

“For All of Your Protection Needs”:  
Tracing the “witch-bottle” from the Early Modern Period to *TikTok*

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The purpose of this paper is to understand the survival and modern continuation of a tradition surrounding the apotropaic artifacts that came to be known as “witch bottles.” The origins of these artifacts can be traced to the Early Modern period in Britain and North America. Clearly no tradition survives unbroken or unaltered, and customs surrounding the making of witch-bottles are no exception. The purpose of this article is to examine what happens to the “witch-bottle” between its first appearance in the seventeenth century and its re-imagining in a workshop for making witch-bottles led by a Lincolnshire artist on August 19, 2021. In this transit from past to present, we offer brief coverage of past customs and provide a stronger focus on the twenty-first-century incarnations of these artifacts. Contemporary fashioning of “witch-bottles” are relatively understudied in comparison to earlier historic finds, but, as we argue, they have the ability to make those early finds more meaningful.

Let us begin with an account of the twenty-first century workshop.

It turns out you get your hands dirty making a witch-bottle. Plastic tablecloths, paper towels, and aprons are necessary for contending with the messy crafting process, as demonstrated by artist, researcher, and workshop leader Lucy Wright.<sup>1</sup> The activities in which workshop participants engage include squirting bright paint into balled-up clay then kneading the color through until it's turned from grey to pink or blue or yellow, then flattening it with a rolling pin and then molding it onto the outside of an empty wine bottle, using fingers to smooth out the surface until clay completely obscures the glass. They are encouraged to embellish the outside with shapes created by cookie-cutters or imprints from the star-like crowns of dried poppy heads, and to use plastic modelling tools to inscribe the clay with initials and dates, claims of ownership and artistry. These artists will be scrubbing paint off their fingernails and glitter out of their hair for days to come.

[Figures 1-2]

Bottles, once made, are filled with contents and accompanying wishes. “How do you spell ‘mermaids’?” asks one little girl, an intense look of concentration on her face. As her grandmother spells it aloud, the girl leans over a small piece of paper and writes with a colored pencil. She had announced, a moment before, that she was wishing “mermaids and unicorns and princesses are real.” Wish written, a “potion” is then made, mixing lavender, rosemary, dried peonies, and sequins. Along with the rolled-up wish, this mixture is funneled into the bottle with a paper cone, and then the bottle abruptly stoppered up. We wouldn't want the wish to escape.

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<sup>1</sup> Her personal web page gives samples of Wright's other artworks: <https://www.artistic-researcher.co.uk/>

The bottle is bagged and then taken home, where it will be put on display in the grandmother's summer house.

[Figure 3]

A boy has a slightly different wish to make. "To be rich," he declares, opting to use only gold sequins and glitter in his potion. A surprisingly solid understanding of sympathetic magic for one so young. Perhaps it is instinctive. Or perhaps he learned a thing or two from visiting the "Harry Potter Studio Tour, London" just the week before. His bottle won't be put on display. Once he's taken it home, he'll be putting it in a locked box in his bedroom. Lucy, the workshop leader, asks the boy to remember her when his wish comes true.

It was a sunny Thursday afternoon in August when families from Navenby, Lincolnshire, attended this "Make a Witch-Bottle" workshop at a local museum called "Mrs. Smith's Cottage."<sup>2</sup> Halfway through the school summer holidays, parents and guardians were on the look-out for activities to keep their children entertained, and this was a novel contender. Having received funding to run a series of public events, Sally Bird, Learning and Development Officer for Mrs. Smith's Cottage, wanted to host a workshop that drew on folklore as "something fun," that encouraged creativity, and allowed people to take something tangible away with them. Various factors led to a witch-bottle making workshop. Familiar with Lucy's art, Sally was inspired by the creative incorporation of inscribed hexafoils and daisy-wheels, decorative motifs

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<sup>2</sup> Formerly the cottage of Hilda Smith, who lived there from 1922 until the 1990s, when it was saved by the local community and preserved as a museum in 1999;

<https://www.mrssmithscottage.com/learn/history/>

popularly (but probably erroneously) known as “witch-marks,” into her work.<sup>3</sup> Sally also knew that a historic “witch-bottle,” currently held at Lincoln museum, had been found in a house not far from the museum,<sup>4</sup> and was acquainted with local residents who knew the story of its discovery. “This was enough for me to want to do this,” explained Sally, who added that the theme of care and protection – inherent to the witch-bottle – connected neatly to the life of Mrs. Smith.<sup>5</sup> Lucy, whose aim was also to help people create artwork they could then display in their homes, agreed to direct the workshop, and so it was advertized via the museum’s website and social media accounts, as well as on a sign on the street outside. “Inspired by witch bottles used in the past to protect homes from bad luck,” the invitation began, “we are helping you create your very own witch bottle. Filled with lovely things and wishes for the future.”

Those signed up for the workshop were advised by email the day before to “please have a think about the wishes or messages that you might want to put into your witchbottle” – and to wear clothes they did not mind getting messy. Flowers were gathered from Mrs. Smith’s garden

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Champion, a leading researcher on medieval graffiti, is critical of the term “witch-marks”, noting its recent origin and sensationalist connotations. See *Medieval Graffiti: The lost voices of England’s churches* (London: Ebury, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> A somewhat sensationalizing account is given in Greig Watson, “Artefact recalls witches' shadow,” BBC News, Nottingham, Wednesday, 28 January, 2004; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/lincolnshire/3437241.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/lincolnshire/3437241.stm).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sally Bird, Learning and Development Officer, Mrs Smith’s Cottage, 29/07/2021. All quotes from interviews are referenced this way throughout. Where they are not referenced, the quotes are from the survey or the *YouTube* and *TikTok* videos and comments.

to be used in the “potions” and all materials were set up on a table outside, making the most of the pleasant weather. With Lucy demonstrating techniques, the workshop attendees made their own bottles, and by the end of the day, an array of bright or pastel-colored clay bottles, eclectically adorned, were making their way to various homes in Lincolnshire and beyond.

[Figure 4]

“Filled with lovely things and wishes for the future” is not a description readily applied to the historic “witch-bottle.” And yet, on August, 19, 2021 in a little Lincolnshire village, this is what witch-bottles became – if only for a day. They were the creative, whimsical focus of a museum workshop aimed at public engagement, and most popularly used for entertaining children over the school holidays. The resulting creations were to be displayed as pieces of art in the home, or else secreted by their young creators, who wished to be rich or for mermaids to be real. They are a far cry from the Early Modern “witch-bottle,” but we know that customs cannot be immutable in a world of shifting beliefs, values, and technologies. Customs must adapt in order to survive. Clearly the craft and visual vocabulary evoked by the older “witch-bottles” survives. But what customs and context for understanding surrounded the early modern practices? Is there in fact any continuity?

