The Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries

This book is suitable for a variety of courses including:

Edexcel: The witch craze in Britain, Europe and North America, c1580–c1750
OCR: Popular Culture and the Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries

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Dedication

Keith Randell (1943–2002)

The Access to History series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to ‘cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be’. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.
Witch-hunting in England

In some ways, witch-hunting in early modern England was similar to that in continental Europe. But in other ways it was markedly different. This chapter will examine the similarities and differences by focusing on the following issues:

★ Witchcraft in early modern England
★ English witch-hunting 1560–1612
★ The Lancashire witches 1612
★ Matthew Hopkins and the East Anglian witch-hunt 1645–7

The key debate on page 115 of this chapter asks the question: To what extent was English witchcraft distinct from continental European witchcraft?

Key dates

1563 Witchcraft Act
1584 Publication of The Discoverie of Witchcraft
1604 Witchcraft Act
1645–7 East Anglia witch-hunt
1612 Pendle witches
1612

Witchcraft in early modern England

What were the main features of English witch persecutions?

It is likely that some 500 witches were executed in England between 1500 and 1700. There was only one mass witch-hunt: that associated with Matthew Hopkins in East Anglia between 1645 and 1647 (see pages 106–13). Witchcraft in England, according to historian James Sharpe (2002), was ‘an endemic, rather than an epidemic problem, where witch trials were sporadic and few … and where the acquittal rate was high’.
The sources

Contemporary sources of witch activities are patchy.

**Trial records**

Most trial records have been lost. The only area where *indictments* against witches survive in bulk, but not in their entirety, is in the south-eastern counties of Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex. These records indicate that witchcraft charges rose steadily in number from the 1560s, peaked at a total of more than 180 in the 1580s, stayed high in the 1590s and then fell away with fewer than twenty indictments in the 1630s. There were some 130 indictments in the 1640s and 1650s, largely attributable to Hopkins’ witch-hunt (see pages 106–13). After 1660, indictments returned to their 1620s’ level. The last-known trial in the south-east was in Hertfordshire in 1712. Essex, with 464 indictments, had the highest number of indictments. Sussex, by contrast, had only 36 indictments and one execution. The trial records suggest that witchcraft indictments formed only a tiny fraction of the courts’ criminal business.

**Pamphlets**

Pamphlets were often published after witchcraft executions. Some 140, varying in length from about 100 pages to just a handful, have survived. They tended to take the form of sensational moralising tales based loosely on the evidence found in trial reports. The pursuit of truth tended to take second place to the writer’s desire to spin a good yarn or teach a clear moral lesson. Given that most trial records have been lost, the pamphlets are often the only surviving contemporary accounts of many witch trials.

**Witchcraft in England pre-1542**

Prior to 1542, Church courts dealt with most cases concerning witchcraft, cunning folk and sorcerers. Sanctions were directed more to penance and atonement than to harsh punishment. Often, the guilty party was ordered to attend the parish church, wearing a white sheet and carrying a wand, and swear to lead a reformed life. The surviving records suggest there were relatively few witchcraft cases.

Where fraud, treason, murder or injury were involved, witchcraft could be dealt with in secular courts. From the fourteenth century, most English monarchs faced combined treason/sorcery plots, in which those planning their downfall sought magical assistance. In the reign of Henry VI, for example, Margery Jourdemayne was burned at the stake for conspiring to bring about the king’s death through sorcery. One of her co-conspirators, Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, escaped death, but after performing a public penance, spent the rest of her life as a prisoner.
The 1542 Act

By the 1542 statute it became a capital offence to conjure spirits or to practise witchcraft, enchantment or sorcery in order to find lost treasure, destroy a person’s body, members or goods, or for any other unlawful intent or purpose. There is no evidence that this Act, the harshest of all English witchcraft statutes, was ever enforced: it was repealed, for reasons which are unclear, in 1547.

The 1563 Act

The 1563 Act, passed in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (reigned 1558–1603), re-established witchcraft as a felony. Under this Act:

- Killing people by witchcraft was punishable by death.
- Injuring people or animals or damaging goods by witchcraft, attempting to do the same, using witchcraft to find lost or stolen money, goods or treasure, or using witchcraft to provoke love or for any other purpose, was punishable by a year’s imprisonment for the first offence, and death on the second.

The statute was once thought to have been inspired by Protestant clergy who had fled abroad during the reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor (reigned 1553–8) and who had been influenced by continental witchcraft ideas. However, it now seems that the 1563 Act was passed because a group of Catholic plotters were discovered using sorcery against Elizabeth’s Protestant regime and the authorities realised that there was no law in existence to try them. The government apparently pushed for new laws against Catholics and witches. While the 1563 statute may well have been the product of a particular situation, it is likely that the Elizabethan regime, emulating most other European governments of the period, would have enacted witchcraft legislation. While ecclesiastical courts retained a role in the determination of witchcraft accusations, after 1563 secular law dominated, with punitive displacing reformative justice.

The 1604 Act

The 1604 statute made injuring people a capital offence on the first conviction. It added and made capital the offence of using dead bodies or parts of them for witchcraft or sorcery. It also imposed the death penalty for anyone who ‘shall consult covenant with entertain employ feed or reward any evil and wicked spirit to or for any intent or purpose’.

Reginald Scot

Oddly, the first major book on witchcraft published in England, Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), was an attack on witchcraft persecution. An educated layman of deep Calvinist convictions, Scot was sceptical of the notion of witchcraft for two reasons:
He believed in the sovereignty of God: it was thus wrong to attribute supernatural power to witches.

He could find no biblical foundation for witch-hunting.

Using philosophy and science, Scot established the impossibility of the deeds confessed by witches.

SOURCE A

From Reginald Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft, first published in 1584. Reprinted by Elliot Stock, 1886, pp. 5–6.

One sort of such as are said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, foule, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as knowe no religion: in whose drousie minds the divell hath gote a fine seat; so as, what mischeef, mischance, calamitie, or slaughter is brought to passe, they are easilie persuaded the same is doone by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination hereof. They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting, scolds, mad, divelish; and not much differing from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits; so firme and stedfast in their opinions, as whosoever shall onelie have respect to the constancie of their words uttered, would easilie beleive they were true indeed.

These miserable wretches are so odious unto all their neighbors, and so feared, as few dare offend them, or denie them anie thing they aske: whereby they take upon them; yea, and sometimes thinke, that they can doo such things as are beyond the abilitie of humane nature.

Pro-witchcraft texts

A number of texts which perceived witchcraft to be a serious threat were written by Englishmen in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Published works included:

- A Treatise against Witchcraft (1590), written by a Cambridge-educated clergyman, Henry Holland.
- Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft (1608), written by William Perkins, the leading Puritan theologian of his day. This work remained influential throughout the seventeenth century.

Most English demonologists hoped to see the establishment of a godly commonwealth. Extirpating witchcraft was only one aspect of this process and was not the most important one. More significant for most witchcraft writers was the need to eradicate ‘superstitious’ beliefs and practices. Their prime targets were the rituals of the Catholic Church as well as a host of popular beliefs and customs, including resorting to cunning folk.
Sharpe stresses that there was ‘no single hegemonic attitude to witchcraft among educated men and women in England but rather a plurality of possible positions’. Some believed in the threat of witchcraft. Others were sceptical. Probably most were somewhere in the middle: they were willing to accept witchcraft as a potential threat but cautious about persecuting people who were simply disliked in their communities.

The role of the Devil

English witchcraft beliefs have often been portrayed as being less concerned with the demonic pact than continental beliefs. Nevertheless, by the early seventeenth century, there was a growing awareness of the idea of the pact. While few people read the serious demonological texts, many read (or had read to them) the pamphlets which described witch trials. These conveyed a clear warning of the danger of Satan’s snares and stressed that witches were his agents. Several of those executed in Lancaster in 1612 (see pages/uni00A0101–4) confessed to entering into a diabolical pact. By the time of Hopkins’ witch-hunt (see pages/uni00A0106–13) between 1645 and 1647, such ideas were firmly implanted.

However, the sabbat was a phenomenon rarely alluded to in sources dealing with English witchcraft. There does not seem to have been much concern about it at popular or theoretical level.

Familiars and the witch’s mark

When it came to witchcraft accusations, the Devil generally had, ‘at best, a walk-on part’, writes historian Malcolm Gaskill (2010). Instead, familiars – or imps – in the shape of animals, birds and insects took centre stage. Familiars, half-animal and half-demonic beings that most witches were thought to own, were a uniquely English phenomenon. Some familiars were described as fearsome beasts. Others seemed to be like pets. A 1566 pamphlet recounting the trial of three Chelmsford women includes the confession of Elizabeth Francis, aged twelve. She was initiated into witchcraft by her grandmother, who gave her a familiar in the shape of a cat called Satan. Elizabeth was assured she would be rewarded in return for her renunciation of God and her giving her soul to the cat in return for a few drops of blood.

