



# PICKING UP THREADS OR SPINNING NEW YARNS?

Investigating the Uncanny in  
Industrial Communities

DR KIRSTEN LEACH, INDUSTRIAL FOLKWAYS

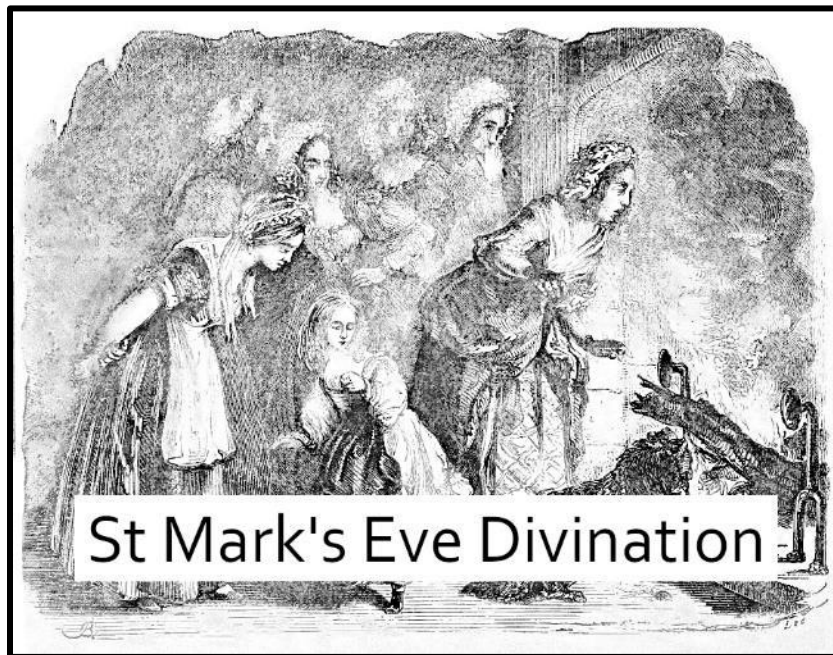


# Introduction

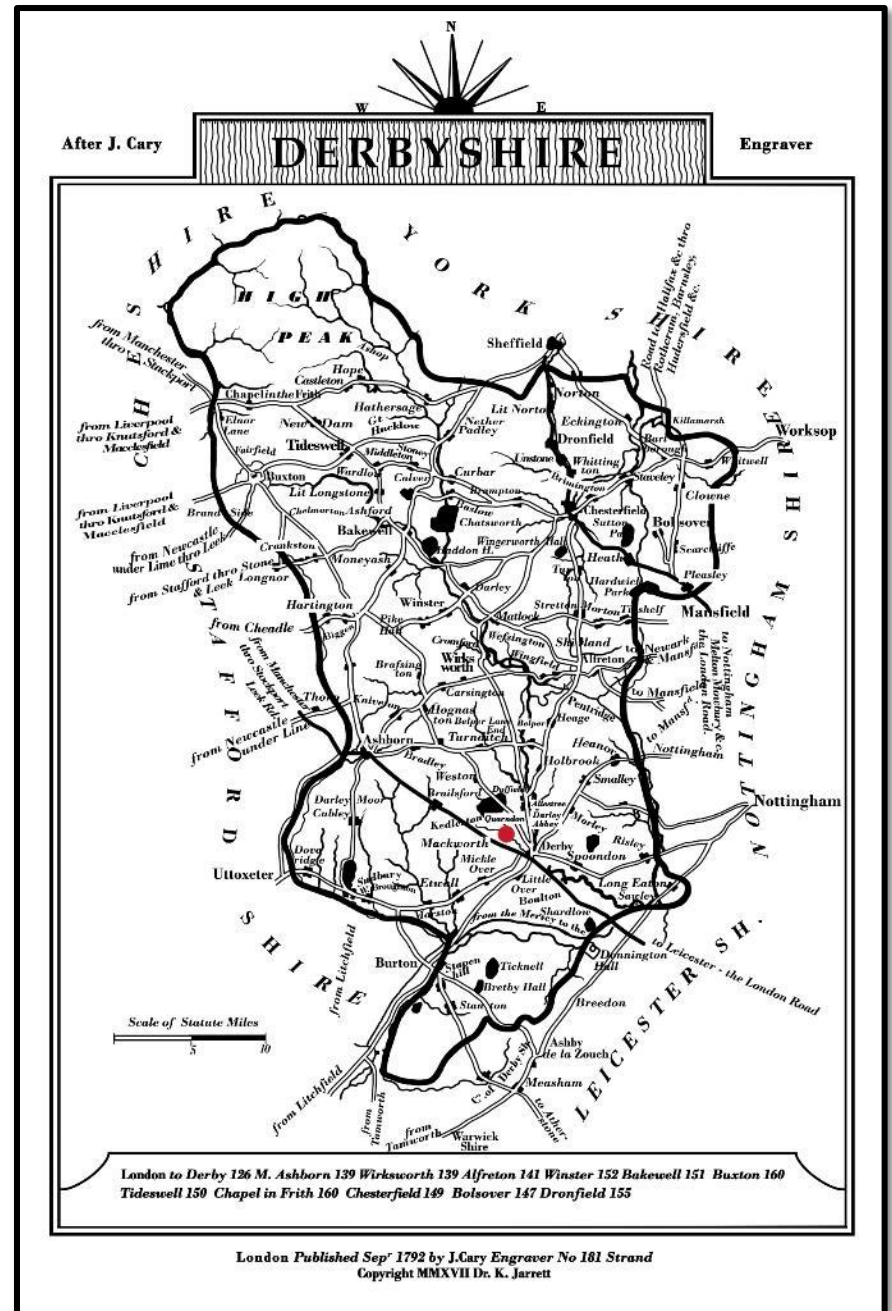
This paper introduces an independent, archaeological research project, integrating creative practices: the Industrial Folkways project (or I.F. / IF). As there's quite a bit to get through, details of my research, teaching and community work background are provided [elsewhere] [online](#).

So, for the purposes of this paper, I'll only mention that I used to teach Adult Education for various Universities (which informs IF educational work); but that I had to find different ways of working, due to disabilities. This prompted me to develop more flexible educational community projects, out of which this project has developed.

