

# Factsheet

## Kew Palace Witchmarks

In 2003 markings carved into the wooden eaves in the roof of Kew Palace were found by a Historic Royal Palaces curator. Previously assumed to be carpenters markings they were never investigated further. Now formally identified as ‘witches marks’, we have discovered another fascinating layer of the building’s history, revealing more about the people who inhabited the palace since it was built in 1631.

- Fear of witches and the animal forms they took in was at its height in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1604 King James I wrote of them *“for some they sayeth that being transformed in the likeness of a little beast or fowl, they will come and pierce through whatsoever house or church, though all ordinary passages be closed, by whatsoever open the air may enter in at.”*
- Apotropaic, ritual or ‘witches’ marks were carved into doors, windows and fireplaces where air, and therefore witches, could enter a building to protect them from such evil spirits. Although common on doors and jambs of doorways, they are most likely to be found around fireplaces.
- The symbols took a variety of forms:
  - interlocking circles (some carved to create a six-petalled daisy flower effect) and concentric circles;
  - intersecting lines creating crosses and M’s representing the Virgin Mary or double V’s for ‘Virgin of Virgins’.
- Carpenters might have carved them into the fabric of buildings during construction, however, they should not be confused with non-symbolic carpenters marks, more often used to remind the craftsman of how something should be assembled from its ‘flat pack’ form.
- There are five marks found in the roof at Kew Palace. One is an ‘M R’ for Maria Regina - Mary Queen of Heaven; another incorporates the ‘V V’ sign and a third has an alpha sign. They are located on the roof timbers of the building, in an area of the building previously used as servants quarters. They do not

date from the period of occupation of King George III but much earlier, possibly to when the palace was occupied by wealthy Dutch merchant Samuel Fortrey and his family who built the palace in 1631.