Familiars were supposed to suck blood from witches and the English version of the witch’s mark was regarded as the place from which the blood was sucked. The mark was usually identified as a teat or similar protuberance. The identification of this mark became one of the most definite proofs of witchcraft. By the seventeenth century the mark was normally found in the anus of female witches, possibly adding a sexual dimension to the witch’s relationship with her familiar. Contemporary notions of modesty meant that teams of women, usually including a midwife, were appointed as searchers.
Cunning folk

Alan Macfarlane (1970) demonstrated that in the Elizabethan period no village in Essex was more than ten miles from a ‘cunning’ person, of whom a high proportion were male. Cunning folk carried out a number of services including:

- providing medicine for the sick
- helping people to identify those who were bewitching them
- giving advice about how to deal with witches.

Given that cunning folk were considered a ‘good thing’ by the bulk of the population, they were unlikely to be reported to the authorities. Nevertheless, many preachers and writers argued, as did Richard Bernard (see page 87): ‘All witches, in truth, are bad witches and none are good.’

Witchcraft, magic and educated culture

The tendency for recent historians to focus on the witchcraft beliefs of the masses has tended to obscure the importance of magic and the occult in educated culture.

Alchemy and astrology

Throughout the early modern period educated men dabbled in alchemy, attempting to turn base metals into gold by occult means. Belief in astrology was also widespread:

- John Dee, an English intellectual and skilled mathematician, established himself as Elizabeth I’s court astrologer, one of his first tasks being to help establish the best date for her coronation.
- In the 1640s, the parliamentary regime sought the advice of William Lilly, an astrologer, seeking predictions about its military plans.
- Doctors used horoscopes to aid their diagnosis and treatment.
- Charts and almanacs that set out the various astronomical events of the coming year, and the best time for action, were very popular.

It is likely that the widespread acceptance of the reality of magical and occult influences helped to convince the educated elite that malefic witchcraft existed.

The impact of classical culture

Classical culture helped to reinforce the acceptance of witchcraft among the scholarly. Education for those destined to become clergymen was largely restricted to training in Latin and Greek and immersion in classical texts. These texts contained overt references to witchcraft and magic. Dramatists of the period, anxious to display their learning to their audiences, made use of witches and the occult. The best known example is the witch scene in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, probably first staged in 1606. These cultural and intellectual currents
were present in the minds of judges, justices of the peace (JPs) and the gentlemen who sat on grand juries and screened witchcraft accusations.

The impact of the Reformation

Historians once assumed that witch-hunting in England was the result of the Reformation. In the eyes of many Protestants, the dividing line between Catholicism and magic was blurred. At the heart of Catholicism was the belief in the power of rituals and relics, which were not far removed from the spells and potions peddled by cunning folk. A raft of methods were employed by the Catholic Church to invoke God’s power or ward off evil spirits. These included rituals for blessing people, houses and crops. Holy water was routinely scattered on fields to ensure good harvests. The use of talismans, amulets and crosses was also commonplace. Protestant theologians wanted to rid society of such superstitious practices. They also sought to extirpate witchcraft.

The impact of Puritanism

By the seventeenth century, many English radical Protestants – Puritans – were at odds with the Anglican Church, which they saw as too ‘papist’. Influenced by the ideas of John Calvin (see pages 21–2), Puritans wished to establish a godly commonwealth on earth. In the Civil War (1642–6) the Puritans succeeded in defeating King Charles I. Oliver Cromwell, who effectively ruled England from the late 1640s until his death in 1658, was a Puritan.

Historians have generally regarded Puritans as more likely than Anglicans to persecute witches. Certainly the most serious witch-hunt in England, in 1645–7, occurred in an area dominated by Puritans and was undertaken by Puritans. However, recent thinking has questioned the connection between Puritanism and a desire to prosecute witches. While some Puritans, notably William Perkins (see page 87), argued for the extirpation of witches, others, while not denying witchcraft’s reality, were cautious about how to approach the issue. Some accepted the views of Reginald Scot (see pages 86–7) and believed that many of the misfortunes which were ascribed to the Devil were in fact due to the providence of God. Macfarlane, analysing witchcraft prosecutions in Essex, could find little evidence of the influence of a persecuting Puritan clergy. ‘At the very least’, writes Sharpe (2002), ‘among English Puritans, witchcraft was a contested issue, rather than a phenomenon which was likely to engender a persecutory knee-jerk reaction’. It is perhaps noteworthy that Oliver Cromwell’s speeches and letters of the Civil War period contain no mention of witchcraft.

Socio-economic influences

Alan Macfarlane (1970) and Keith Thomas (1971) provided an approach to witchcraft which focused on ideas about witchcraft on a popular level and concentrated on the connections between witchcraft accusations and socio-economic change.
The quality of life in England’s village communities in the early modern period remains problematic. The 10,000 or so English parishes varied in extent, in density of population and in their economic life. The heavily populated and economically advanced villages of south-eastern England were markedly different from the thinly populated northern parishes. It is thus hard to generalise. Nevertheless, there is evidence of marked if gradual socio-economic change. The key was population growth. From 1530 to 1630, England’s population rose from 2.5 million to 5 million. This created a flooded labour market resulting in a substantial proportion of the population being wholly or partially dependent on wage labour. Many found it hard to get work and received less in terms of real wages. The result was increased poverty and serious social strains at the base of society.

However, rising bread prices brought enhanced profits for those with a surplus of grain to sell. Thus, many villages were increasingly divided between the poor and a loose oligarchy of gentry and prosperous yeomen farmers, tradesmen and craftsmen who exercised control as employers and through the holding of local offices.

Macfarlane regarded the socio-economic changes that were occurring as crucial to the understanding of witch persecutions in Essex. He claimed that the widening gap between rich and poor resulted in altercations and deteriorating relations between people at local village level. He believed that between c.1560 and 1660 richer villagers were concerned about how to deal with the growing number of poor whom they saw as an increasing nuisance. He claimed that they felt guilt at not helping them and that they transferred this guilt to the transgressors of the community norms – particularly those who begged and mumbled threats against those who refused to give them charity.

Macfarlane’s Essex model, however, does not fit Kent, Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Surrey. These counties saw similar socio-economic change to that occurring in Essex but witnessed relatively little in the way of witchcraft persecution. Nor is the transference of guilt theory convincing. Most of those who brought witchcraft accusations did so because they felt personally threatened by witches. There is little evidence to suggest that they felt consciously or subconsciously guilty.

The English legal process

English legal procedures were different from those across most of Europe. In England, the determination of guilt was left to a trial jury. The judge remained in theory, although not necessarily in practice, an impartial arbitrator who presided over the judicial process rather than an official who was entrusted with the investigation, prosecution and conviction of the crime.

KEY TERM

Yeomen Farmers who owned a relatively small amount of land, on which they themselves usually worked.
Accusations

Most of the accusations in England were rooted in rural communities, where the presence of an undesirable person could less easily be ignored than in a town. Macfarlane calculated that in 410 of 460 cases in Essex, the witch and his or her victim came from the same village. In many cases, the ‘victim’ had probably made some effort to counter the perceived witchcraft. He or she may have visited a cunning person to seek advice. The victim may also have taken direct action. Drawing blood from a witch by scratching (often her forehead) or burning something belonging to a witch (especially her hair) was thought to be effective. Assuming none of this worked, the victim might eventually take the matter to court.

The process of bringing a suspected witch to trial was relatively simple. In rural communities, a complaint would be made to the village constable, who would pass it on to the local JP. The latter would then question both the accused and the accuser. In doing so, he would try to draw out information which would be useful at the court of assize. All this was written down in a pre-trial document. On the basis of the evidence, the JP would commit the suspect for trial or let her go free. If she was sent for trial, she would pass the period of waiting in gaol. This could be up to six months, depending on when in the court cycle arrest had taken place. The input of JPs was of great importance in many witchcraft cases, not least those of Pendle in 1612 and East Anglia between 1645 and 1647.

The assizes

Judges of the three common-law courts at Westminster, appointed by the Crown, heard criminal cases at the assizes: a generally effective way of bringing centrally directed justice to the localities. England’s counties were grouped into six circuits, and twice a year, in January and mid-summer, two judges were allocated to each of the assize circuits and sent out from Westminster to try cases. In England, therefore, witch trials were presided over by experienced judges who were culturally distanced from the world of village squabbles that so often formed the context of witchcraft accusations. This distancing process was enhanced by a convention that assize judges could not ride the circuit in a county in which they lived.

