

Witches and Witchcraft in Ely

I want to start this evening by asking you to think of the first image that comes into your head when I say the word 'witch'. I don't want to pre-judge what you are thinking, but I suspect that for most of us it may be a comic image – an old woman with a grotesquely hooked nose and a pointy hat riding a broomstick, perhaps, or possibly your mother-in-law. Three centuries ago, witches were no laughing matter, and one of the things I want to try to do this evening is explain how this remarkable change happened: how did we go from being so afraid of witches that a person who stepped out of doors on Hallowe'en was considered literally mad, to a society where witches are worn-out figures of fun, suitable for children's entertainment? On the way, I am going to talk about Ely's special place in the history of English witchcraft – although for more detail on that subject, you will need to buy my very reasonably priced book.

We think we know what witches are, but the question I want to try and answer this evening is this: 'What did people in the past think witches were?' Did they think that witches were special magical people who shot sparks out of the ends of wands, like the witches and wizards of the Harry Potter books? Well, no, they didn't. Or did they think that witches were members of a nature-loving religion, gathering at ancient sites in the landscape to worship a Goddess, like many people who call themselves witches in the twenty-first century? Again, no. Understanding what people in the past meant by a witch is no easy task, because it involves entering into a mental world that does not really exist anymore. However, I would like to suggest that there are close analogies in the contemporary world to what witches were thought to be.

One example is internet trolls, those anonymous individuals who post malicious messages on websites that can sometimes cause great harm. We find trolls troubling because we cannot understand why they are so wantonly, inexplicably unpleasant; and of course, in the internet age, their malice alone can harm or even kill, if their victims become suicidal. Trolls do not do direct physical harm, but the harm they cause is no less real. Now someone might object at this point that internet trolls are real, and witches were not: but consider that internet trolls would have no power to harm anyone, unless there were vulnerable people who take their comments to heart. We hand power to trolls by our belief in their power to harm, and the same was true of witches.

I want to tackle a historical misconception at this point. Many people assume that witches, wizards and magicians were all pretty much the same – after all, they were all thought to have supernatural powers. In reality, people in the past, especially in the Fens, made a sharp distinction between good and evil supernatural power. Magic was good, or at least morally neutral, in itself: its practitioners were called cunning-men or women, or wizards and wisewomen. They were highly respected members of the community, and often devout churchgoers. This talk is not about them – the wizards and wisewomen of the Fens deserve a study in their own right. Being a wizard was a craft in the true sense: it was a difficult skill passed on from father to son or mother to daughter. We might say that these people were primitive psychotherapists.

On the other side, the dark side, were witches. Witches were intimately bound up with cursing, the evil eye and evil-wishing. This was the idea that certain people were born evil, and had the inexplicable power of bringing evil and misfortune into the lives of those around them. Importantly, this was not a skill that was learnt, like magic, but a supernatural power that was inside the person themselves. This strange belief – that some people are just plain evil without trying – seems to be something that exists in almost every culture on the planet. Today it is most potent in parts of Africa and New Guinea, where people are still regularly killed for being witches. This form of belief has been imported to the UK amongst migrant communities, and in 2012 the Metropolitan Police had to set up its own Witchcraft Taskforce to tackle the issue of witchcraft-related child abuse.

So what evidence do we have that English people once shared these beliefs? The answer takes us to the Isle of Ely, in the year 1071, when it was besieged by the army of William the Conqueror. As you will all know, William was frustrated that Ely was being defended so effectively by Hereward the Wake. He had tried everything, but Ely seemed impregnable. It was at this point that one of his knights, Ivo Taillebois, suggested that he make use of the services of an old woman who lived nearby. Hereward realised that something was up, so he donned a disguise as an English peasant and headed to the Norman headquarters at Brandon, where he managed to stay in the same house as the old woman. In the middle of the night he noticed that she got up and went to a spring, where she conversed with a spirit called 'The Guardian of the Springs'. Hereward went back to Ely and warned his men in advance what to expect. When the Normans attacked, they put the old woman on a high wooden gantry at the edge of the Fen, from where she hurled curses at the English.

However, Hereward's men crept up to the gantry with torches, set it alight, and sent the witch falling to her doom.

The witch of Brandon was one of the first to appear in English history, but she has a mixture of characteristics. On the one hand she seems to be a typical witch, thought to have a special power to curse. On the other hand, she seems to be in league with a supernatural power of some sort, the mysterious 'Guardian of the Springs', who brings to mind the water-sprites of Anglo-Saxon paganism. The idea that witches were in league with dark powers was an accusation that would return in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, the Middle Ages were not the golden age for witches that we often suppose them to be. People certainly believed in witchcraft, but witchcraft and magic were not considered to be serious offences. There were no laws against witchcraft, and most of the concern came from the Catholic Church. In the fifteenth century the church started to take magic and witchcraft more seriously, mainly because there was a concern that magicians were in league with heretics, those who questioned the truth of the Catholic faith. **[Lady Chapel]** One victim of this new-found zeal on the part of the church was Richard Barker of Babraham, who was arrested in December 1465 on the charge of using magic to find buried treasure.