[Figure 5]

### The Early Modern Witch-Bottle

“Take your Wive’s Urine as before, and Cork, it in a Bottle with Nails, Pins and Needles, and bury it in the Earth; and that will do the feat,” advised an old man, speaking to the husband of a woman believed to have been bewitched. “The Man did accordingly. And his Wife began to

mend sensibly and in a competent time was finely well recovered ... this Counter-practice prescribed by the Old Man, which saved the Mans Wife from languishment, was the death of that Wizard that had bewitched her.”<sup>6</sup>

This is one of the earliest known descriptions of the counter-practice that began to be called “witch bottles” in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> It recounts a case in Suffolk, believed by Ralph Merrifield to have occurred prior to 1660,<sup>8</sup> of a landlady diagnosed as bewitched by an “Old Man that Travelled up and down the Country.” It appears in the book *Saducismus Triumphatus, or Evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions*, written to counter skepticism of witchcraft by clergyman Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680) and published posthumously in 1681. This account may have been a later addition by the book’s editor Henry More. At first, the old man of the story – clearly of the cunning-folk variety<sup>9</sup> – had prescribed inserting pins, needles, and nails along with

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus, or, a full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions* (London: Printed for J. Collins and S. Lownds 1681), 206

<sup>7</sup> Scholars such as Annie Thwaite prefer the term “urinary experiment,” due to the term “witch-bottle” not being contemporary with the historic practice (Annie Thwaite, “What is a ‘Witch Bottle’? Assembling the Textual Evidence from Early-Modern England,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 15 no. 2, 2020: 227–51, 228). However, since our main interest is in the post-nineteenth-century revival of such practices, we will continue to use the term witch-bottle as current practitioners do.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: Batsford, 1987), 171.

<sup>9</sup> Owen Davies, *Cunning-folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003).

the landlady's urine into a bottle and placing it on the fire. When the bottle exploded, expunging its efficacy, he recommended burying the bottle instead, a method that proved more successful. The bewitched landlady was cured and the bewitching "Wizard" died.

This example of magical medicine was drawing on various other practices and beliefs, most comprehensively detailed in Thwaite and Jeffries et al., but briefly considered here.<sup>10</sup> We see nails being recommended to counter witchcraft in 1593, when Essex minister George Gifford described a cunning man's remedy: "set on a posnet or some pan with nayles, and seethe them, and the witch shall come in while they be seething, and within a few days after, her face will be all bescratched with the nailes."<sup>11</sup> Here nails are employed because of their sharpness; when boiled, they scratch the witch's face, thereby identifying them. In 1671, we see nails again, this time accompanying the victim's urine in a bottle. In physician Joseph Blagrove's *Astrological Practice of Physick* (1671), a remedy against bewitchment was described thus:

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<sup>10</sup> Thwaite, "What is a 'Witch Bottle'?" and Thwaite "The 'Urinary Experiment': Material Evidence of Magical Healing in Early Modern England," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 16 no.1 (2021), 1–16; cf. Chapter 5 in Ann-Sophie Thwaite, *Magic and the Material Culture of Healing in Early Modern England*, Ph.D dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2020; <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.63593>; Nigel Jeffries, Owen Davies, Ceri Houlbrook & Michael Marshall, *Bottles Concealed and Revealed: Examining the reuse of stone and glass vessels as 'witch bottles' and their concealment in mid to late 17th-century England* (London: Museum of London Archaeology, forthcoming 2023).

<sup>11</sup> George Gifford, *A Dialogue concerning Witches and Witchcrafts* (London: Percy Society, 1842) (repr of original 1593 publication), 64.

stop the urine of the Patient, close up in a bottle, and put into it three nails, pins, or needles, with a little white Salt, keeping the urine always warm: If you let it remain long in the bottle, it will endanger the witches life: for I have found by experience, that they will be grievously tormented making their water with great difficulty, if any at all...<sup>12\</sup>

Blagrave here witnesses the belief that stoppering the urine in a bottle with nails, pins, and needles, and keeping it warm, would cause such pain to the witch's bladder that the witch would identify herself by her discomfort and could thereby be forced to undo the curse. The burial of such a filled bottle was obviously different to heating it, but as the "Old Man" recorded in the *Saducismus Triumphatus* asserted, it "will do the feat".<sup>13</sup> As Thwaite suggests, the recommendation of burial likely stemmed from the idea that the efficacy of the remedy was strengthened and prolonged by keeping the bottle's contents sealed and undisturbed.<sup>14</sup> Burying the bottle reduced the risk of somebody finding it, opening it, and (wittingly or unwittingly) rendering the remedy ineffectual.

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Blagrave, *Blagraves astrological practice of physick, Discovering the true way to Cure all kinds of Diseases and Infirmities which are Naturally incident to the body of man*, (London: Printed by S.G. and B.G. for Obad. Blagrave at the printing-press in Little Brittain, 1671), 154

<sup>13</sup> Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Thwaite, "Urinary Experiment," 14-15; Thwaite, *Magic and the Material Culture of Healing in Early Modern England*. 234.

Unsurprisingly, it is not the heated bottles that we have archaeological evidence for, but rather their buried counterparts.<sup>15</sup> Detailed in Jeffries et al. around two hundred glass and stoneware bottles have been recovered from burial “in the Earth” (fields, riverbanks, gardens, churchyards) or concealment within the fabric of buildings (most commonly under floors, hearths, and thresholds). They have been identified as seventeenth-century “witch-bottles,” contemporary with Glanvill and Blagrave’s writings, because of their contents. Many contain traces of urine, along with hair and nail clippings, presumably those of the victim, further enhancing their sympathetic link with bottle and witch. Many also contain sharp objects, such as pins, nails, and thorns, intended to inflict pain on the alleged witch. Myriad other items have been found in these bottles, often alongside the aforementioned contents, from animal bones to fragments of wood, but the most common archaeological survivals correspond with Glanvill and

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<sup>15</sup> Examples of witch-bottles include a Bartmann jug containing hair, earth, a cloth heart, and bent pins, held at the Museum of London (60.121: <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/115335.html>) and another containing a mass of rusty nails (A17210: <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/468031.html>); and a Bartmann jug found containing a heart shaped cloth pierced by pins, held in the Norfolk Museums Collections (NWHCM : 1932.19 <https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/collections/collections-object-page?id=NWHCM+%3a+1932.19> ).

Blagrave's descriptions: urine and sharp, metallic objects.<sup>16</sup> These bottles have largely been found in Greater London and Eastern England, and the majority are stoneware.

The seventeenth-century “witch-bottle” is an example of counter-magic. The examples recorded in Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* and Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physick* were just some of the many men and women from this period practiced in the arts of medical counter-magic to whom the afflicted would turn – for a fee – if neither religious leader nor mundane physician could cure them. Owen Davies describes cunning-folk as men and women “who stood out in society for possessing more knowledge than those around them, knowledge that was acquired either from a supernatural source, from an innate hereditary ability, or from being able to understand writing.”<sup>17</sup> It was undoubtedly early modern cunning-folk who were prescribing the urinary experiments now known as “witch-bottles,” among other cures and commodified magico-medical knowledge.

The witch-bottle is not the only example of bottle magic; there are many other forms throughout history and across cultures – far too many to list here.<sup>18</sup> However, the term “witch-

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<sup>16</sup> The contents of the catalogued bottles are detailed in Jeffries et al., *Bottles Concealed and Revealed*.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, *Cunning-folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), viii. This is still the standard authority on the subject of cunning-folk.