The assize process

Evidence was first presented to a grand jury to determine whether a person should go to trial. If a majority of the twelve jurors thought there was a case to answer, the accused was indicted. If the suspect pleaded not guilty, she was tried before a trial jury which determined her guilt or innocence. It was customary that there was no defence lawyer for those accused of felony. The truth was expected to emerge from the written testimonies that had been taken before the trial. Because the assizes only happened twice a year, there was always a great deal of business to get through. Routine trials lasted just 15–20 minutes. Even complex ones rarely lasted 30 minutes. In contrast to modern times, the defendant was effectively presumed guilty unless proved otherwise.
Legal evidence

Evidence for witchcraft cases was questionable because by its very nature witchcraft was secret. English courts, like those on the Continent, were thus forced to rely on indirect evidence. Juries were not bound by the strict laws of evidence that prevailed on the Continent and could convict a witch on the basis of either reputation or circumstantial evidence. Given that witchcraft was supernatural, courts had to admit evidence of a supernatural or quasi-magical kind:

- The suspect’s association with an animal or insect could be interpreted as the entertaining of a familiar spirit.
- If some contact with the suspected witch were followed by a mishap, a causal connection could be imputed.
- Various categories of physical evidence were accepted. These might include a waxen image of the victim found in the accused’s possession after a misfortune had been suffered. Witches’ marks were accepted as evidence. If the accused’s alleged crime was to have committed murder by witchcraft and the corpse bled at her touch, this was also regarded as evidence of guilt. If a witch was unable to recite the Lord’s Prayer in court without faltering, this suggested guilt.
- On occasion, spectral evidence relating to demonic apparitions (see page 108) was accepted as admissible.

Sub-inquisitorial trial

Historian C.R. Unsworth accepts that English legal practice was ‘distinctly more moderate’ (2001) than continental practice, especially with regard to torture. However, he points out that in many respects, English criminal proceedings developed tendencies which led them to resemble the inquisitorial process:

- Judges often acted oppressively towards accused witches in an effort to secure a confession or otherwise managed trials in such a way as to promote the chances of conviction.
- Zealous clergyman put pressure on the accused to confess.
- Those who searched for the Devil’s mark were effectively professional witnesses, equivalent to those who provide forensic evidence in court today. If Devil’s marks were discovered, the accused was likely to be found guilty. The search itself, an examination in private prior to the court proceedings, can be seen as akin to inquisitorial procedures in Europe.
- As in Europe, rules relating to the giving of evidence were modified for witchcraft cases. Children below the normal age of competence (fourteen years of age) often gave evidence, sometimes against their parents (see page 103).
- Magistrates, in presenting evidence from the initial inquiry to the trial court, were in a strong position to prejudice the latter.
• In an exceptional situation in 1645, during the Civil War, when central justices failed to supervise the conduct of prosecutions, self-proclaimed witch-finders Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne succeeded in using forms of torture (see page 111).

Given these procedures, it is legitimate, thinks Unsworth, to classify English witch trials as ‘sub-inquisitorial in character’.

**Acquittal**

The evidence suggests that opinion about witchcraft accusations within local communities could be divided. While some people might identify women as witches, others were cautious or felt moved by ties of kinship or friendship to support the accused. Therefore, a suspected witch was not destined automatically to face trial and execution. Local enmities and friendship groupings might work as effectively against the accuser as against the witch. Thus, in 1623, Edward Fairfax, member of an important gentry family in Yorkshire, concerned about the bewitchment of his daughters, had the women he suspected tried. But Fairfax was unable to secure a conviction in the face of a rallying of community support for the alleged witches.

The evidence suggests that acquittal rates for witch suspects in England were high. On the south-eastern counties circuit of the assizes only 104 of 474 (22 per cent) accused were sentenced to death. This suggests that judges and juries handled witchcraft cases with caution and some scepticism.
English witch-hunting
1560–1612

How did English witch-hunting develop in the period 1560–1612?

On the basis of the criminal charges, most people were worried about *maleficium*, not the Satanic pact. People taking witches to court were selective about what harms witches were meant to have caused. Between 1560 and 1680 in Essex, they were accused of causing the death of 233 humans, the illness of a further 108, while in 80 cases they were accused of harming or killing animals. A further six were charged with harming property by witchcraft: burning barns, hindering the brewing of beer and preventing cream from becoming butter. Most of those tried as witches found themselves in court as a result of actions levelled against them by their neighbours – in Thomas’s words, the ‘tyranny of local opinion’.

The village community

Witchcraft was a rural phenomenon largely because most people lived in the countryside. London, with 150,000 people in 1550 and 500,000 by 1700, was easily England’s largest town. Few other towns had more than 10,000 people. Norwich, England’s second largest town, had a population of 30,000 by 1700. Although there is evidence of cases of witchcraft in towns it was less common. Most people lived in village communities. Few historians now believe that pre-industrial villages were harmonious, cooperative places where people lived happier lives than those of later industrial workers.

In village communities, most people knew everyone else. Those who stood out as troublemakers were swiftly punished, either by the Church courts or by the community. Community-led punishments included the *duking-stool*, putting the offender in a cage or leading them around the streets by a metal bridle. The most frequent offenders were ‘scolds’, legally defined as ‘a troublesome and angry woman who, by her brawling and wrangling amongst her neighbours, doth break the public peace and beget, cherish and increase public discord’. There was a close association between scolding and witchcraft. Reginald Scot (see pages 86–7) claimed that the ‘chief fault’ of witches ‘is that they are scolds’.

Gossip was a major pastime in most villages. The conduct of individuals was constantly subjected to neighbourhood evaluation, with an awareness of past reputation for good or ill constantly being brought into play. Thus, when misfortune occurred and a natural explanation seemed insufficient, memories of past acts of witchcraft could be raked up. An enormous range of antagonisms, personal feuds and areas of competitiveness underlay a witchcraft accusation. In Thomas’s view, a local reputation for deviance fuelled the process which led to ‘the making of the witch’.

**KEY TERM**

*Ducking-stool* A stool or chair in which people who had committed a not very serious offence were tied and ducked in a pond or river.
Macfarlane’s evidence from Essex suggests that those accused of witchcraft were most likely to be the wives of labourers while those accusing them were more likely to be members of yeomen families. This may have been because taking a witch to court was expensive: poor people who thought themselves bewitched may therefore have been dissuaded from taking their tormentors to court. Usually it took many years for the pressure of suspicion to build before it exploded into an accusation. Plaintiffs, says Sharpe, ‘had to be unusually confident or foolhardy, or unusually afraid or angry’.

**The female stereotype**

As on the Continent, the powers of malefic witchcraft in England were overwhelmingly ascribed to women. Given Macfarlane’s research in Essex, it is likely that 90 per cent of those accused of witchcraft were female. They were also generally elderly. John Gaule, writing in 1646, could castigate the attitude by which ‘Every old woman, with a wrinkled face, a furrowed brow, a hairy lip, a goober [prominent] tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue, having a ragged coat on her back; a skull cap on her head, a spindle in her hand, and a dog or cat at her side; is not only suspected, but pronounced for a witch.’ Single women were particularly vulnerable because it was believed that without the guidance of a husband they did not have the willpower to resist the Devil’s wiles.

Most suspected witches were relatively poor. The notion that older members of society were looked after by their children or relatives seems to have had little basis in fact. There were far more women than men at the bottom of the social scale.

As well as being the most vulnerable and dispensable members of society, elderly women were prone to eccentric behaviour, refusing to conform to social norms, including regular attendance at church. Their neighbours often felt uncomfortable in their presence. The likelihood of senility also increased with age, which made it easier for interrogators to extract confessions of Devil worship or other evil practices.

Suspects had often requested something at the door of one their more substantial neighbours: food, money, work. This would be refused and the woman would either curse the refuser or go away mumbling threats. Soon afterwards a misfortune might befall the refuser’s household. The misfortune would be ascribed to witchcraft, especially if the curser already had the reputation of being a witch.
**Male witches**

Male witches were sometimes the husbands or offspring of female witches, dragged in by association. William Perkins (see page 87) said ‘witches are wont to communicate their skill to others by tradition, to teach and instruct their children and posterity, and to initiate them in the grounds and practices of their own trade’. But men were also accused for independent acts of witchcraft and broader forms of sorcery for which women were rarely indicted.

**Female involvement in witch accusations**

While women were usually the victims, they often played a key role in generating accusations of witchcraft:

- Inter-female rivalries were a common feature of rural life. Far from there being a sense of sisterhood, hostilities between women could be more intense than those involving men.
- Witchcraft accusations became one of the most effective means by which women could exercise power in a male-dominated society.
- At the centre of many of the accusations was concern over children at a time when childcare was regarded as an overwhelmingly female activity.
- Evidence from the south-eastern English counties assize circuit suggests that women were up to fifteen times more likely to give evidence in witchcraft trials than in other felony cases. It may be that women were giving evidence at their husband’s instigation. But it is just as likely that many of the men who bore testimony did so at the prompting of their wives.

**Elizabethan witch-hunts**

The first English witch trial resulting in a hanging took place in 1566 at Chelmsford in Essex. A rush of similar trials followed. The witch panic was accentuated by the discovery in 1578 of a plot to kill Queen Elizabeth and two of her advisers by maleficent magic. A full-scale investigation was launched by the Privy Council. The panic felt at the heart of the government may have filtered down to the rest of society. Cases of witchcraft increased significantly in the 1580s and 1590s, particularly in Essex – the ‘home of English witch-hunting’, says Sharpe (see Source B, page 98).

