

# CONTEXT AND MEANING GENERATION: THE CONSERVATION OF GARMENTS DELIBERATELY CONCEALED WITHIN BUILDINGS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper shows how the context, created from spatial, temporal and textual elements, has a profound effect on artefact conservation and demonstrates this via the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project. There is a long-standing but seldom-reported practice of deliberately concealing worn garments within the structure of buildings, e.g. alongside chimneys. These finds, usually uncovered during building work, are sometimes viewed as rubbish and are thrown away. Some are valued as evil-averting agents and are re-concealed. Some are valued as rare examples of dress. The significance attributed to the finds affects whether and how they are preserved. If they are valued primarily as rare garments, conservation may focus on preserving the finds themselves rather than on preserving evidence of concealment. The distinct phases of their 'life' and the range of meanings attributed to them mean that these garments provide a vivid model for analysing how understanding of context influences conservation.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In dieser Arbeit wird gezeigt, wie der durch räumliche, zeitliche und inhaltliche Elemente gebildete Kontext erheblichen Effekt auf die Restaurierung eines Werkes hat. Dies wird anhand des *Deliberately Concealed Garments Project* gezeigt. Es gibt einen alten, aber selten beschriebenen Brauch, getragene Kleidung innerhalb der Gebäudestruktur, also beispielsweise neben Schornsteinen, zu verstecken. Diese Funde, die meistens bei Bauarbeiten entdeckt werden, werden bisweilen als Abfall angesehen und weggeworfen. Einige aber werden als etwas das Böse abwehrendes geschätzt angesehen und erneut versteckt. Einige werden als seltene Beispiele von Kleidung bewertet. Die Bedeutung, die man diesen Funden zuschreibt, beeinflusst, ob und wie sie erhalten sind. Wenn sie hauptsächlich als seltene Kleidung gewertet werden, wird die Konservierung sich eher auf den Erhalt der Funde selbst konzentrieren und die Belege für das Verstecken nicht erhalten. Diese besondere Phase des „Lebens“ der Textilien und die Spannweite von Bedeutungen, die ihnen zugeschrieben werden, lässt sie zu einem lebendigen Beispiel dafür werden, wie das Verständnis für den Kontextes die Konservierung beeinflusst.

## INTRODUCTION

The deliberate concealment of garments and other objects within the structure of buildings is a widespread but seldom-reported practice [1, 2]. This paper demonstrates how the conservation of these once-concealed objects is influenced by the relative importance attributed to their multiple contexts.

The Deliberately Concealed Garments Project (DCGP) was established in 1998 to help preserve these garments, as well as information about them [3, 4]. A concealment — known as a cache from the French word 'to hide' — may consist of a single item, for example, a bottle or shoe, or it may consist of several items hidden together. The circumstances of their concealment and discovery make these garments vulnerable to damage and loss. They are often soiled, creased and fragmentary when found, and their conservation poses challenging ethical and technical problems.

By the time these garments are uncovered, they will have moved through multiple contexts and will have been used for different purposes, ranging from everyday wear to their later use as objects selected for deliberate concealment in buildings. Through the process of discovery and exhibition, some enter museum collections. Whether they are selected for conservation (investigation, preservation and presentation), and how they are conserved, depends on the relative importance attributed to their first 'life' as garments and to their subsequent 'life' as agents of apotropaic (evil-averting) practice.

## CONTEXTS

The contexts of deliberately concealed garments are analysed, considering both spatial and temporal contexts, as well as the textual element.

## *Spatial context*

Garments found deliberately-concealed within the structure of buildings are commonly found in two locations: first, near openings to buildings, for example near doorways and chimneys. The second common location is in voids, for example under floorboards or within walls. The size and content of the Water End Cache make it typical of British caches: two items of footwear, a felt hat, six bottles, three metal pot lids, a pair of scissors, sheets of newsprint, string and lengths of linen tow, a wooden clothes peg and a bucket handle were found inside the wall of a timber-framed house. The largest reported cache in the UK was found in Sittingbourne, Kent and is made up of over 500 items.