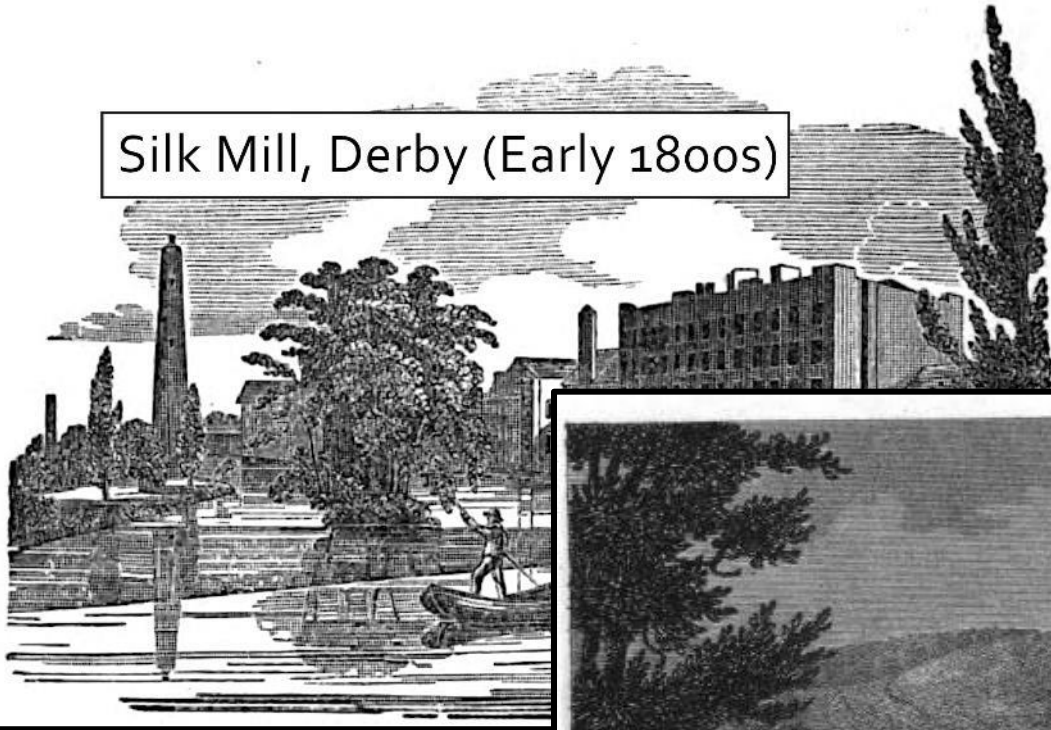




The project explores lifecycle and seasonal customs, and supernatural beliefs and practices in Derbyshire during the 1700- and 1800s.



Silk Mill, Derby (Early 1800s)



In particular, it'll investigate the effects of mechanisation, urbanisation and commercialisation...



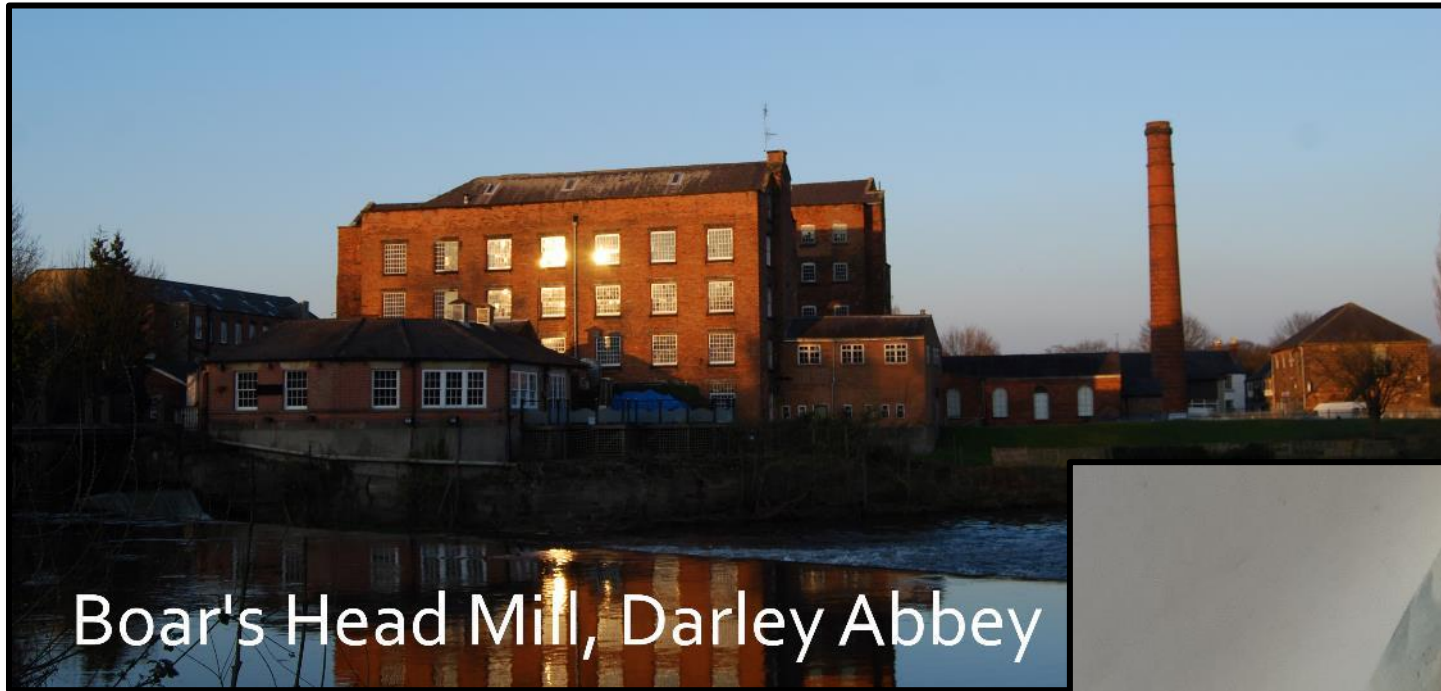
*Matlock Bath from the Temple house*



...on concepts of, reactions to, and perceived interactions with, the 'uncanny': that is, notions of preternatural beings and realms; considering continuity and change.



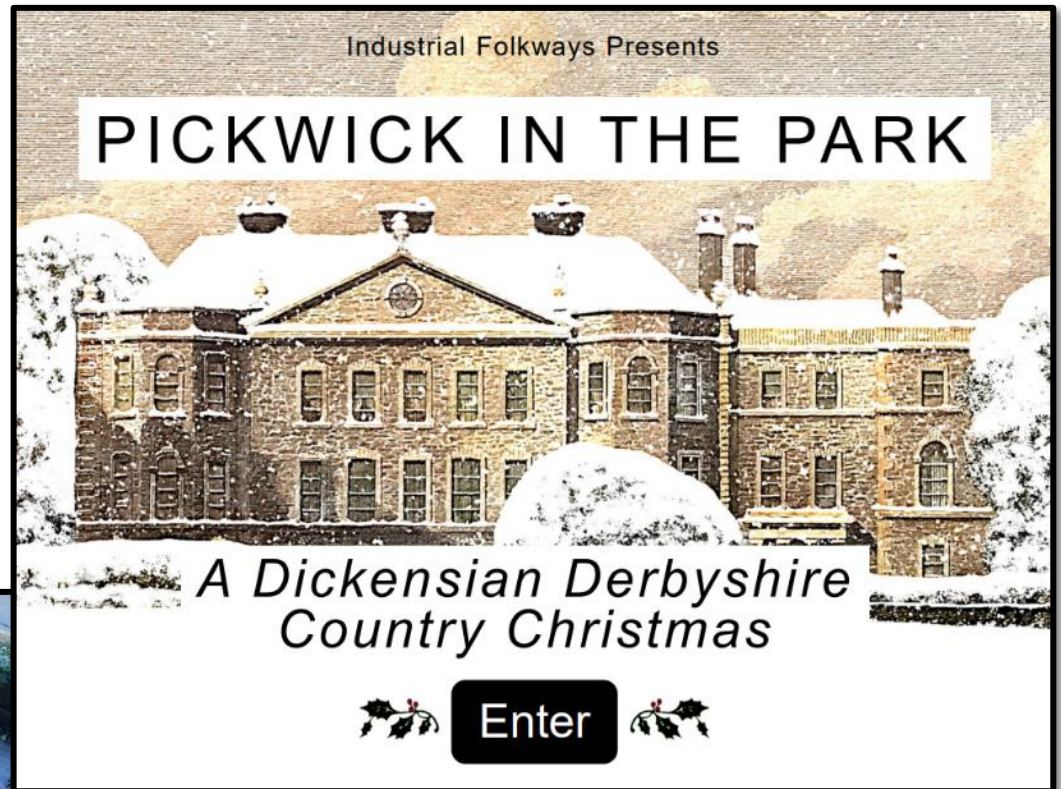
I aim to sample eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts in and around the Derwent Valley...