However, by the end of Elizabeth’s reign, the number of witchcraft trials had declined significantly. Late in Elizabeth’s reign, the ascendancy of Whitgift as Archbishop of Canterbury led to the development of a religious style which eschewed both ‘popery’ and extreme Protestantism. This style, usually described as Arminianism, was continued by Richard Bancroft, who succeeded Whitgift in 1605. By the 1590s, the Anglican hierarchy was sceptical about demonic possession and the threat posed by witches.
The Boy of Burton

In 1596, Robert Toone of Burton in Staffordshire went hunting in local woods with his thirteen-year-old nephew, Thomas Darling. Separated for a short time, they were soon reunited and returned home. Thomas then became ill. Confined to bed, he complained that a green cat was tracking him and that he could see green angels. He also began to have fits. Darling’s family suspected that he was bewitched, a notion that seemed to be confirmed when Thomas claimed that while alone in the woods he had met an old woman who had cursed him. From Thomas’s description, the woman was first identified as Elizabeth Wright, known to neighbours as the Witch of Stapenhill. But others declared that she was too old to go wandering about the woods and that the woman was more likely to be her 60-year-old daughter Alice Gooderidge.

Local JP’s arrested both women, inspected them for witches’ marks – duly found – and then took them to visit Thomas. In Alice’s presence, he fell into a serious fit. This seemed to prove that she was the witch and she was imprisoned. Eventually, she confessed that she was a witch, had summoned the Devil and asked him to torment Thomas. Thomas’s family now called on the assistance of John Darrell, a lawyer turned Puritan preacher, who had already established a reputation for relieving those who were ‘possessed’. Darrell claimed that Thomas
was possessed by two evil spirits whom he proceeded to drive from his body. Thomas recovered. Alice died in prison before she could be brought to trial.

The case made Darrell famous and he was called on to perform other exorcisms, including one in Nottingham in which he apparently cured William Somers. Somers declared that his affliction had been caused by witchcraft and named thirteen women as witches. However, in 1598, Somers admitted to feigning being possessed. As a result, Darrell was arrested and found guilty of fraud by a Church commission in 1599. He was soon released from prison but his career as an exorcist was over.

The influence of Samuel Harsnett

Samuel Harsnett, chaplain to Bishop Bancroft of London, sat on the commission which investigated Darrell's activities. Harsnett had previously spearheaded a campaign to discredit a rash of exorcisms performed by Jesuit priests in England in 1585–6, the purpose of which had been to promote Catholicism by demonstrating that they, not the Anglican clergy, were the Devil's true opponents. The fact that Puritans, like Darrell, were now conducting their own exorcisms was of concern to the Anglican clerical establishment, which was keen to discredit Puritanism, Catholicism and exorcism.

In 1599, Harsnett published *A Survey of Certain Dialogical Discourses*, which condemned Darrell's exorcist practices. The treatise also questioned the belief in demons and came close to denying the reality of witchcraft. Later, by order of the Privy Council, Harsnett wrote another attack on exorcism, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603). In this work, he scoffed openly at witchcraft superstition, and declared there were natural explanations for most apparent supernatural phenomena, including exorcisms. In 1603, the Anglican Church prohibited ministers from casting out devils, except by special licence from a bishop. Harsnett continued to rise in the Church, becoming Archbishop of York in 1628.

The impact of James I

James I became king of England in 1603. Previously he had been James VI of Scotland. In Scotland, he had supported major witch-hunts after 1590 (see pages 125–34) and written a book – *Daemonologie* – about the dangers of witchcraft. Initially, it seemed that he intended to take stronger action against witches. The Witchcraft Act of 1604 was a harsher version of the 1563 Act (see page 86), making hanging mandatory for the first offence of witchcraft. However, James's policies and attitudes towards witchcraft after 1603 are not clear or consistent. He was certainly not the avid witch-hunter of historical myth.

The Gunter case

In 1604, Anne Gunter, the fourteen-year-old daughter of Brian Gunter, a gentleman from North Moreton, Berkshire, displayed many of the symptoms
that had become common in cases of possession. She experienced convulsive fits, became temporarily deaf and blind, sneezed up, voided and vomited pins, foamed at the mouth, went as many as twelve days without eating and physically assaulted those around her. Anne alleged that three women, Elizabeth Gregory, Mary Pepwell and Agnes Pepwell, were responsible for her condition. Not everyone was convinced, particularly as the Gunter family had long been at odds with the families of the accused women.

Elizabeth Gregory and Agnes Pepwell were tried in March 1605 (Mary Pepwell had fled). The jury decided on a verdict of not guilty. This was largely because Thomas Hinton exposed Anne’s fits as counterfeit, and assize judge David Williams was sympathetic to the two women, appointing three sceptical JPs (including Hinton) to the jury.

Anne’s fits attracted the attention of King James and he interviewed her on several occasions between August and October 1605. At some point, he referred the case to Richard Bancroft, now Archbishop of Canterbury. Bancroft, in turn, placed Anne in the custody of Samuel Harsnett, who extracted a confession from her. She admitted that her father had made her fake being possessed in order to accuse Gregory and the Pepwells of witchcraft. Harsnett reported this to James who now took legal action against the Gunters. The prosecution took place in February 1606 in the Court of Star Chamber, a court which was, in effect, the Privy Council acting in a judicial capacity. The record of the court’s decision has been lost but it seems Gunter was convicted and fined. The Gunter trial was the first attempt by an English government to bring the accusers of witches to trial. It is striking that the process of counteraction began only two years after the passage of the severe 1604 witchcraft statute.

Summary diagram: English witch-hunting 1560–1612

The influence of yeomen families

The influence of women

The village community

Female stereotyping

English witch-hunting 1560–1612

Elizabethan witch-hunting

The impact of James I

The Boy of Burton

The influence of Arminianism

The Gunter case

The influence of Samuel Harsnett
The Lancashire witches 1612

Why are the Pendle witches’ trials in Lancaster in 1612 so important in English witch-hunting history?

The trials of the Pendle witches in Lancaster in August 1612 are among the most famous witch hearings in English history. The accused lived in the area around Pendle Hill in Lancashire.

The socio-economic situation

Lancashire at the time was regarded as a wild and lawless region. The Pendle area was experiencing poverty at the base of society. However, it is difficult to link economic pressures directly to the witchcraft accusations in 1612. Many parts of England were experiencing similar economic problems without subsequent witch trials. Moreover, a much greater economic crisis in the Pendle area in the 1620s did not produce a major witch-hunt.

Historian John Swain (2002) thinks it likely that there were people in the Pendle area (including some of those charged) who, in an effort to earn more money, cultivated a reputation for witchcraft. It may be, says Swain, that for some of the Pendle witches ‘witchcraft was a business, albeit a very risky one, for which several paid the ultimate price’.

Events leading up to the trials

On 21 March 1612, John Law, a pedlar, encountered Alizon Device, who asked him for some pins. Law refused. A few minutes later he stumbled and fell. Managing to regain his feet, he reached a nearby inn. Initially, Law made no accusation against Alizon. But she appears to have been convinced of her own powers. When Abraham Law took her to visit his father, John, a few days after the incident, Alizon reportedly confessed to bewitching him and asked for his forgiveness.

Alizon, her mother Elizabeth and her brother James were summoned to appear before Roger Nowell, an experienced JP, on 30 March. It is unclear whether Nowell encouraged what now happened or just happened to get sucked into an ever-growing mass of accusations and confessions. Alizon admitted to Nowell that she had sold her soul to the Devil and that she had told him to lame John Law. James stated that his sister had also confessed to bewitching a local child. Elizabeth was more reticent, admitting only that her mother Elizabeth Southerns (alias ‘Old Demdike’) had a suspicious mark on her body.

Questioned about Anne Whittle (alias ‘Chattox’), the matriarch of another family reputedly involved in witchcraft in the Pendle area, Alizon accused Chattox of murdering four men by witchcraft and of killing her father in 1601. There seems to have been bad blood between the two families, possibly because they were in competition, both trying to make a living from healing and extortion.
On 2 April, Demdike, Chatttox and Chatttox’s daughter, Anne Redferne, were summoned to appear before Nowell. Both Demdike and Chatttox were by then blind and in their eighties. Both provided Nowell with damaging confessions. Demdike claimed that she had given her soul to the Devil twenty years previously while Chatttox said that she had given her soul to ‘a Thing like a Christian man’, on his promise that ‘she would not lack anything and would get any revenge she desired’. Although Anne Redferne made no confession, Demdike said that she had seen her making clay figures. Margaret Crooke, another witness, claimed that her brother had died after having had a disagreement with Redferne. Based on the evidence and confessions he had obtained, Nowell committed Demdike, Chatttox, Redferne and Alizon Device to prison in Lancaster Castle, to be tried for causing harm by witchcraft at the next assizes.

