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Revealing the Ritually Concealed: Custodians, conservators, and the concealed shoe

Introduction

The accessioning of an object into a museum collection invariably, and inevitably, results in what Lowenthal bemoans ‘the loss of environmental context’ (1985: 286). ‘Museumizing’ is a process whereby an object is physically removed from both its typical place of use and its typical group of users, consequently limiting – or entirely prohibiting – access to it. However, accessioned objects undergo more than physical displacement; they are also conceptually altered. Place an object within a glass cabinet and it is instantly demarcated as something ‘other’, something ‘special’; something to be visually admired rather than haptically engaged with: ‘Touch with your eyes’.

This is an issue that has occupied many curators and museologists in the past, with Paine noting a striking parallel between ‘museumification’ and ‘sacralization’ (2013: 2); when an object becomes a ‘museum object’ it ‘acquires a new meaning, a new value, a new personality’ (2013: 2). This process is what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms the ‘museum effect’ (1991: 410), whereby objects become ‘enshrined’ by their museum environments (1991: 386). Enshrined and, some might say, entombed. As Macdonald asserts, a ‘museum, for most objects, is a final resting place – a moment frozen in time for future contemplation’ (2002: 92). Although placing an object in a museum will probably extend its material life, it is no longer a ‘living’ object (Jones 2006: 120).

This issue is pertinent to all objects that find their way into the enshrining glass cabinets of museums – or the distant depths of their stores. It is, however, an issue that is more complex for certain categories of objects. This paper focuses on one such category: the ritually concealed, specifically that of the shoe. Its aim is to explore how the concealed shoe’s status as a ‘concealed object’ complicates its transition into a museum environment. It will achieve this by exploring the biographies of accessioned examples, from the moment of their discovery to their conversion into museum artefacts, in order to demonstrate the complex processes of ‘museumification’.

Introducing the Concealed Shoe

A full contextualisation of concealed shoes is beyond the scope and remit of this paper, and has been the subject of numerous other studies (cf. Easton 1999, 2016; Eastop 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2016; Evans 2010; Evans *et al.* 2016; Hoggard 2004; Houlbrook 2013; Manning 2012; Merrifield 1987; Swann 1996, 2016). What follows, therefore, is a necessarily brief summary, which cannot do justice to the complex theories surrounding the enigmatic custom of concealment, but will hopefully outline the main points.

In the 1950s June Swann, former Keeper of the Boot and Shoe Collection of Northampton Museum, noticed a recurring pattern in the finds being donated to her department (Swann 1996, 56; Swann 2016: 118). A range of footwear, dating primarily from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, was brought to her attention, having been discovered in unusual locations within buildings: within walls, up chimneys, in ceilings, beneath floorboards. Noting how peculiar these locations were, in most cases discounting accidental loss as a cause, Swann took it upon herself to gather as much data as possible on this unfamiliar, previously unstudied phenomenon (Swann 2016: 119). She instigated the *Index of Concealed Shoes* (hereafter the *Index*), which, from its moment of conception, grew exponentially. In 1969 Swann had recorded 129 such shoes; by 1986, the number had grown to 700 (Merrifield 1987: 133); by 1996, to 1550; and the *Index* continues to grow.

In 2016-17, the University of Hertfordshire collaborated with Northampton Museum to digitise the *Index*, producing a dataset that is both more accessible and more searchable. At its most recent count, the digitised *Index* contains a total of 2980 entries. It was a widespread practice, with concealed shoes having been discovered as far afield as Australia (Evans 2010) and North America (Manning 2012), but the majority were found in the British Isles. This data will be drawn on throughout this article to highlight some notable trends in the custom of concealment. For example, the most common location for a concealed shoe is up the chimney, followed by – in order of popularity – within walls, under floors, in roofs, and in fireplaces. More than half were from domestic buildings, but shoes have been discovered in a wide variety of structures, from manor houses to colleges, from hospitals to military barracks, from churches to Charlie Chaplin's Film Studio (Swann 2016: 122).