...for potential evidence of folk magic and supernatural beliefs; and build on my studies into regional ritual practices and 'superstitions'...

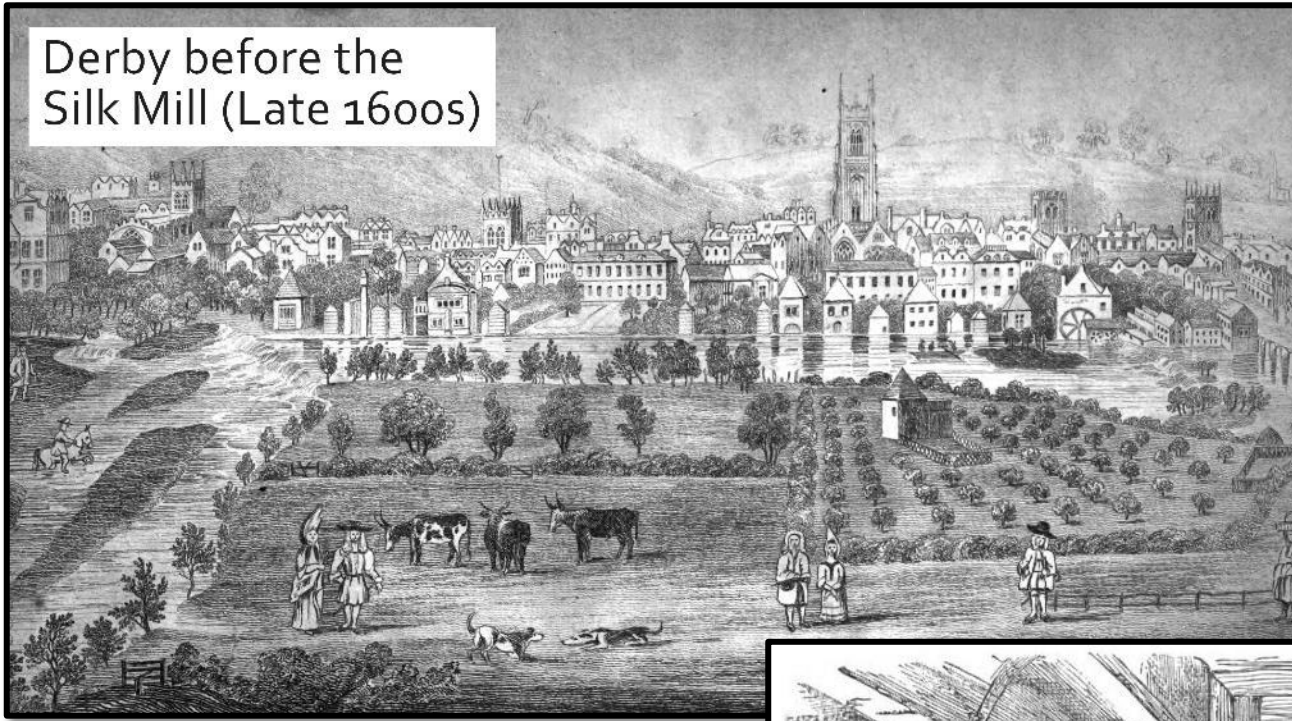


Christmas customs; and traditions relating to love and marriage, and death and burial, in project development....





Derby before the  
Silk Mill (Late 1600s)



The objective is to  
compare  
traditions in  
Georgian and early  
Victorian urban  
and industrial  
neighbourhoods...

...with those from  
contemporaneous  
and earlier rural and  
agricultural  
communities...





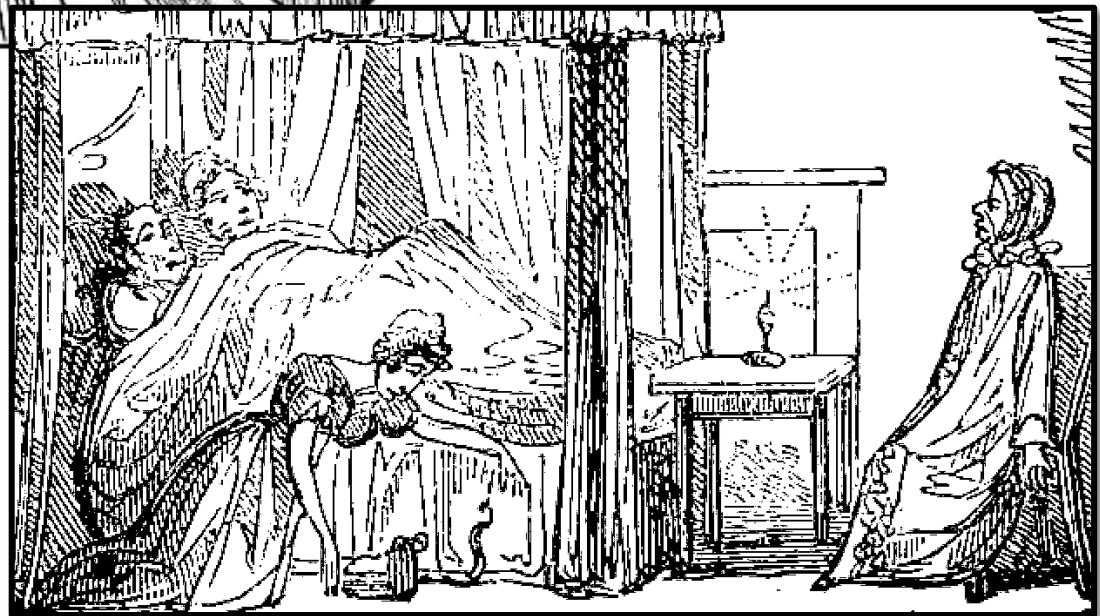


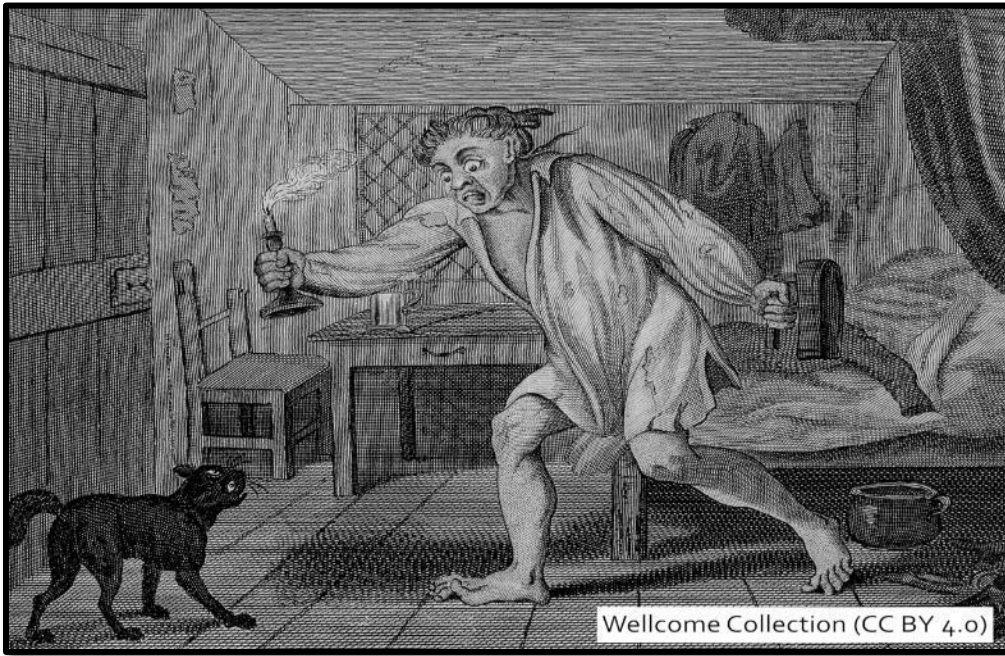
...considering how popular traditions were adapted and created in maintaining and (re-)shaping social relationships and identities.





