

Burn marks on furniture

Burn marks on woodwork in buildings are the subject of much current research. When we found similar flame-shaped burn marks on the inside of clocks and on chairs we realised their significance. Burn marks have been recognised for some time on fireplace lintels, roof timbers and panelling in buildings of the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries, as single marks or in clusters. Recent experimental research has shown that they were not accidental but were deliberately made by tapers or rushlights (rather than candles) and that it took five minutes holding a taper at 45° against dry wood to make even a 1mm deep burn mark (J. Dean and N. Hill, 'Burn Marks on Buildings: Accidental or Deliberate?', *Vernacular Architecture*, 45 (2014), pp. 1–13). Many are deeper. Burn marks are now known to be widespread in the UK and Europe.



above Burn marks on the mid rail of a nineteenth-century chair (scale in centimetres)

left Burn marks on clock by William Clark of Belford, made about 1770–1774 (the right-hand panel has been replaced)



In his youth Eric noticed burn marks on his family's Victorian mahogany chairs. Decades later Margaret acquired a nineteenth-century chair with burn marks which could not have been made accidentally because of the angle of the chair back with the seat. Burn marks on furniture may not be unusual: they have been found on a court cupboard and a grain ark at the National Museum of Wales and a sixteenth-century French cabinet in the Bowes Museum.

Eric found burn marks on the interior of longcase clock cases of the late-eighteenth century. The marks

must have been made either by the maker of the case or more probably by the clockmaker who assembled the mechanism and the case; either way this gives a very narrow date window for the burning, as many clocks are dated on the dial or the clockmaker's working dates are known. Marks are consistently located on the backboard behind the dial, so are difficult to see or photograph. The clock hood was fixed to the rest of the trunk and was not normally removed. Often there is a hidden fastening bolt to make sure the hood could not be removed unless the trunk door had previously been unlocked. Even access to the dial to move the hands was difficult.

The examples of burn marks on furniture as late as the nineteenth century and on clocks of the second half of the eighteenth century are both later than the currently reported marks on house timbers.

There seems to be nothing recorded about them in folklore literature or elsewhere. Their meaning may have varied according to time and place. One suggestion was that they were to protect buildings from fire, perhaps by 'fighting fire with fire'. On the inside of clocks that seems unlikely. Perhaps they were thought to give general protection. Most burn marks reported until now have been very visible, even when to modern eyes they disfigure the woodwork. However, the marks inside clock cases were not visible in daily use so perhaps some burn marks on furniture were also hidden.

By investigating furniture nationwide and of all dates we may add to the evidence for the date range of burn marks and perhaps help elucidate their meaning. Please check your furniture (and any other woodwork) in the hope of finding further examples and please send any reports to margaret1.maddison@gmail.com