As shoes are relatively dateable artefacts, the production of most can be narrowed down to within a century (although Swann warns us that time of production may greatly pre-date time of concealment (2016: 122)). These data tell us that while the custom of shoe concealment was evident prior to the sixteenth century, it was not until the seventeenth, the eighteenth, and most prominently the nineteenth centuries that it gained widespread popularity. Some examples post-date 1900 but not many. These shoes represent a wide variety: both working- and upper-class styles, belonging to men, women, and children. Clearly it was not a discriminative practice.

However, as prolific as this custom evidently was, it still remains a mystery to us, simply because no contemporaneous written record has been identified explaining the practice. As Hutton observes, the ‘folklore record remains obstinately silent’ on certain subjects (2016: 11) – and this proves to be one such subject. It is unclear whether this silence is incidental – to use a popular aphorism, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence – or whether it was actually an integral aspect of the ritual of concealment (Eastop 2016: 137). Perhaps, as Swann suggests, ‘the secrecy continually encountered suggests that the superstition, if disclosed, ceases to be effective’ (1996: 67), and indeed the efficacy of many rituals is contingent upon secrecy (Luhmann 1989: 251; Roper 2005: 189). Either way, in our consideration of why shoes were concealed and what their concealers were hoping to achieve, we have only theories – which this paper will outline briefly before delving into a more in-depth examination of the ‘museumising’ issues they pose.

The Concealed Shoe as Apotropaic Device

The most common theory is that concealed shoes were a category of apotropaic device, employed to protect a household against malevolent forces. The strongest evidence to support this is the locations of the shoes: in chimneys, hearths, walls, roof spaces, and under floorboards. One attribute unites these locations: their liminality and, consequently, their vulnerability. During the period that we are focusing on (from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries) the outside world was perceived as being rife with dangers; malevolent forces, from witches and demons to ghosts and fairies, threatened to infiltrate the post-medieval household

(Reay 1985: 116). These preternatural forces could gain entry via the smallest access points; as James I wrote in his *Daemonologie* of 1597, concerning popular beliefs of witches' familiars:

some of them sayeth, that being transformed in the likenesse of a little beast or foule, they will come and pearce through whatsoever house or Church, though all ordinarie passages be closed, by whatsoever open, the aire may enter in at (James I 1597 [1924]: 39).

It was the marginal areas of a structure, therefore, such as the roof and the chimney, which were considered the most vulnerable to these outside threats (Lloyd, et al, 2001: 57; Johnson 1996: 160-161). This explains why so many probable apotropaic devices of this period – from dried cats to horse skulls, from timber markings to witch-bottles – inhabited the liminal, assailable areas of walls, roofs, chimneys, hearths, and thresholds.¹ The shoe, therefore, finds itself in the company of a category of objects with more attestable preternatural functions, suggesting that it too was probably employed as an apotropaic device. This engenders the question, however, of why the shoe was considered suitably protective – and, furthermore, why does it appear to have been *the* most commonly concealed object in England (Hoggard 2004: 178)?

Despite its relatively innocuous character, the shoe can be perceived as suitably apotropaic, and two theories regarding this focus on the physicality of shoes. Firstly, their material. In popular belief, evil spirits, fairies, and demons did not like the smell of leather (MacCulloch 1914: 202; Radford and Radford 1948: 306), which would fit with many concealed shoes. Secondly, their shape. Merrifield draws our attention to the tale of John Schorn, a parish priest from Buckinghamshire and one of England's unofficial saints (1987: 135). According to popular belief, manifested in numerous pilgrim badges – as well as the names of several Buckinghamshire pubs (Swann 2016: 125) – Schorn was famous for his feat of capturing of a devil inside a boot, leading to the concept of the shoe or boot as a type of 'spirit trap' (Hoggard 2004: 179). This story may stem from the bowl-like shape of the shoe, which can act as a form of container (Brooks 2000: 68).

