Witches and Witchcraft in Ely

A HISTORY

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

1. Hereward and the Witch 3

2. A Necromancer in the Lady Chapel 5

3. Witchcraft and the Reformation 9

4. Witchfinders in Ely 11

5. Witchcraft in Ely in Modern Times 15

Notes 20
Introduction

The Cambridgeshire Fens are one of the last places in England where traditional belief in witchcraft was widespread. Until as late as the mid-twentieth century, Fenland communities were isolated, and their inhabitants were more vulnerable to environmental illnesses, such as malaria, than the rest of the population. A hard life, geographical isolation, close-knit communities and mistrust of outsiders may all have contributed to the Fenlanders’ abiding belief in the power of witchcraft. Ely’s place in the history of English witchcraft is a special one. As the cathedral city at the heart of the Fens, under the independent jurisdiction of the Bishop, Ely was the place where anyone locally accused of witchcraft would be brought to trial. The city was the hub from which John Stearne completed the last stage of Matthew Hopkins’s infamous witch-hunt in the 1640s, and Ely was the scene for the (quite literal) downfall of the first ‘witch’ to appear in English history. In this short book, the entire story of Ely’s involvement in the dark history of witchcraft is told for the first time.

The terms ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ are notoriously hard to define. One place to start is Old English, from which we get our words ‘witch’ and ‘wizard’. Although many people think that a witch must be a woman, the modern English ‘witch’ is actually a gender neutral term, from the Old English wicca (masculine) or wicce (feminine) meaning a sorcerer or diviner. ‘Wizard’ simply means ‘a wise man’. The feminine equivalent of ‘wizard’ is ‘wisewoman’, not ‘witch’. Wizards and wisewomen practised magic, the supposed manipulation of nature to produce miraculous effects, and in the past they were regarded as individuals who combined a natural aptitude with a certain amount of skill. Witches, by contrast, were individuals with an uncanny ability to cause harm to others, just by wishing it or thinking about it. Fenland wizards and wisewomen deserve a separate study in their own right, and this book is not about them.

The word ‘witchcraft’ creates the misleading impression that it was a type of skill, when in reality witches were primarily thought of as a type of person. This is not to say that specific kinds of behaviour were not associated with witches. The question of why people believed (and still believe) in witches is a puzzle that continues to divide scholars. What is certain is that belief in witches is powerful enough to motivate some people to harm other human beings. The idea that there are people out there who
believe in witches may seem disturbing, but a quick glance at a local newspaper reveals that people are always keen to assign blame when things go wrong, even when there is not obviously a human being at fault. This familiar instinct to want to blame someone seems to be at the root of belief in witches, which is common to most human societies.

In close-knit rural communities, both in the past and in many developing countries today, the ritual of assigning blame is played out without the aid of inquiries, watchdogs and the Health and Safety Executive, especially when natural causes are not obvious. Illnesses in children and cattle and sour milk were the misfortunes most commonly blamed on witches, and one historian of witchcraft, Owen Davies, has argued that belief in witchcraft was only extinguished in places like the Fens by the advent of NHS healthcare, veterinary medicine, and commercial dairies.¹ Contemporary belief in witchcraft is by no means confined to Africa and Papua New Guinea, and is still thriving in parts of France and Italy.²

There are two extremes of historical interpretation when it comes to witchcraft; most historians now tend to avoid both. The first holds that witchcraft was nothing more than a fiction invented by neurotic clergy and judges who picked on innocent old women to act out their own fears and anxieties. This was the accepted interpretation of witchcraft until the second half of the twentieth century. The problem with this approach is that genuine fear of witches permeated early modern society, and it did not always seem to need much encouragement from above. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that at least some of those who were accused of being witches also believed that they were witches themselves, and the use of torture alone cannot explain the elaborate stories they told.

The second extreme assumes that all or most of those accused of witchcraft were practitioners of magic, or even members of a secret pagan religion, who were being persecuted and demonised by the Christian authorities. The problem here is that early modern people understood very clearly the difference between witchcraft and magic; wizards and wisewomen were often protected by the local community because they provided valuable services, whereas witches were rejected. Furthermore, the testimony of witches is so varied that there is not enough evidence to prove that they were practising a form of pagan religion.

Very occasionally, respectable people at the centre of the community were accused of being witches. Most of the time, however, witches were people on the margins of society. The longer life-expectancy and better survival rate of women in pre-industrial Britain meant that there were always large numbers of unmarried women and widows who struggled to support themselves. Women who fell into these categories provided the vast majority of witchcraft suspects. They were accused of becoming envious of their neighbours, and because they were otherwise powerless, their malice transferred itself by supernatural means to their neighbours’ children or animals. Exactly how this process of transference worked was a matter of dispute, but by the beginning of the seventeenth century, lawyers and theologians were agreed that people became witches when they made a pact with the devil. This was not quite the same as the contract with the devil signed by the
Witches and Witchcraft in Ely

legendary magician Faust: Faust asked the devil to appear, and he did, whereas the devil was thought to accost witches unannounced, offering his services.