These days we would treat Richard as the victim of a confidence trick. A man had offered him a set of magical equipment which, for a handsome fee, would supposedly help him locate buried treasure. Richard was caught and, because Babraham was in the Diocese of Ely, he was taken to be imprisoned in the Bishop's Gaol at the Barton Gate. Richard may have been tortured: the original Latin document describing his trial, which is in Cambridge University Library, says that he was brought before the Bishop *post varias cogitationes*, 'after various considerations', which sounds to me like a euphemism for enhanced medieval interrogation techniques. The Bishop in question was William Grey, who heard the case in the Lady Chapel, then a richly painted jewel of late medieval architecture, in January 1466. Just to the left of the Bishop's throne was a sculpture representing the story of Theophilus, an early form of the Faust legend in which a magician sells his soul to the devil – no doubt an uncomfortable reminder to Richard of the nature of his sin. The Bishop's commissaries displayed Richard's magical paraphernalia and he was found guilty, and sentenced to do public penance in the market places of Ely and Cambridge before his magical equipment was publicly burnt.

This manuscript in Cambridge University Library, although it was written about a hundred years after Richard's trial, contains the kind of magic he was trying to use. This was what was known as 'conjunction', the summoning of good and evil spirits to help the magician, usually to find money, sex and power. This was not really witchcraft in the true sense, because anyone with the right books who could read or write could have a go. It was considered a sin by the church, but it did not make you an evil person in the same way that being a witch did.

Richard Barker got off lightly, because he could only be punished by the church, not the state. It was not until 1542 that the first law against witchcraft appeared on the statute books, in the reign of Henry VIII. This law was primarily directed against people like Barker who used magic to search for buried treasure, but it also made it illegal to harm or kill people by supernatural means, which is what witches were supposed to be able to do. However, the death penalty was only applied to those who killed by magic. In 1563, shortly after the accession of Elizabeth I, the law was tightened up, and the death penalty applied to anyone who harmed by magic, or even tried to harm. And finally, in 1604, Parliament under James I passed an act that was directed specifically against witches. Now the death penalty applied to all supernatural offenders. This act was not repealed until 1736, when a new law made it illegal to call yourself a witch. This law in turn remained in force until 1951 when it was replaced by the Fraudulent Mediums Act, still in force, which makes it illegal to ask for payment in return for pretended supernatural powers. As far as I know, it doesn't cover charging members of the public to attend a ghost tour of a haunted building.

The punishment for witchcraft after 1604 was death by hanging. Witches were only ever burnt to death in Scotland and on the Continent. However, witches were sometimes tested by swimming; this involved trussing the witch with ropes and dragging her (or sometimes him) through a pond to see if the water rejected her. This was something quite different from ducking, which was the punishment for scolds.

The religious changes of the Reformation produced a national panic about witchcraft. There is a huge debate among historians about why this was, but it seems that religious changes brought about insecurity, and one of the ways this expressed itself was in fear of witches. In 1566 another witch was put on trial in Ely, Elizabeth Mortlock of Pampisford. Elizabeth was guilty of giving women a magic girdle that would protect them in childbirth, and of promising to protect people from the fairies. These were actions that may not have

raised an eyebrow a century earlier, but because Elizabeth used a charm that invoked the Five Wounds of Christ (here portrayed on the tomb of Bishop Richard Redman in Ely Cathedral), she was considered suspiciously Catholic by the Protestant church authorities. People were becoming jumpy about the possibility that witches were in their midst, and in 1593 a famous case of bewitchment occurred at Warboys in Huntingdonshire, when Lady Cromwell, the second wife of Oliver Cromwell's grandfather, accused local women of bewitching two daughters of the Throckmorton family. Lady Cromwell subsequently claimed to have been bewitched herself. Oliver was not born until 1599, but he must have grown up in the shadow of a deep-seated fear of witches that was particularly prevalent amongst God-fearing Puritans.

But it was in the middle years of the seventeenth century, between 1644 and 1647, that England experienced its first and last proper witch-hunt. It was modest by European standards: Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled Witchfinder General from Manningtree in Essex, presided over the deaths of around 300 women and men – in Germany thousands were burnt as witches. However, Hopkins and his sidekick, John Stearne from Lawshall in Suffolk, popularised the idea that witches were not just evil people, but people who had deliberately made a pact with the devil. They were worshippers of Satan, on the devil's side, and therefore worthy of death. Hopkins and Stearne were helped by the fact that their witchhunt centred on East Anglia, where there was a distinctive belief in imps or familiars. These were pet animals who somehow gave witches their power. Hopkins declared that imps were demons in disguise, who sucked on a witch's blood, thereby making a pact with her or him. The first stage of identifying a witch involved examining the witch's body for extraneous teats or flaps of skin, which given the nature of seventeenth-century skin diseases the witchfinder was almost guaranteed to find. The next stage involved tying the suspect to a stool and keeping them awake overnight: during the night, any animal that entered the room would be the witch's familiar. Again, given the verminous nature of seventeenth-century dwellings the appearance of a rat or insect was almost inevitable.