As well as physical suitability, the shoe also embodies a significant amount of symbolism. Murray notes that the foot is 'a liminal extremity, on the cusp between us and the soil... Feet are on the frontier and it is around frontiers that rituals accumulate' (1999: 131). And rituals certainly do seem to accumulate around the shoe, which was used as a charm (Cadbury 2016: 207n) and is associated with concepts of fertility, healing, and, most notably, luck (Houlbrook 2013: 106). During the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first) it was considered unlucky to put your left shoe on first (Radford and Radford 1948: 158), to place a new shoe on a table

(Radford and Radford 1948: 305), and to find a knot in your shoe lace (Radford and Radford 1948: 306). Conversely it was considered *good* luck to throw an old shoe after somebody as they undertake a new endeavour or begin a journey. As John Heywood wrote in 1598: ‘And home agayne hytherward quicke as a bee, Now for good lucke caste an olde shoe after mee’ (1598, 1.9.37–8 in Farmer 1906, 21). Perhaps shoes were concealed within buildings to bestow good luck upon them.

It is suggested that the shoe’s power to endow luck stems from its close association with its wearer. Shoes are highly personal items. Murray believes that ‘[a]s bearer of the individual’s imprint, the shoe functions as a signature – a spiritual graffito’ (1999: 136), while White posits that shoes ‘are compelling symbols of individual lives and act metaphorically to suggest an intimacy with the person who wore them’ (2009: 141); it is intrinsically linked with its wearer and therefore acts as representative of them, a theory put forward by Swann. ‘Why the shoe?’ she asks; because it is ‘the only garment we wear which retains the shape, the personality, the essence of the wearer’ (1996: 56). By retaining the foot’s shape – and smell – the shoe becomes a metaphorical symbol of the wearer. As well as endowing luck, this could have two further effects.

Firstly, the shoe could act as a ‘lightning conductor’, to use Easton’s phrase (1999: 23), in diverting the malevolent supernatural threat from entering the house. The threat – be it a witch, demon, or spirit – ‘sees’ the shoe, believes it to be a member of the household, and attacks the shoe instead. It subsequently becomes trapped inside, á la John Schorn. Secondly, the shoe’s physical contact and metonymical link with its wearer could have endowed it with that wearer’s essence, luck, or protective power via such conceptual processes as contact sorcery (Eastop 2016: 142). Other items of clothing appear to have been imbued with a similar power; Hartland’s nineteenth-century tale of fairies in Selkirk is just one demonstrative example. When fairies came to steal a new-born baby (as they were wont to do), the mother covered herself and the baby with her absent husband’s waistcoat; the fairies, upon seeing the waistcoat, quickly departed, causing no harm. As Hartland writes, the ‘suggestion seems to be that the sight of the father’s clothes leads “the good people” [the fairies] to think that he himself is present watching over his offspring’ (1891: 98).

Evidently there are a variety of theories concerning the perceived functions of concealed shoes, and we should avoid the trap of assuming only one theory correct. The author has written elsewhere concerning the ‘mutability of meaning’. Drawing on Lauri Honko’s work (1985),

Houlbrook observes that ‘participation in folk customs tends to be formulaic and ritualized. However, the reasons behind participation and the ‘meanings’ ascribed to the custom will be as varied as the practitioners themselves’ (2014: 41). Forgive the pun, but one shoe does not fill all; these shoes were probably concealed for different reasons at different times by different people, and as Cadbury notes, people probably conducted such customs ‘without thinking too carefully about how they worked’ (2016: 205).