Opinion was divided on exactly how the devil did this. Some accounts have him appearing as a ‘black man’ or in the guise of a priest or a handsome young man. However, in East Anglia there was a distinctive belief in ‘imps’ or ‘familiars’, animals who approached the witch and offered to serve her in return for ‘suckling’ on the witch’s blood. Imps took the form of dogs, cats, mice, toads, birds and a variety of other creatures, and real animals were often identified as witches’ imps.

Although no book has been written before on witchcraft in Ely, this book is dependent on some of the excellent scholarly work that has been undertaken on the Ely witch trials, notably Malcolm Gaskill’s Witchfinders (2005). This is a very thorough discussion of the East Anglian witch-hunt of the Civil War era. I have also been reliant on Enid Porter’s books on Cambridgeshire folklore for information on beliefs about witches in the Fens in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No other county benefitted quite as much as Cambridgeshire from the attentions of such a dedicated scholar of folklore.

There is little value in condemning the beliefs that people had in the past, and it is one of the lessons of history that people should be judged for their actions, not their beliefs. If the great European witch-hunts in which Ely played a small part teach us anything, it is that a too-eager search for evil does nothing but uncover the true evil in the searcher’s heart.

1: Hereward and the Witch

In 1070 the army of William the Conqueror was besieging the Isle of Ely. For four years, Hereward and his warriors had been holding out against the Normans, refusing to yield the last free English territory to the invaders. The Normans had tried everything, and were at a loss to find a way to conquer the Isle; everything, that is, except black magic. At a council of the Norman forces, the notorious and brutal knight Ivo Taillebois told William that he knew an old woman ‘who by her art alone could shatter the strength and stronghold [of the English] in the isle’. William hesitated: he was a loyal son of the church, which forbade all forms of magic, and he himself had acquired a reputation for holding no truck with superstitions. But the need was desperate, and in the end he instructed his soldiers to fetch the woman in secret.

The English saw the Normans making new preparations for an assault, and assumed that William was in possession of some new weapon, but they were not sure what it was. Shaving his hair and beard, Hereward set out for the Norman headquarters at Brandon, on the edge of the Fen, where he pretended to be a yokel who could not understand Norman French and became a guest in the same house.
where ‘that old woman poisoner’ (*anus illa venefica*) was staying. Hereward kept a close watch on the woman’s movements and saw what happened next.  

Getting up in the middle of the night, she withdrew to the springs of water, which flowed out nearby in the eastern part of the same house; he followed her secretly when she went out and began to try her incantations. And he heard answers, I do not know of whom, from the guardian of the springs; these I scarcely know. [Hereward] wanted to kill her, but questions unheard delayed him.

The Normans, confident of victory, mobilised their forces and gathered them around their secret weapon, the old woman, who was set in a high place, ‘and having gone up, fulminated for a long time against the isle and its inhabitants, making many destructive spells, likenesses and fantasies of their overthrow’. However, just as the old woman was about to launch her third attempt at a magical attack against the defenders, they crept out of the reeds and set fire to the trees at the edge of the fen. The old woman was so terrified that she fell from her place and was killed:

And that aforesaid poisoner, having been set in a more eminent place over everyone else so that she might be more free in her incantations, fell from the height by terror, as if struck by a hurricane. And thus, by a broken neck, she who had come beforehand to kill others lost consciousness and perished.

From the two accounts of Hereward’s exploits in the *Gesta Herwardi* (‘Acts of Hereward’) and *Liber Eliensis* (‘Book of Ely’), it seems clear that the woman he encountered was a diviner who was engaged in some sort of hydromancy (foretelling the future from water) as well as a practitioner of enchantment, the attempt to influence behaviour by the recitation or singing of spells. The language of the *Gesta Herwardi* also suggests that she may have been practising effigy magic, *similitudines* and *figmenta*, against the English warriors. This involved making images of one’s enemies, usually out of wax, and melting them or pricking them with pins.

But was the old woman a witch? The Latin terms used for her in the original texts are *venefica* (‘female poisoner’) and *phitonissa* (‘oracle/seer’). Both words are heavy with Classical and Biblical associations. Circe in Homer’s *Odyssey* and Medea in the plays of Euripides are women knowledgeable about poisons, an occult power to kill without honour or warning that was long regarded as a branch of magical knowledge. *Phitonissa* was a mediaeval corruption of *pythonissa*, the word
used for the woman who acted as the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. A similar term, *mulier habens pythonem* (‘a woman having a divining spirit’) was used in the Latin Vulgate version of the Old Testament to describe the witch of Endor, who raised the spirit of Samuel on the instructions of King Saul (I Samuel 28:3-25). *Phitonissa* implied that the woman was both a diviner and a necromancer.