<sup>18</sup> To give two examples, bottle magic is employed in Hoodoo, whereby the bottle is the container for a spell used for love, money, protection, binding enemies, and ensuring a safe and peaceful home. (Catherine Yronwode and Lara Rivera, *Bottle Up and Go: The magic of Hoodoo container spells in boxes, bags, bowls, buckets, and jars* (Forestville, Calif: Lucky Mojo Curio

bottle” itself has been generally reserved in scholarship for the thin-necked receptacles containing objects identifiable as the magical-medical ingredients detailed by Glanvill and Blagrave—most commonly urine, hair, and pins or nails. While there is uncertainty over the classification of some historic “witch-bottles” – i.e. bottles discovered without contents but still labelled “witch-bottles”<sup>19</sup> –the term has been generally used by scholars to refer to Early Modern bottles filled with urine and sharp objects intended to inflict pain, then heated or buried to counteract a witch’s curse. With this definition in mind, how did the witch-bottle become “Filled with lovely things and wishes for the future” on 19 August 2021 in a Lincolnshire village?

As already noted, customs must adapt to survive. But the Navenby witch-bottle workshop did not spring up out of the blue. It was not a colossal leap from early modern counter-curse prescription to twenty-first-century decorative receptacle of children’s wishes. The witch-bottle custom did not simply cease at the close of the seventeenth century, to be abruptly disinterred in 2021. It underwent many adaptations over the centuries.

There are far fewer material records of buried witch-bottles noted from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than the seventeenth, but this is likely a result of recordings bias. As Davies and Easton suggest in their work on cunning-folk and the production of magical artefacts, “a nineteenth-century broken glass bottle dug up from an old garden plot is less likely to attract

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Company, 2020), 34. Another example is the ‘Glass flask reputed to contain a witch’ collected in Sussex by Margaret Murray in 1915, and donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum (Accession number 1926.6.1): <http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID25731.html>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jeffries et al., *Bottles Concealed and Revealed*.

attention as a possible apotropaic, and so such a practice may be considerably underrecorded.”<sup>20</sup>

There are some such finds recorded: for example the eighteenth-century bottle containing thorns and nails found buried beneath the floor of a building in Saffron Walden, Essex; the nineteenth-century glass bottle containing hair, urine, and a human tooth, recovered from the ground near Oswestry, Shropshire; and another nineteenth-century glass bottle found in the vicinity of the chimney of a former public house in Watford village, Northamptonshire.<sup>21</sup> Glass witch-bottles apparently came to replace the stoneware witch-bottles of the seventeenth-century. This reflects advancements in the bottle manufacturing industry, glass bottles becoming much more accessible in the late nineteenth century. Literary records also indicate that by the nineteenth-century, some cunning-folk were experimenting with reusable iron bottles.<sup>22</sup>

The witch-bottle custom did continue into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

However, most later bottles are used in different ritual contexts, and their labelling as “witch-bottles” is does not necessarily signify that they were fashioned in the same manner, or with the

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<sup>20</sup> Owen Davies and Timothy Easton, “Cunning-Folk and the Production of Magical Artefacts,” in Ronald Hutton (ed.), *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 209-231, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffries et al., *Bottles Concealed and Revealed*; ‘Man discovers a 19th century ‘witch bottle’ containing hair, urine and a human tooth’, *Metro* July 6, 2021:

<https://metro.co.uk/2021/07/06/man-finds-19th-century-witch-bottle-holding-hair-urine-and-a-tooth-14878100/> ; ‘Ancient anti-witchcraft potion found at old Northamptonshire pub’, BBC

News, October 31, 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-50186758>

<sup>22</sup> Jeffries et al., *Bottles Concealed and Revealed*.

same intent, as the “urinary experiment.” Some concealed bottles lacked the typical “witch-bottle” ingredients and were hidden alongside other objects. This was the case with five nineteenth-century glass bottles discovered within a wall in a house in Water End, Hertfordshire, alongside clothing, scissors, metal lids, a wooden clothes peg, and newspaper pages from 1895 and 1896.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of such concealed objects remains a mystery, no contemporaneous literary sources having been identified that contextualize such concealed caches,<sup>24</sup> but it is unlikely that they were intended for the same magical-medical cure as seventeenth-century “witch-bottles.”

Even bottles that did include ingredients, buried alone, may have been used for different purposes. Some nineteenth-century examples of bottles buried with pins were likely remedies for warts, such as one found in the churchyard of Bodmin, Cornwall, as indicated by literary sources contemporary with the bottles.<sup>25</sup> Others containing liquid and pins may have been love charms, such as one recovered during roadworks in Stockport and reported on in the local newspaper.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook, “Concealed and Revealed: Magic and Mystery in the Home,” in Sophie Page and Marina Wallace (eds.) *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2019), 67-95, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook, *Building Magic: Ritual and re-enchantment in post-medieval structures* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). Most of the book is concerned with the mysteries of concealed objects

<sup>25</sup> Davies and Easton, “Cunning-folk,” 212.

<sup>26</sup> *Stockport Advertiser*; reprinted in the *Belfast Mercury*, 23 November 1857, cited in Davies and Easton, “Cunning-folk,” 212.

Bottle magic certainly continued to be employed beyond the seventeenth century, but the custom seems to have diversified and shifted slowly away from the idea of protection from witchcraft.

The ritual use of bottles explicitly termed “witch-bottles” emerges in the twentieth century, but we witness a significant shift away their seventeenth-century ancestors in their purpose. This shift was driven largely by the beliefs and practices of contemporary Wiccans, insights into which are gained in this paper through interviews, surveys, and online ethnography. First, however, is a necessarily brief overview of Modern Pagan Witchcraft.

### Modern Pagan Witchcraft

A recurring theme in witchcraft studies is the challenge posed by the fact that there is no unequivocal definition of the terms “witch” or “witchcraft.” In his discussion of the historiography of witchcraft, Malcolm Gaskill uses a marvellous analogy that witchcraft “generates endless contrasting images that resist intelligible unification” and that “in many cases the historian is required to reconcile several distorted versions of the same event, like a painter attempting a portrait in a hall of mirrors.”<sup>27</sup> Detailed examination of the historiography of witchcraft is beyond the scope of the current paper, but it is useful to note some key points.

Traditionally, in Britain and Europe more broadly speaking, those accused of being “witches” in the early modern period were women who occupied a position that placed them in

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<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, "The Pursuit of Reality: Recent Research into the History of Witchcraft," *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 4 (2008): [add page range], 1075. The page range is 1069-1088, 1075 is the page from which the reference is sourced.

opposition to the accepted order of the community in which they lived because they were believed to cause harm to others-- not accidental or incidental harm, but deliberate harmful acts using supernatural means designed to achieve a specific purpose. With a few exceptions, popular opinions about witches shared the view that someone identified as a “witch” were “typically frightening and is often almost a caricature of all the most unpleasant human characteristics.”<sup>28</sup> However, as Ronald Hutton points out, in modern society other types of witches have emerged, including those who use supernatural means to benefit others, those who follow a nature-based neo-pagan religion, and those who resist the imposition of patriarchal structures and hierarchies.<sup>29</sup> The age-old stereotype of the wicked, ugly old witch has not disappeared, but she has certainly been confronted by other images and in the twenty-first century, she has some serious challenges to her hegemony. As a testament to her staying power, however, Raquel Romberg writes about her experience of a Puerto Rican *bruja* adopting – or shapeshifting into – an iconic Anglo representation of a witch during her apprenticeship to a woman named Haydée, a *bruja espiritista* (Spiritist witch healer).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John Widdowson, "The Witch as a Frightening and Threatening Figure," in *The Witch Figure*, ed. Venetia Newall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973). 202.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Witch : A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017),.x.

