THE RITUAL PROTECTION MARKS OF MORTIMERS CROSS MILL

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As part of the WMS Spring Meeting held on the 20th of April 2024, the Society visited Mortimer's Cross mill near Leominster in Herefordshire. While there, I photographed numerous ritual protection marks. As I explained in a previous article, 'Ritual Protection marks within Welsh mills' (*Melin 37*, 2021) such marks are technically known as '*apotropaic*' marks from the Greek 'to ward off'. They come in a variety of forms – sometimes they are simply burn marks caused by deliberately holding a burning taper, or candle, to a timber to form a flame-shaped burn. Also common are complex shapes formed of repeating arcs incised into timber surfaces known as 'compass-drawn' designs. As described previously, ritual protection marks are found predominantly in buildings from the sixteenth century onwards when a belief in the need for magical protection against evil spirits was common. Somewhat surprisingly, their use continued into the early twentieth century. Although their study is still a relatively new field and the belief behind their use is not fully understood (their meaning may well be nuanced and multi-faceted), these designs were applied at perceived weak points within houses - such as doors, windows and fireplaces - and were

thought to offer protection to, or blessings on, the home and its occupants. These features are also to be found within mills – a similar environment where people would spend much time and would therefore contain the same perceived weak points as in any home.

The present mill at Mortimer's Cross was built around 1760 and what began as a paper mill was converted to a grain mill around 1870. The ritual protection marks had been inscribed into the timber fixtures and fittings of the grain mill, such as a tongue and groove partition that separates the mill machinery from the meal troughs (one of which was also inscribed), and a planked dresser. All of the designs seen on the day of my visit are based on circles, and although burn marks are seen at other mills, none were seen here. While some of the mill furniture featured a single, simple engraved circle, others featured several separate engravings. Because they are old and slight, they can be very hard to see in daylight, so I decided to highlight the designs by altering photographs I took with *Microsoft Paint*. I did this by overlaying a black line – one that followed arcs and circles of the faint engravings. As a result, it is possible to see the designs clearly.

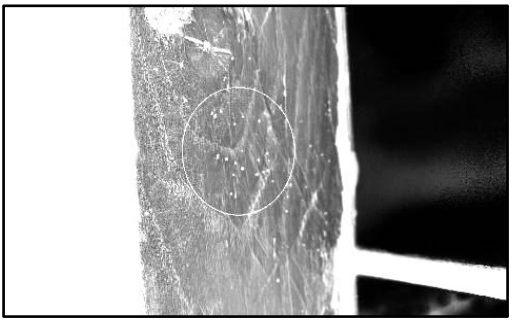
Methodology

Zooming-in on photographs to highlight what are effectively scratches in wood can be a highly subjective pursuit. A second

pair of eyes may make out curving arcs that I didn't see. They may choose to highlight something that I decided was a scratch and did not originally form part of the engraving. Indeed, the depth of their engraving can be so shallow as to make it hard to differentiate between the two. Hence, I only highlighted those I was certain formed part of a design. That said, it was reasonably easy to identify the circular or semi-circular arcs considered here, as scratches are often composed of single or multiple straight lines made when brushing against something. It becomes much harder when the original engravings are themselves composed of vertical and horizontal lines. In cases when I suspected an arc had originally formed part of a complete circle that was now not visible, or the maker had intended to engrave a whole circle but had stopped for some reason, I only highlighted what was visible, rather than what was likely to have been there. The next time I visit mills, I will take a bright torch with me so that I can apply a raking light to any markings I find in the hope they will become more visible to the camera.