The Biography of the Concealed Shoe

The concealed shoe, and the complex theories surrounding it, have been briefly outlined; it is now time to turn to a consideration of the issues such an object poses within a museum environment. The first issue is classification: how does one classify a concealed shoe? Is it a ‘magical’ object and can it be designated as such? These are not simple questions to answer when we consider the convoluted biography of the concealed shoe.ⁱⁱ

It was noted above that when an object transitions into a museum environment, it undergoes both physical displacement and conceptual alteration; it no longer does what it was initially intended to do. It is recontextualised. The concealed shoe, however, has already been recontextualised decades – centuries – before it enters a museum; this recontextualisation occurs at its moment of concealment.

As far as we know, concealed shoes were not crafted as concealed shoes. They were initially produced to act as any other item of footwear, designed to separate foot from ground. However, as Mackenzie’s study of *Androgynous Objects* (1991) highlights, no object is static or fixed, but is instead adapted to suit various uses and interpretations. Just as many ritual deposits – such as coins (Houlbrook 2014, 2015) – are originally created to fulfil a purely secular purpose and only later are converted into objects with numinous significance or preternatural qualities (Osborne 2004: 2), so too are many apotropaic devices. The concealed shoe began its ‘life’ as an item of footwear; it only became a concealed shoe when it was actually concealed.

When, in the life-span of a shoe, was it selected for concealment? Judging by the condition of the vast majority of these shoes, the obvious answer is: when they could no longer serve their function as footwear. Looking at the statistics from the digitised *Index*, a mere 6% of the shoes recorded in the British Isles were in good or new conditions, while the remaining 94% were old, worn, and damaged, a notable point made by Swann (1996: 59). Figure 1, for example,

shows the child's shoe discovered in the chimneybreast of a seventeenth-century farmhouse in Ilkley, Yorkshire, with a seemingly unserviceable hole in the toe. Figure 2 is the pair of men's boots from the roof space of the vestry of the Savoy Chapel, London, with gaping holes in the uppers. Figure 3 shows one of the five shoes of the Otley Cache, found in the roof-space of a townhouse in Otley, Yorkshire, which is so badly damaged that it is barely recognisable as footwear.

The poor conditions of the shoes are unsurprising. Considering the expense of shoes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – costing, on average, a week's wages (Swann 1996: 59) – it is unlikely that anyone of modest means would have concealed a new shoe. Rather they would have worn the new shoe, and continued to wear it – repairing and altering it – until it was no longer serviceable as footwear. Only then would it have been used as a concealed shoe in a process of 'ritual recycling' (Houlbrook 2013).

Bearing in mind, then, the two 'lives' of the concealed shoe – as footwear and as apotropaic device – its classification gets somewhat confused: is it profane or 'magical'? The author argued in her paper *Ritual, Recycling and Recontextualisation* (Houlbrook 2013) that the concealed shoe renders redundant such classificatory dichotomies of 'sacred'/'secular' and 'numinous'/'profane'. 'Would the original concealers of the shoes...have distinguished between the numinous and the profane in all of their actions? Probably not' (Houlbrook 2013: 108) – therefore we should not either. However, how a curator chooses to interpret and present these objects is an issue that will be considered later, because the concealed shoe undergoes another transition before it even reaches a museum. Before then, the concealed has to be revealed.

The Discovery of the Concealed Shoe

The concealed shoe is, by definition, concealed; they are secreted away for decades or centuries before they are discovered. This is the case with most archaeological evidence, from the remains of ancient peoples to the remnants of their settlements; but the notable difference is that, in most cases (although not all), such finds are made by archaeologists who are seeking them. The concealed shoe, on the other hand, is invariably stumbled upon by chance rather than by design, and often by people who, unfamiliar with the custom of shoe concealment, do not recognise the historical significance of their find.

Most concealed shoes are found during renovation or restoration work, such as the child's shoe found recently in the fireplace of a seventeenth-century house in Hethersett, Norfolk. Other examples include the child's shoe found in the 1980s in the chimneybreast of The Lamb Inn in Bury, Greater Manchester; the child's shoe found by builders, also in the 1980s, in the southern staircase of The Olde Boar's Head in Middleton, Greater Manchester; and the man's boot found in the roof space of Woodchester Mansion, Gloucestershire. Other shoes, such as the woman's and child's discovered in Belper, Derbyshire, came to light after the building they were concealed in was demolished.

