

Burn marks and other interesting timber features at Cowleigh Park Farm.



Cowleigh Park Farm, Malvern Worcestershire. The main timber framed part of the house is believed to date back to the early 17th century.

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January 2023

An interesting discovery

Soon after moving into Cowleigh Park Farm I noticed a teardrop shaped burn mark on one of the timbers at the top of the stairs. I put this down to the location where a candle must have been situated to provide light on the landing. Every time I went up the stairs after noticing this, I pondered on why there were no screw or nail holes in the wall below where the candle holder (a small spike also known as a pricket) would have been fitted, and why the candle would have been so low down on the wall – and indeed how careless to have placed a candle so close to the wall in the first place, especially considering how frightened people were of their houses burning down! I then spotted another similar mark, this time on the large oak mantelpiece. Now this really *was* a silly place to put a candle – firstly the fire would have cast a lot of light anyway so a candle was not necessary, secondly the heat from the fire would have melted the candle, and finally there was no way a candle could have been suspended here - as the pricket would have to have been floating in the opening below the mantelpiece!

This got me thinking and looking – and eventually finding out about taper burn marks

What are Taper Burn Marks

The folklorist George Ewart Evans writing about scorched marks on the wood of his home conjectured that these were merely caused by someone with a **rod** hot poker testing it was hot enough before plunging into a pint of ale to make a mulled drink! The fact that these marks appear all over the place and often well away from a fireplace, and are always shaped like tear drops suggests they were formed in another way. Architecture specialists John Dean and Nick Hill attempted to form marks similar to those found in mediaeval and early modern period homes using rushlights dipped in sheep fat and tallow candles with hempen wicks. These created linear burns or amorphous scorches and were liable to cause significant fires rather than discreet, contained marks. They demonstrated that only using a very deliberate technique was it possible to create the characteristic tear-shape. Holding a candle or taper at a 45° angle so that the hottest part of the flame lightly touched the timber allowed the burn to gradually eat into the woodwork. After 5 or 10 minutes the flame had created a burn a few millimetres deep at the base with a tapering above. The charred wood that formed inhibited further burning but after scraping this out with a knife burning could be reactivated. James Wright (below) has found evidence of this scraping and concluded that burn marks required time and patience to form. They were certainly not formed by accident.



James Wright repeating Dean & Hill's experiment to form burn marks

So why were they formed?

When Cowleigh Park Farm was built 400 years ago people held many superstitious beliefs. Taper burn marks belong to a group of markings found in old houses called “apotropaic” marks or marks that supposedly have the power to avert evil influences or bad luck. For those interested, “apotropaic” comes from the Greek *apotrōpaios* (averting evil, that should be averted, ill-omened).

Burn marks are often found on the outside walls of houses, door posts and especially around chimneys – all possible places where evil spirits might enter the home. Of the 11 marks so far found in the main house at Cowleigh Park Farm, the majority (6) have been found on the mantelpiece – presumably to ward off witches intent on coming down the chimney (see Figures 1 – 7). With the exception of one mark in the attic of the main house, all remaining marks are all on the outer walls of the house on substantial timbers – just where you would place them if you were trying to ward off evil spirits. An additional 4 marks have been found upstairs in the Farmhouse Cottage, that was built several hundred years later.

Another possible function of burn marks was to cauterise the house against fire. Indeed, there are records of houses being built with charred wood from trees that had been struck by lightning (presumably due to the mistaken belief that lightening doesn't strike twice).

For those interested in burn marks, this subject is covered in detail by Matt Champion on his blog: <http://medieval-graffiti.blogspot.com/2017/10/taper-burn-marks-fighting-fire-with-fire.html> and also by James Wright at: <https://triskeleheritage.triskelepublishing.com/mediaeval-mythbusting-blog-8-burn-marks/>

See also the historic England site: <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/features/discovering-witches-marks/types-of-marks/>

New visitors to Cowleigh Park Farm are unlikely to notice burn marks – more often than not they will be focusing on navigating the steep stairs or trying to balance on the uneven floors or possibly avoid banging their heads on the low ceiling beams! But the marks are here if you look carefully, especially with the aid of a good light. The purpose of this leaflet is to help visitors interested in finding and examining some of these interesting symbols more closely. A few other interesting carpenters marks and other features are also included.



Figure 1. Fireplace in main house showing location of burn marks. Close up images follow showing marks from left to right.



Figure 2. Burn mark above fireplace (far left).



Figure 3. Burn mark above fireplace.



Figure 4. Burn mark above fireplace.



Figure 5. Burn mark above fireplace.



Figure 6. Burn mark above fireplace.



Figure 7. Burn mark above fireplace (far right).



Figure 8. Burn mark at top of stairs (first floor).



Figure 9. Burn mark in office, main house - second floor.



Figure 10. Burn mark by attic stairs, main house.



Figure 11. Burn mark in attic, main house.