The engravings identified at Mortimers Cross fall neatly into two categories – single and multi-point designs. Single-point designs are simply circles formed with a two-pronged tool such as a pair of dividers, where one point of the divider stays in place and acts as a pivot so that the other point could swing 360° to form a complete arc, and a circle-shaped engraving. The second

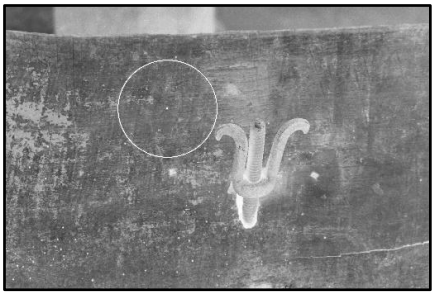
type, which we shall call multi-point designs, are more complicated as the dividers are moved multiple times to create a circle that contains several arcs – the resulting design resembling a flower.



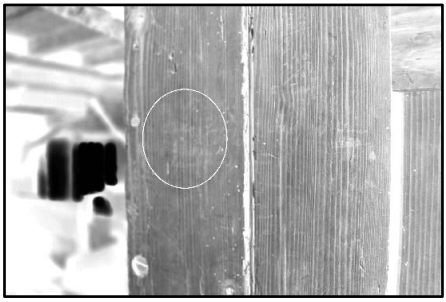
[Fig. 1] *Single Point.*

Single Point

This first image (*fig. 1*) is of a single circle engraved into the inside face of a window frame. The bleached timber provides a suitably pale background to contrast against the black ink that I used to highlight the engraving depicted in the photograph. Right in the centre of the circle, and slightly smaller than the nearby worm holes, is the centre-point. Two more of these single-point circles were identified, located on the front face of one of the two grain hoppers (*fig. 2*), and another on the side of the dresser (*fig. 3*).



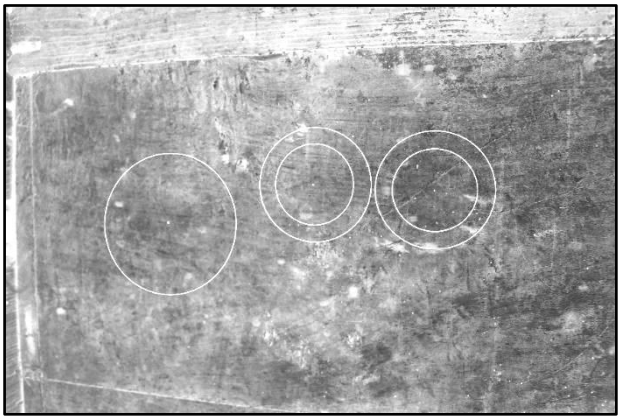
[Fig. 2]



[Fig. 3]

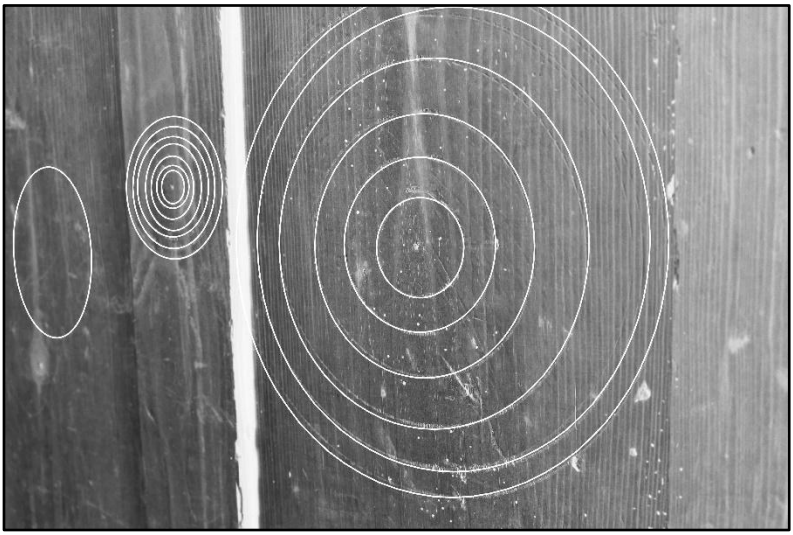
The notion that such a simple device could keep away evil spirits stems from the belief that patterns without an end could fascinate evil spirits to the extent that they became trapped while fruitlessly searching for its end. Hence, engravings such as these are sometimes called '*demon traps*'. Once the spirits managed to free themselves from this trap they presumably learned their lesson and kept away.