The meeting at Malkin Tower

On 10 April, Elizabeth Device organised a meeting at Malkin Tower, the home of the Demdikes. Friends and others sympathetic to the family attended. When word of the meeting reached Nowell, he decided to investigate. On 27 April, an inquiry was held before Nowell and another magistrate, Nicholas Bannister, to determine the meeting’s purpose, who had attended and what had happened. Evidence emerged that those at the meeting had plotted further acts of witchcraft and considered trying to blow up Lancaster Castle to secure the release of their imprisoned family members. As a result of the inquiry, eight more people – Elizabeth and James Device, Alice Nutter, Katherine Hewitt, John Bulcock, Jane Bulcock, Alice Gray and Jennet Preston – were accused of witchcraft and committed for trial. Preston lived at Gisburn, then in Yorkshire, so she was sent for trial at York; the others were sent to Lancaster.

Nowell and his fellow JPs were now convinced that they were confronting a major outbreak of witchcraft. This seemed to be confirmed on 19 May when Chatttox confessed to making a pact with the Devil and James Device confessed to being a witch. Moreover, neighbours came forward in large numbers to tell the authorities of acts of witchcraft which had occurred over many years.

The York assizes

Jennet Preston was tried at York assizes on 27 July. Her judges were Sir James Altham and Sir Edward Bromley. She was charged with the murder by witchcraft of a local landowner, Thomas Lister, four years previously. She had already appeared before Bromley accused of murdering a child by witchcraft but had been found not guilty. Evidence against Preston was sent from Lancashire to York, not least that she had attended the Malkin Tower meeting. She was found guilty and executed on 29 July.
Chapter 4  Witch-hunting in England

The Lancaster assizes
The judges Altham and Bromley now travelled to Lancaster to try the rest of the Pendle witches. Old Demdike had already died in prison while awaiting trial. A number of other suspected witches were also tried at Lancaster, including:

- the Samlesbury witches, Jane Southworth, Jennet Brierly and Ellen Brierly, the charges against whom included child murder and cannibalism
- Margaret Pearson, who was facing her third trial for witchcraft, this time for killing a horse
- Isobel Robey, accused of using witchcraft to cause sickness.

Thomas Potts
Almost everything that is known about the Lancaster trials comes from The Wonderful Discoverie of Witches, written by Thomas Potts, clerk to the Lancaster assizes. Potts was instructed to write his account by the trial judges. He completed his work in mid-November 1612. Bromley revised and corrected the manuscript before its publication in 1613, declaring it to be 'truly reported'. Potts seems to have relied heavily on witness depositions and accounts of what happened in court. But he also edited and dramatised the materials to give an impression of an unfolding succession of dreadful revelations. Essentially, he was intent on displaying that justice had been done.

The importance of Jennet Device
Nine-year-old Jennet Device was a key witness for the prosecution, something that would have been permitted in few other seventeenth-century criminal trials. However, King James had made a case for suspending the normal rules of evidence for witchcraft trials in Daemonologie. As well as identifying those who had attended the Malkin Tower meeting, Jennet gave evidence against her mother, brother and sister. She must have harboured a deep-seated hatred of her family or been pressured and intimidated by members of the judiciary.

18 August
Anne Whittle (Chattox) was accused of the murder of Robert Nutter. She pleaded not guilty but the confession she had made to Nowell was read out in court and evidence against her was presented by a witness who had lived with the Chattox family twenty years earlier. Chattox broke down and admitted her guilt, calling on God for forgiveness and the judges to be merciful to her daughter Anne Redferne.

Elizabeth Device was charged with three murders. When Jennet stood up to give evidence, Elizabeth screamed and cursed her daughter, forcing the judges to have her removed from the courtroom. Jennet then stated that she believed her mother to be a witch. James Device also gave evidence against his mother and Elizabeth Device was found guilty.
James Device pleaded not guilty to two murders by witchcraft. However, the confession he had made to Nowell was read out in court. This, and the evidence presented against him by his sister Jennet, persuaded the jury to find him guilty.

19 August

Anne Redferne, who had been found not guilty of one charge of murder the previous day, was now found guilty of another. Jane Bulcock and her son John, identified as attending the Malkin Tower meeting by Jennet Device, were found guilty of murder by witchcraft. Alice Nutter was unusual among the accused in being comparatively wealthy, the widow of a yeoman farmer. She made no statement either before or during her trial, except to enter her plea of not guilty to the charge of murdering Henry Milton by witchcraft. Jennet Device claimed that Alice had been present at the Malkin Tower meeting. It is possible that Alice called in at the meeting on her way to a secret Catholic service and refused to speak for fear of incriminating her fellow Catholics. Alice was found guilty.

Katherine Hewitt and Alice Grey were charged with murder and with attending the meeting at Malkin Tower. Hewitt was found guilty. Grey was found not guilty.

Alizon Device, whose action against Law had prompted the trials, was charged with causing harm by witchcraft. She seems genuinely to have believed in her own guilt. When Law came into court, she fell to her knees and confessed.

Execution

The ten Pendle witches who had been found guilty were hanged in Lancaster on 20 August.

The other witches

Concentration on the Pendle witches has tended to divert attention from the trial of the other five witches at Lancaster:

- Margaret Pearson, convicted for non-capital witchcraft, was sentenced to stand on the pillory in Lancaster, Clitheroe, Whalley and Padiham on four market days, where she had to make public confession of her offence, followed by a year’s imprisonment.
- The accusations against the three Samlesbury witches were thrown out.
- Isobel Robey was acquitted.

The judges

Before 1612, no English judge had condemned so many witches at one assize. As Stephen Pumfrey (2002) points out, judges were briefed on royal policy before riding out on circuit so Bromley and Altham presumably believed they were acting in accordance with James’s wishes. Pumfrey argues that they commissioned Potts to write The Wonderful Discoverie to show that they were following James’s guidelines. Interestingly, the book was dedicated to Sir Thomas Knyvet, a powerful courtier, who was very much aware of James’s
thinking. Moreover, it seems that James approved their actions. Bromley was promoted to the Midlands circuit in 1616.

The last years of James’s reign

Towards the end of his reign, James seemed to grow increasingly sceptical of witchcraft accusations, preferring to display his knowledge of witchcraft through exposing fraudulent accusations rather than discovering nests of malefic witches. In 1616, he castigated two judges for finding a large number of accused witches in Leicestershire guilty. Five were pardoned as a result of James’s intervention – an intervention with important consequences in an age when ambitious men kept an ear cocked to catch every royal hint. According to historian Malcolm Gaskill (2010), by this time James was ‘more passionate about deer-hunting than ever he had been about witch-hunting’. Given to intense but short-term attachments to both people and causes, James seems to have lost interest in demonology.

A decline in official concern

By the mid-1620s, English authorities had become sceptical about witchcraft accusations. Few witches came before the courts after Charles I became king in 1625 and those that did were invariably acquitted, usually for insufficient evidence.

An incident in 1633–4 indicates the government’s hostility to witch-hunting. In 1633, eleven-year-old Edmund Robinson, who lived near Pendle, claimed to have been taken to a sabbat by a witch and to have seen a number of local women there whom, on his father’s suggestion, he identified as witches. The judge, who tried the first few cases arising from Robinson’s statements, became alarmed when he realised that the number of accused was rising sharply. He thus invoked the aid of central government. The Bishop of Chester, who was instructed to investigate the matter, was soon convinced the affair was a fraud. Robinson, his father and five of the suspects were then taken to London. William Harvey, the eminent royal physician, was ordered to examine the five women. Assisted by a team of surgeons and midwives, Harvey found little by way of witches’ marks on the women. Robinson then confessed that he had made up the story and that the names had been suggested by his father ‘for envy, revenge and hope of gain’. On this admission, all of those who had been convicted were acquitted. What is striking is how the government acted quickly and decisively to prevent what could have been an outbreak of witch-hunting far larger than the 1612 trials.

By 1640, witchcraft had become marginalised as a source of concern for central government and as a subject of intellectual and theological debate. In the 1630s, playwrights did not regard witchcraft as a serious subject. Nor were any major demonological texts published. However, despite the sceptical attitude of the elite, it may be that popular anxiety about witchcraft increased during the 1620s and 1630s because the law no longer offered protection against witches.
The East Anglian witch-hunt between 1645 and 1647 is usually associated with Matthew Hopkins. In reality, however, Hopkins worked closely with John Stearne. The two men were to become England’s most notorious witch-finders.

The impact of the Civil War

By 1642, Charles I and Parliament were at odds. Civil War convulsed England for the next four years. Each side had a different religious perspective. The king’s most aggressive opponents were the Puritans – strict Calvinists who had urged further reformation of religion before the war. By the 1640s, many Puritan clerics feared that the Devil was everywhere: some even believed that Charles I was Satan’s agent.
The Civil War saw the collapse of traditional authority and traditional institutions. Parliament legislated without royal assent, excluded bishops from the House of Lords, executed William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and dismantled the Church courts. In parliamentary-held areas religious images in churches were destroyed. Some Puritan activists came to regard witches as they did devotional art: as something that needed to be rooted out and destroyed.