Sometimes the significance of these shoes are recognised, and sometimes they are not. The Otley Cache, for example, was found when builders were renovating a townhouse; they had already found one shoe and discarded it by the time Christine Deane, Keeper of the Otley Museum collection, arrived on site and salvaged the rest. This is sadly the fate probably shared by many concealed shoes: perceived by their finders as nothing more than old and dirty shoes, they are thrown away, never to be recorded. Still more undoubtedly remain undiscovered, shrouded in the dark recesses of a building's roof space, its walls, or up its chimney – and for the sake of those that have yet to be found, attempts are being made to ensure that their significance is recognised by their finders.

In a paper written in 1996, Swann made an appeal to finders of concealed shoes 'to treat any finds as an archaeological excavation, recording address, position including direction of north, any order or layers, associated objects, and comments from finders and observers' (1996: 67). In 2013, Timothy Easton made a similar appeal in his *Historical Archaeology* paper, asserting the importance of photographing all finds *in situ*, making a detailed record of exactly where and how they were found, and carrying out only the necessary conservation (2014: 30-31).

In terms of public engagement, the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project (hereafter DCGP) probably has the most impact. In 1998, Dinah Eastop of the Textile Conservation Centre, the University of Southampton, set up the ongoing DCGP, which built on Swann's *Index* (Eastop 2016). The DCGP, which is concerned with all forms of concealed garments, aims to gather data about finds as well as to promote public understanding of their significance (Eastop 2016: 134-135). It achieves this by recording oral history accounts of discoveries and providing information for finders via a publically-accessible website (Eastop 2010). The author has also contributed to this effort by producing *The Concealed Revealed* website (Houlbrook 2015) and

Facebook page, which include guidance for finders as well as information concerning the broader category of all concealed objects.

Museumification

Even if a concealed shoe is discovered and its significance recognised, it will not necessarily end up in a museum environment. As Swann observes: ‘Most people appeared instinctively to put shoes back where they were found’ (2016: 119); for example, out of the 31 concealed garments in the Otley Museum records, 17 were returned to their finders, and there seems to be a widespread belief that removing a concealed shoe will result in bad luck. The concealed revealed is re-concealed, and this is a process considered by the author elsewhere (Houlbrook forthcoming).

In roughly half of the cases, however, shoes are donated to a museum. What the museum chooses to do with them, however, is dependent upon the specific interests and expertise of its staff (Eastop 2016: 134). Before the research of Swann and Merrifield – and before the accessibility of information via the internet – some museums may not have recognised the significance of a concealed shoe and disposed of it themselves. Fortunately this is probably not the norm today, but many museums do still choose to relegate these items to storage rather than to display. An example of this is the pair of men’s boots in storage at the Museum of London.

These boots, hobnailed with elastic sides, had been found in the roof of the vestry of the Savoy Chapel in London, originally with a sooty scrap of wallpaper tucked inside bearing a pencil inscription which read: ‘William Chapman/ B 3d July 1828/ this was don in 1876’. Upon the author’s visit to the museum in November 2015, the boots were retrieved from storage and, stuffed with balled-up pads of tissue paper to help retain shape, were set out for inspection on a white tissue table-cloth. Given a pair of latex gloves, warned by the curator that the boots were extremely fragile, and asked to handle them as little as possible, the author was hesitant to touch them at all, lest the boots fall apart in her hands, and when she did move them, it was gingerly, with a great deal of reluctance and breath-holding. With hindsight, this trepidation seems to have had less to do with the state of the boots and more to do with their environment.