<sup>30</sup> Romberg, Raquel. “A Halloween Bruja: On the Magical Efficacy of Stereotypical Iconic Witches.” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 11, no. 2 (2016): 208-225. doi:10.1353/mrw.2016.0015, 208-225.

The most prominent such challenge in the anglophone world is the use of the term “witch” as a self-description by practitioners of Modern Pagan Witchcraft, a religious movement that emerged in England in the 1950s, but its roots were firmly planted at the beginning of the twentieth century through theories propounded by Egyptologist and Folklorist Margaret Murray. Murray posited a continuing tradition of a cult of the Horned God and Diana—in other words, a living, breathing, Pagan religion that had survived centuries of Christian persecution.<sup>31</sup> The most popular style of Modern Pagan Witchcraft is commonly known as Wicca, or British Traditional Wicca, which is characterized by an initiatory induction into a group or coven traditionally led by a one or more senior Wiccans. The evolution of Wicca is a complex subject but in summary, retired civil servant Gerald Gardner (1884-1964)<sup>32</sup> claimed that had been initiated into such a cult in Hampshire, England, in 1939 and he subsequently combined what he described as their fragmentary material with elements from Druidry, rural folklore, Freemasonry, and ceremonial magic to formulate a cohesive set of rituals.<sup>33</sup> In December 1950 he met Cecil Williamson

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<sup>31</sup> Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921); Murray, *The God of the Witches* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931); Murray, “Organisations of Witches in Great Britain,” *Folklore* 28, no. 3 (1917).

<sup>32</sup> For an historical examination of Gerald Gardner see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Second edition. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 213-48.

<sup>33</sup> Gerald Brousseau Gardner, *High Magic's Aid* (London: Neptune Press, 1949); Gerald Brousseau Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (London: The Aquarian Press, 1959); Gerald Brousseau Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* ([S.l.]: Rider, 1954).

(1909-1999), whose childhood encounters with practitioners of a traditional style of English rural witchcraft inspired a lifelong passion for witchcraft and magic. Throughout his life Williamson wrote, recorded, and filmed stories about witches and their practices, and in 1951 he purchased a farm on the Isle of Man, which he turned into a Museum of Witchcraft. Gardner was invited to become the resident witch and through this association, a formalized practice of a Pagan religion called Wicca emerged. Williamson vigorously promoted witchcraft and the museum through articles in newspapers and magazines, all supported by an occasional appearance on television.

Today, a new generation of Wiccans continue to contribute to a growing body of written literature about Wicca; indeed there are now so many authors writing about Wicca that it is impossible to name them all. Books that explain aspects of practicing Wicca are especially popular, with many people using these guides as a template to start their own covens or practice alone. Since the beginning of the new millennium, electronic media has become increasingly influential, with many Wiccan communities emerging on social media platforms. Some of these are restricted to Wiccans who can verify their initiatory lineage, but a great many are open to those seeking information about Wicca and are particularly helpful to those who by necessity or preference do not belong to a coven or group.

Wicca has evolved certain recognizable core principles since the 1950s that offer a structure for its beliefs and practices. Wicca generally honours a God and a Goddess and follows a seasonal cycle of rituals that are known collectively as “Sabbats,” which can vary from a simple outline to an elaborate ritual drama, depending upon a variety of circumstances including the preferences of the participants. Wicca is experiential, so rituals are often crafted to reflect certain principles or to focus upon entities intended to provide a spiritual gnosis for the

participants. Wiccans generally meet “once in the month, and when the moon is full,”<sup>34</sup> under the auspices of deities or spirits where they might practice techniques of magic, healing, and divination, as well as making witch-bottles and other traditional forms of spells and charms, which are as much a part of the practices in the twenty-first century as they were when Wicca first emerged. In this context, the term “witch-bottle” is capable of acquiring a more positive set of connotations than it had when it labelled only a form of counter-magic (or counter-witchcraft).

### The Twentieth-Century Witch-Bottle

Witch-bottles occupy an interesting space within Wicca, with a marked division between those who consider witch-bottles to be an historical tradition designed to repel or harm witches, and those who consider them to be apotropaic charms. Informal interviews conducted in person and by telephone during 2021/2 revealed that people who were introduced to Wicca via personal interaction in the 1960s and 1970s generally occupy the former position, with views typically represented by, “why would I, as a witch (Wiccan) use any technique designed to repel witches?” The people represented in this cluster generally have a personal connection to Gerald Gardner and are primarily located in England. They were selected based on their personal connection to the earliest extant practice of Wicca, their availability, and their willingness to discuss witch-bottles. This kind of oral history is of great benefit to the project, because this cluster includes people who are not active on social media and are therefore not subject to the influences of platforms such as Facebook and TikTok.

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<sup>34</sup> Extract from “The Charge of the Goddess” in *Aradia: or, The Gospel of the Witches (of Italy)*, Charles Godfrey Leland (London: D Nutt, 1899) 6. [fill out data, page number; not cited elsewhere]

In *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present* Doreen Valiente acknowledges that the purpose of a witch bottle is not always clear, but offers a theory that:

it was a form of self-defence, used by people who believed themselves to be ‘overlooked’ by the Evil Eye, to get back at the person who was bewitching them. Believing that a magical link existed between the witch and themselves, they tried to put the magic into reverse, and turn it back upon the sender<sup>35</sup>

Valiente also lists the typical contents as “hair, nail-clippings, urine, etc.,” with a cloth heart pierced by pins, sharp nails, and salt, because “witches were supposed to hate it.” The transition from this demonstrably anti-witchcraft practice to one adopted by many thousands of geographically diverse, contemporary Wiccans, is interesting, and surprisingly straightforward to identify. A year after Valiente’s book, a book by Raymond Buckland was published, which contains detailed instructions on how to make a witch-bottle.<sup>36</sup> The description and the rationale for the witch-bottle are indistinguishable from those suggested by Valiente, but Buckland maintained to his contemporaries that it was a technique taught to him by Monique Wilson, High Priestess of the Perth, Scotland, coven. Either is plausible, and the important point is that from this book, as well as Buckland’s later workbook,<sup>37</sup> the idea of making a protective witch-bottle

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<sup>35</sup> Doreen Valiente, *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present* (London: Hale, 1973). (London: Hale, 1978), 38.

<sup>36</sup> Raymond Buckland, *The tree : the complete book of Saxon witchcraft* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974). 94-5.

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Buckland, *Buckland's complete book of witchcraft*, 1st ed., Llewellyn's practical magick, (St. Paul, Minn., U.S.A.: Llewellyn Publications, 1986). 169.

entered contemporary Wiccan practices. Making an apotropaic witch-bottle was also embedded into the practices and teachings of Buckland's initiatory tradition and is common in covens located in the USA.