**The situation in East Anglia in 1645**

By early 1645, the eastern counties of England, the heartland of the parliamentarian and Puritan cause, were in a state of crisis. The outcome of the Civil War was far from certain. (It did not become so until parliamentary
forces defeated the king’s army at Naseby in June 1645.) It seemed possible that royalist forces might advance into East Anglia. People were fearful and overtaxed. Inflation had led to growing poverty. The principal concerns of the County Committees that ruled parliamentary-controlled areas were money, order, resources and obedience. Communities fighting for their lives also seemed threatened from within – by witches. ‘The sense that victory on the battlefield depended on godliness at home made hunting witches feel like part of the war effort’, writes Malcolm Gaskill (2005).

Witchcraft in Essex in 1645

In March 1645, in the small town of Manningtree near Colchester in Essex, John Rivet accused Elizabeth Clarke of being a witch. Some townsmen, who confronted Clarke, were shocked – but also pleased – to hear her admit an association with several witches. Her confession was entrusted to John Stearne. Stearne, in his mid-thirties, had grown up in Suffolk but was now resident in Manningtree. A staunch Puritan, he had the ear of local magistrate Sir Harbottle Grimston. Grimston was a highly principled man with half a century’s experience of defending truth – as he saw it – in religion and politics. Like many Puritans, he believed that the witchcraft threat was real.

Grimston and his assistant Sir Thomas Bowes received Clarke’s confession from Stearne. They then gave him a warrant to discover from Clarke the names of other witches. Matthew Hopkins volunteered to assist Stearne. Like Stearne, Hopkins was a devout Puritan, anxious to serve the parliamentary cause and concerned about witchcraft. Hopkins, Stearne and several other local people sat with Clarke for several nights, waiting for her familiars to appear. Eventually, various creatures put in an appearance – a creature like a cat, an imp like a dog, another dog like a greyhound, followed by an imp like a ferret and another like a toad. Clarke now admitted that she had allowed the Devil the use of her body six or seven years before and implicated Anne West, a suspected witch from the nearby village of Lawford, in her confession.

After Clarke’s testimonies, other women were arrested – Anne and her daughter Rebecca West, Elizabeth Gooding, Anne Leech and Helen Clarke. They were imprisoned in Colchester awaiting trial. Hopkins knew that confessions did not guarantee conviction. A first-hand account of a sabbat from a witness was necessary to satisfy a judge that the case fell within the law’s compass. He eventually persuaded Rebecca West to become an informer. Her life would be spared in return for her revealing her attendance at the sabbat and the full extent of the witches’ conspiracy.

Meanwhile, more women from the Colchester area were accused. For example, Margaret Moone was blamed for deaths of livestock, spoiling food and beer, and the murder of a child. She was examined and three teats were found in her ‘secret parts’. In April 1645, she confessed that she had twelve imp-disciples.
The situation in the summer of 1645
Hopkins and Stearne, accompanied by two search-women, continued the witch-hunt without initially straying far beyond the territory over which Grimston and Bowes presided. By June, there were at least 30 suspected women in Colchester gaol, where conditions were unspeakable. By mid-June, four suspects had died in prison.

The Chelmsford trial 1645
On 17 July 1645, 29 women accused of witchcraft were tried at Chelmsford. With the Civil War in progress, the trial was conducted not by assize judges but by JPs presided over by the Earl of Warwick, Lord Lieutenant of Essex. Warwick did not possess much legal expertise. According to Gaskill, he was happier directing a sea-battle than he was debating theory.

The trials were short. Batches of women were brought forward together. Most were found guilty. Only one was fully acquitted. However, concerned magistrates and a clergyman approached Warwick to beg reprieves for nine women. The request was granted. Application was made to Parliament stating that the court was not fully satisfied with the evidence given against the women and that they were deemed ‘fit for mercy and pardon’.

Fifteen of the condemned were executed at Chelmsford on 18 July. The remaining four were hanged at Manningtree on 1 August.

Witch-hunting in Suffolk
By July 1645, Hopkins and Stearne had moved their witch-finding to Suffolk, Hopkins operating in the east of the county, Stearne in the west. Most contemporaries believed – wrongly – that they had been given a commission

Matthew Hopkins
- **c.1620** Born in Great Wenham, Suffolk; his father was a Puritan clergyman
- **c.1643** Moved to Manningtree
- **1644** Became interested in witchcraft after overhearing various women discussing meetings with the Devil
- **1645–6** With John Stearne, conducted a series of witch-hunts in East Anglia
- **1647** Published *The Discovery of Witches*
- **1647** Died in Manningtree, probably of consumption

Very little is known about Hopkins apart from his witch-hunting activities. During a two-year period, he and Stearne are thought to have been responsible for the deaths of over 100 witches – a fifth of the total number of people executed for witchcraft in England. While Hopkins saw himself as doing God’s work, he is generally regarded today as a bigot and a sadist. Historian James Sharpe believes that Hopkins was an ‘essential catalyst’ in the witch-hunt process. Malcolm Gaskill, in contrast, claims that ‘the seventeenth-century tragedy of the witch-finders is only partially that of Matthew Hopkins’.
The witch-finders chose their destinations carefully. While they preferred a written invitation, local knowledge did much to ensure they received a warm reception. Communities noted for their godly enthusiasm were most likely to find their way on to their itinerary, especially those where there had been much destruction of church images in 1643–4. More than any other single factor, the fate of a witch suspect was determined by the politics and religion of the prevailing local authority, usually the lord of the manor. Over the summer as many as 150 Suffolk men and women from some 50 small towns and villages were identified as witches.

What point was the illustration in Source C trying to convey?
Confessions

Hopkins and Stearne made obtaining admissions of guilt their business. Their interrogations could last several days. The confessions, recorded by Suffolk magistrates, indicate that suspects were invariably starved of sleep. This, coupled with confinement, isolation and intimidation, caused the mental health of all but the most resilient to deteriorate. After several nights awake, suspects entered a void between waking and sleep, their eyes open but their brains dreaming. The accused thus had no idea what they were admitting to. Fact fused with fantasy.

The usual routines of searching and watching were also implemented. Hopkins would sometimes cut the arm of the accused with a blunt knife and if she did not bleed, she was said to be a witch. It is also possible that some suspects were ‘swum’ (see page 18). Finding the so-called witch’s mark remained crucial.

The Suffolk trials

Some 90 Suffolk witches were tried at Bury St Edmunds on 26 August. The grand jury approved 60 or so for trial. At least sixteen were rejected. The rest may have been carried over to the next assizes. By the end of 26 August, half the accused presented by the grand jury had been tried, of whom sixteen women and two men were sentenced to death, including John Lowesan, an unpopular Anglican vicar. Lowesan and the rest of the Suffolk witches were executed the following day.

SOURCE D


Having taken the suspected witch, she is placed in the middle of a room upon a stool or table, cross-legged, or in some other uneasy posture, to which she submits not, she is then bound with cords: there is she watched and kept without meat or sleep for the space of 24 hours for (they say) within that time they shall see her imp come and suck. A little hole is likewise made in the door for the imp to come in at; and lest it might come in some less discernible shape, they that watch are taught to be ever and anon sweeping the room, and if they see any spiders or flies, to kill them. And if they cannot kill them, then they may be sure they are her imps.

The witch-hunt continues

In 1645–6, Hopkins and Stearne travelled over other eastern counties – Norfolk, Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. The executions continued with Hopkins now giving evidence against suspected witches in court. In Aldeburgh in January 1646, seven women were tried for witchcraft. All were found guilty and hanged. The last serious witch-hunting came on the Isle of Ely. Hopkins may have visited the area briefly in early 1647.
but he was already seriously ill. (He died, aged 27, later in 1647.) The final phase of the hunt was left to Stearne.

Gaskill claims that Hopkins and Stearne had the potential to earn more in a week than most people earned in a year. It has been suggested that this motivated their actions. But it remains likely that they were spurred on by religious conviction. The costs to the local community of Hopkins’ work were such that in 1645 a special local tax rate had to be levied in Ipswich. The Aldeburgh witch-hunt was a severe drain on the town, costing a seventh of its annual expenses. Costs included the following:

- Matthew Hopkins’ fees (£8)
- the fees of the searcher Mary Phillips (£2)
- Hopkins’ and Phillips’ expenses in Aldeburgh (over £4)
- the gaoler’s fees (over £2)
- the fees of the guards at the trial (15 shillings 6 pence; 77.5p)
- food and drink during the trial (£15)
- the carpenter’s fee for the gallows (£1)
- the roper’s fee for making the nooses (8 shillings; 40p)
- the executioner’s fee (11 shillings; 55p)
- burial costs (6 shillings; 30p).