Moving up in complexity, the left-hand side of the meal trough features three circles in close proximity to each other (*fig. 4*). Two of the three featured circles are concentric, in that they have a second circle within them, both sharing the same centre-point. These are a mirror image of each other in terms of size and appearance. On this basis, it is reasonable to assume that they were made at the same time and made to be a pair. Whether they were meant to be seen as a composition and had a meaning different to single circles, or whether the makers simply repeated the process for their own satisfaction can't be known. Likewise, it is not known what relationship all three designs have with each other. The single circle is at a different height to the others after all. It may be the result of a separate event at a different time, and maybe by a different person. Or are they all part of an active and ongoing process where any additions refreshed, complemented, and re-enforced earlier designs?



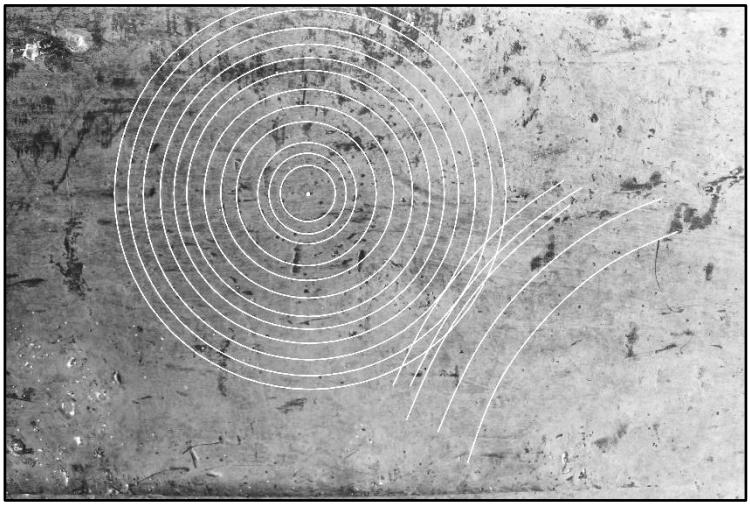
[Fig .4]

A second collection of three circles was also identified on the side of the dresser (*fig. 5*). Here we find a single circle, and two concentric circles – one of seven rings and another of six. Each concentric circle utilises the same centre-point for each of its rings. This ensures that each will be central in relation to the preceding, and successive rings, forming an even, 'dart-board' appearance. However, the intervals between each concentric ring are not even, and thus perhaps perfection wasn't of primary concern here. Perhaps this was enough to perform its intended function. Both designs demonstrate that it was up to the maker to decide exactly how much time they devoted to this task, and the level of accuracy they chose to attain, rather than any perceived 'rules' behind their making dictating their level of success.



[Fig. 5]

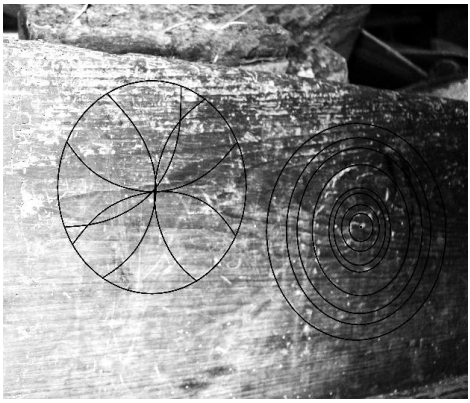
The last of the single point designs from Mortimers Cross Mill to be mentioned here is another concentric circle, this time with 12 rings (*fig. 6*). Contrary to the large circle depicted in (*fig. 5)*, here time has clearly been spent in an attempt to maintain an even distance between each ring. To its right, and overlapping it slightly, are the beginnings, or the remains, of another even larger concentric circle.