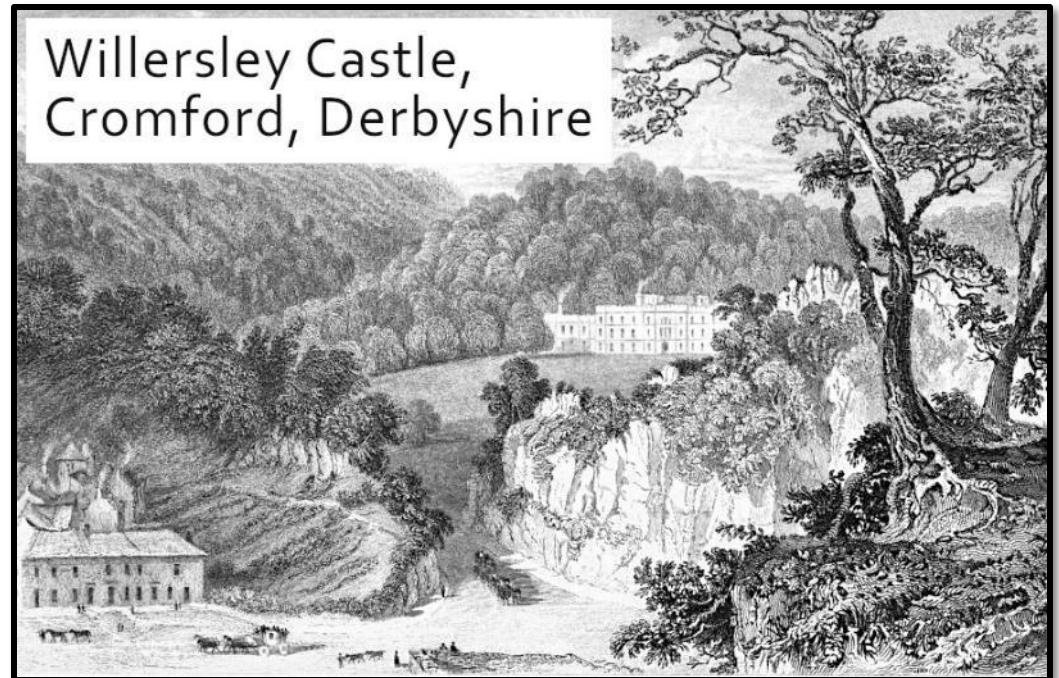
Investigation may  
enhance what we  
know of people's  
hopes and fears...





...at this time of profound change, providing opportunities for getting to know, a little better, both the people whose labour fuelled the Industrial Revolution...

...and those who's money financed, and profited from, these developments.

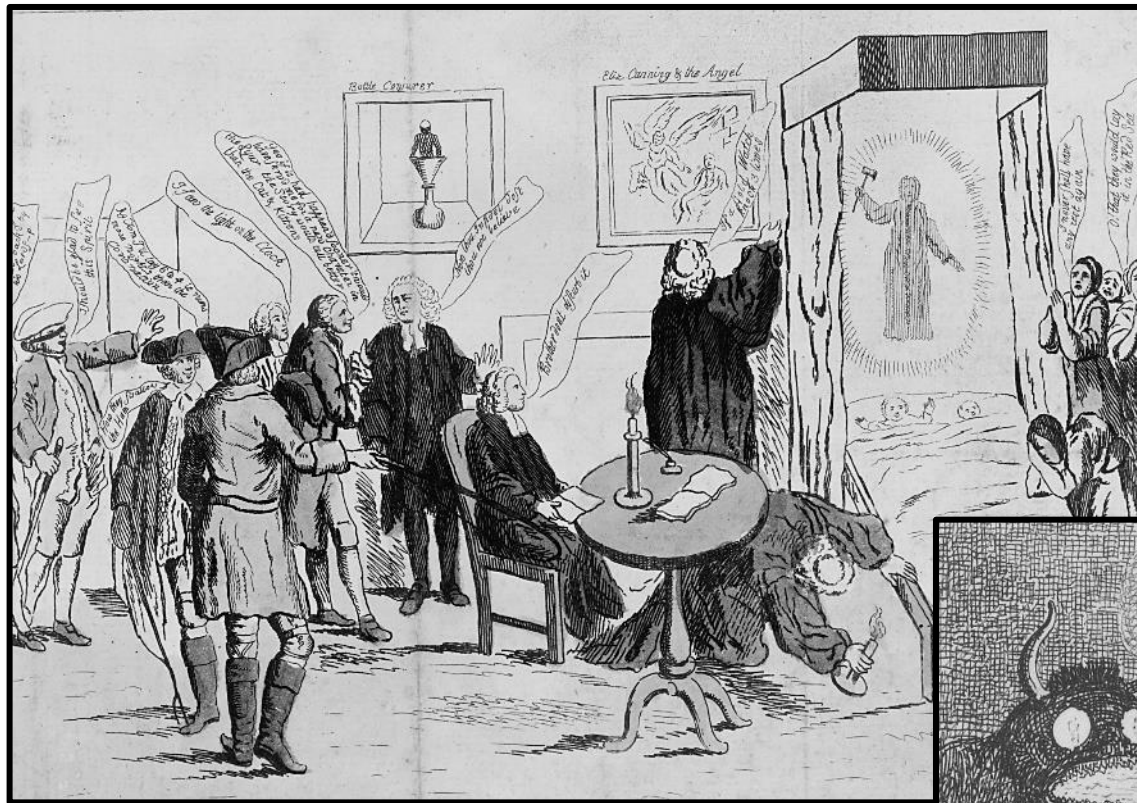






There's also scope to challenge the influential and pervasive narrative of educated 'middling-' and 'higher-sorts' that so-called 'superstitions'...





...were principally the domain of the ignorant 'lower orders' (particularly women, and especially the old, and servant classes).