The old woman of Brandon certainly counted as a witch on the basis that she was in possession of supposed harmful supernatural powers, but she was very unlike the people who were prosecuted as witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is no mention of her having made a pact with the devil, for instance, although she clearly enjoyed some sort of relationship with the ‘guardian of the springs’. However, well-worship was an ancient part of pagan British culture, and it may be that we are looking at a relic of a pre-Christian practice here rather than an early instance of what was later known as ‘witchcraft’.

One striking feature of the story of the ‘witch’ of Brandon is that neither Hereward nor his warriors showed the slightest fear of the spells that the old woman was casting against them. A possible reason for this could have been their belief that the Isle of Ely was protected by the shrine of St Etheldreda, which like other Anglo-Saxon shrines was believed to have the power to defend and deliver from evil. In the twelfth century, about a century after the siege, a young monk of Ely called Edwin began behaving strangely and ran about the choir during the monastic offices. It was only when a holy monk from Winchester visited Ely, and saw a small black boy gripping Edwin’s habit, that the monks concluded that Edwin was possessed by an evil spirit. Their solution was to hold a vigil with Edwin that night before the shrine of St Etheldreda, and in the morning the monk was cured. 8

## 2. A Necromancer in the Lady Chapel

Thanks to the influence of historical novels and films, many of us tend to think of the Middle Ages as an era of intense obsession with and persecution of witches, when the air was acrid with the smell of tar and burning flesh. The truth was altogether different, at least in England. Witches were never burned to death in England, and before the sixteenth century, witchcraft was not even a crime on the statute books. Indeed, before the fourteenth century there is barely any evidence at all that people believed in the idea that human beings could use magic to harm their enemies.

During the Middle Ages, forbidden magic was an offence under the law of the church, Canon Law, and the church jealously guarded its right to prosecute magicians, meaning that the state rarely
got involved. Magic was a relatively minor offence, on a par with adultery, extra-
marital sex, fathering a child outside wedlock, and poor church attendance. The
severest punishment available was public penance, which required the offender to
appear in the local church or market place and confess their faults, barefoot and
dressed in sackcloth. This was humiliating, but hardly deadly. Magic was much less
serious than heresy, an offence that carried the death penalty, because it was seen
as an error that was usually committed in ignorance. Heresy threatened the
foundations of church and state, but magic was usually only a local problem
because magicians were keen to keep their activities secret. Magic was seen as a
moral rather than a religious issue, essentially a form of antisocial behaviour.

In mediaeval Ely, there were three separate courts of law. The Bishop was
Lord of the Isle of Ely, which was not then part of Cambridgeshire. The Isle had
its own Justice because the Bishop exercised royal authority. Offenders against the
King’s laws were brought before Quarter Sessions, which were held four times a
year, and committed to the Bishop’s Town Gaol (now Ely Museum on Market
Street) until the Assizes, when the Justice of the Isle of Ely visited and tried all of
the offenders collected during the year. However, the Bishop also had another gaol
by the Barton Gate (at the Barton Square end of Barton Road) where offenders
against Canon Law were held prior to a trial in the Cathedral's Chapter House. A
third court was held in the large room above the Porta; this was the Manorial
Court of the Dean and Chapter, which resolved disputes concerned with land and
property in the local area.

In the winter of 1465-66 a man named Richard Barker was arrested at
Babraham in Cambridgeshire, ‘on account of vehement suspicion of heresy and of
the art of necromancy, with whom were found one book and one roll of the same
art with characters and circles, exorcisms and conjurations pertaining that that art,
and also a six-sided wand with divers figures and unknown names engraved on it’.
Barker also had ‘a great chart with characters, circles, six-sided and five-sided
figures, with unknown names and figures on the same, ordained for the work of
necromancy'.

Bishop William Grey would have sat enthroned in the chapel, surrounded
by exquisite carvings in soft stone of the life and miracles of the Virgin Mary that
glowed with paint and lavish gilding. Above the carvings, the chapel was one of the
largest glazed spaces in Europe, a single colossal jewel of red and blue glass. Had
the unfortunate Barker looked up at the carvings at the east end of the south side
of the chapel, he would have been able to catch sight of a cautionary tale especially
for him. Among the miracles of the Virgin Mary was a representation of the legend
of Theophilus, an early version of the later Faust legend. Theophilus was a priest at
a church in Cilicia during the third or fourth century, who was removed from his
position by a new bishop. In despair, Theophilus went to a Jewish magician who
persuaded him to sell his soul to the devil to obtain what he wanted. Theophilus
was restored to his position, but realised that his soul was in danger. He spent
night after night in prayer to the Virgin Mary, until finally she appeared with the
contract he had signed. Theophilus confessed his sin, and died content.
The original ‘Faustian pact’: Theophilus, holding a round hat, makes his pact with the devil (Ely Cathedral Lady Chapel).