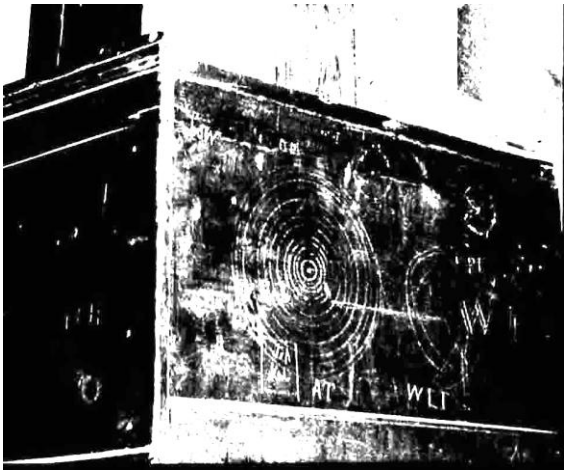
[Fig. 6]

Similar single-point designs have been identified at Clodock Mill, Hereford; Melin Ganol, Llanrhystud; Melin Cenarth, and Kingsland Mill, Holyhead.

In the case of the last two, large concentric rings were also present (*fig. 7* and *fig. 8*). There is an obvious connection to be made between concentric rings and the mill itself. More so than the simple circles, the close-set concentric circles appear to have movement, which is reminiscent of the rotating movement of mill stones, cogs, waterwheels, and sails.



[Fig. 7]

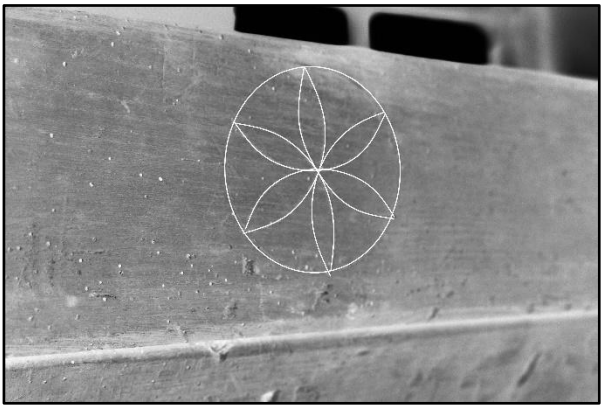


[Fig. 8]

Multi-Point Designs

A recurring design within the identified catalogue of ritual protection marks are designs that resemble a flower contained within a circle (or circles) – commonly known as '*daisy wheels*'. To make these, a circle is formed with a compass-like device such as a pair of dividers, scissors, or perhaps shears. Once this is formed, the dividers are lifted from the engraving – without widening or reducing their width – and one of its points is placed anywhere along the circle's perimeter. The other end is used to describe an arc from one edge of the circle to another. This process is then repeated by placing one of the points of the divider at the point where the arc meets the perimeter of the circle, and another arc is described. Once this process is repeated to its natural conclusion, a six petalled flower is formed. A good example was identified on the grain hopper that supplies the mill stones at Clodock Mill, Hereford (*fig. 9*).

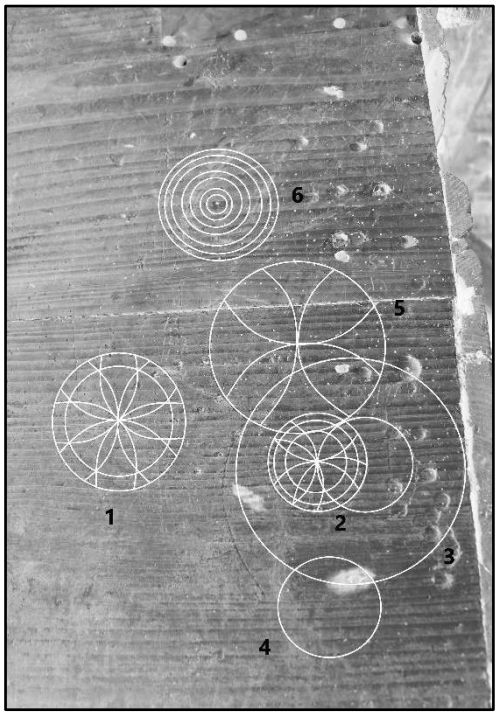
Three variants of the daisy wheel were seen at Mortimers Cross (*fig. 11)*. All feature on a planked partition wall that separates the mill machinery from the most prominent of its two meal troughs (*fig. 10*).