## Examples of apotropaic graffiti locations

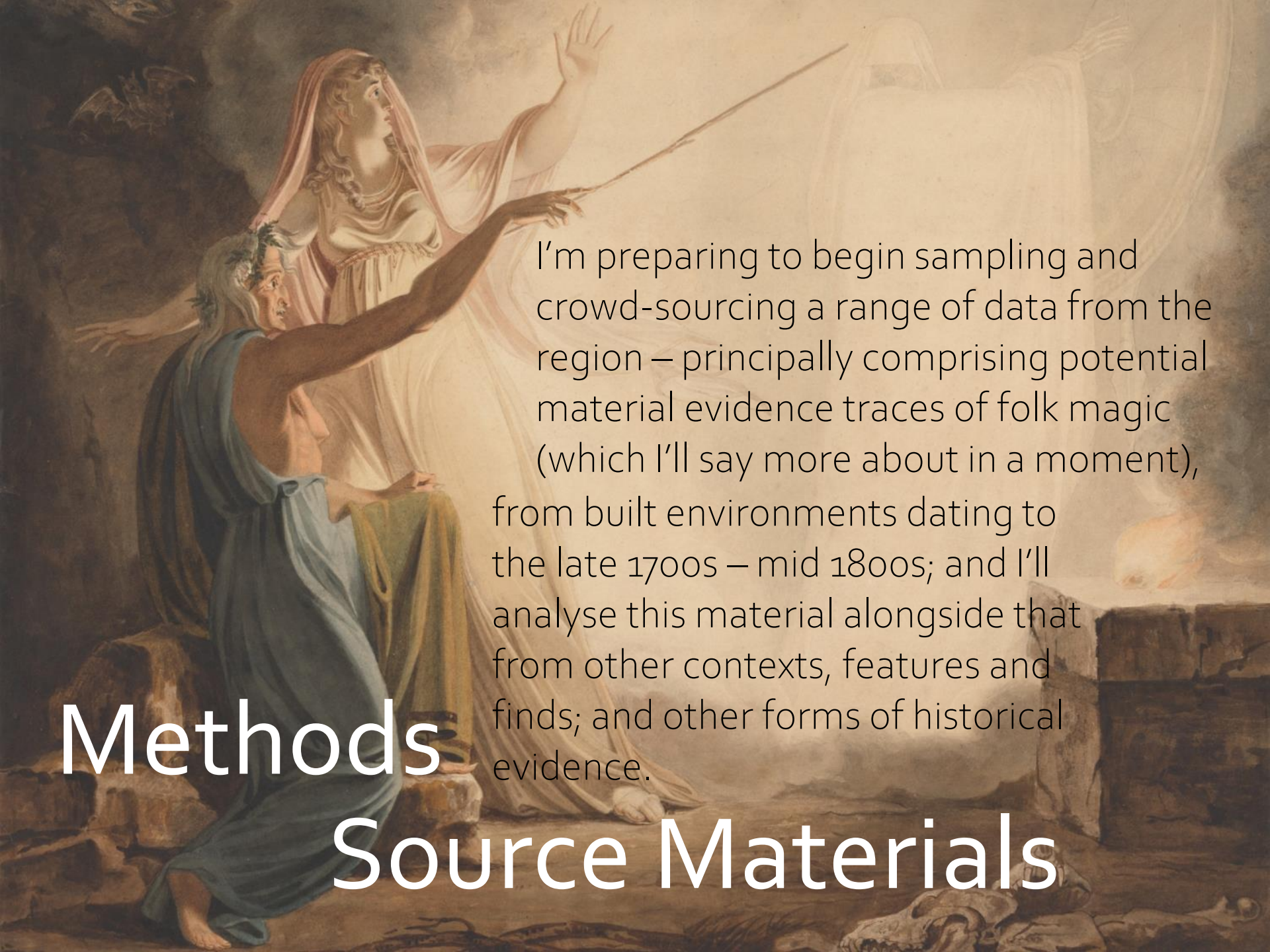


Many physical traces of Georgian and early Victorian, so-called 'superstitious', practices survive. By looking at evidence for folk magic...



...which typically represents clandestine actions – we might glimpse hopes and fears beliefs, perceptions and emotions, that wouldn't have been spoken of, much less committed to more formal forms of writing.

These residues might easily be found within environments in which we still live, work, worship, and relax, today; and seeking out and recording them requires minimal cost, equipment, knowledge, skills and time (making use of existing freely-available resources). Project participation might consequently both provide opportunities to broaden interest in and enable engagement with the historic environment, and allied services.



I'm preparing to begin sampling and crowd-sourcing a range of data from the region – principally comprising potential material evidence traces of folk magic (which I'll say more about in a moment), from built environments dating to the late 1700s – mid 1800s; and I'll analyse this material alongside that from other contexts, features and finds; and other forms of historical evidence.

# Methods

# Source Materials



# IF Study Areas

This'll involve targeting a sample of industrial housing; and commercial and community premises and spaces (including, for example places of worship, and associated...



Google Earth

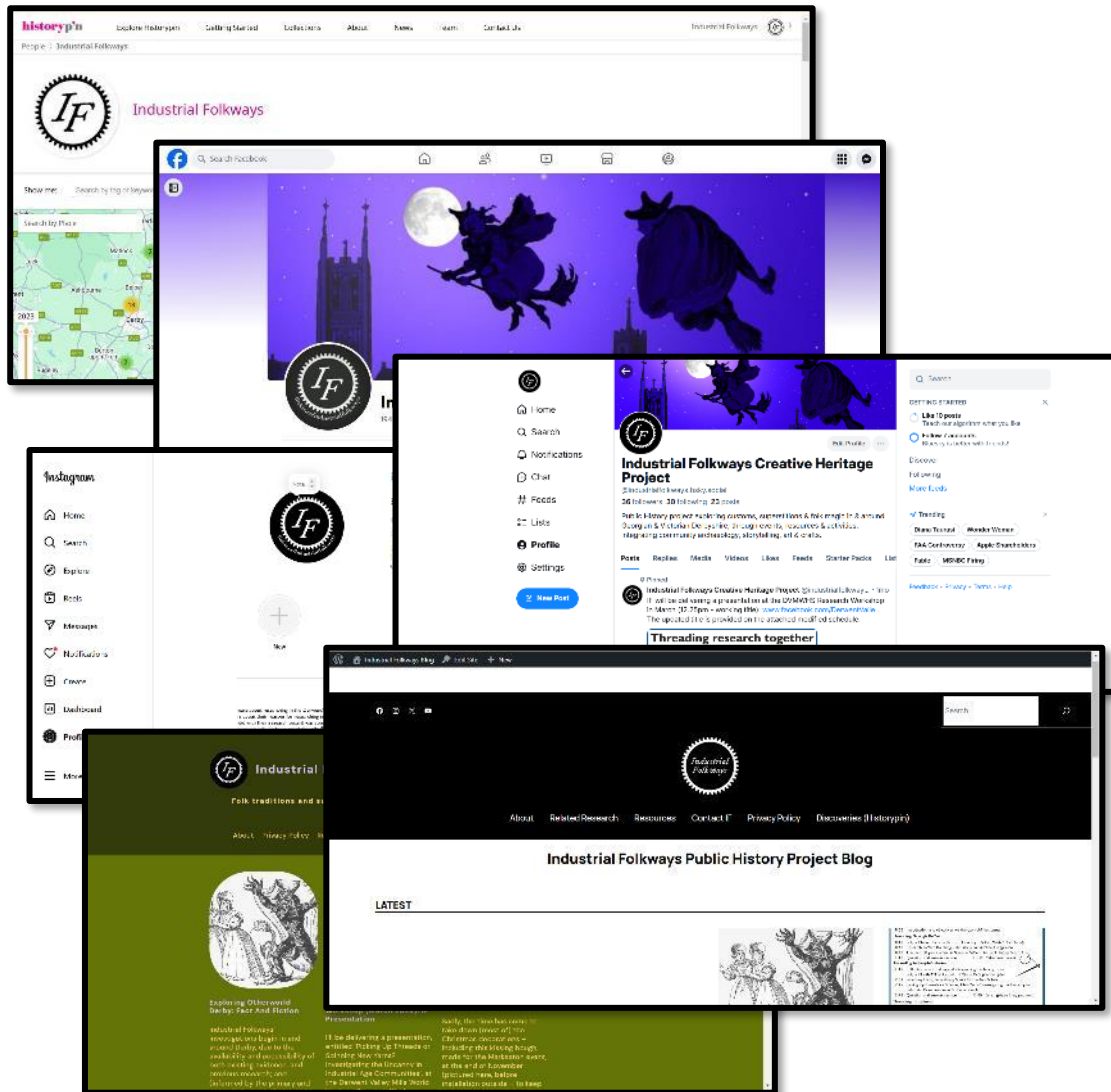
Matlock Bath  
Cromford  
Belper  
Duffield  
Allestree  
Darley Abbey  
Markeaton  
Derby

...memorials;  
shops; and  
pubs); in and  
around the  
Derwent Valley  
(highlighted  
here in blue).