As was stated above, a museum environment, according to Macdonald, almost sanctifies an object: ‘Once they are in museums – such is the magic-conferring power of these institutions – objects are special’ (2002: 92). However, ‘museumizing’ objects does more than ‘sanctify’ them; it also isolates them. The location of the Savoy Chapel boots – in storage – prevents them from being seen by members of the public. Only the author’s academic credentials privileged her engagement with them; as Gathercole observes, some objects ‘are at the core of museum scholarship, locked away in store-rooms, revealing their secrets only to the initiated’ (1989: 76). Locked away, revealing their secrets only to a select few... This sounds familiar. Was this not the status of these boots before they were accessioned; before they were discovered in their hiding place in the Savoy Chapel vestry? Has a museum environment resulted in a reversal of the usual process: the concealed revealed has become re-concealed? Perhaps environmental context has not been entirely lost after all.

In other cases, concealed shoes are displayed, usually in museums which specialise in folklore or footwear. For example, at Northampton Shoe Museum, eight concealed shoes are on display in a mock chimney in the ‘Life and Sole’ shoe gallery, while the Cambridge Folk Museum has three concealed shoes from Cambridgeshire exhibited in a glass display cabinet in the centre of the room, alongside other apotropaic devices: witch-bottles and a horse’s leg and jaw bone. There is obviously something to say about the irony of displaying a ritually concealed object – environmental context certainly has been lost in such cases. However, it is not this loss which appears to concern most museums and heritage centres, but rather another issue entirely, one which Eastop (2006a) succinctly words as: ‘to clean or not to clean’.

To Clean or Not To Clean

In 1990, the UK Institute of Conservation (UKIC) defined conservation as ‘the means by which the true nature of an object is preserved’ (UKIC 1990: 8). This often involves some form of restoration, whereby an item is cleaned and patched up with minimal compromise to the historical ‘integrity’ of that object in order to preserve its ‘true nature’. However, what if the object’s ‘true nature’ includes wear, tear, dirt, and damage?

It was noted above that the vast majority of concealed shoes are heavily worn and, in some cases, badly damaged – a fact that is unsurprising considering such expensive items as shoes would probably not have been apotropaically recycled until they were no longer serviceable as

footwear. However, old shoes were probably not used in such a way only because they had *lost* their value as footwear, but also because they had *gained* value; it is possible that older shoes were perceived as possessing more potent apotropaic power because a connection with their past wearer is more visibly evident. Perhaps shoes are only imbued with the wearer's essence and protective power if they have been worn by them for a long time and their imprint is thus unambiguous (Murray 1999: 137). The selection of a shoe for concealment was probably therefore firmly entrenched in its physical condition (Evans *et al.* 2016: 244), therefore rendering wear, tear, and damage part of the object's 'true nature'.

Fortunately, as Eastop notes: 'It is now widely recognized that 'true nature' is not a fixed state but varies with context, is socially determined and is subject to contestation' (2006a: 518). Indeed, the Institute for Conservation defines 'true nature' as 'evidence of its origins, its original construction, the materials of which it was composed, and information as to the technology used in its manufacture. *Subsequent modifications may be of such a significant nature that they too, should be preserved*' (UKIC 1990: 8, emphases added). Subsequent modifications, therefore, are sometimes perceived as being significant enough to be preserved – such as the wear, tear, and damage of concealed shoes.

This is why, for example, although Otley Museum conserved four of the shoes in the Otley Cache, they chose to keep one in its original state (Figure 3). Despite only the quarters and heel remaining, this has been identified as a working class lace-up boot, probably a woman's, but it is in such a terrible condition that not much else can be deduced from it – except that it demonstrates the level of damage concealed shoes exhibited before concealment. It also clearly illustrates that some museums at least recognise the poor conditions of such shoes as significant enough to be retained.

Eastop makes a contrast between finds that are viewed by museums as 'material evidence of the past' (i.e. as footwear) and those that are seen as 'material evidence of beliefs' (i.e. as apotropaic device) (2016: 136). At Otley, the unrestored shoe is clearly prioritised as being the latter. Evidence of such prioritising can also be seen at the Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester, which has two concealed shoes in its collection, neither with a wealth of provenance information accompanying them. What is known is that both were found concealed in the roof space of two different manor houses, both in poor, damaged conditions.

