

## Witch Posts

Have you ever heard of a witch post? Considering there are only twenty known to exist, it is probably quite likely that you haven't. We have three in the collection at Ryedale Folk Museum and think of ourselves as very lucky to have them.

Witch posts (or heck posts), as they are believed to have become known during the 19th century, are actually an upright support for the smoke hood over the fire. They are a rare architectural feature of medieval houses found mainly in the North York Moors and would have been considered the height of luxury.

Traditionally a witch post is defined by the St Andrew's cross carved into the surface at the top of the post, followed by raised scrolls carved beneath the cross. The purpose of the cross is believed to have been to protect the hearth and house from the malign influence of witches or to prevent them from being able to enter the house. This is a modern interpretation of their purpose and other theories exist.

At one time witch posts were thought to be made from wood from rowan trees, when in situ they would be coated in lime distemper to preserve the wood and discourage insect infestation. It was only when the lime distemper was removed it was realised they were actually oak. Rowan was considered during the medieval period to be a powerful deterrent to witches and their spells.

One of the kind donors of a witch post, told us it had been used as a lintel over the door of his farm garage and discovered during renovation. It was lucky that he noticed it might be something more interesting than a bit of old wood!

So, if you're doing a spot of DIY on your home and live in an older property in this area, keep your eyes peeled because you just never know!



Image – a witch post in, Stang End, one of the Museum's historic buildings

Photo by Angela Waites Photography.