Theophilus is presented to the devil enthroned; only the devil's hairy legs and claws are now visible (Ely Cathedral Lady Chapel).
The carvings in the Lady Chapel, executed between 1321 and 1349, are now very difficult to interpret, owing to their almost total defacement during the reign of Edward VI, but in 1892 the antiquary Montague Rhodes James (now more famous as an author of supernatural stories) concluded from a careful examination of the carvings that they represented the story of Theophilus. The legend was the ultimate source for the idea that witches made a pact with the devil, which Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne were to use to such effect in their seventeenth-century witch-hunt in the Isle of Ely, but it was also a warning to the mediaeval clergy, who were sometimes tempted to make use of their literacy, the skill that set them apart from most of the rest of the population, to pry into unlawful sciences.

The official account of Barker’s trial notes that he was committed to prison (probably in the Barton Gate), ‘and after various considerations’ (et post varias cogitationes) he was brought before the Bishop. It is possible that ‘considerations’ is a euphemism for torture. In his defence, Barker claimed that a man called John Hope had promised him wealth if he would give him two pounds, six shillings and eightpence for the books and instruments, and said he had great hopes of certain spirits appearing to him, who would answer his questions, direct him to gold and silver, and reveal secrets to him. After a failed attempt to dig up treasure at Burton-on-Trent, Barker attempted his magic in the house of William Clerk in Saffron Walden. When Clerk got suspicious, he seems to have given Barker up to the authorities.

To us, it might seem obvious that Barker was the victim of a clever confidence trick on the part of John Hope. As far as the Bishop was concerned, however, he was guilty of seeking after ‘idolatrous, superstitious wisdom, as a consequence of heretical wickedness’ (superstitiosa sapientia idolatriam, ex consequentia hereticam pravitatem). Barker had broken the First Commandment, against idolatry (Exodus 20:3-4). But Bishop Grey was less concerned about the magic than the possibility that Barker might be a Lollard heretic, at a time when the church was especially anxious about this sect, who denied the Catholic doctrine of the mass and the authority of bishops.

Penance alone would atone for Barker’s sin, and he was sentenced to a punishment that simultaneously chastised him and entertained and edified the general public. Barker was to walk around the market places of Ely and Cambridge on two Sundays in bare feet, the sign of a penitent, carrying his book, wand and charts, as melancholy props to illustrate his crime. Once his penance was done, the implements of sorcery were burnt in Cambridge marketplace as gawping scholars and stallholders looked on. Not only that, but the Bishop added a further personal penance: Barker was to fast on bread and water every Friday, and recite the seven penitential Psalms every Sunday.11

Because it was conducted in an ecclesiastical court, the proceedings of the trial were in Latin and Barker was called a nigromanticius or ‘necromancer’. Local people might well have called Barker a ‘witch’, because the word had not then acquired its later meaning of a person who causes supernatural harm, and referred
to any practitioner of magic. By any modern definition, however, Barker was not a witch but a wizard or magician, someone who was trying to use an acquired skill to produce marvellous effects (in this case, discover buried treasure).

Mediaeval accusations of sorcery were not confined to hapless individuals like Robert Barker, and later in the fifteenth century a Bishop of Ely came to be implicated in a supposed magical plot against King Richard III. John Morton, Bishop of Ely between 1479 and 1486, and later Archbishop of Canterbury under the first Tudor King, Henry VII, sent a gift of strawberries from his garden in Clerkenwell to Richard shortly after he became King. Richard supposedly claimed that the fruit was bewitched, and had caused his arm to wither, and used the incident to summarily execute Lord Hastings for treason. However, the incident also tarnished Morton’s reputation, and in October 1483 Morton was implicated in the Duke of Buckingham’s rebellion along with a ‘necromancer’ named Thomas Nandyk of Cambridge. In the long term, however, Morton’s opposition to Richard secured him the patronage of Henry VII after his defeat of Richard at Bosworth Field in 1485.

3. Witchcraft and the Reformation

The Reformation was a time of great insecurity, both literal and psychological, as old certainties about religion and society were challenged. One consequence of this insecurity was a growing anxiety about witches. In the century between 1560 and 1660, 92 people appeared before the church courts in Ely accused of witchcraft. Of that number, 26 were men and 66 were women. This number was small compared to some German witch-hunts of the period, where hundreds of women were tried and executed at a time, but it was still significant.