I'll also open up more general participation, to crowd-source data from similar and broader contexts within and beyond the Derwent Valley, dating to, before, and after, this time, for comparative analyses (highlighted on the above map in yellow). This'll include integrating material relating to potential later ritual activity at prehistoric, Roman, Medieval, and Early Modern monuments, features, and sites (which I'll say something about in a moment).

# Data Collection and Submission



Recording techniques are simple, employing easy-to-use and readily-available equipment (such as mobile phone cameras and torches), and participants can submit findings through online resources, such as the project blog, and other social media.

Some buildings will be targeted by leafletting, or post; and potential participants approached through relevant community and special interest groups; local and regional media; and online.





Contact will also be made with other relevant projects and organisations, to evaluate the potential for data-sharing; previously-recorded material will also be referenced (i.e. that logged through other relevant projects; academic publications; and in museum collections and archives).



# Data Collection: Locations



Evidence is typically found within and around buildings in locations that were in the past previously considered vulnerable to entrance by malignant forces: doorways, windows, and chimneys...

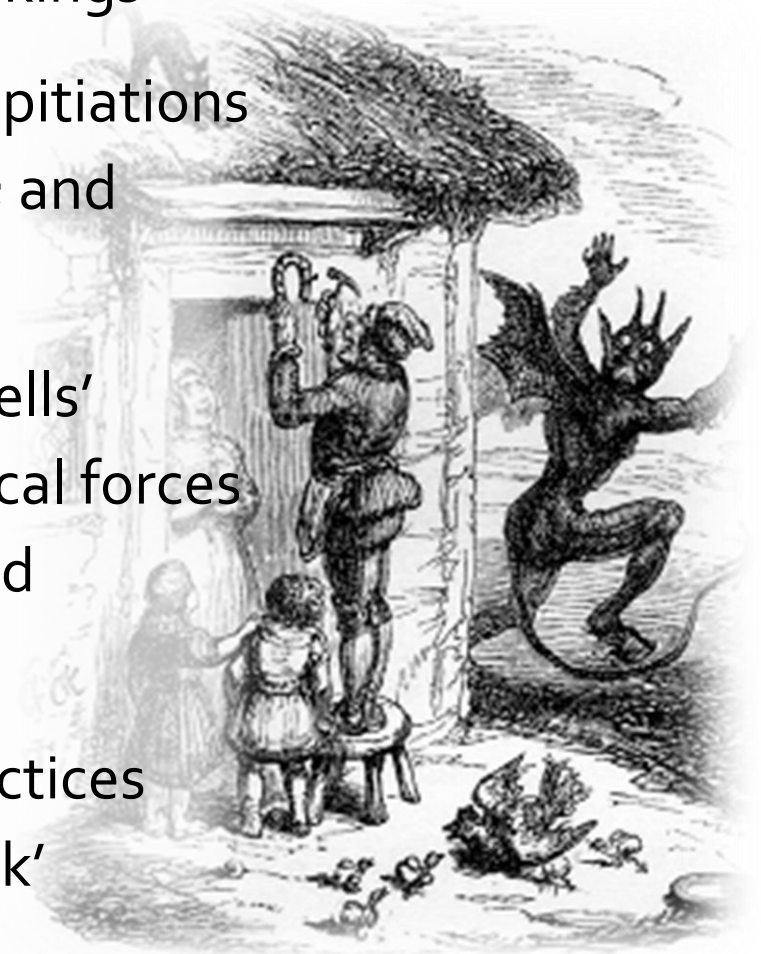
...under floors, behind wainscoting, and on ceilings; in attics, lofts and voids; and external enclosures and boundaries (particularly in the vicinity of gateways and other entrances).





# Data Collection: Range of Evidence

- Ritual graffiti and other surface markings
- Votive and apotropaic deposits (propitiations and inducements to spiritual forces; and protective objects ; respectively)
- Written and material remains of 'spells' (rituals attempting to harness magical forces with the intent of achieving specified outcomes)
- Artefacts and material traces of practices believed to evoke general 'good-luck'



From *The True Legend of St. Dunstan and the Devil*, Edward G. Flight, 1852

# Apotropaic Graffiti



This typically comprises simple incised slashing; symbols...

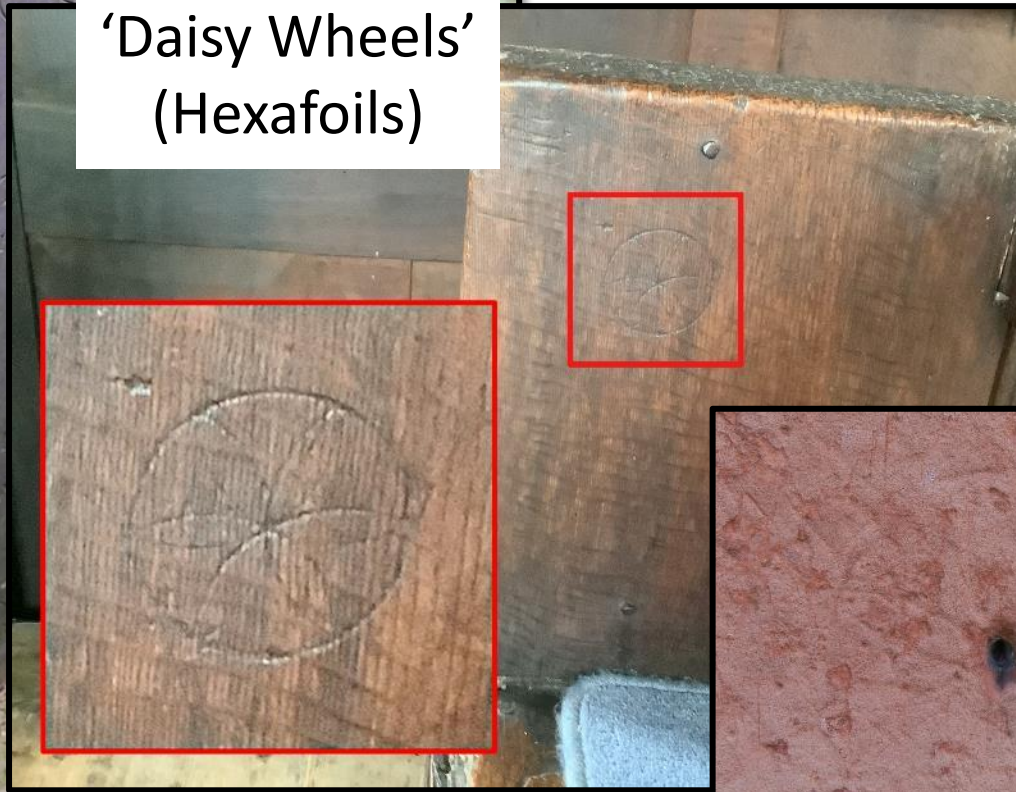






...symbols, including pentagrams, hexagrams, hexafoils, hearts, crosses; concentric and intersecting circles and grids...