[Fig. 9]

[Fig. 10]

These engravings are on the left reveal of a projection in the wall, above the left-hand meal trough. They are also in an easily accessible area where a person could stand and therefore have room to make them. It is a fantastic collection of markings that begins to highlight the range of possible different designs but also the maker's knowledge of this subject. To describe them further, I have numbered them 1-6.



[Fig. 11]

1) An eight-petaled daisy wheel with a second circle around its circumference. These are hard to make and so demonstrates the work of a practised hand. To its right is another daisy-wheel – this time the maker appears to have started to engrave a second daisy wheel 'in-waiting' which demonstrates how compass-drawn designs such as these can be extended easily - forming patterns with no end that could carry on to form a 12-petalled flower with three circles around its circumference but stopped short of completion - three more arcs and the engraving would have been complete. One arc however, has been completed, and all the way to its natural conclusion – a circle. As the perimeter of this circle intersects the centre-point of the 12-petalled daisy wheel, I consider it to be part of the same design and made at the same time. The continuation of this single arc forever.

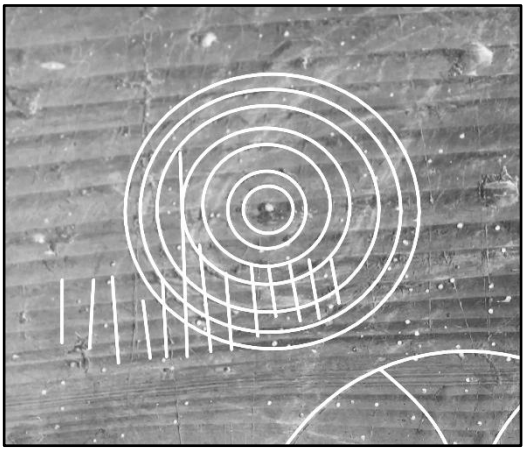
2) A large circle that surrounds the engraving described above. This bears no discernible relationship to the design which it surrounds as they have different centre-points. This suggests that they were made at different times. One thing that is noticeable about this engraving is a large arc on its left side where the dividers slipped and the maker had to start again.

3) A smaller circle that overlays the larger one, but also bears no discernible relation to the large circle.

4) This design also overlays others – the large circle and the 12-petalled flower, and also bears no discernible relationship with them. This variant of a daisy wheel is sometimes known as a 'consecration cross'.

5) A concentric circle composed of 7 circles, all of which are neatly spaced.

6) The last feature, not shown in the previous image, seems to overlay the concentric ring. It is a series of parallel marks that run vertically. Given that it is not circular it is much harder to be certain this is a ritual protection mark, but it serves to highlight how subjective it can be to differentiate purposefully-made scratches from those accidental in origin.



[Fig. 12]

The engraved marks seen at Mortimers Cross mill, and highlighted here, allow a closer look at the beliefs of the millers who spent their time here. Timber partitions, doors and dressers doubled as convenient 'display' blackboards that performed functions beyond their initial purpose. While engravings as described can highlight belief, many notations in pencil also survive, such as inscriptions and numbers. These are likely to evidence the more down to earth practice of running the mill, perhaps relating to quantities, orders and settings. Such faint remains are common within mills but are easy to miss, and dismiss, yet they present a valuable source of first-hand data and are worthy of further study.