To investigate further, we sent out an informal survey asking a simple question: "have you ever made a witch bottle?"<sup>38</sup> In keeping with the social media focus of this paper, the survey was conducted on a Facebook group, membership of which was restricted to people whose initiatory induction into a Wiccan coven had been authenticated. At the time of the survey, the group had 363 members and a lively discussion followed the question, with 117 comments being posted of which fifty-three were responses from people who said they had made a witch bottle, with two people saying no, they had never made a witch bottle. From the non-American responses, a Wiccan in Sweden said, "Yes, absolutely! It's a super common thing over here, both among initiated and among other practitioners as well" and a Wiccan from Norway said, "It's definitely in our magical toolbox in Scandinavia." Another Wiccan in Manchester gave a more detailed response about why she made a witch bottle:

Yes, I made one to deflect aggressive and harmful energy of a man who was stalking me. I tried to go to the police, but they couldn't do anything. I made my bottle with the intention to attract, diffuse and deflect the negative energy directed against me. It seemed to have worked really well. The horrible obsessive emailing and phone calls stopped immediately.

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<sup>38</sup> The survey was conducted on May 6, 2021 via a private group on Facebook, restricted to initiates of the Gardnerian tradition of Wicca.

Most of the responses were remarkably consistent in both rationale and technique, generally similar to this example from a Wiccan who lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

I make them for protection/as apotropaic charms, using more or less what folks historically did. The spin of course is that I'm a witch and so I'm not using the bottle to do harm to a witch, but rather to contain some part of my essence as a way to draw/lure negative influences away from me and into the bottle. I use a combination of sharp items (razor blades, pins, broken glass, nails), protective herbs (Martian associations for defense qualities; Saturnian associations for their restrictive qualities), and then for "my essence" I add a few drops of blood and fill the jar with my urine. It's then sealed with wax and hidden away. If I had a place to bury it I would but living in the city I simply hide it in my apartment somewhere. My understanding of the value of the sharp items is that they help "trap" or otherwise "injure" the negative energy caught up in the jar, further restricting it from reaching me as its target.

One Wiccan who lives in NSW, Australia, added her own unique twist to her witch-bottle:

All [witch-bottles] included items linked to the person along with the usual rusty nails, broken glass, hawthorn thorns and of course my urine. One included a dead baby snake I found dead in the ducks' water dish the very morning I planned to work the spell, which absolutely encapsulated that particular recipient, who I thought of as a "snake in the grass."

Sybil Leek is generally considered to be separate from the type of Wicca practiced by those associated with Gardner. Valiente mentions Leek's shop in the New Forest<sup>39</sup> in her private unpublished journal but Leek emigrated to the USA in 1964 and had little contact with covens associated with Gardner. The current High Priest of the coven she established in Pennsylvania was interviewed in 2021 and described how the three High Priestesses taught by Leek used witch-bottles. Edna (1960s) and Christine (1977-82) both followed a broadly similar approach to those responding to the survey, but Charmaine (late 1960s to 1970s) was more aligned with its historical use:

Charmaine used the Witch Bottle for cursing, rather than protection, which is done outdoors when the Moon wanes on the night of Mars (Tuesday). In Dragon's Blood ink, the name is written of the one to curse and any items related to the person. Pins, nails, broken glass are all filled in the bottle. Then you fill it with your own urine and use wax to seal up the bottle. This is then buried away from your home at the base of a dead tree that is still standing but rotting away, accompanied by an incantation.

This echoes the division between those who consider witch-bottles to be a historical tradition designed to repel or harm a witch, and those who consider them apotropaically, as a form of personal protection. Here there is a slight twist, as the bottle is used by a witch, but used against another. Given the respective sizes of those two groups and the trend for apotropaic

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<sup>39</sup> Sybil Leek's shop in Burley, Hampshire, was called 'A Coven of Witches' and although Leek moved to the USA in 1964, the shop continued to trade and is still operating today. [need more data here; not cited anywhere else]

witch-bottles to be promoted in social media, it seems clear why the latter has emerged as the dominant model.

### Witch-Bottles Online

“Contemporary Pagans have long embraced technology,” observes Chris Miller. In his recent work on modern witches’ interactions and integrations with digital cultures, Miller notes that the use of social media within Pagan communities has become such a significant phenomenon it has engendered a new term: WitchTok. Playing on the name of the popular video sharing site *TikTok*, this term denotes a substantial digital subculture of self-identified Wiccans and witches.<sup>40</sup> It is within this subculture that we most prominently find the twenty-first century witch-bottle.

Typing the words “make witch-bottle” into *TikTok* and *YouTube*, another popular video sharing site, brings up myriad results. The titles of the videos range from “DIY: Making A Witch Bottle” to “How to make a simple witch’s bottle for protection out of ONLY DOLLAR STORE ITEMS.” The following analysis is based on observation of twenty such videos, the top ten generated for each site. All videos chosen were publicly accessible and consist of an individual (the video’s producer) demonstrating how to make what they identify as a “witch-bottle.” The videos were published online between February 2015 and September 2021, and while the location of their producers is not always divulged, most of them are in North America and the UK, with one in Australia. The video lengths range from four minutes to just under an hour on *YouTube*, with most being around ten minutes long, while on *TikTok*, which specializes in short

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<sup>40</sup> Chris Miller, ‘How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok: Intersections of Digital, Consumer, and Material Culture(s) on #WitchTok’, *Religions* 13 (2022): 118.

form user videos, they vary from seven seconds to one and a half minutes. As of September 2021, the producers of these videos had an average of 110,000 followers/subscribers, ranging from thirty-three to over 1.3 million. Data from the videos themselves, taken together with interviews with some of these video producers, and interviews with teachers of face-to-face workshops, is here analyzed to consider how a witch-bottle is conceived in contemporary (and highly digital) society.

Not all the video producers explicitly self-identify as Wiccan or contemporary pagan, but the majority do, and the remaining few do so implicitly, by the use of “wiccan” or “witch” in their usernames. The videos involve the producer standing either in front of or behind the camera, zooming in on the materials they prescribe as required for making a witch-bottle (see below), and following the process of inserting the ingredients into a container. Instructions are given verbally or in captions. Some videos are quite professionally produced, with atmospheric background music and stylized shots, reinforcing what Miller identifies as a “Witchy aesthetic,” involving “dark colours, particular symbols, plants, candles, and crystals.”<sup>41</sup> Other videos are simple and unedited. They all feature the producer explaining, either briefly or in detail, the purpose of a witch-bottle, often stated as fact rather than as their perception. It is in these explanations that we see how much the custom has changed since its original iteration in the seventeenth century, which was, according to Blagrave, “to afflict the Witch, causing the evil to return back upon them.”<sup>42</sup> The early witch-bottle was a form of magical medicine, prescribed

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<sup>41</sup> Miller, “How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok” [page number needed here]. The only version I have access to doesn’t give the print page numbers. It is page 7 of 22

<sup>42</sup> *Blagrave’s astrological practice of physick*, 154.

specifically for individuals (not witches) believed to have been bewitched. The twenty-first-century witch-bottle is something quite different.