Opposition to the witch-finders

In July 1645, a report was delivered to Parliament raising concerns about the number of confessed witches in Suffolk. In September 1645, the Moderate Intelligencer, a parliamentary newspaper, expressed unease at the state of affairs. In March 1646, pardons for the nine reprieved Essex witches were finally granted by Parliament: criticism of the evidence on which they had been convicted was implicit in the judgment.

Meanwhile, at Great Staughton in Huntingdon, a minister named John Gaule launched a preaching campaign against the witch-finders, declaring them to be no better than Catholic Inquisitors. He proceeded to publish his sermons in a book, Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches and Witchcrafts. Gaule’s criticisms had some impact. At the Norfolk assizes, Hopkins and Stearne were questioned about their interrogation methods and their fees. They were also asked whether their success as witch-finders suggested that they themselves were in league with the Devil.

Hopkins’ and Stearne’s defence

Hopkins published his response – The Discovery of Witches – as did Stearne in A Confirmation and Discovery of Witch Craft. Both men insisted that witches posed a threat to society and that they themselves only visited places to which they had been invited and applied their expertise to suspects identified by local people. There was much truth in this. Victims of witchcraft chose whether to go to law. JPs decided whether there were grounds to prosecute. Thereafter, the
progress of a prosecution depended on grand and trial juries under the guidance of a judge. Hopkins and Stearne were not the commanders-in-chief of the witch-hunt. ‘They were catalysts who gave accusers confidence by confirming their suspicions and beliefs’, says Gaskill. Essentially, they were working within society, not against it. They received active cooperation and encouragement from large sections of the local population. Hopkins was a man of his time, thinks Gaskill, ‘no more ruthless than his contemporaries and, above all, driven by a messianic desire to purify’. By contrast, Oliver Cromwell, who was also driven by a desire to purify (a process that he called ‘a reformation of manners’), chose to do it more through clemency and conciliation, appealing for ‘liberty of conscience’.

Conclusion

Between 1645 and 1647, at least 250 people were tried as witches or at least subjected to preliminary investigation, of whom at least 100 – and possibly many more – were executed. (The exact number is unknown: the records do not survive.) The East Anglian witch-hunt was thus a tragedy. But it needs to be seen as part of something even more terrible – a Civil War characterised by bigotry, brutality and bloodshed. The conflict is thought to have killed 190,000 Englishmen out of a population of 5 million – 3.7 per cent – a greater proportion than those who died during the First World War.

Most of those executed were thought to have committed the usual types of maleficium. What was new was the widespread presence of the Devil in the witches’ confessions, with details of the pact and accounts of sexual intercourse between the witch and the Devil, although even in these confessions familiars appeared more frequently than did Satan. Much of this was probably attributable to Hopkins’ and Stearne’s interrogation methods, particularly sleep deprivation. Many of those questioned presented signs of inner turmoil, secret doubts and desires surfacing from the depths of consciousness. Some felt guilty and confessed. A desire for the alleviation of suffering probably also lay behind confessions.

There were several factors at work in East Anglia which probably encouraged witch-hunting in the mid-1640s:

- East Anglia was very much affected by the strains of warfare.
- The local administration was concerned with maintaining the war effort. Hence, local JPs who might otherwise have helped to defuse witchcraft accusations at an early stage were preoccupied, allowing local pressure to get out of hand.
- People in East Anglia had been exposed to preaching from Puritan ministers and parliamentary propaganda that had stressed the threat posed by the Devil and his agents to the creation of a godly commonwealth. Popular Puritanism, reinforced by the Civil War, helped to fuel the East Anglia witch-hunts.
Witch-hunting 1647–60

Partly because of the vivid reporting of the events of 1645–7, concern about witchcraft continued through the 1650s. There were a number of outbreaks of witch-hunting:

- The most serious came in Newcastle in 1650 when the town’s Puritan administration called in a Scottish witch-pricker to help them hunt witches. Fifteen people were executed.
- In 1652 at the Maidstone assizes in Kent, eighteen people were tried, a third of whom were hanged.

After the restoration of Charles II in 1660, witchcraft received only half-hearted support from the ruling elite. As a result, witch trials declined sharply after 1660 (see pages 171–4).
Key debate

To what extent was English witchcraft distinct from continental European witchcraft?

The idea that English witch-hunting was different from continental European witchcraft has long been central to writing on English witchcraft. Those, like Macfarlane and Thomas, who believe that English witch accusations were unique, generally stress the following points:

- English witch-hunting was tame in comparison with continental witch-hunts. Only 500 witches were executed.
- English trials were free of some of the more bizarre elements found in continental witch trials: there is little by way of the sabbat or of sexual intercourse with incubi or succubi. Mention of a broomstick occurs only once in an account of an English trial.
- English witch-hunts remained preoccupied with *maleficium* rather than with the demonic pact.
- The demand for prosecutions arose essentially from local communities rather than being stoked up by the elite or the government.
- In England, the fact that witches were hung rather than burned reflects the lesser link with heresy.
- The concept of the witch’s familiar was uniquely prominent in England.

However, the English experience of witchcraft and witch-hunting may not have been unique. Arguably, it was simply a variation on a number of themes which can be found across Europe. There was actually no such thing as a unified ‘continental’ witchcraft model.

- The ‘English’ pattern of isolated accusations against individual or small numbers of witches occurred in many European regions.
- English demonological writers were familiar with the works of continental demonologists, while continental peasants seem to have shared the same concerns over *maleficium*.
- The East Anglian trials (1645–7) suggest that by the 1640s a wide range of continental – ideas about witchcraft were present in England.
- The German chain-reaction hunts of the early seventeenth century, regarded as typical of the ‘continental’ situation, were in fact atypical.
- Unsworth has shown that with regard to witchcraft the English legal process had similarities with continental practice.
- The East Anglian trials (1645–7) show that England had as great a potential for mounting large-scale witchcrazes as any European nation.
EXTRACT 1


England’s experience of witch prosecution was, in several important respects, quite different from that of the greater part of Continental Europe. In English trials, the emphasis of the charge normally fell on the maleficia allegedly performed by the supposed witch, rather than on any contract with the Devil … The sabbat at which the Devil was held to preside was virtually unheard of before the Essex trials of 1645 promoted by the witch-finder Matthew Hopkins and his colleague John Stearne … In a similar manner, there was less emphasis on weather magic – the raising of storms and the destruction of crops – than on the Continent … But a common charge against English witches, though much less often raised against their European counterparts, was that they kept ‘familiars’ – imps or demons, usually in the form of small animals such as dogs, cats, mice and toads, which did their bidding in return for nourishment from a special nipple concealed on the witch’s body, and known as her ‘witch-mark’. (This witch-mark is not to be confused with the ‘Devil’s mark’ of Continental witches, an insensitive point in the body produced by Satan as a sign of compact.) … Multiple trials were considerably less common in England than in mainland Europe, probably because of the absence of the notion of witches gathering in large sociable groups at the sabbats, and the non-employment of torture to extract from accused people the names of accomplices.

EXTRACT 2


The Hopkins persecutions pose a major challenge to current interpretations of English witchcraft, not just because of the large numbers of the persecuted, but also because the records demonstrate that fantasies of demonic witchcraft were anything but absent from England. Clearly, for the witch-finders the witches’ ‘League and Covenant with the Devil’ was central to the crime, including sexual intercourse, and the stigma diabolic, the Devil’s mark. The familiar spirits in animal shape, or imps, a speciality of English witchcraft, were also a token of their alignment to the Devil. According to their confessions, the witches did not restrict their activities to simple maleficient magic, but gave details of their pact and of their witches’ assemblies … Furthermore the treatment the suspects received from their persecutors included general maltreatment, sleep deprivation and the use of leading questions … Sharpe concludes that the events in East Anglia ‘show clearly that England has as great a potential for mounting large-scale witch crazes as any other European nation’.

There were earlier occasions, which had the potential for a large-scale persecution in England, for instance the Lancashire trials of 1633–4 where at least nineteen witches were executed, while another sixty were under suspicion.
… The confessions show the fully developed fantasy of a witches’ sabbat, revealing ideas about a permanent meeting point ‘at Harestones in the forest of Pendle’ where the witches flew for feasting and dancing, shape-shifting and having sexual intercourse, where they adored the devil and practised harmful magic.