Hopkins and Stearne moved up from Essex into Suffolk and then into Cambridgeshire. In August 1647 Hopkins returned to Manningtree and died, but Stearne carried on the work, presiding over the last stage of the witch-hunt in Ely. At least eight people from the villages of Sutton, Stretham and Haddenham was arrested and taken to the gaol in Ely. Some died from the terrible conditions in gaol before they even got to trial. Just before the trial, it emerged that there was a witch in Ely itself, Peter Burbush of the parish of St

Mary. Burbush claimed that you could become a witch by urinating against the wall of St Mary's church after the Sunday service:

When a man came to the Sacrament, let him take the bread and keep it in his hand, and after that he hath drunk the wine to go out with the bread in his hand and piss against the church wall, at which time he shall find something like a toad or frog gaping to receive the said bread, and after that the party should come to the knowledge how to be a witch.

Not all of the Ely witches were found guilty – it is a misconception that all seventeenth-century judges were bloodthirsty. Strange as it may seem, standards of evidence did apply in witchcraft cases. Indeed, it was partly because lawyers were concerned about the standards of evidence in witchcraft prosecutions that they began to wind down in the second half of the seventeenth century. King Charles II started pardoning women accused of witchcraft, as happened in Ely in 1679. This new liberal attitude troubled some, notably Joseph Glanvill, a theologian who published a book called *Saducismus Triumphatus* (meaning 'Sadducism defeated') in 1681. Glanvill thought that denying the existence of witches was a slippery slope to denying the existence of God, and this remained the prevailing view among educated people. Questioning witchcraft was simply too dangerous as it might lead to atheism.

However, by 1718, when the vicar of St Mary's church in Bury St Edmunds published *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, Francis Hutchinson was able to denounce belief in witchcraft as a dangerous superstition. What had changed so radically in less than 40 years? Well, once again historical opinion is divided. One likely reason is that educated people had begun to accept Isaac Newton's idea that the universe was governed by fixed laws that could be found out by human beings. This removed much of the mystery from nature, and began what Max Weber called 'the disenchantment of the world'.

But just because the educated ceased to believe in witchcraft in the eighteenth century, that did not mean that ordinary people thought any differently. Every year, home owners in East Anglia dig up 'witch bottles', devices that were thought to repel witches. Urine, nail and hair clippings from the victim of bewitchment were put in the bottles which were then buried, thus neutralising the power of the witch's curse. Witch bottles are a type of apotropaic object, which simply means that their purpose was to ward off evil. Other common examples are mummified animals, usually cats or toads, hidden behind walls, in roof spaces or under hearthstones. No record survives of what belief

motivated these bizarre deposits, but they seem to have had something to do with protecting a house from evil. The laws against witchcraft were long gone, but people accused of being a witch were still subject to vigilante justice. Right up to the twentieth century, there were attempts to burn down the houses of alleged witches, and many old women had their faces scratched in the street as a result of the belief that a witch's power was removed if she was 'scored above the breath'. Some old women, desperate for an income, seem to have encouraged people to believe that they were witches, and effectively blackmailed their neighbours. All of this began to come to an end after the First World War: communities were shattered, and even where folk beliefs survived they were finally wiped out after the Second World War, when there were major population movements from the city to the countryside that affected even the Fens.

But the second half of the twentieth century also saw a rather unexpected development: the return of witchcraft in a new form. Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist, proposed in 1921 that European witches had actually been members of a secret pagan fertility religion, worshipping a goddess and a horned god, who were demonised by the Christian authorities. After the 1736 Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1951 (the act made it illegal to claim to be a witch), a retired colonial civil servant called Gerald Brosseau Gardner, who was inspired by Murray's ideas, claimed to have found people following this ancient religion and called it Wicca, after the Anglo-Saxon word for witches. Wiccans call themselves witches, but they are very far from the witches that people of the past believed in. Wiccans have a strict ethical code which outlaws cursing or spells that harm. Nevertheless, they claim to be successors to those witches who suffered and died for their eccentric beliefs that differed from orthodox Christianity. Whether witches are really following a genuinely ancient religion or not, there are now a lot of them. Followers of Wicca and related pagan religions now constitute the seventh largest religion in England and one of the fastest growing. People find this a fulfilling spiritual path and it has acquired its own quirks and traditions. It is not so much that witchcraft has survived to the present day, but that it has been reincarnated in a different form.