Protection is still perceived as the primary function of a witch-bottle; common hashtags for these videos include #protection, #protectionspell, and #protectionmagick. However, there are key differences. As one *TikTok* video producer noted in their comments, “A long time ago people used this to keep witches away from their house. Now witches use this to protect themselves from other witches.” The modern-day witch-bottle is therefore being made by the modern-day witch, rather than by a non-witch. Occasionally it is specified, as above, that a witch may use it to shield against or counteract another witch’s negative attention, but often the nature of the antagonist is less specific. “It’s to keep out negativity and any kind of emotional or psychic attacks...almost like a return to sender spell,” explains one YouTuber, while another states that it protects against “somebody who’s giving you a hard time, a hater, a troll, a bully,” by deflecting their negative energies. In fact, the concept of protection is much vaguer. One YouTuber describes the witch-bottle as “100% designed to keep you safe and to keep your premises safe,” while another assures the watcher it will fulfil “all of your protection needs.” Variouslly dubbed “wards,” “guards,” and “shields,” the modern-day witch-bottle appears to protect property as well as people, with some producers specifically seeking protection from mundane home invasions. In one example, the witch-bottle is compared to a security camera.

The modern-day witch-bottle is not only used for protection; it serves other functions. Health is one, with #healing featuring alongside #protection, while love is another. “This one,” explains the *TikTok* producer of a witch-bottle, “has been charged up with a lot of love and great healing energy,” while another details how she is making a witch-bottle to reinforce the love between her and her boyfriend. This shift from a defensive purpose to a more positive one is

reflected upon by two organizers of face-to-face witch-bottle making workshops. In an interview, Tanya Moulding, an aromatherapist who has taught classes in esoteric London bookshop Treadwells, noted from experience that “People want a positive spin.” The custom, she believes, is now less about fear and repulsion, and more about health, abundance, purification, and spirituality.<sup>43</sup> Lucy Wright, who ran the July 2021 Mrs Smith’s Cottage workshop, encouraged her witch-bottle makers to wish for positive results as they filled their bottles. This was why the available ingredients consisted of herbs, flowers, glitter, sequins, and paper for writing wishes on: Lucy did not think people wanted to put anything “horrible” in them.

[Figure 6]

Shifts in function are also reflected in the witch-bottle’s contents prescribed in the videos. “The first thing I like to do is fill it with herbs that scream love to me,” commented one YouTuber, listing dragon’s blood, red rose petals, hibiscus, mistletoe, and lavender. Cloves are included by a *TikTok* video producer “for love and protection,” while roses feature “for self-love and love of others,” as well as for healing. Rosemary is also prescribed, for “clarity and healing”; myrrh for purification; vanilla for its nurturing properties; selenite for cleansing; and seashells “for communication and healthy relationships.” Myriad other items are listed, representing a diverse range of proposed functions, from wildflowers “to bless your home” to glitter “because you need the amazing shine and sparkle to light up other people’s worlds.”

Other factors, besides a shift to a more positive function, have resulted in changes to prescribed contents. “Traditional” items, in-keeping with seventeenth-century recommendations (including nails, pins and needles, and urine), are still recommended by many of the modern-day

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Tanya Moulding, 17/09/2019.

witch-bottle producers. Urine is recommended, with one YouTuber stating in their video, “I’m gonna go take a piss and I’m gonna be right back,” and another disclosing that she has drunk a lot of coffee to strengthen the efficacy of her urine. Urine is, explains one YouTuber, “a link to you” or “like a marker,” suggests another, “like how we think of animals marking their territory... tying them energetically to the bottle.” This is why other personal items (referred to as “taglocks”) are also listed: blood, menstrual blood, saliva, hair, and fingernails. Sharp objects are even more popular; thirteen of the twenty videos observed listed nails, pins, or needles. “You want sharp objects, preferably rusty and old. Older the better. If they’re bent that’s even better,” established one producer, while another explained, “we want that sharpness to pierce through anything that has been sent to us...think of it as a metaphorical barbed wire.” However, there are contemporary twists on these ingredients.

Urine is often replaced by water or other fluids. Including urine, observed one producer on *YouTube*, “sounds gross” to many people, while another noted, “you have to think of sanitation.” “Not everybody wants to add urine,” explained one YouTuber. “Some people are a little squeamish about that. Some people probably just don’t have very good aim.” One exclaimed, “I am not going to use urine for this one kind of because eww. That’s a little bottle, man. That would be the most horrible urine sample ever.” This producer recommends vinegar instead, or spit – which she adds to the bottle discretely, hidden behind her hand. Other substitutes include wine, lemon juice, and river water. “You don’t have to use your piss,” granted one producer, “you can use anything you fucking want.” Indeed, this sense of flexibility is evident in nearly all the videos: “honestly, you can put anything that you feel drawn to put in these bottles. There’s no steadfast rule,” assured one *YouTube* video producer.

Substitutes and additions based on personal preferences are permitted, even encouraged. Safety pins, sherds of broken mirror, smashed shells, razor blades, broken pieces of plastic, thorns, and nettles can be used instead of nails. Crystal chippings and semi-precious stones are popular additions, as are pieces of paper bearing the producer's personal sigil or the names of people they wish to protect. One *TikTok* producer includes a black ribbon, the color specifically chosen for protection, while another added black glitter, "for camouflage from my enemies." Red thread, poison ivy, "hotfoot powder," a dead bee, and a peacock feather are just some of the unique ingredients listed by the various producers, believed to increase the strength of the spell or direct the bottle's function.

This flexibility also allows for accessibility and discretion, which the producers consider important. Advice is given on affordable and unremarkable ingredients: "If you're in the broom closet and again you're trying to find ways to use magical ingredients that really don't cost you a lot of money, that are really inconspicuous, there's quite a few things you can use." Herbs "that you can find in your kitchen cabinet" are recommended; "things you can find in your drawers... or bought at your local supermarket," suggests another. One *TikTok* producer prides herself on making a witch-bottle entirely from objects purchased in the "dollar store." Indeed, budget tips are a trend on WitchTok more broadly, with many videos proposing budget-friendly alternatives to a vast variety of spells.<sup>44</sup>

This flexible attitude, that prioritizes convenience and accessibility, extends also to the choice of bottles. While the majority of seventeenth-century witch-bottles are sturdy stoneware,

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<sup>44</sup> Miller "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok" [page number needed here]. See note above (page 14 of 22)

ranging roughly from 10-40cm in height, the bottles used in the *YouTube* and *TikTok* videos tend to be miniature corked glass bottles, clip-top glass jars, or screw-top vials, rarely taller than 10cm. The reasons for this are three-fold. Firstly, affordability. Most of these bottles were purchased cheaply from “the dollar store,” “Hobby Lobby,” and “B&M,” while others were recycled mustard or coffee jars, corroborating what Miller observes about the prolific re-purposing of household objects in magic.<sup>45</sup> “Any little bottle will do,” explains one YouTuber. Like the stoneware bottles of the seventeenth century, these little glass containers are mundane, utilitarian objects that have been ritually recycled.

The second reason for the use of these containers is size: “obviously the bigger your jar is, the more likely it is someone’s going to find it, the more difficult it is to bury and hide. So the smaller the better,” reasoned another producer. And the popular decision to use glass was based, at least by some, on its non-biodegradability: “that’s one of the fundamental purposes behind a witch’s bottle. You want it to last for as long as you’re going to last.”

It is specified that the bottle needs to be airtight, and while the majority are corked or twist-capped, many producers recommend additional wax sealing: “so none of that shit can get out” and to “seal the spell inside.” There is ritual significance to the wax sealant, most of it coming from candles. Black is the preferred candle color – “I always use black for protection” and “Black wax seal to seal out negativity from both inside and outside sources” – but white and red are recommended substitutes. Other colors perform different functions. A green candle is used when the bottle is intended to heal, while gold is “for prosperity and security.” Despite the

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<sup>45</sup> Miller “How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok” [page number needed here]. See note above –

ritual significance of the candles, other options are suggested for convenience. Glue could be used, recommended one producer, or a wax crayon.