Chapter summary

Some 500 witches were executed in England under the Witchcraft Acts of 1563 and 1604. This number, small by continental European standards, reflects a degree of scepticism about witchcraft, displayed, for example, in Reginald Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft. Most English people were concerned with maleficia rather than with the Devil. The precise impact of Puritanism and socio-economic factors on witchcraft remain debatable. The English legal process was different from that on the Continent but it did have some continental tendencies. Most condemned witches were relatively old and poor women. Witch-hunting seriously began in the reign of Elizabeth but there was some scepticism in the Anglican Church by the early seventeenth century. James I, despite his reputation, was not as fierce a witch-hunter in England as in Scotland. Nevertheless, the Pendle witch trials resulted in the execution of ten witches on one day in 1612. Witch-hunting declined in the 1620s and 1630s but revived in East Anglia in 1645. This witch-hunt, associated with Matthew Hopkins, was partly the result of the situation arising from the Civil War. Debate continues about the extent to which English witch-hunting differed from that on the Continent.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter:

1. What were the main features of English witch persecution?
2. What are the main sources for English witch-hunting?
3. What were the main English witch treatises in the period 1560–1630?
4. How important was Puritanism with regard to witch-hunting?
5. How were English legal processes different from continental European legal procedures?
6. How did English witch-hunting develop in the period 1560–1660?
7. What were the main features of Elizabethan witch-hunting?
8. How far was James I an avid witch-hunter?
9. What caused the Pendle witch trials?
10. To what extent was Matthew Hopkins responsible for the East Anglian witch-hunt?
11. In what respects was English witch-hunting distinct from continental witch-hunting?
Question practice

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. To what extent were the Lancashire witch trials of 1612 the result of the socio-economic situation in the Pendle area?

2. ‘Puritanism was largely responsible for the East Anglia witch-hunts in the years 1645 to 1647.’ How far do you agree with this statement?

3. ‘The East Anglia witch-trials were not brought about purely by the influence of Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne.’ How far do you agree with this statement about witch-hunting in the years 1645–7?

4. ‘The East Anglian witch-hunt was the result of the breakdown of traditional authority.’ How far do you agree with this explanation?

5. How accurate is it to say that the case of the Boy of Burton was the primary turning point in popular perceptions of witchcraft in England in the period c.1580–c.1750?

INTERPRETATION QUESTION

1. Read the two passages and then answer the question. Evaluate the interpretations in both of the passages and explain which you think is more convincing as an explanation of the reasons for the persecution of witches in East Anglia.

PASSAGE A


An even more shocking expression of this new brutality was the massive wave of witch hunting in East Anglia in 1645–7, during the brief and brutal ascendancy of the Witch-finder General, Matthew Hopkins. A petty gentleman living in Manningtree, Essex, Hopkins claimed to have become greatly troubled by the presence of witches during the winter of 1644–5. He initiated a series of investigations and extracted his first confession – from an elderly and disabled widow named Elizabeth Clarke – in March 1645. This set the pattern for a rush of similar interrogations and convictions, which spread with terrifying speed across Essex and into Suffolk, Norfolk and Huntingdonshire. A total of 184 women were tried in the two years of Hopkins’s activity, at least 100 of whom were executed. This was comparable to the worst excesses of the continental trials. The renewed fervour for witch hunting continued after Hopkins’s sudden disappearance (and probable death) in 1647.

PASSAGE B


And yet Hopkins and Stearne were not commanders-in-chief of the witch-hunt: they were catalysts who gave accusers confidence by confirming their suspicions and beliefs. In their books they were emphatic that they had never accused anyone of anything; they went only to places where they were invited, and applied their expertise to suspects identified by the inhabitants. There was truth in this. It was for the searchers and watchers appointed by their own parishes to decide whether there were grounds to prosecute, and for victims and their allies to choose whether to go to law. Thereafter the progress of a prosecution depended on the consideration of a godly magistrate… and even then proceedings might still be thwarted by a grand jury, after that by a trial jury under the guidance of a judge …
No one knows exactly how many suffered in the witch-craze of 1645 to 1647: as many as three hundred 
women and men were interrogated, of whom more than a hundred were put to death … If one discounts 
the sensational, the particular and the judgemental, one is left with a different kind of Matthew 
Hopkins: an intransigent and dangerous figure, for sure, but a charismatic man of his time, no more 
ruthless than his contemporaries and, above all, driven by a ‘messianic desire to purify’. In this the 
witch-finders resembled most puritans, believers with little breadth of mind but considerable depth of 
spirit, even if they did mistake their own passions for the word of God … Nor should the other witch-
finders be forgotten, for without them Hopkins would have remained the obscure younger son of a 
country clergyman.

SOURCE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. Assess the value of Source 1 for revealing popular attitudes to witchcraft and the approaches of 
magistrates to gathering evidence to be used against suspected witches in early seventeenth-century 
England. Explain your answer, using the source, the information given about its origin and your own 
knowledge about the historical context.

2. Assess the value of Source 2 for revealing judicial fears about witch-hunting in East Anglia in 1647, and for 
revealing Hopkins’ defence of his actions. Explain your answer, using the source, the information given 
about its origin and your own knowledge about the historical context.

SOURCE 1

Potts was clerk of the court during the trial of the witches. He was instructed to write this account by the 
two presiding judges. One of them, Sir Edward Bromley, checked and revised it before publication.

The Confession and Examination of Anne Whittle alias Chattox being prisoner at Lancaster; taken the 
19 day of May 1612; before William Sandes, Mayor of the borough town of Lancaster, James Anderton 
of Clayton, one of his Majesty’s Justices of Peace within the same county, and Thomas Cowell, one of his 
Majesty’s Coroners in the said county of Lancaster.

First, the said Anne Whittle, alias Chattox, sayeth, that about fourteen years past she entered, through 
the wicked persuasions and counsel of Elizabeth Southerns, alias Demdike, and was seduced to 
condescend and agree to become subject into that devilish abominable profession of witchcraft. Soon 
after which, the Devil appeared unto her in the likeness of a man, about midnight, at the house of the 
said Demdike; and thereupon the said Demdike and she, went forth of the said house unto him; 
whereupon the said Spirit moved this examinate [person under examination], that she would become his 
subject, and give her soul unto him; the which at first she refused to assent into; but after, by the great 
persuasions made by the said Demdike, she yielded to be at his commandment and appointment; 
whereupon the said wicked Spirit then said unto her, that he must have one part of her body for him to 
suck upon, the which she denied to grant unto him; and withal asked him, what part of her body he 
would have for that use; who said he would have a place of her right side near to her ribs, for him to 
suck upon; whereunto she assented.

And she further sayeth. That at the same time, there was a thing in the likeness of a spotted bitch that 
came with the said Spirit unto the said Demdike, which then did speak unto her in this examinates 
hearing, and said that she should have gold, silver and worldly wealth, at her will …
And being further examined how many sundry persons had been bewitched to death, and by whom they were so bewitched: she saith, that one Robert Nutter, late of the Greenhead in Pendle, was bewitched by this examinee, the said Demdike, and widow Lomshawe (Late of Burnley), now deceased.

And she further saith, that the said Demdike showed her, that she had bewitched to death, Richard Ashton, son of Richard Ashton of Downeham Esquire.

**Source 2**

From a tract, written by Matthew Hopkins and published in 1647, ‘in answer to several queries’ about his investigative techniques which had been raised with the assize judges in Norfolk. Quoted in Matthew Hopkins, *The Discovery of Witches*, published in 1647 (available at: [www.gutenberg.org/files/14015/14015-h/14015-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14015/14015-h/14015-h.htm)).

**Quest. 13**

How can any possibility believe that the Devil and the Witch joining together, should have such power, as the Witches confess to kill such a man, child, horse, cow, the like; if we believe they can do what they will, then we derogate from God’s power, who for certain limits the Devil and the Witch and I cannot believe they have any power at all.

**Answer**

God suffers the Devil many times to do much hurt, and the Devil doth play many times the deluder and imposter with these Witches, in persuading them that they are the cause of such and such a murder wrought by him with their consents, when and indeed neither he nor they had any hand in it, as this. We must needs argue, he is of a long standing, above 6,000 years: then he must needs be the best scholar in all knowledge of arts and tongues, and so have the … best knowledge of what disease is reigning in this or that man’s body, by reason of his long experience. This subtle tempter knowing such a man liable to some sudden disease (as by experience I have found) as Plurisie, Imposthume etc, he resorts to divers Witches.

**Quest. 14**

All that the witch-finder doth is to fleece the country of their money, and therefore rides and goes to towns to have employment, and promiseth them fair promises, and it may be doth nothing for it, and possesseth many men that they have so many wizards and so many witches in their town, and so hartens them on to entertain him.

**Answer**

You doe him a great deale of wrong in every of these particulars. For, first,

1. He never went to any towne or place, but they rode, writ, or sent often for him, and were (for ought he knew) glad of him.
2. He is a man that doth disclaine that ever he detected a witch, or said, ‘Thou art a witch’; only after her tyall by search, and their owne confessions, he as others may judge.
3. Lastly, judge how he fleeceth the country, and inriches himself, by considering the vast summe he takes of every towne, he demands 20.s. a town, and doth sometimes ride 20 miles for that, & hath no more for his all his charges thither and back again (& it may be stays a weke there) and find there 3 or 4 witches, or if it be but one, cheap enough, and this is the great summe he takes to maintain his companie with 3 horses.