'Daisy Wheels'  
(Hexafoils)





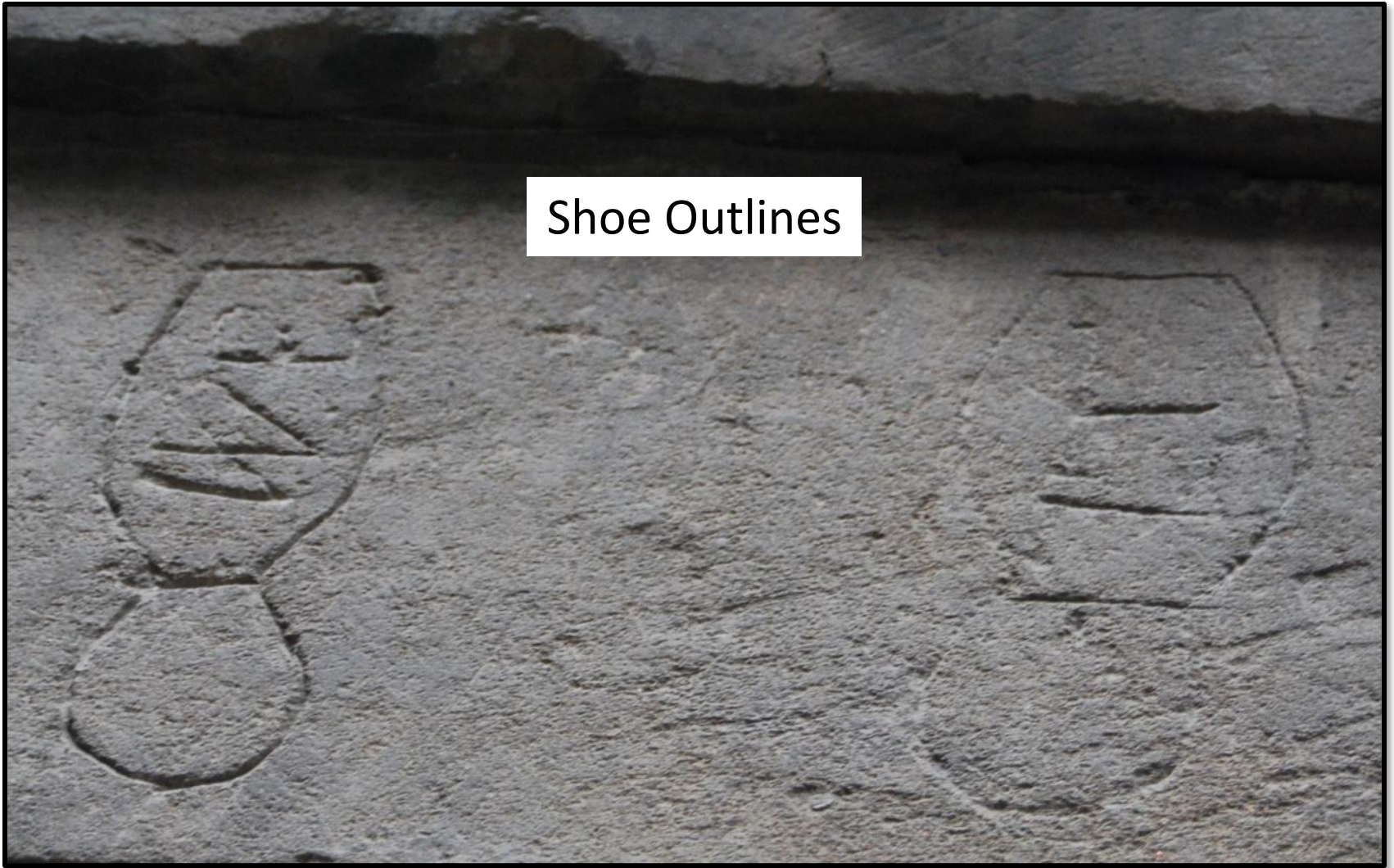


'Marian' Marks



...possibly a narrow range of letter characters (if still significant  
– as in the early Modern era)...

## Shoe Outlines



...hand and shoe outlines, and other pictograms; and burning, soot and chalk markings...





Scorch / Burn Marks



...and burning, soot and chalk markings.



# Ritual Deposits

Votive deposits might comprise: coins, texts, and animal bones placed within or beneath building foundations, roofing, and repairs.

Apotropaic deposits tend to comprise:

- concealed footwear and clothing (most frequently shoes, but might include any garments; which are usually worn, damaged, or partial);
- 'mummified' (that is, naturally dried) animals (frequently cats, birds and rats, which might be posed, and nailed to building features);
- 'witch' bottles (that is, ceramic or glass vessels containing a restricted range of material that commonly includes finger-nail parings and human hair; nails and pins, which might be bent; often liquid – usually urine; and texts);
- and iron objects (such as knives and horseshoes).

# Concealed Deposits

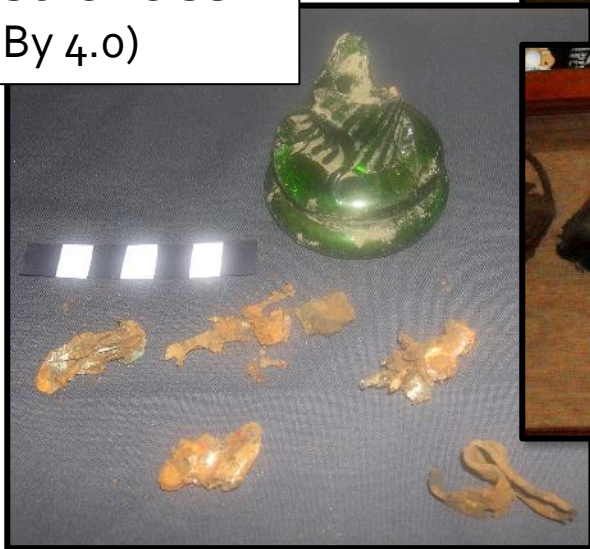
Witch Bottle,  
c. 1820,  
Navenby,  
Lincolnshire  
(Portable  
Antiquities  
Scheme CC  
By 4.0)



Concealed shoes (St  
Edmundsbury  
Heritage Service, St  
Edmundsbury  
Borough Council,  
Edmund Patrick CC  
BY-SA 3.0 Wikimedia)



'Dried' cats and rodents, Stag Inn, Hastings, East  
Sussex (The Voice of Hassocks, Wikipedia, CC BY 1.0)



The latter category might overlap with that of the material remnants of attempts to use magic for other than protective purposes (such as love spells). The same might be said of pierced animal hearts (often bovine), stuck with nails or pins, and hung within chimneys; and iron objects (such as knives and horseshoes).

Portable charms, talismans and amulets also fall into this category (that is, artefacts intended to bring general 'good luck' - such as...



# Spells and 'Good-luck' Tokens

...'crooked' sixpences; gain power over others; and protect against evil; respectively). Consequently, stray finds from the region are also of interest (as might be found in gardens and yards; within boundaries; and on formerly utilised open land).