Once the ingredients are added to the bottle, what is then recommended? “bury it in the Earth” stipulated the *Saducismus Triumphatus*’s “Old Man” in 1681.<sup>46</sup> The archaeological evidence from the seventeenth century suggests many producers of witch-bottles followed this advice, with a high proportion of bottles having been discovered in fields, riverbanks, gardens, churchyards, and most others buried within the fabric of buildings. Today, the custom of burial or concealment continues. Most of the contemporary video producers recommend burying the bottle, explaining that they have buried bottles in the past. “Does it need to be hidden?” asks one YouTuber. “Yes, 100%. So obviously I’m not going to tell you where my witch-bottle is hidden on my current property.”

Unlike the seventeenth-century bottles, that can be hidden both on the person’s property and off, so long as it is buried, the contemporary witch-bottle appears explicitly linked to the home. For best results, recommends one producer, two bottles should be made: one buried at the front door and one buried at the back. If only one can be made, allows another YouTuber, then it should be buried at the front as this is “the first entry point of the home.” One producer records himself digging a hole in his garden and placing the bottle inside, while disclosing that he has one buried in every corner of his property.

Not everybody has a garden though, and there are various options for concealing a witch-bottle inside the home. “Be creative,” advises one producer on *YouTube*. “Find someplace that’s important to you and hide it, and it will work just as well.” Suggestions include basements, under

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<sup>46</sup> Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, 206.

stairs, attics, behind furniture, under the bed, in a cupboard, or in a pot plant. One producer, recognizing that some people may not want other residents to know about the witch-bottle, recommends the bedroom. The most important factor, stress several producers, is that the bottle is placed somewhere it is unlikely to be disturbed by others – much like a seventeenth-century witch-bottle.

Not all contemporary witch-bottles are concealed. Some are proudly displayed, one appearing on a mantelpiece, identified as the producer's altar, at the end of the video. "My initial intention was to bury this but honestly it's turning out kind of cool, so I don't know if I really want to bury it," admits another producer. Another declares at the end of her *TokTok* demonstration, "And she [the bottle] is finished and ready to display in a prominent place in my home." This is in-keeping with the bottles produced at the face-to-face workshops. Lucy Wright considers the witch-bottles pieces of art, and hopes their producers view them as "something nice for the home."<sup>47</sup> One producer at Lucy Wright's workshop, a young girl, planned to display hers in her grandmother's summer house.

There is an artistic element to many of the witch-bottles, again reinforcing Miller's identification of a "Witchy aesthetic" in digital content.<sup>48</sup> While one producer stresses "you don't really want your bottle to look pretty. The uglier, the nastier, the better. That's kind of the point behind it guys," others are aiming for an aesthetically pleasing finished product. Sealing with black candle wax, notes one, "adds a really cool witchy looking touch to it," and another observes, clearly pleased, that her finished bottle is "actually kind of pretty in a weird witchy

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Lucy Wright, 19/08/2021.

<sup>48</sup> Miller, "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok" [page number] 7 of 22

way.” Commentors on the videos (see below) also remark on the aesthetics: “I love how it looks” and “Ooooooh, pretty colors...”

The adaptation of the witch-bottle custom to (and by) a different community in a different time is far from unprecedented. The material culture of many practices has been observed to shift, responding to changes in belief systems, spiritual aspirations, and cultural contexts. The work of David Morgan, for example, has demonstrated this by tracing the developing iconography of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, while Joseph Murphy explores the evolving visual culture of Afro-Cuban San Lázaro as African, European, Catholic and Spiritist beliefs collided.<sup>49</sup> The material culture of holy wells in Ireland has altered in response to the shifting motivations of pilgrims, as observed by Ronan Foley.<sup>50</sup> In the past, in exchange for the curative properties of the well’s water, nearby trees would be festooned with the offerings of cloth rags, chosen for their ephemerality; as the rag decayed, the malady was believed to fade. Today, however, it is just as common to find holy wells bedecked with durable objects – rosaries, statuettes, framed photographs, and memorial announcements – intended to last, which demonstrate a recreation of holy wells as sites of mourning and memorialization.

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<sup>49</sup> David Morgan, *The Sacred Heart of Jesus: The visual evolution of a devotion* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008); Joseph M. Murphy, “The Many San Lázaros of Hialeah: Material Practice in the Celebration of a Cuban-American Saint.” *Material Religion* 13 (2017), 483-513.

<sup>50</sup> Ronan Foley, “Performing health in place: The holy well as a therapeutic assemblage.” *Health and Place* 17 (2011), 470-479.

It is also often the case that the material culture of customs changes in response to the practicalities of everyday life. This is evident in Hannah Gould's examination of altars in the homes of Western followers of Japanese Buddhism. Already having moved from private temples to domestic living spaces, Buddhist altars undergo various adaptations as they enter the Western home. In the past, issues of supply and importation costs led many Western Buddhists to improvise altars from pieces of furniture, while today it is more common that altars are custom-made to accommodate the space available, match a modern home décor, and reflect the user's spiritual disposition. "Many altars meld together different sources of spiritual and cultural identification into a material bricolage," notes Gould, citing the example of a woman in California incorporating Hindu deities and a Catholic rosary with her travel-sized Buddhist altar.<sup>51</sup> Clearly, as Meredith McGuire stresses in her work on lived religion, beliefs and practices are "ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory."<sup>52</sup> The contemporary witch-bottle demonstrates this clearly. It is a custom that amalgamates past beliefs and practices with modern spiritualities, and has been materially adapted to fit into the practicalities and sensibilities of modern-day life.

### Contemporary Cunning-Folk?

Despite some significant differences between contemporary witch-bottles and their historic predecessors, some elements are remarkably similar. Owen Davies has already been

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<sup>51</sup> Hannah Gould, "Domesticating Buddha: Making a Place for Japanese Buddhist Altars (Butsudan) in Western Homes," *Material Religion* 15 no. 4 (2019), 489-510, 499.

<sup>52</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

quoted commenting on the way cunning-folk stood out in their communities as possessing special knowledge; he adds, “There are a number of reasons why people may have wanted to become cunning-folk. The desire for money, power or social prestige, and even to do good, all undoubtedly played their part.”<sup>53</sup> These descriptions can easily apply to the producers of the *YouTube* and *TikTok* videos.

As with the work of historic cunning-folk, these videos are presented as professionally provided magical instruction. Some of the videos have elements of a sales pitch: “100% designed to keep you safe and to keep your premises safe” advertises one *YouTube* video; “for all of your protection needs,” promises another. And, just as historic cunning-folk found their business lucrative,<sup>54</sup> monetary earnings certainly motivate at least some of the video producers, several of whom sell custom-made witch-bottles. In the video comments, one YouTuber writes, “Bottles are listed in my Etsy if you want a custom one of your own,” while another responds to a request by explaining she sells them in her shop for \$25. As well as being a religion, Wicca and witchcraft have also been described as an “industry,” with commodified elements marketed to consumer bases both off- and online.<sup>55</sup>

Earnings can also be made if the producer’s online channels become popular enough. With *YouTube*, a producer can share in revenue from advertising featured on their channels if

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<sup>53</sup> Owen Davies, *Cunning-folk : Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 84.