The practice of concealing garments within the structure of buildings is not restricted to the UK. Caches have been discovered in mainland Europe as well as Australia, New Zealand and North America. Two notable examples are from southern Germany. Investigation of the Alpirsbach monastery led to the discovery of four linen garments (a doublet dated to 1540–75, a pair of hose with codpiece, and three shirts), a linen bag and leather shoes, hidden in the void between a ceiling and the floorboards of the room above [5]. Much larger, but equally rare caches were uncovered under floorboards and within walls during the restoration of three timber-framed medieval houses, known as the 'Mühlberg Ensemble', in Kempten (Allgäu). A huge range of everyday artefacts was found, including 360 leather shoes and 192 other leather garments, such as gloves. The houses were built between 1289 and 1354. They housed a community of pious women, before passing into ecclesiastical ownership in 1501. The finds date from c.1500 to the 1920s [6]. The survival of a large number of Early Modern period garments is very unusual; the finds are highly-valued as new primary sources for the study of dress.

The Saltville Cache is an interesting North American example. The cache was discovered by a building contractor while repairing a timber-clad house in Saltville, Virginia, USA. The cache, which included several garments (four single shoes, two gloves, a jacket, a corset, a bow-tie) as well as an umbrella frame, five bottles and pamphlets, was found within the front wall above and alongside the front door. The shoes were found in one space between the studs, above the front window; the jacket and corset were found in another space; the umbrella in another. A cigar box containing papers was found tied to the beam over the front door.

Other discoveries in Saltville include a cat found in the front wall of a house. A shoe and a 'corset type thing', found in another property, were burned by the house owner, 'thinking there was no significance to them' [7]. A group of homemade cloth dolls, which appeared to represent a family (man, woman, children and a baby) were found within the walls of another house, along with shoes; the finder threw the shoes away but retained the dolls. The Saltville caches demonstrate the vulnerability of caches to destruction (the burning of the corset) and to partial retention (keeping the dolls while throwing away the shoes). The finding of a 'family' of shoes is consistent with UK caches containing a 'family' of footwear [2]. This suggests that some concealed objects may have served as symbols or surrogates for the family who hid them.

## *Historical context*

This raises core questions: when did people hide things within buildings, and why did they do it? Neither question can be

answered with any certainty, because of the lack of contemporaneous references to the hiding of garments. Finds can be dated on stylistic grounds or by their association with datable objects, such as coins and newsprint. Some caches contain material of widely different dates. For example, Abingdon Cache 2, which was found in a hop-filled wall cavity, consists of a tie-on pocket dated c.1740, a child's cap dated 1740–1770, fragments of business documents, as well as trade tokens and coins ranging in date from 1573–77 to 1797. Assemblages of objects of different dates are not uncommon, making it hard to say when the caches were deposited, or whether a particular cache was deposited at one time or was added to over time [8].

The reasons for concealment are not known. It is likely that several different, concurrent traditions are involved. Caches may be linked to foundation sacrifices, and thereby to Masonic practice. Others may be an outcome of folk-magic, which was practised alongside mainstream religious observance [9]. Thus, the hiding of garments is linked to the burial of 'witch-bottles' [10], animal bones [11], cats [12], and the marking of buildings [13, 14, 15]. These actions were believed to offer protection by disabling or diverting witches and other malevolent forces which might enter via doors, windows and chimneys [8]. One feature of concealed garments is that some appear to have been deliberately damaged prior to concealment [16]; this may be interpreted as the 'ritual killing' of objects [10]. Such practices are consistent with the logic of sympathetic magic [17, 18] and the protection of children noted below [19]. There was widespread belief in witches in late-seventeenth-century Europe; evidence of devils and witches was collected in order to support certain views of divinity [20].

Contemporary attitudes to witchcraft — and to practices that may be viewed as 'superstitious' — affect what happens to deliberately concealed garments. Some finders fear being considered superstitious. Some finders may view the objects they find as so tainted by superstition that they should be disposed of. Other people view the things that they find as bringers of good luck, or the averters of bad luck [21]. 'Folk traditions' of the past may merge with current practices, for example, the recent millennium celebrations of the year 2000 generated a lot of interest in hiding time-capsules.

