

Witch Hunting in 16th and 17th Century England

Lauren De Angelis

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

De Angelis, Lauren () "Witch Hunting in 16th and 17th Century England," *The Histories*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol8/iss1/3

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

I

Witch Hunting in 16th and 17th Century England

By Lauren De Angelis '11



When analyzing England in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one cannot ignore the overbearing presence that witchcraft had over the people, courts, and rulers. One must understand that witchcraft was not a new belief, but, in fact, found its basis in the bible in such verses as, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."¹ These ideas were thus not new during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there was a drastic increase in the number of trials and convictions during this time. One must understand that an increasing number of accusations and trials occurred because rulers enacted specific legislation that made the practice of witchcraft a crime, and eventually a capital offence. Witch trials were thus prevalent under those rulers, such as Elizabeth I and James I, who found witchcraft to be dangerous to their monarchies. Although these rulers feared witchcraft, the courts became less concerned with this problem in the 1640's due to unrest caused by the Civil War, which forced the government's attention. Towards the end of the 1600's, more individuals became skeptical because a "growing body of intelligent men...discredited the stories of witchcraft and were even inclined to laugh at them."² Although witchcraft in sixteenth and seventeenth century England held a prominent role in legislation, trials, and persecutions of many individuals, this role declined because of political instability and increased skepticism.

Early laws regarding witchcraft dating back to the 1000's existed in England, but it was not until 1542 that a monarch, Henry VIII, issued the first English Statute concerning witchcraft. This statute proclaimed the practice of witchcraft "cannot be used and exercised to...hurt or damage the Kinges Subjectes," find treasure, or force someone to "unlawfully love" another.³ By specifying the crimes that were caused by witchcraft, Henry VIII was able to definitively declare it a felony and punishable by death. Prior to this date, witchcraft was simply believed to be a sect of heresy, which would firstly be tried by the Church and then by the State; however the growing number of witch trials on the continent of Europe alarmed Henry. As a result of these growing trends of witchcraft,

¹ L'estrage C. Ewen. *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*. (London. Kegen Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., LTD). p. 1

² Wallace Notestein. *A History of Witchcraft in England From 1558 to 1718*. 2nd ed. (NY: Russel & Russel, 1965). p. 284

³ Ewen. p13, 25

he thought it best to issue the Statute to protect his subjects.⁴ Although he set these laws in place, there were no notable trials that enforced this law until the reign of his daughter, Elizabeth I.

There are various reasons why Elizabeth began to heavily enforce the laws enacted by Henry VIII. Firstly, Elizabeth appointed an Anglican minister named John Jewel as the Bishop of Salisbury who fervently believed in the evilness of witchcraft. In one particular sermon, he emphasized the fact that those “kind of people (witches and sorcerers) within these few last years are marvelously increased within...the realm,”⁵ which caused Elizabeth to fear for the safety of those in her empire. Secondly, Elizabeth feared being murdered by those who practiced witchcraft against her. From the time she stepped onto the throne, there were murder plots that used the influence of witchcraft to help ensure success. Finally, it was the influence of her advisors, who felt a need for a stronger enforcement of the law, which caused her to issue the Statute of the Realm that would nullify her father’s statute in favor of a stricter, more concise law against witchcraft.

In this new statute, killing an individual through the use of witchcraft was still punishable by death, but other crimes now received a lesser punishment. Instead of death for “destroying goods, provoking unlawful love or discovering treasure,”⁶ one was liable to a year’s imprisonment with four appearances on the pillory. Although this law appears more lenient than Henry VIII’s, one must understand that a second offense did result in death. Not only did this statute enforce a death sentence, but it also encouraged more individuals to bring charges against each other in secular courts because there was little evidence needed to convict an individual.⁷ Although private citizens felt strongly about punishing witches, many times administrators were lenient. Even the queen herself was arguably biased towards certain witches if they helped her during her reign. One such individual was John Dee who “was said to have revealed to the queen those who were her enemies at foreign court.”⁸ When he was under attack for suspicion of practicing witchcraft, Elizabeth offered protection and aid until the time of her death in 1603. Towards the end of her reign, the government began to acquit more individuals than in previous years, which Notestein argues was due to the emergence of Reginald Scot’s book entitled *Discoverie of Witchcraft* that began to sow the seed of doubt in England.