The English Reformation began in 1534 when the heirless Henry VIII, unable to obtain a divorce from the Pope, declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. The year 1542 saw the first act of Parliament to mention ‘witchcraft’. However, the 1542 act was mainly targeted not against witches in the true sense, but against people who used magic to tell the location of stolen goods or buried treasure, like Richard Barker. The government was worried about the potential social disorder that might be created if poor people believed they could get rich quick, and this was a mark of the rapidly widening gulf between rich and poor in the Tudor period. Nevertheless, for the first time, magical offenders could be tried by the state rather than the church. Very few people were prosecuted under this act, and in 1547 it was repealed when Henry VIII’s young son, Edward
VI, came to the throne. In Edward’s reign (1547-53) the first attempt was made to turn England decisively Protestant. Plain church services in English were introduced and churches and cathedrals were stripped of their rich mediaeval decoration.

It was during this period that the exquisitely carved scenes depicting the life of the Virgin Mary in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral were systematically defaced. This must have changed the atmosphere considerably at sessions of the ecclesiastical court that took place there; once a jewel of painted and gilded decoration, the Lady Chapel was now a potent symbol of the zealous Protestant desire for purification of religion. Where the story of Theophilus had once warned people against the dangers of magic, now the entire building warned them against the sin of idolatry. Ely’s Bishop, Thomas Goodrich, was an enthusiastic supporter of Edward’s Reformation. However, in the summer of 1553 religious policy swung back to Catholicism when Edward died and his half-sister Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, became Queen. Mary has become notorious for the burning of Protestant ‘heretics’ that took place during her reign, including in Ely, but there was no simultaneous persecution of witches. Bishops periodically asked local clergy to give the names of anyone suspected of magical practices, but interest in witches did not go beyond this.

Mary died in November 1558 and was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth, the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, who introduced a new religious settlement which restored the English Prayer Book of Edward VI but retained some traces of Catholic ceremonial. The Catholic bishops who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy, declaring Elizabeth to be Supreme Governor of the Church of England, were deposed and imprisoned. This happened to Bishop Thirlby of Ely on 5 July 1559. Thirlby was replaced by Richard Cox, a Protestant who had been in exile at Frankfurt during Mary’s reign. The returning Protestant exiles became very concerned that magic and witchcraft had been allowed to grow up unchecked during Mary’s reign. They believed that Catholics were too soft on this particular type of offence because Catholicism itself, with its elaborate and formal ceremonies, was not much different from magic in the first place. In 1563, Parliament passed a new act against magic and witchcraft, once more giving the secular courts the power to punish people for these offences.

Bishop Richard Cox conducted a visitation of his diocese in 1565-67, which meant that the archdeacons required local clergy to identify anyone in their parishes who had committed offences against church law. Cox did not visit Ely often, since at that time the Bishops of Ely spent much of their time in London at their palace in Holborn. Most of the offenders were charged with sexual offences such as adultery and fornication. In June 1566 Elizabeth Mortlock of Pampisford was presented before the Bishop’s Consistory Court, presided over by Cox’s commissary Thomas Ithell, for ‘being noted to the office of a witch’ and healing children ‘by unlawful means’. Because Elizabeth was only accused of magical healing, she could not be tried under the 1563 Witchcraft Act (where this was not one of the offences listed).
When questioned, Elizabeth claimed that she acted only ‘with the help of God’ and described the prayers she used: ‘Five Paternosters in the worship of the Five Wounds of our Lord, five Aves in the worship of the five Joys of our Lady and one Creed in the worship of the blessed Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, one God and three persons in Trinity and the holy Twelve Apostles’. These were Catholic prayers: the five wounds of Jesus was a popular late mediaeval devotion which is depicted on the tomb of Bishop Redman in Ely Cathedral. The recitation of Hail Marys (‘Aves’) that Elizabeth described suggests that she may have been praying the rosary. The court also heard that Elizabeth ‘measureth the girdle or band of any such persons being sick [or] haunted, from her elbow to her thumb, and craving for God and saint Charity’s sake that if someone be haunted with a fairy yea or no she may know’.15

Elizabeth was found guilty of ‘unorthodox devotion’, and told that she must stand before the congregation in Pampisford church wearing a white sheet and a placard around her neck reading ‘For wicked witchcraft worthily I bid rebuke and shame’. The reference to magical girdles was a reflection of the fact that in 1559, bishops had been ordered to seek out women who made use of them, especially to protect mothers in childbirth.16 Childbirth in Tudor England was extraordinarily dangerous, and therefore there was a particular temptation to seek unlawful supernatural assistance at this time. Fairies were genuinely feared in Tudor times, but the court was primarily concerned about Elizabeth’s use of forbidden Catholic prayers.