One of the Platt Hall shoes, shown in Figure 4, is a man's mule with a damask upper cover, dated to the 1720s. The image on the left illustrates the state it was in when first found: it was

frayed, misshapen, disintegrated in places, and soiled with birds' droppings. Because it is a rare shoe – one of the earliest upper-class men's shoes to have survived – the Gallery of Costume decided to restore it; the soiling was subsequently removed, and the shoe was humidified to re-shape the leather upper, and given a silk infill and adhesive overlay. As we can see from the image on the right, it now looks much more like an example of 18th-century upper-class male fashion than the apotropaic device it probably became. To return to Eastop's dichotomy, it is therefore prioritised as 'material evidence of the past' rather than as 'material evidence of beliefs' (2016: 136).

The other shoe held by the Gallery of Costume (Figure 5) has been treated very differently. It is an eighteenth/nineteenth-century woman's working-class shoe with a black lace and a shallow heel. When it was found, it was flattened, dirty, with holes in its upper – and this is how it remains, because the Gallery of Costume decided not to restore it. Because it is not a particularly rare shoe, they chose to prioritise it as 'material evidence of beliefs' (demonstrating the typical poor condition of the concealed shoe as probable apotropaic device) rather than as 'material evidence of the past'. Although these two shoes were both found in similar circumstances and conditions, and were accessioned in the same museum, they have been treated completely differently, demonstrating the variability of what we perceive to be an object's 'true nature'.

Matters of interpretation are significant to this study, for they demonstrate not only how heritage professionals perceive the concealed shoe but also how the public are being invited – or even instructed – to understand the object and the customs behind it. This issue, including the question of whether museum interpretations of concealment have stagnated or developed over time, is deserving of a paper in itself; one that the author plans to pen in the near future. This will be with particular reference to the upcoming display change of Northampton Museum's shoe gallery, as part of a major expansion that began in February 2017.

Conclusion

It was posited in this paper's introduction that the accessioning of an object into a museum is not a simple matter of physically transferring said object into a museum environment; loss of context, Paine's 'sacralization' (2013: 2), and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's 'museum effect' (1991: 410) all amount to a complex process of recontextualisation. It was also posited that for some

categories of objects, this process is even more complex than for others – and the concealed shoe is one such category.

The fact that concealed shoes are, by definition, concealed, complicates their transition into a museum environment. Firstly, because many of them probably remain undiscovered and, of those that are found, the obscurity of this phenomenon – not to mention their rather modest appearances – lead to many of them being discarded as rubbish. Secondly, their concealment within domestic spaces leads some finders to retain them and, in some cases, re-conceal them rather than donate them to a museum (Houlbrook forthcoming). And thirdly, for those that do find themselves accessioned, their ironic transition from concealed object to displayed artefact constitutes a dramatic loss of context.

Other issues beset the curator or conservator, which stem from the concealed shoe's already convoluted biography. The concealed shoe has not always been an apotropaic device but began its 'life' as utilitarian footwear; should it therefore be presented as an example of historic footwear or of domestic protective magic? Should it be restored or left in its found state, retaining the wear, tear, and soiling that may have been integral to its efficacy? Evidently the more complex an object's biography is, the more complex its transition into a museum environment proves to be.

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Figure 5 – Woman's working-class shoe held at the Gallery of Costume, Manchester (Photograph by author)

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ⁱ The corpus of literature surrounding post-medieval apotropaic devices is vast but for broad overviews see Davies 2015, Easton 2014, Hoggard 2004, Hutton 2016, Merrifield 1987.

ⁱⁱ The processual notion of the 'biography' of an object goes back to Kopytoff (1986), who believes that an object's life-cycle should be viewed similarly to that of a human's.