



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Carlyle's "cat in the wall" and "Witch Pots"

By Steve Kimbel



While renovating her home at Clay Coton, Northamptonshire; Carolyn Kokta found a "Witch Pot" with strong connections to the Carlyle House "cat in the wall."

The "witch pot" was hidden deep inside the inglenook, a recess next to her open fireplace. Besides the heavily corroded parts of a metal pot, there were scraps of clothing, including what appeared to be the

remnants of a sleeve and what were definitely the fingers from someone's glove.

Kokta believes her home was built some time in the 16th Century and renovated in the first half of the 17th Century. It was during this period that people in England and later in New England were in the grip of a mass hysteria over witches, warlocks, and black magic.

The cat entombed in the stone foundation of John Carlyle's home has close parallels to the earlier practice of placing a "witch pot" in the wall of one's home to protect it from witches and their black magic.

There is good circumstantial evidence that John Carlyle was aware of ancient tales and legends of the paranormal. In fact, witchcraft was part of relatively recent royal history. King James the first of England, a.k.a. James the sixth of Scotland, (June 19, 1566 to March 27, 1625) came to the throne under a cloud of superstition involving the use of sorcery to prevent his return to Scotland following his marriage to Princess Anne of Denmark.

Christopher Smout, a University of Edinburgh scholar estimates that between 3,000 and 4,000 people were executed for witchcraft in Scotland between 1560 and 1707. Various scholarly studies completed in the last two decades estimate the total of persons executed for practicing the black arts in Europe at between 40,000 and 100,000.

The cases of witchcraft in Europe arise in the early 13th century with the burning to death of a French woman accused of having sexual relations with the devil. The killing continues into modern times until an Irish woman is

murdered by her husband in 1895 because he believed she had been kidnapped by fairies. He defended his actions by claiming he had incinerated a "changeling" the fairies had left behind when they took his wife.

America's best known experience with witches begins about 1630 and ends in one of history's most infamous examples of mass hysteria. In 1881 a local Massachusetts historian accounted for 12 persons executed in New England between 1630 and 1692 when 23 women were hanged and one man pressed to death during the so called Salem Witch Trials.

An interesting example of how influential stories of witches and witchcraft were in Carlyle's world is the fact that one of Scotland's greatest poets, Robert Burns, features the occult in one of his longest poems. "Tam o' Shanter," the hero of Burns' 1791 lyric poem, is pursued by a coven of witches and warlocks after he disrupts their revelries in a local churchyard where they were dancing to the tune of a bagpipe played by the devil himself.

Carlyle's probate inventory shows he owned "23 Vols. Voltares (sic) Works." Voltaire was one of the intellectual activists whose ideas defined The Age of Enlightenment. He is also credited with inspiring both the American and French Revolutions. This makes finding a dead cat in the foundation of John Carlyle's stone house on Fairfax Street even more surprising. Judging from his reading habits Carlyle was apparently a man of the Enlightenment whose intellectual leaders like Voltaire disdained superstitions, including "witch pots" and sealing a dead cat inside of your home's walls.

CARLYLE HOUSE

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