#### *Textual element of context*

One of the distinctive features of past concealment practices is the lack of contemporaneous written explanation or commentary. It is possible that many of the people who assembled caches were unable to read or write, and/or they felt no need to write down this aspect of their lives. The oral history recordings made by G.E. Evans in East Anglia, UK, in the 1960s, reveal the longevity of rural traditions and what might be considered folk practices, such as fear of the evil eye. Evans also draws attention to how information was traditionally transmitted orally through storytelling and singing [17]. Concealment may have been something you did, but did not talk about. They may have believed that the efficacy of the protection (offered by the concealments acting as decoys) would be put at risk if the concealments were mentioned. Smith [19] explains the use of the term 'pot lid' as a clandestine way of referring to children, at a time when referring to them by name was thought to draw the children to the unwanted attention of witches.

The paucity of contemporaneous commentary about concealment practices draws attention to a significant feature of the term 'context', literally 'with text'. The word context draws on a Latin root which means to weave or to knit together. As a construction of language, context forms the connexion, or preliminaries or explanations which determine the meaning of a particular text. In the case of garments found deliberately concealed within

buildings, their preservation is influenced by the multiplicity and indeterminacy of their spatial and temporal contexts, which are understood through language.

#### APPROACHING CONSERVATION IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Objects deliberately concealed within buildings change over time, in both their physical composition and in their cultural salience. Attempts to address the problems associated with these changes lead to questions about what aspects should be conserved and by what means. The following case-studies show how the prioritisation of one context over another has influenced the conservation of some once-concealed garments.

##### *Conservation to preserve evidence of concealment*

The Alpirsbach and Reigate caches show how the significance attributed to the context of concealment varies, and how this evaluation affects conservation interventions. The conservation of the Alpirsbach finds was determined by the decision to preserve all evidence of use up to the point of concealment [5]. The soiling and creasing arising from the garments' wear prior to their concealment were considered significant, but the soils and creases arising from concealment were not considered significant. In the case of the linen doublet found in the Reigate Cache, the decision was made to preserve all evidence of use up to the point of discovery. In this case, the evidence of the concealment context, as well as the context of pre-concealment wear, was considered significant, and the cleaning of the Reigate doublet was restricted to the removal of post-discovery contaminants [22]. The long-term effect of leaving garments in their soiled state requires investigation [23].

##### *Conservation to preserve evidence of an object's whole 'life'*

Detailed documentation and investigation of its materials and construction, coupled with mounting on a cloth-covered board, was the strategy adopted for the conservation of the stomacher (a garment worn by women in the eighteenth century) found in the Nether Wallop Cache. Detailed analysis of the stomacher showed that it had started 'life' as a corset, which had been cut down to make a stomacher. The stomacher had been heavily used: there was evidence of at least one recovering, as well as numerous repairs. All this 'wear and tear' pre-dated its concealment alongside a chimney flue built into a timber-framed house in Hampshire, UK. The decision was made to preserve all evidence of the stomacher's complex history of production and consumption. It underwent detailed examination and documentation but no interventive treatment [24]. The internal structure and materials of the garment were documented by means of X-radiography, which revealed the 'whalebone' (baleen) strips which stiffen the stomacher. With the owner's consent, a sample of baleen was removed from the stomacher for DNA analysis; this showed that the baleen was from a North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*), and from a previously-unrecorded mitochondrial lineage of this species [25].

##### *Conservation to preserve evidence of production*

The conservation treatment selected for the tie-on pocket and the baby's cap found in Abingdon Cache 2 prioritised the preservation of the artefacts' production over evidence of their concealment. Research showed that the pocket, made with cloth block-printed in just one colour, was a very rare example of a once very common type of cheap pocket. It was therefore decided to implement a cleaning treatment that would reduce the creases that distorted the shape of the pocket and put stress on the cloth. Crease reduction also made it easier to apply an effective stitched support, Figs 1 and 2. Thus, the conservation treatment



Fig. 1 The tie-on pocket from Abingdon Cache 2, before treatment.

enabled the pocket to be displayed in such a way that it more closely resembled its ‘as new’ form [26]. Preserving evidence of its production was privileged over retaining evidence of its later use as part of a cache.

