

CONTENTS



Introduction	7
The Superstitions	13
Acknowledgements	180
Bibliography	181
Index	185



HORSESHOES

Horseshoes can be found hanging above the doors of homes across the world and are thought to ward off evil. One source of this belief in the Western world is described in *The True Legend of St Dunstan and the Devil*, written in 1871 by Edward G. Flight, which tells the story of a first-century blacksmith monk who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of England's best-loved saints. Legend has it that during his days in the foundry, Dunstan was asked by a man to make some horseshoes for his own feet. As Dunstan prepared the man's feet for shoeing, he noticed that they were cloven hooved and realized with horror that his customer was the Devil. Exhibiting a fearlessness befitting a future saint, he drove the nails into the soft centre of the hoof, causing the Devil so much agony that from that day on he didn't dare to go near a horseshoe.

The protective power of the horseshoe, however, pre-dates not only St Dunstan but Christianity itself. Hindu texts use the Sanskrit word 'Yoni' to describe the sacred temple or womb, representative of the Goddess Shakti, which was believed to be the origin of all life

and is depicted in ancient stone carvings, paintings, and architecture as a downward-pointing horseshoe. It was also an important pagan symbol, representing the crescent moon and the ancient moon goddesses Artemis and Diana. In Arabic countries the horseshoe is incorporated into amulets that protect against the Evil Eye (*see page 21*), while in British, Celtic and Germanic folklore a horseshoe nailed above the door was used to defend homes from witchcraft.

In the West, as the more secular idea of bringing ‘good luck’ has taken precedence over the need to ward off evil, the positioning of the horseshoe has become significant. In the UK and the US they’re most often hung with the open end up, to stop the good luck from falling out, though folklore traditionalists warn that this encourages trouble-making pixies to use them as seats, so open end up but tilted slightly is optimal. In the rest of the world the open end is usually down, mirroring the shape of the sacred womb. Whichever way a horseshoe is hung, more luck can be gleaned by keeping it in place with seven screws.



PICKING UP PENNIES

This tradition comes from a nursery rhyme that we commonly recite as ‘See a penny, pick it up; all day long you’ll have good luck.’

In fact the original rhyme featured pins, not pennies: ‘See a pin and pick it up, all day long you’ll have good luck. See a pin and let it lie, you’ll feel want before you die.’ This may in turn be derived from the old English proverb ‘He that will not stoop for a pin will never be worth a pound,’ which was first recorded in print in Samuel Pepys’s *Diary* in 1668.

It is one of many ancient sayings to promote the notion that it’s worth taking trouble over small things. People who used the rhyme in the 1600s would also have been fearful of leaving a pin on the ground because of their associations with witchcraft.

Pins were thought to have been used to bind a spell in place or to fix a desire – for good or ill, to an object that represented the person on whom the spell was being cast.

If you didn't pick up the pin, a witch might find it instead and use it in a spell against you.

Pins were also used in hexes, which could be performed to reverse the effects of damaging spells, often held responsible for the misunderstood medical ailments that afflicted citizens of the seventeenth century. Urinary infections, for example, were frequently 'treated' by placing pins representative of the patient's pain into a glass 'witch bottle' along with a sample of their urine. The mixture would be boiled to transfer the pain from the victim of the spell back to the witch. The bottle would then be buried or bricked up into the walls of the person's home to defend them against future curses.

The superstition had more mundane foundations too as pins were an essential tool for needlework, which was a necessity rather than a hobby in the seventeenth-century home.

The switch from pin to penny seems to have occurred in early nineteenth-century America and may have simply been a linguistic slip, although the appearance of the words 'In God We Trust' on American pennies is believed in some quarters to have transformed a castaway coin into a token of luck from the Good Lord for those who believe in him.