4. Witchfinders in Ely

Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, and was succeeded by her cousin King James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England. James believed that witches had tried to kill him several times back in Scotland, and even wrote a book about witches, Daemonologie, in 1597. In 1604 Parliament passed a new Witchcraft Act, which made it illegal to enter into a pact with the devil and specified the death penalty for this offence. The 1604 Witchcraft Act was a charter for an English witch-hunt, although this took several years to get underway, and James’s son Charles I was less enthusiastic. On one occasion, when Charles was visiting Newmarket for the horse-racing, his personal physician Sir William Harvey, a brilliant Cambridge scientist who discovered the circulation of the blood, impersonated a wizard and introduced himself to a local witch
who thought that her pet toad was a familiar spirit. Harvey lured the toad out, killed it and performed a dissection, proving that the woman’s ‘familiar’ was nothing more than an ordinary toad.\(^{17}\)

Few people in Stuart England were prepared to laugh at the idea of witchcraft as Harvey did. The Isle of Ely and Huntingdonshire were a heartland for Puritans, those Protestants who wanted a church and government based on strict Biblical principles, even if that meant challenging the King. In spite of their dislike for the monarchy, Puritans ironically adopted King James’s ideas about witchcraft from his *Daemonologie*. Between 1589 and 1593, the Puritan Throckmorton family at Warboys in Huntingdonshire experienced witchcraft first hand. The accusations of witchcraft in the Warboys case were brought by Lady Cromwell, the second wife of Oliver Cromwell’s grandfather, and she was eventually one of the witches’ supposed victims.\(^{18}\) Oliver Cromwell was born in 1599, after the bewitchment scare, and there is no evidence that he was ever directly involved in any witch-hunting. However, a strong belief in witchcraft was a defining feature of Puritan identity. This was a little strange, given the central position given to the Bible in Puritan belief. Although the Bible says ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ (Exodus 22:18), it says nothing about what witchcraft is.

Puritans took the view that people became witches when they despaired of their lives and appealed to the devil for help. The devil would then appear, usually in the form of an animal familiar, and ask to suckle blood from the would-be witch’s body. This constituted the blood pact between the devil and the witch. The familiar then offered to serve the witch, harming and killing people on her (or his) behalf. Anyone could be the victim of a witch, although witches usually harmed because of envy, and the victims were often the witch’s social superiors. However, once apprehended, witches had no power to escape the officers of the law.

The famous witchfinder Matthew Hopkins had two methods for identifying witches. The first was to tie the suspected witch to a stool set in the middle of a room throughout the night. Any animal that entered the room during that time would be the witch’s familiar. This could continue for as many nights as necessary, during which the suspect would be kept awake. The methods of modern totalitarian regimes have proved that sleep-deprivation is as effective as any physical torture, and many were willing to confess after a couple of nights. It is possible that some of them even hallucinated their own confessions under duress.

A second form of identification was an examination of the witch’s body for a teat from which the familiar suckled on the witch’s blood. Given the prevalence of a wide variety of skin complaints in the seventeenth century, the discovery of a suspicious flap of skin was almost inevitable. If no teat could be found, then another identifying feature of a witch was an area of skin where the witch felt no pain, even when stabbed with a needle. Occasionally, witches were also swum; this involved tying the witch’s arms and legs together and throwing her or him into deep water attached to a rope. This was a version of an ancient Anglo-Saxon trial by water, based on the idea that water would reject an evil person, so the witch would float.\(^{19}\) Swimming should not be confused with ducking, which involved
tying a victim into a chair which was then submerged; this was the punishment for scolds, and never used for witches.

On 26 September 1646 the first of several witch-trials were held in Ely’s Shire Hall, presided over by John Godbold, Chief Justice of the Isle of Ely. By 1646 the Bishop of Ely, Matthew Wren, had been deposed and the Church of England abolished by Parliament to be replaced by a presbyterian form of worship. Ely was now part of the Eastern Association, a group of counties that supported Parliament, and was governed by Oliver Cromwell as Lieutenant Governor. The first batch of witches tried at the Ely Quarter Sessions had been sent by Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne from King’s Lynn and Littleport, where they had first been identified. This, however, was one of Hopkins’s failures, as all three witches on trial were acquitted.\(^{20}\) In fact, acquittal rates in witchcraft trials were quite high, but it was even more common for defendants to die in custody awaiting trial. Given that cases were usually heard only once or twice a year, the accused were imprisoned for months at a time in insanitary conditions. Hopeless incarceration, rather than death by hanging, may have been the real horror of the witch-hunt.