As these case-studies show, garments found deliberately-concealed in buildings provide vivid examples of the multiple contexts and competing histories of many textiles. They also show the influential role that curators and conservators have in privileging one view over another [27].

#### EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF CONSERVATION

The conservation strategy developed for the DCGP involved exploring, expanding and creating contexts.

##### *Preservation by data collection and dissemination: website*

As explained above, what happens to a cache after its discovery varies according to the circumstances under which it is found. Caches often remain in the custodianship of the finder or the owner of the building in which they were found; less frequently they are collected by museums or historical societies. Museums may not collect the whole cache, choosing instead to retain parts considered significant for their collections. As a result it can be difficult to obtain a clear picture of when and where caches have been found. A database of caches was therefore

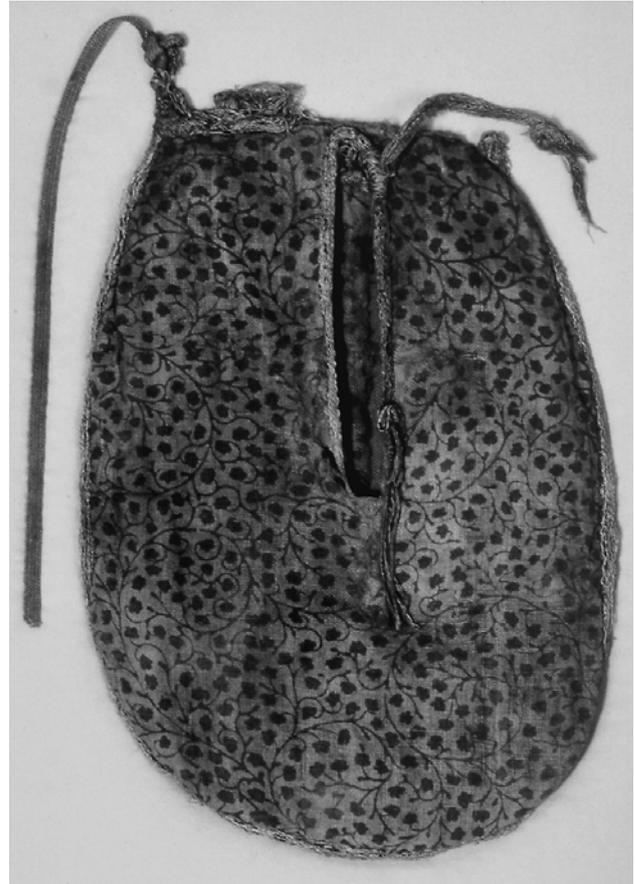


Fig. 2 The tie-on pocket from Abingdon Cache 2, after treatment.

established as part of the DCGP; it can be accessed via the project website<sup>1</sup>.

The database is designed to bring together information about caches from any locations across the world to create a ‘virtual collection’ of finds. The database includes objects that are no longer accessible, either because they have been destroyed or because they have been re-concealed. Objects are documented individually and are grouped by cache. The virtual collection enables the number of particular object types to be determined, as well as the frequency with which objects are discovered in a particular location. Finders, owners and museum staff are encouraged to report finds, which are then recorded in the database, via the on-line ‘Report a Find’ forms available on the site. The virtual collection forms a context for the finds.

The website also contains an extensive bibliography, advice for finders about what to do when they discover a cache and transcriptions of oral history interviews. The site has been successful in attracting enquiries and information about caches from buildings in the UK, Sweden, North America and Australia.

##### *Preservation by data collection: oral history*

The lack of contemporaneous explanation means that the significance of the finds has to be deduced from the finds themselves (from their location, distribution and contents). This has led to intensive investigations of the materials and construction of garment finds [22, 24]. It has also led to special attention being focused on the circumstances of their discovery and on the views of finders and custodians.