Figure 12. Burn mark, cross beam in first floor bathroom, main house.



Figure 13. Burn mark in front bedroom, Farmhouse Cottage. Notice the vertical striations in the mark indicating where the burnt wood has been scratched out.



Figure 14. Burn mark in small bedroom, Farmhouse Cottage.



Figure 15. Burn marks in bedroom next to the bath, Farmhouse Cottage. These are the most rudimentary of the marks in the house and show no evidence of scraping to enlarge the mark.



Figure 16. Two-man timber tongs. 54 inches long (see below)

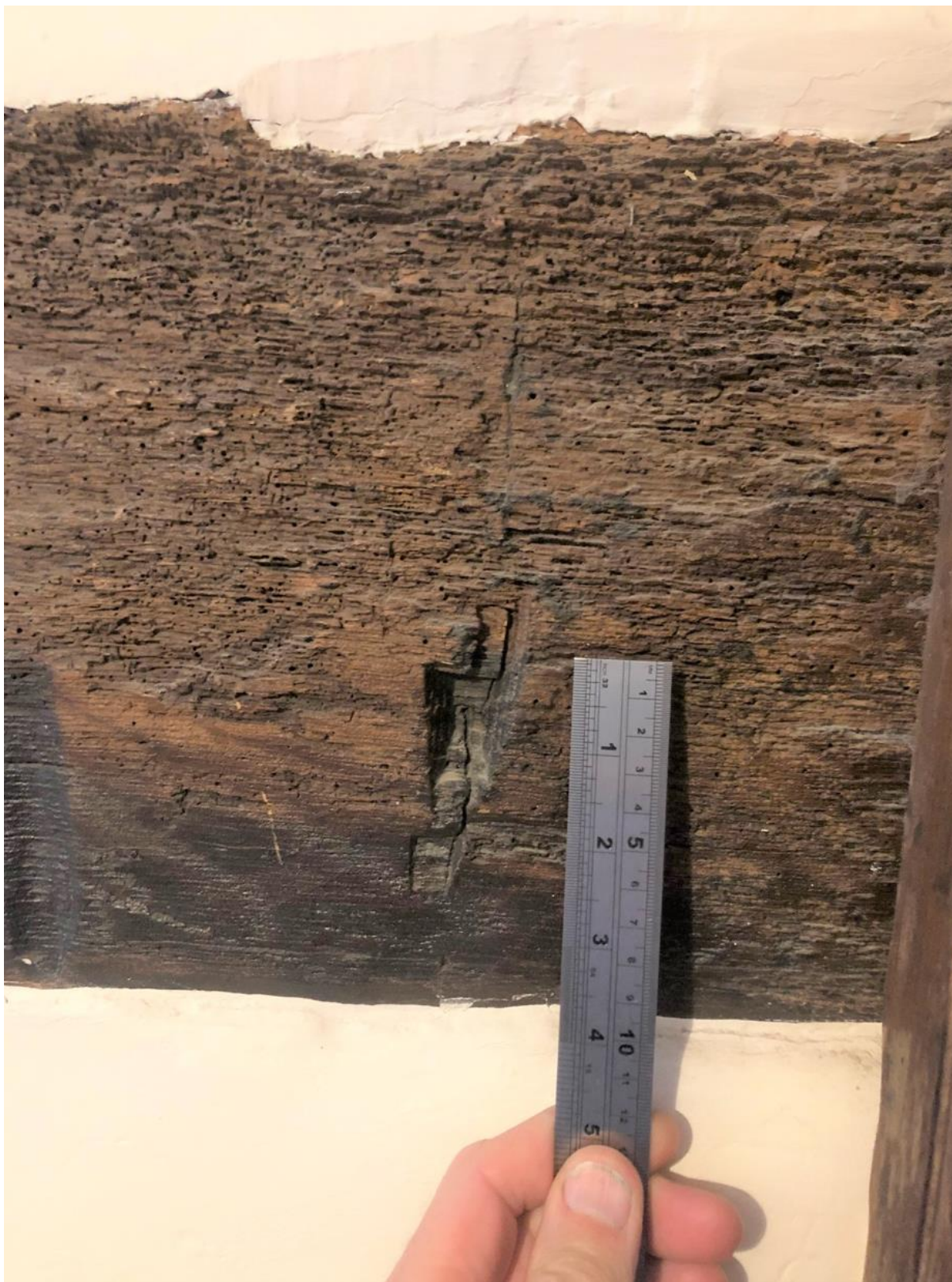


Figure 17. Slot possibly for timber tongs (see Fig 16). Landing first floor, main house.



Figure 18. Slot possibly for timber tongs, second floor office, main house.



Figure 19. Slot possibly for timber tongs suggesting reuse of timber since the piece of wood was quite light. Understairs cupboard, second floor, main house (one of two identical slots).