It is important to understand that there were individuals who began to doubt the existence of witchcraft, even during the early years of persecution. Although there were few who did so, Reginald Scot is the most renowned of this time because he became one of the most influential figures for later critics. When looking at his career, one can see that the tragedy which occurred at St. Osyth, a town near his home, spurred him to write his book. During this affair that occurred in 1582, there were a series of accusations and trials in which “twenty odd witches were named” for killing and bewitching upwards of

⁴ Alan Macfarlane, and J. A. Sharpe. *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England : A Regional and Comparative Study*. (New York: Routledge, 1999). p. 14

⁵ Notestein. p. 17

⁶ Ewen. p. 24

⁷ Notestein. 53

⁸ Notestein. p. 53

forty individuals.⁹ He was not simply writing to educate the public, but also writing for those who were receiving the injustice and horrible treatment of the courts. Witnessing these trials and hearing the testimonies of the accused caused him to begin to look upon witchcraft with a great deal of doubt. He stated, "I say, he that attributeth to a witch, such divine power, as dulie and onelie apperteineth unto GOD (which all witchmongers doo) is in hart a blasphemor, an idolater, and full of grosse impietie."¹⁰ Scot shows those who are accusing are also sinning against God, and are no better than those whom they condemn.

In his work, Scot was careful never to deny the existence of witches because that would have gone against biblical statements, but he implied their nonexistence through statements that appeared empathetic to the accused. In one instance, Scot describes these poor souls as "commonly old, bleary eyed and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papists...who are so odious unto all their neighbors, and so feared...that they are believed to doo such things as beyond the ability of a humane"¹¹ This statement exemplifies the fact that Scot believed individuals classified and feared were those who looked like they were evil, even if they were not. Although there is no record of the initial impression that Scot's book caused, one can see it must have sparked individuals' attentions because King James I believed it was worthwhile to write a response.¹²

Just as Scot had his opinions about witchcraft, so too did King James of Scotland (who would later become James I of England). James believed that "he had every reason to fear and hate the creatures" because his life, like Elizabeth's, was being threatened by witches.¹³ The most notable attempt came in 1589 when a man named Dr. Fian was accused of plotting to kill the king with witchcraft. It was believed that he and his group of followers had given their souls to the devil in order to murder the king. Thus, in 1597, he wrote his beliefs about the existence of witchcraft in the *Daemonologie* because he wanted to show his hatred towards witches and also combat Scot's denial of witches. King James, using the Bible as the central basis of his argument, stated, "In the law of God it is plainly prohibited...it is plain where wicked *Pharaoh's* wise-men imitated a number of *Moses* miracles" through the use of witchcraft in order to show their power against God, which shows that witchcraft must therefore exist.¹⁴ He then went onto expound how witches practice supernatural acts, such as flying through air using the power of the devil. All beliefs that he held about witchcraft were in this book, which was quite influential among believers during this time. One will see that these beliefs heavily influenced how he dealt with witchery during his reign as King of England.

When James I ascended to the English throne in 1603, he issued a new law that ushered in the most intense period of witch trials in England. This law stated,

⁹ Joseph H. Marshburn. *Murder and Witchcraft in England. 1550-1640*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma) p. 54

¹⁰ Reginald Scot. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. 2nd ed. (Yorkshire: Ep Limited, 1973). p. 9

¹¹ Scot. 5

¹² G.B. Harrison. *The Trial of the Lancaster Witches*. (London: Peter Davis, 1929). p. xiv

¹³ Notestein. p. 94

¹⁴ G.B. Harrison. *The Trial of the Lancaster Witches*. (London: Peter Davis, 1929). p. xiv

For the better restrayninge the said Offenses, and more sever punishinge the same, be it further enacted by the authorities of the aforesaide, That if any person or persons...shall use the practise or exercise any Invocation or Conjuracion of any evill and wicked Spirit, or shall consult covenant with...any evil or wicked spirit...will lawfullie...suffer the paines of death.¹⁵