An oral history programme was initiated as part of the DCGP as a means of understanding more about the circumstances of

<sup>1</sup>[www.concealedgarments.org](http://www.concealedgarments.org)

discovery and concealment, and learning more about the views of finders and custodians. The oral history recordings thereby provide new primary sources for the study of concealment practices. The recordings are held by the Wessex Film and Sound Archive, UK, where they are publicly accessible. The oral history programme is proving very effective, for example, the wonder of discovery and the unease felt by some finders is much more vividly recorded in oral history than in 'Report a Find' forms.

This can be illustrated by the discovery of two caches, known as the Brixham Cache, found in a house in Devon, UK, Figs 3 and 4. The two caches were found by a local builder while renovating the house. He discovered them within the straw insulation placed behind the seventeenth-century panelling of the cross-passage. One cache, consisting of the fragmentary remains of a pair of seventeenth-century breeches and a linen cloth fitted with a patch pocket was found above the front door of the house. The other, found above the door leading from the cross-passage into the main room, was an assemblage of smaller items including an iron key, a barbed fish hook tied to string, and an animal bone. The builder recognised the finds as important and alerted the owner of the house. During the oral history interview the builder reported that the garments found above the front door had been tied together with straw; he also stated his view that the finds should be re-concealed after they had been documented [28]. This information had not been elicited during earlier informal discussion.

*Preservation by data collection and dissemination: exhibiting finds*

As reducing the risk of loss and damage to finds is the main aim of the DCGP, one of the core objectives has been to raise public awareness of the practice of concealment and of the significance of finds. The fact that the practice of concealing garments is not well known increases the risk of such finds being disposed of as rubbish. Awareness-raising measures include the website, articles in both specialist publications [29] and the popular press (such as local newspapers), and the development of a touring exhibition, called *Hidden House History*. The exhibition displays finds and explores the practice of concealment. Visitors are invited to report finds and to consider the ethical questions raised by these finds, for example, they are asked for their views on what should happen to caches after they have been discovered.



Fig. 3 The Brixham Cache was found in two places in a fourteenth-century house: above the main entrance to the house, and (as shown) above the door leading from the cross passage into the main room.

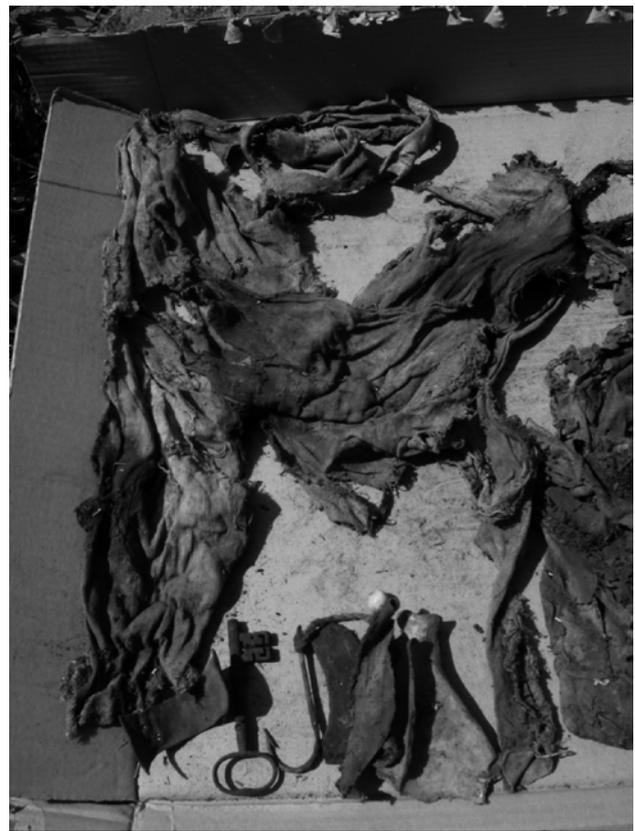


Fig. 4 The Brixham Cache consists of a very fragmentary pair of blue wool breeches, a linen cloth fitted with a pocket, a key, a fishing line, part of an ox shoe, scraps of cloth and leather, a marble, and an animal bone.