Figure 20. Slots - possibly for timber tongs, suggesting lifting from both left and right faces. By top of spiral stairs, main house.



Figure 21. Evidence of multiple repurposing, hinge post in back bedroom first floor, main house.



Figure 22. Hinge post in main beam by fireplace, main house. Given its location, maybe this was used to hang game on?



Figure 23. Chamfer mark, back bedroom first floor, main house - an indication of quality in the construction of the property.



Figure 24. Oak pegs. Roof of main house. These pegs are used to hold mortise and tenon joints together – as these particular ones are in the apex of the roof they have not been trimmed at all and show how long the original pegs were. Note also how some of the tenon is exposed due to movement of the wood over the years! An interesting fact is that when making mortise and tenons for a timber framed house the peg holes are deliberately slightly off set so when you put the two joints together the holes are not quite aligned. In the figure below the holes in the tenon would have been made slightly further to the right relative to the holes in the mortise. When the flexible green peg is hammered into the mortise the tapered end meets the hole in the tenon. As the holes are not quite aligned the peg bends slightly into and through the tenon hole and back into the mortise helping pull the tenon tightly into the mortise. Simple but clever!

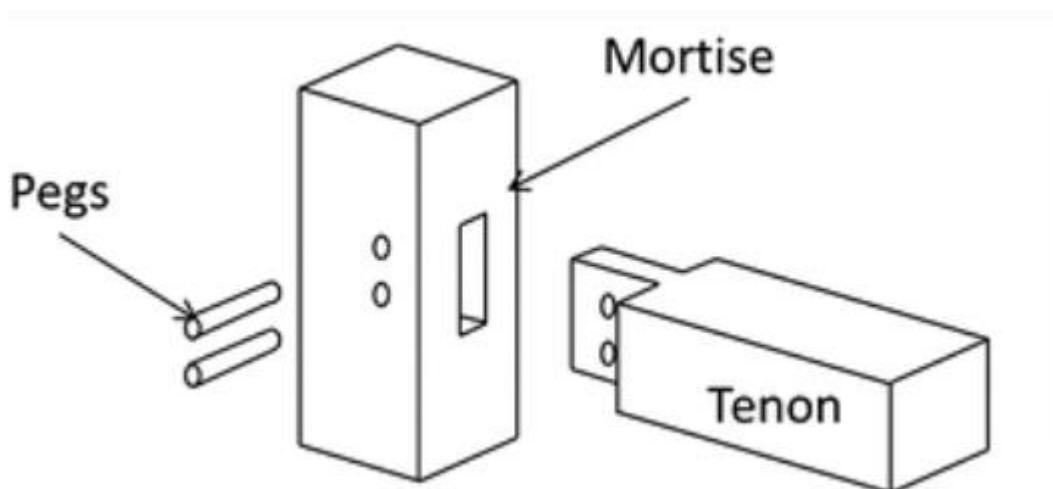




Figure 25. Oak pegs in attic of main house. As these are at a lower level these have been rather crudely cut with a chisel or similar tool, the cut marks can be clearly seen. You can imagine the carpenter standing here about 400 years ago with his hammer and chisel and chopping away at these pegs. As they would have been largely out of sight in the dark attic little effort was made to tidy up the end of the peg after cutting it short. Note also the carpenters mark on each piece. These were used for matching up unique joints during construction. Carpenters' marks are only found on one face of the timber and are always found close to a joint. Marks would have been made on site by local craftsmen while the timbers lay on the ground, since the house was assembled in pieces, a bit like Ikea furniture.



Figure 26. Unusual combined King post trusses (upper two beams) and Queen post trusses (lower three beams) in the attic of the main house showing neatly cut carpenters marks (I and II) as well as the top hinge post for a door (no longer there, although the lower hinge post is still present). Note also the blacksmith made reinforcing iron work that was probably added later (since it is resting on the upper hinge post which would not have allowed room for the hinge to operate).



Figure 28. Neatly made carpenters marks, Farmhouse Cottage. (Numbers I, II, II, IV, X, XI and XII are also visible in other parts of the house).



Figure 29. Large and rather crudely made carpenters' marks (IV) on mortise and tenon joints, main house.



Figure 30. Carpenter's scribe marks made to assist in the correct alignment of the mortise joint, Farmhouse Cottage.



Figure 31. Purlin with piece cut out for chimney, long since removed. Attic of main house.



Figure 32. Interesting gap between timbers left by removal of chimney, joined **tougher** by an additional timber. This wouldn't get planning approval today! Attic of main house.



Figure 33. Remaining central six-sided chimney with space on either side where the other two chimneys would have stood.



Figure 34. When removing chimneys, the fireplaces would have also have been filled in – close inspection of the beam in the main house master bedroom shows a chamfer mark along the bottom edge consistent with this being the mantelpiece of the original fireplace.



Figure 35. Interesting notches cut over south door into master bedroom, main house. Possibly a record of past conquests?