This law showed a marked difference from that of his predecessor, Elizabeth. He felt that Elizabeth's law did not cover all that was necessary to fully punish this horrendous crime because her law did not address contracting with the devil or conversing with spirits. As it stood under James I's law, these crimes were punishable by death on the first offense. It was easy to bring a witch up on a felony charge because one could accuse her of keeping a familiar, a spirit within an animal, much more easily than accusing her of murder. All that was thus required were a few gossiping groups to cause a stir within a village. Under this new statute, two-thirds of those who escaped death under Elizabeth were now condemned, thus showing the greater degree of seriousness that individuals felt toward this crime.¹⁶ When studying this period of witch persecution in England, it is imperative to show examples of how these trials were actually run in order to grasp how individuals handled cases under this statute.

Before delving into specific trials it is worth noting who was more likely to be accused, how they were tried, what punishments they received, and if they were likely to be tortured. As previously stated, those accused were mostly women who were old and wretched because many believed that the "female sex was both weak and vicious—weak towards Satan and vicious towards fellow human beings."¹⁷ This is not to say that men were never found guilty of witchcraft because, between 1300 and 1499, 37% of those tried were men.¹⁸ This percentage shows that although women were more likely to be accused, men were not all together seen as innocent. Under James I, there were certain procedures that one was allowed to perform for both women and men. For example, "any person who suspects another to be guilty is allowed to arrest him, and bring him to the Constable or to a Justice" in order to begin his trial.¹⁹ The ability for individuals to arrest suspected witches emphasizes the increase of trials during this time.

When these individuals were brought up on felony charges, they were tried at the Court of King's Bench at Westminster, at the Court of Assizes, at the Quarter Sessions, or at Independent Courts. Under the Act of Parliament 1 & 2 Phillip & Mary of 1554, one is allowed the possibility for bail, but to receive it, the individual had to be personally questioned, along with those who accused him, to see if the circumstances of the crime

¹⁵ Ewen. p. 19-20

¹⁶ Notestein. p. 106

¹⁷ MacFarlane, and Sharpe. p. 16

¹⁸ Susanna Burghatz The Equation of Women and Witches: Case Study of Witchcraft Trials in Lucerne and Lausanne in 15th and 16th Centuries. p. 59

¹⁹ Ewen. p.52

allowed for bail.²⁰ The accused person was detained in a prison until the date of their trial if bail was not received. Upon reaching trial, courts took care to ensure that a potential witch was “genuine” by setting down a set of signs that it would use to see if an individual was using witchcraft. These signs ranged from a murdered individual bleeding when a witch touched it to merely keeping pictures of clay or wax in the home. Although one would think that torture would be used to punish a witch during a trial or used to illicit confessions, “there is no evidence that physical torture was ever officially allowed in England, except where treason was involved.”²¹

When the accused individual was found guilty, there were certain punishments that were given. Under each monarch, these punishments ranged from automatic death to one-year imprisonment. Although death resulted in many of the cases, there were different ways in which individuals were killed. Many times they were burned at the stake or boiled to death. It is worth noting “the reign of James...shows a notable increase in witch executions over that of Elizabeth. Records show that forty to fifty people suffered for the crime during the reign of James, all but one of them within the first fifteen years.”²² The most noted trial during this time, perhaps the most noted during his reign, were those trials held at Lancaster in 1612.

In 1612, there was a series of witch incidents that were quite sensational. In the forest of Pendle, there were two feuding families headed by Elizabeth Southernes, or ‘Old Demdike’ and by Anne Chattox. Both families professed supernatural powers and ignited fear within each other.²³ Roger Nowell, a justice of the peace, was brought to the lands of Lancaster when the feuding resulted in the death of a member of well-to-do family. When four women were arrested, Elizabeth Device, daughter of Elizabeth Southernes, called their children and friends to gather “on Good Friday for a special meeting held at Malkin Tower...in the Forest of Pendle”²⁴ in order to plot the escape of their leaders by blowing up Lancaster Tower. When this plot was eventually exposed, individuals began to accuse one another for using witchcraft. Multiple individuals were brought to trial and eventually were put to death for their many felony crimes. By the end of this trial, the people of this town were horrified to know that these women had been followers of the devil for years and were using black magic against them by taking the “scalpes of people, which had been buried, and then cast out of a grave”²⁵ This trial lived in infamy for many years, and in 1633, another series of trials (which were directly related to the 1612 trials) emerged here under Charles I.

