

A WITCH-BOTTLE FROM WINSLOW

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In late 1977 whilst carrying out alterations to a fireplace at 5, Vicarage Road, Winslow, Mr. N. Bowerman discovered a stoneware bottle sealed upside down beneath its tiled hearth. The bottle was a bellarmine (Fig. 1.), a well-known stoneware form imported from Germany from the early sixteenth century through into the late seventeenth when manufacture commenced in the London area. In 1953 Ralph Merrifield published an article bringing together a number of individual discoveries of intact bellarmines and showed that their contents, which included such items as felt hearts and pins, and manner of deposition, clearly associated them with witchcraft. A number of further discoveries have subsequently been reported, particularly from Suffolk, (Smedley and Owles, 1964), but this appears to be the first recorded find from Buckinghamshire.

The Winslow bottle, had no stopper and was empty on discovery but one item it may well have formerly contained would have been urine, which is referred to in seventeenth century accounts of the practice, and whose presence has in some instances been confirmed by chemical analysis. The majority of witch-bottles seem to have been buried underneath hearths, or near thresholds, and were probably intended as a prophylactic measure to prevent the entry of a witch into the house whether through the door or down the chimney.

The bottle itself is complete apart from a few chips at the base. It has a mottled reddy-brown salt glaze and grey fabric and overall height of 206 mm. It has a slightly omphalos base, wire cut. The face mask has a rounded beard and slightly frowning mouth. The medallion is circular and in the form of a rosette. At the centre of the petals is a ring containing a star and the whole is enclosed in a simple border of billets. The face does not accord particularly well with any of Holmes' types (Holmes, 1951), although bearing a general resemblance to type VIII. The medallion, however, can be closely paralleled amongst pottery from Basing House, Hampshire (Moorhouse, 1970), most of which dates before 1645, and with a medallion on a witch-bottle from Norwich (Merrifield, 1953, pl. III b). The style of the medallion's border also compares with an example in the London Museum carrying the date 1648 (London Museum, 1966). Finally the medallion is a very close match but slightly larger than one on a bellarmine recovered from the wreck of the East Indiaman *Vergulde Draeck*, which foundered north of Perth, Western Australia in 1656 (Green, 1977). Shortly after 1672, John Dwight started production of bellarmines at Fulham (Christophers, 1973), having been granted a patent in that year (Weatherhill, 1971), and there has recently been a suggestion that short-lived production of the type may have taken place earlier than this at Woolwich (Pryor and Blockley, 1978). However the parallels above suggest that the Winslow example was certainly a Rhenish import.



Fig. 1. The Winslow Witch-Bottle, ($\frac{1}{2}$ scale).

Thanks are due to Mr. G. Petchey, the owner of the bottle, for permission to illustrate the piece. It is on loan to Buckinghamshire County Museum, ref. L294 and CAS 4455. The drawing is by Melanie Steiner.

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