Malcolm Gaskill, in his book *Witchfinders* (2005), has given a detailed account of the witch-trials at Ely in May 1647, which were the last of the great witch-hunt. By this time Hopkins had returned to his native Essex, and the witchfinding was left to his deputy, John Stearne. Hopkins and Stearne seem to have invented the profession of witchfinding; there had been witch-hunters before, but they were enthusiastic local magistrates acting as amateurs. Hopkins and Stearne travelled around the country, offering to identify witches and remove them from the community in return for payment and board and lodging. In Gaskill’s view, the witch-hunt only ended because the witchfinders were becoming too expensive and were no longer securing enough convictions to justify their high cost.

Stearne’s attention was directed first of all to the villages of Haddenham, Stretham and Sutton. Exactly why these villages were chosen is unclear. Gaskill thought that the Ely witch-hunt was motivated by a combination of religious and political motives – religious, because the villages around Ely were seen as a refuge for religious radicals disapproved of by the Puritans, and political because the families targeted with witchcraft accusations were sometimes those who had resisted enclosure and the drainage of the Fens. Drainage was big business in mid-seventeenth-century Ely, because it involved creating fertile new farmland for major landowners and depriving local people of their traditional rights of fishing and fowling.

Two of the accused witches, William Watson and John and Bridget Bonham of Sutton had been involved in a protest against the enclosure of the West Fen, just outside Ely, by Sir Miles Sandys in the 1620s. After sleep deprivation Bridget Bonham declared that her husband was a witch, and he admitted that he had cut his finger to make a pact with a black mole-like creature. Margaret Moore of Stretham genuinely seems to have believed that she had the powers of a witch; she initially made a pact with a spirit called Annys,\(^{21}\) which appeared to her in the form
of a small child along with the spirits of her own dead children, promising to save her remaining child if she would give her soul to the devil.\textsuperscript{22}

The witchfinders were not always successful; Joan Briggs of Haddenham refused to confess to witchcraft and no teats were found on her body. Stearne moved on to Stretham, where teats were found on Elizabeth Foot and Joan Salter and a poor couple, Robert and Dorothy Ellis, were also accused. By 31 May there were nine witches in the gaol at Ely. The most unusual of the Haddenham suspects was Adam Sabie, who was examined by Stearne on 1 June. Sabie held eccentric religious beliefs that could easily be interpreted as demonic deception; he claimed that he had been visited by a radiant spirit in the form of a child in 1612 and again in 1636, when the spirit appeared to him as a flame of fire in Somersham Wood, ‘and said unto him, “Fear not Sabie for I am thy God”, and immediately there appeared a sudden darkness about the place where this examinee was, it being then about noonday, and the spirit said unto him, “Go unto the house of Lady Sandys and she shall give thee £20”, which she did’. The spirit then entered Sabie’s body, assuring him ‘Adam, I am thy God, and fear not what man can do against thee for all wrongs shall be righted’.\textsuperscript{23}

Adam Sabie’s religious beliefs should not necessarily surprise us, given the effects of religious freedom after the Civil War. For a brief period, a vast array of sects sprang up and tried to gain converts before Parliament attempted to impose presbyterianism. Some of these sects, such as the Quakers and Ranters, emphasized the ‘indwelling of the Holy Spirit’, and it was probably something like this that Sabie was trying to describe. In any case, Sabie was left to rot in prison while Stearne continued on his travels. He returned to Ely at the end of July where he testified before a Justice of the Peace, Dr Richard Stane, that marks found on the body of a labourer, Thomas Pye, proved that he had suckled imps; Pye claimed that he did not even know what an evil spirit was, but he was thrown in gaol anyway.\textsuperscript{24} Hopkins died at the beginning of August, but Stearne continued his work, preparing testimony for the Autumn Assizes which began on 23 September. At least one of the gaol’s inmates, Dorothy Ellis, had died by this time. Just before the Assizes the only allegation against a resident of Ely emerged; the blacksmith Peter Burbush of the parish of St Mary was accused by his neighbours of having obtained a spell from a labourer in the parish:

> 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.

This accusation is a rather unusual one, as usually it was enough for a person to despair and appeal to the devil for assistance in order to become a witch; the testimony against Burbush suggests that some people thought that a sacrilegious ritual was involved. The ritual also made no sense in the context of Puritan teaching, according to which the bread and wine in Holy Communion were
symbolic only; the idea of feeding consecrated bread to familiars was a Catholic one, suggesting that it may have been a much older idea surviving into the 1640s.