When Charles I took power in 1626, his reign began a marked decrease in witch executions. Although there were isolated problems in some places, there was a relatively quiet atmosphere during this time. There was “but one really notable alarm...that illustrated the continuity of the superstition in a given locality.”²⁶ This trial was again in

²⁰ Ewen, p. 53

²¹ MacFarlane and Sharpe, p. 20

²² Notestein, p. 105

²³ Notestein, p. 122

²⁴ Marshburn, p. 146

²⁵ Harrison, p. 136

²⁶ Notestein, p. 146

the town of Lancaster. Because of the previous events that occurred in this area, a local eleven year old boy stated that he was led by a woman to the area of the Malkin Tower, the original site of the 1612 plot. This exclamation not only led the town to cry out, but also led to the deaths of those who he had imprisoned because of his accusations. After being examined on June 16, the boy stated that he had fabricated the entire story because he wanted to create "fantastic tales about witches"²⁷ Although Charles I's reign was relatively quiet, one has to understand that the Lancaster Trials of 1634 represent the continuance of skepticism among the people. Granted, there were fewer executions, but trials still occurred during this time. As one can see, "superstition was still a bird of prey, but its wings were being clipped."²⁸ It was a time that showed a lessening in signs that would have definitively brought a witch to trial

It is worth noting that during the reign of Charles I, a civil war began between the royalists and parliamentarians, which resulted in the eventual overthrow of the monarchy in favor of a Commonwealth headed by Oliver Cromwell. During the years of the war (1642 to 1651), the courts and magistrates were no longer focused on the troubles that witchcraft was causing the population. Although courts did not prosecute as much as they had in the past, witch-finders were able to use local courts to quell the public discontent that emerged.²⁹ The courts did not in fact aid those who believed in witchcraft as much as they had in the past, but with the help of witch-finders, witches still stayed in the public mind. There was in fact a great "difficulty of detecting witches with certainty, thus leading to the employment of professional witch-finders who were supposed to have greater experience than the local searchers and watchers,"³⁰ but the influence of one man, Matthew Hopkins, led to a string of trials and executions which was quite unusual for this period.

Between the years of 1645 and 1647, Matthew Hopkins was a highly valued witch-finder who went back and forth in the eastern counties. Because "England was in a state of judicial anarchy, local authorities were in control...and had often been against witches," Hopkins gained the opportunity to excel in an atmosphere where the civil government was unconcerned with witchcraft. This allowed him to gain support from minor courts and local people. Many saw Hopkins as a man of action because he was able to seek out witches fairly easily and bring them forth on felony charges. Although it is not known how he came to hold such an ardent hatred of witchcraft, Hopkins was familiar with the ideas held in James I's *Daemonologie*. One must understand that this man did not go from town to town accusing people haphazardly, but systematically checked individuals for sure signs of witchery. Because he was professional in his actions, individuals had faith when he recognized someone as a witch. His credibility fueled the local courts in the East, which allowed Hopkins to send more witches to the gallows in fourteen months than any other witch-finder.³¹ It was not until there became

²⁷ Marshburn. p. 148

²⁸ Notestein. p. 163

²⁹ Notestein. p. 183

³⁰ Ewen. p. 69

³¹ Notestein. p. 195

more stability in England that this man was checked in his actions of mass witch persecutions.

Following the Civil War, there was in fact still a period in which the higher courts in England took back control of witch trials because they now had the time to focus on this local crime. Between 1649 and 1653, practicing witchcraft was still seen as a serious offence. It was not until 1653 when the Protectorate, under Oliver Cromwell, was established that one notices a substantial decrease in witchcraft trials. It is worth noting that the "period of the Protectorate saw but half a dozen" cases, which was lower than the thirty trials held in the prior years.³² Although there was no longer Civil War, Cromwell was responsible for maintaining the first protectorate England had ever seen, which may have influenced his decision to thwart the trials of witches. Although he allowed trials to commence, Cromwell pardoned many accused individuals because he was trying to balance the rage of the people with keeping peace throughout the land.

