment and, ultimately, even death."

For the first time, visitors are now able to see all three posts at Ryedale Folk Museum as part of a new exhibition, 'Believe it or not?', exploring magical thinking and folk beliefs and the museum staff are taking the opportunity to search for more posts.

"It's been several decades since anyone attempted to map them properly," Ms Smith expands. "We've had one post since 1971, when an entire longhouse was donated to Ryedale Folk Museum and moved stone by stone, complete with original saltbox and 'witch post'. It's one of more than 20 heritage buildings to explore here." Since then, two further posts have been donated and others located locally. "We'd very much like to hear from you if you think you have one in your home." As well as the 'witch posts', 'Believe it or not?' shares over 200 objects connected with folk beliefs and magical thinking. "We have brought together a very special selection of rare objects, from our own collection as well as items kindly loaned to us," Ms Smith concludes. "Often such objects were feared and shunned because of their magical associations."

Objects include items owned by those accused of witchcraft in the North York Moors, including a crystal ball and sigils or spell tokens, thought to be items of transactional magic. Other items on display include: a collection of medicinal charms accumulated by Victorian naturalist and folklorist William Clarke and part of the collection of Scarborough Museums and Galleries; customs surrounding 'witch bottles', with items on loan from York Castle Museum; and a range of folk objects embellished with protective markings from Ryedale Folk Museum's collection.

Themes include magical associations of folk dance, including Morris dancing and sword-dancing customs, and ritualistic traditions of the harvest through the museum's substantial collection of artistic corn dollies.

You can visit 'Believe it or not?' until Sunday 17 November, daily except Fridays.

If you have information about witch posts, please email info@ryedalefolkmuseum.co.uk

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Photo caption: Witch post and fire place, in 'Stang End' longhouse, Ryedale-Folk-Museum-by Olivia Brabbs

Note for editors:

Nestled in the beautiful village of Hutton-le-Hole in the North York Moors National Park, Ryedale Folk Museum is Yorkshire's leading open-air museum. Together, more than 40,000 objects and 20 heritage buildings, beautifully displayed over a six-acre site, bring to life the history and lives of ordinary people from Ryedale.

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Source : Ryedale Folk Museum

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