From *The True Legend of St. Dunstan and the Devil*, Edward G. Flight, 1852

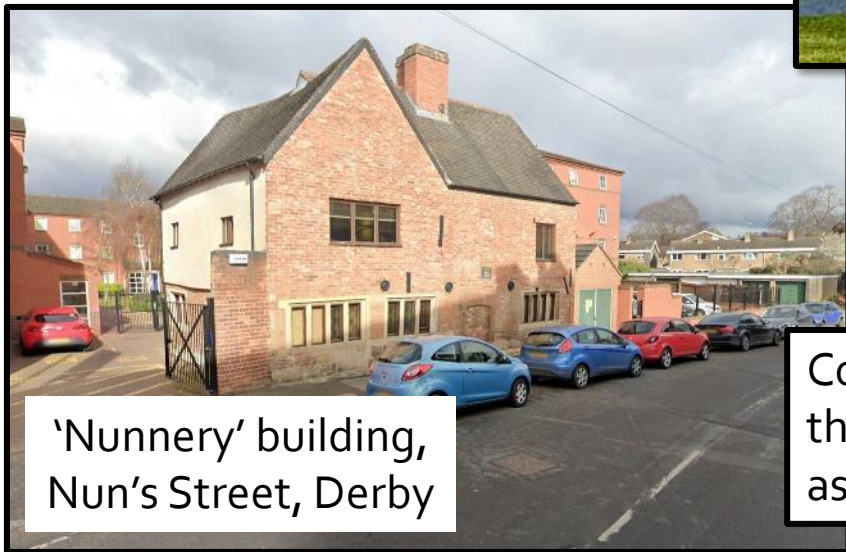
# Later Activity at 'Antique' and Natural Sites and Features

I previously mentioned the prospect of integrating material potentially indicating later activity at prehistoric, Roman, Medieval, and Early Modern monuments.

Remains of Nine Stones Close ('Grey ladies'), Harthill Moor, Derbyshire  
(Photo: from Michael Maggs, Wikimedia, CC by 4.0)



Prehistoric monument in lead mining area, associated with fairies in nineteenth-century folklore.



'Nunnery' building,  
Nun's Street, Derby

Construction of an industrial district in the 1820s unearthed probably associated medieval human remains

To this can be added comparable activity at certain natural features, notably rivers, wells, springs, caves and hilltops, and associated features (such as trees).

Both categories of site are associated with supernatural realms and beings in Industrial Age folklore; as are a narrow range of (later) artefacts.

I'm interested in the distribution and deposition of these assemblages, which might be recognised through archaeological investigations (potentially recorded in previous excavations and surveys), and as surface finds. I'd therefore welcome photos taken by the public of prospectively relevant artefacts in situ, and their map/GPS coordinates. I'd also be grateful for up-to-date photos of the sites themselves; their environs; and access to them.

(Although I've studied and visited most of the relevant sites - having taught archaeology of Derbyshire and the Peak District for the University of Nottingham and WEA, disabilities have prevented me from revisiting them, for some time.)



I intend to use local archaeological material to inform and inspire the production of a few simple craft activities for participants.

I also plan to integrate this material in archaeological storytelling, which is a well-established technique that I've often employed in teaching, and in sharing research through Public History endeavours. This'll involve my creating and presenting written, and possibly oral, narratives, that'll both impart information on participation, and on discoveries, in potentially accessible and memorable ways. And I'm exploring how the project might provide opportunities for participants to also produce and share archaeologically-informed stories.

# Telling, Making and Engagement with the Historic Environment



Derby Museum archaeology collection: popular 19<sup>th</sup> century supernatural narratives and interpretations may be explored through archaeological storytelling

Friar Gate, Derby, on former common land: late 18<sup>th</sup> century opponents to development evoked history / folklore and the supernatural



Decorative hexafoil textile craft activity



# Prospective Outcomes

Project activities hold the potential to expand knowledge and understanding in areas highlighted as priorities for further study within the DVMWHS research agenda.





# DVMWHS Research Agenda

Potential to expand knowledge on and understanding of:

- How 'the move from a rural to an industrial society impacted upon folk culture';
- How 'antiquarian studies revised perceptions of the past for Derwent Valley communities', considering the extent to which 'public cultures of Enlightenment developed across the social spectrum'; also the
- 'Impact of industrialisation and population movements on the world views on these communities'; and 'interactions between pre-factory industrial and agricultural settlements'.

And it looks at the:

- Impact of Enlightenment-period religious beliefs, including those of factory owners – and how this may have affected relationships between employees and their employers.

Given that project research enables insight into private (even secret) practices and beliefs, it may be particularly valuable in determining how ideologies imposed from above (as requirements not only for employment, but also housing, education, and social integration) actually played-out behind closed doors, that is, enabling us to look at the

- Extents to which 'factory owners [actually] exercise[d] control' over the personal, family and community lives of mill workers.

Comparisons within and between neighbourhoods, settlements (and other sites), and regions may contribute to 'understanding of:

- Regional variability in the pace and nature of change'; 'of the economic, social and political impact of Enlightenment thinkers'; of the
- 'Relationship between scientific, industrial and technological innovation in the Derwent Valley; and how developments in these areas impact[ed] upon scientific and technical education'.

Looking at the significance of prehistoric, Roman, medieval and later features, sites and monuments may contribute to investigations of the:

- Impact of '18th century tourism and consumer culture [...] on the Derwent Valley'; and perhaps offer opportunities to enhance the 'development of tourism and recreation' today.



Various potential social benefits might also come from the project (and I discuss this on the website and blog – details of which are on the next slide). Indeed, I see its potential for rendering such returns as important as its capacity to advance historical study, so am looking at how the different stages of participation might be marshalled in supporting a number of local community and charitable organisations.

For example, I created an [interactive digital guide, display, and activities](#), and related activities, for [Derby Parks](#); I'm considering how I might integrate and develop previous studies into employing creative archaeology in working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence; and am preparing activities for a particularly apposite campaign by [Hospice UK](#) - [Dying Matters](#).

# Public History and Social Benefits



PAST  
SENSE



*'Let's talk  
about it'*



Council for  
British Archaeology

OVER **1000 EVENTS**  
ACROSS THE UK

[www.festivalofarchaeology.org](http://www.festivalofarchaeology.org)

 [archaeology.for.all](https://www.facebook.com/archaeology.for.all)  [@FestivalofArch](https://twitter.com/FestivalofArch)  [#FestivalofArchaeology](https://www.instagram.com/FestivalofArchaeology)



Depending on work-loads, I may also be able to occasionally partner with other practitioners, groups, or historic sites and venues interested in adapting project investigations; or in working together to produce related resources and activities, or a small event, or exhibition (for example, as part of the [Festival of Archaeology](#), [Heritage Open Days](#), or [Georgian Derbyshire Festival](#)); for educational, or possibly fundraising, purposes.

Also, please let me know if making relevant discoveries (I'll provide more information on what to look for, and how, through social media, in the near future).

(And if anyone would like to be more directly involved with the project – in data collection and management, promotional activities, or other tasks – I'd very much welcome any help!)

If anyone has any further questions, or would just like an informal chat about the project, please get in touch.





# Find Out | Participate | Partner

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[kirstenleach@industrialfolkways.org.uk](mailto:kirstenleach@industrialfolkways.org.uk) (to July 2025)
- Blog: <https://industrialfolkways.wordpress.com/>
- Website (to July 2025): <https://industrialfolkways.org.uk/>
- Social media: <https://linktr.ee/industrialfolkways>