When the throne was finally restored in 1660, there was a further decrease in trials in the following decades because there were many changes that were occurring. Witches, if they were even brought to trial at all, received fairer treatment in court and, many times, full pardons. Justices were much more reluctant to send witches to courts because of the critical literature that began to emerge, much of which was reminiscent of the Reginald Scot material from decades past. Intelligent men began to speak out against the old superstitions that were held by the common masses and attempted, through the written word, to expel these beliefs. One such man was John Wigstaffe who, in 1669, wrote *The Question of Witchcraft Debated*, which uses theological arguments to hinder the widespread faith in witches. In his book, there are two important arguments worth noting: "witches find their origin in 'heathen fables'...undercutting...those who insisted the belief in witchcraft as an essential of Christian faith" and that coincidence is the cause of many of these "witch" scares.³³ Another great critic of this period was John Webster who wrote *The Displaying of the Supposed Witchcraft* in order to strengthen and reiterate those theological and philosophical arguments, such as Wigstaffes, to further disparage witchcraft.³⁴ As more individuals spoke out against witchcraft, individuals began to lose their ardent faith in its practice. The growing skepticism aided in the eventual defeat of legal trials in England by 1717.

In 1717, the last trial for the crime of witchcraft was held in the town of Leicester. This trial shows that there were still superstitions present in England, but those in power saw that the Statute of James I needed to be repealed. Although it was not repealed until this time, the Statute had not been previously enforced because courts granted an increasing number of pardons for this felony that called for death. The government could not justify, in the face of growing evidence and criticism against the existence of witchcraft, a death sentence for something that was no longer hard fact. Those signs, such as marks on the body and the keeping of wax figures, were no longer enough to convict individuals who otherwise would have had no chance under such a strict law. Although

³² Notestein, p. 220

³³ Notestein, p. 295

³⁴ Notestein, 305

there were those who still believed in witchcraft, they could not use the courts to help them, thus bringing an end to the official prosecution of witches in England.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one can see that superstition dominated the minds of individuals in England. Sickness, death, and theft were seen as a crime of witchcraft, and thus a threat to the common good. Beginning with Henry VIII, rulers of England felt that strict laws were needed in order to protect its citizens against the dangers that the Devil caused on Earth. Not all people felt that witchcraft existed because there were, from the beginning, those who spoke out against it. Although this felony called for death, one observes that this was not always carried out because there were issues that many times prevented a strict, systematic judicial system. Because of political unrest during the Civil War, Protectorate, and Restoration, the government needed to ensure the survival of England as a nation rather than worry over the many witchcraft cases. It was not just civil unrest that caused the eventual decline of witchcraft trials, but also the growing amount of criticisms coming from learned men. The government could no longer ignore the witchcraft issue, thus officially ending persecution. Witchcraft was a crime so heavily prosecuted in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, but as the realm and those in it, developed and changed, witchcraft trials could no longer be tolerated.

References

- Burghartz, Susanna. The Equation of Women and Witches: Case Study of Witchcraft Trials in Lucerne and Lausanne in 15th and 16th Centuries.
- Ewen, L'estrage C., Witch Hunting and Witch Trials: The Indictments for Witchcraft from the Records of 1373, Assizes held for the Home Circuit A.D. 1559-1736. London:Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929.
- Harrison, G. B., ed. The Trial of the Lancaster Witches. London: Peter Davis, 1929. 1-185.
- MacFarlane, Alan, and J. A. Sharpe. Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Marshburn, Joseph H. Murder and Witchcraft in England. 1550-1640. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma P, 1971. 1-287.
- Notestein, Wallace. A History of Witchcraft in England From 1558 to 1718. 2nd ed. NY: Russel & Russel, 1965. 1-442.
- Scot, Reginald. The Discoverie of Witchcraft. 2nd ed. Yorkshire: Ed. Limited, 1973. 1-602.