*Hidden House History* exhibits once-concealed objects in a variety of ways. Three caches are displayed in reconstructions of the locations in which they were found: under floorboards; alongside a chimney flue; and, within a lath and plaster wall, Fig. 5. The reconstructions have been designed so that the finds can be safely displayed while at the same time evoking the sense of discovering objects hidden in dark, cramped conditions. For example, visitors are encouraged to use a torch to view a cache found under floorboards in the attic of a sixteenth century house in Cuckfield, Sussex, UK, Fig. 6.



Fig. 5 View of the *Hidden House History* exhibition at Havant Museum, UK. The Water End Cache was discovered within a wall and it is displayed in a custom-made case which replicates the cache site.



Fig. 6 A young visitor examines the Cuckfield Cache, which was found under attic floorboards. The custom-made display case at *Hidden House History* replicates the cache site.

Finds from four other caches found in the UK are displayed in traditional museum cases, which provide a clearer view of each exhibit. This allows visitors to see that even very fragmentary, soiled and creased garments may be of considerable historical interest and are therefore worth preserving. For example, the damaged stomacher from the Nether Wallop Cache is displayed alongside the results of the DNA analysis of its baleen stiffening, which led to the identification of a previously-unknown lineage of North Atlantic right whale, as outlined above [24, 25].

Another very significant exhibit is a pair of stays (a corset) dated to c.1625, and thought to be the second oldest pair in the UK. The stays were found under floorboards shortly before the demolition of a building in Sittingbourne, Kent, UK. The stays are displayed, untreated, on a cloth-covered padded board. The neighbouring wall-mounted display panels show other finds from the same cache, which is the largest ever reported in the UK. The display panels also show photographs of the finders, with 'voice bubble' quotations expressing their excitement in uncovering the cache and saving it from the destruction of demolition.

Replicas are used to complement the displays by showing how the fragmentary garments may have looked when new. For example, the remains of a very rare early-seventeenth-century doublet, found in Abingdon Cache 1, are displayed alongside a life-size replica made by Dr Maria Hayward, a textile conservator with specialist knowledge of Renaissance-era dress, Fig. 7. Dye analysis of the original garment suggested that the wool outer fabric, which is now brown, was dyed with the blue dyestuff indigotin. The replica was therefore made with blue wool. This creates a dramatic contrast between old and new and encourages visitors to think differently about the fragmentary, discoloured doublet, Fig. 8. Replicas are also used outside the museum cases. A second replica of the Abingdon doublet (made somewhat larger



Fig. 7 Dr Maria Hayward with a replica she made of the doublet found in Abingdon Cache 1.



Fig. 8 The fragmentary doublet from Abingdon Cache 1 is exhibited alongside a replica at *Hidden House History*.

than the original) was made for 'dressing up' so visitors can get a sense of what it may have felt like to wear a doublet.

*Hidden House History* started its eighteen-month tour of Hampshire and Dorset, UK, in July 2005. The exhibition is an important part of the DCGP's strategy to support the preservation of finds and information about concealment practices. Another part of the preservation strategy is to promote the documentation of cache sites, using the techniques of architectural and archaeological drawing and photography. Both the website and the exhibition have been used as conservation tools because they promote awareness of the fragility and fascination of such finds.

## CONCLUSION

A garment that has been deliberately concealed within the structure of a building illustrates the varied contexts of a single object. It has three distinct contexts: its use as everyday wear; its use as an apotropaic agent; its post-discovery use, possibly as a museum exhibit. A variety of uses is not unique to such garments, but the distinctiveness of each 'life' phase makes a once-concealed garment didactically useful.

Once-concealed garments also provide insights into the nature of 'context'. Discussion of context usually focuses on time and space. The absence of contemporaneous records of concealing garments in buildings highlights the textual dimension of context (literally with text). The meanings ascribed to these garments have a profound effect on whether or not they are saved from destruction, and how they are conserved.

This paper argues that garments deliberately concealed within buildings provide vivid examples of the interplay of the spatial, temporal and textual elements of context and the way meanings are generated during conservation (investigation, preservation and presentation). The distinct phases of their 'life' and the range of meanings attributed to these garments mean they provide exemplary models for analysing how understanding of context influences conservation.

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**A possible substitute image:**

Fig. ? Charlotte Dew and Dinah Eastop examining the Nether Wallop stomach and X-radiographs showing its baleen strips.