<sup>54</sup> Davies, *Cunning-folk : Popular Magic in English History*, 85-89.

<sup>55</sup> David Waldron, “Witchcraft for Sale! Commodity vs. Community in the Neopagan Movement.” *Nova Religio* 9 (2005): 32-48.

they have more than four thousand public watch hours of their videos over the last year and have more than one thousand subscribers (this latter stipulation applies to eight of the ten *YouTube* videos sampled for this paper).<sup>56</sup> Sandra Inman, who runs the Mystical Witch School *YouTube* channel with over fifteen thousand subscribers, explained in an interview that she uses this online platform to “earn a living doing what I love.” However, teaching and the desire to “help people” are her primary motivations, with an online platform allowing her to reach students around the world.<sup>57</sup>

[Figure 7]

Indeed, as well as monetary motivation, also evident across the videos is the desire to impart useful magical knowledge. The producers of these videos are essentially instructors, teaching the viewers of their videos, through visual demonstration and verbal or written instruction, how to make a witch-bottle: “I’m going to bring you in a little closer so you can watch step by step how I do this. That way you can make your own at home.” These instructors have purposefully designed their witch-bottles with accessibility and affordability in mind for the sake of their “students.” “You don’t have to use anything fancy for this,” assures one YouTuber, while another explains, “minimal ingredients in here so it’s easy for anyone to do.” Many of the videos on both *YouTube* and *TikTok* allow viewers to post comments, and the questions posed,

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<sup>56</sup> “Monetisation Policies,” *YouTube*,

[https://www.youtube.com/intl/ALL\\_uk/howyoutubeworks/policies/monetization-policies/#overview](https://www.youtube.com/intl/ALL_uk/howyoutubeworks/policies/monetization-policies/#overview)

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Sandra Inman, Mystical Witch School, Zoom, 07/10/2021

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0R7VBvhsjs>

and problems presented, imply teacher/student relationships: “How important is to include egg shells? Are there any vegan alternatives?”; “Is there another option instead of peeing?”; “Im [sic] not allowed to have candles.”

Individualized rituals are another feature these videos share with the work of historic cunning-folk and others who guided on such processes. These individuals personalized their practices with myriad detailed instructions for the what, when, and where of their witch-bottles. As well as great variety in the ingredients stipulated in these videos, many of which are professed as personal preference – “I like to use...” – directions are also given as to quantities: *Three* pinches of salt, *three* pinches of coriander seeds, *three* drops of eucalyptus oil. Other personal specifications include the use of rainwater rather than tap-water for “cleansing and purity”; carving a protection sigil into the candle used for wax-sealing the bottle; shaking the contents and watching them separate again; chanting over the contents; and drinking coffee before the ritual to strengthen the potency of the producer’s urine as an ingredient. Some producers also give specific guidance on when to create a witch-bottle, such as during the full moon, and how to cleanse the bottle before adding the ingredients: one producer uses her “favorite incense,” another recommends lavender smoke, and another clicks her fingers over the ingredients before mixing them together. Many stress the importance of intention. Some recommend thinking about the purpose of the witch-bottle as the contents are added, others suggest visualizing it, and some advise verbalizing it: “as you’re putting each ingredient inside this you will state what that is for, why you’re putting it in there, what to you does that mean.”

It is interesting to note that most of these personalized specifications are unreadable in the material culture of the witch-bottles themselves. Without witnessing their production on video or hearing the instructions, we would not know that there were specifically three pinches of salt,

that a sigil was carved into the wax-sealing candle, nor that the contents were added in the full moon. We would not know, based on the material evidence of the bottles, that certain rituals were enacted during its creation: certain words spoken, certain incense burned, certain intentions visualized. This has implications for our analysis of surviving historic witch-bottles. Without knowing the diverse, personalized stipulations given by the individual cunning-folk, there are potentially many ritual elements surrounding the creation of the historic bottles that remain unknown.

### Concluding Thoughts

Having traced the witch-bottle from the Early Modern Period to the present day it is clear that the custom has survived, but it was not an uninterrupted journey of consistent use. It was a journey of re-introduction and adaptation. Attitudes towards witchcraft have changed over this period. It has shifted from something widely feared in the Early Modern Period, to a religion that places intellectual, emotional, and spiritual qualities at the center of everyday life. The witch-bottle has shifted to accommodate these changing perceptions. Once magical-medical devices employed specifically to counteract bewitchment, targeted towards identifying and harming the supposed witch, in the twentieth century they became tools *of* witchcraft, created by Wiccans to protect themselves from more general ills or negative energies. With the rise of social media alongside soaring numbers of those who identify as Wiccan,<sup>58</sup> we witness not only the

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<sup>58</sup> The Office of National Statistics reports that in the 2011 Census for England and Wales, 56,620 people identified as Pagan (73,733 in the 2021 census) and 11,766 (12,813 in the 2021 census) as Wiccan. In the 2021 census for England and Wales a further 27,365 people identified as practitioners in another nine associated categories, including Witches, Druids, Shamans, and

opportunity to commoditize witch-bottles again, but a broadening of functions. They are still produced for protection, but to protect the house as well as the individual, and additional purposes have been prescribed: for health, love, abundance.

We also see in the material culture of these witch-bottles adaptations to accommodate both the means and sensitivities of their modern producers. Ingredients are recommended that can be bought cheaply from a shop or easily sourced in a twenty-first-century home; substitutes are permitted; personal preferences encouraged. If it cannot be buried, put it under the bed or in a plant-pot. Or do not conceal it at all. Returning to the Navenby witch-bottles, produced on August 19, 2021, we witness a group of adults and children, none of whom openly identified as Wiccan, mixing herbs, flowers, and sequins in pastel-colored bottles, one of which was to go on display in a grandmother's summer house. They did this not for protection but for making wishes – and for something to do during the school holidays. What were functional magical-medical devices to be hidden in the earth have become, in some contexts, pieces of art to be proudly exhibited in the home.

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Heathens. The US government does not collect detailed religious data because of concerns that it may violate the separation of church and state, but Trinity College in Connecticut ran three large, detailed religion surveys between 1990 and 2008. Those have shown that Wicca grew tremendously over this period. From an estimated 8,000 Wiccans in 1990, they found there were about 340,000 practitioners in 2008. Although Trinity College hasn't run a survey since 2008, in 2014 the Pew Research Center found that 0.4% of Americans, or around 1 to 1.5 million people, identify as Wicca or Pagan. <https://qz.com/quartz/1411909/the-explosive-growth-of-witches-wiccans-and-pagans-in-the-us/> [accessed 25 February 2022]

This mutability of meaning not only demonstrates the essentiality of a custom adapting to survive in a world of changing beliefs, perceptions, values, and technologies, but also the importance of not viewing a historic practice in temporal isolation. As Houlbrook posits elsewhere, strictly limiting oneself within chronological parameters, setting a *terminus post quem* to research, obscures the full picture of a practice.<sup>59</sup> The revival and adaptation of the witch-bottle custom is key to our understanding of the custom itself, of shifting perceptions towards witchcraft, and of how people today engage with the practices of the past.

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