That September morning Chief Justice Godbold processed from the Cathedral to the Shire Hall in the marketplace while sixteen shackled defendants were led from the Bishop’s Gaol along Market Street. Thirteen of them were accused of witchcraft, of whom eight were women and five were men. Although more women were tried during the great witch-hunt than men, in general there were more men accused of witchcraft in England than in Europe, where persecution focussed almost exclusively on women. We know that the jury acquitted John and Bridget Bonham, Thomas Pye, Joan Briggs and the eccentric Adam Sabie, although the court’s proceedings no longer survive so we can only guess why this was the case. Margaret Moore, the only defendant who was certainly convicted, confessed her crimes for a third time to the court with tears, presumably leaving the jury no choice but to find her guilty. Margaret and perhaps others were taken into the marketplace where they were hanged on the public gallows. However, this was the last act of John Stearne’s career, and with his retirement and Hopkins’s death, the great witch-hunt was at an end. The summer of 1648 saw Royalist uprisings against Parliament, including one at Linton in Cambridgeshire, giving the authorities a whole new problem to worry about.

5. Witchcraft in Ely in Modern Times

The executions of 1647 were to be the last time that a witch was tried in Ely, but this did not mean that belief in witchcraft died out. Hopkins and Stearne’s witch-hunt was over, but there was no backlash against those who had taken part. Although witchcraft was a Puritan obsession, the Restoration in 1660 left attitudes unchanged. In 1665 a doctor, William Drage, stated as medical fact that a barber’s boy visiting Ely was chased back to Cambridge by a spectral woman who killed him with a blow to the head. In the late seventeenth century it was fashionable among the intellectual elite, who were appalled by the novel religious ideas that had emerged during England’s brief period as a republic, to use witchcraft as proof that a spiritual world existed. In 1679 a witch was tried at Ely but received a royal pardon from Charles II. Brian Levack has argued that witch-trials started to decline not because people stopped believing in witches, but rather because there was legal uncertainty about the standard of proof required to conduct a successful trial.

The last judicial execution of a witch in England took place in 1717, but thereafter suspected witches continued to receive vigilante justice in their local communities. In 1718 Francis Hutchinson, who had studied the witchcraft trials at Bury St Edmunds and may have spoken to surviving eyewitnesses in the 1690s, published his hugely influential Essay Concerning Witchcraft, in which he argued that belief in witchcraft was an irrational superstition that needed to be eradicated from English society. In the light of Isaac Newton’s model of a clockwork universe
whose forces human beings could understand, intellectuals who had once accepted the possibility of witchcraft began to turn against it. The enemy was now not witches themselves but belief in witchcraft; ignorance and superstition rather than the devil. However, as late as 1736, when the 1604 Witchcraft Act was finally repealed, there were protests at the idea; Cambridge University, a stronghold of Enlightenment rationalism, was ironically surrounded by a rural hinterland in which belief in witchcraft was as strong as ever. Ordinary local people had no reason not to believe in witches, except the fact that they were told not to by the clergy from the pulpit, and most preferred traditional wisdom to new-fangled teaching.

The early twentieth century saw the appearance of folklore as an academic study, as scholars became interested in the possibility that local beliefs and traditions might reveal an ancient substratum of English history. Folklorists travelled from village to village, trying to record ways of life that rapidly disappeared after the First World War. In the 1920s the folklorist Christopher Marlowe published two books on Fenland traditions in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, but the first serious work on collecting Fenland traditions was done by Enid Porter, curator of the Cambridge and County Folk Museum between 1947 and 1976. Porter identified two local men, W. H. Barrett and A. R. Randell, whose knowledge of Fenland folklore provided her with material for several books, which Porter modestly published under Barrett and Randell’s names. In 1969 she published a synthesis of all her work on Cambridgeshire, Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore, which remains the definitive study of Cambridgeshire folklore and, indeed, one of the most complete studies of the folklore of any English county.

According to W. H. Barrett, in about 1850 his grandfather was repairing a remote windmill in Prickwillow Fen, staying in the loft of a derelict cottage. One night he noticed two women trying to light a fire in the hearth beneath him; they were soon joined by four more and began a feast, before taking off their cloaks, under which they were almost naked: one woman was wearing garter s of horsehair, another garters of viper’s skin, another a ferret skin brassiere, and another a lambskin chemise. The man was transfixed, but accidentally startled the witches by knocking over a trapdoor and they ran from the house, leaving behind their cloaks. He returned these to the women he had recognised, but received in return a curse and a prophecy that he would be killed by a windmill, which was indeed how he died. This story is unusual in portraying English witches as meeting together. In almost all cases, witches in English history and folklore are solitary individuals, and for this reason Barrett’s story is probably untrue. The historian of witchcraft Ronald Hutton thought that it originally developed as a ‘tall story’ for the public house.

Belief in animal familiars began in East Anglia and it endured there, especially in the Fens, where it was believed that possession of familiars or ‘imps’ was crucial to a witch’s power. In Horseheath in 1915 the local witch possessed five imps in the form of white mice which she had inherited from her sister,
thereby inheriting her power. A witch could not die until she passed on her imps, and if she tried to harm or kill them she would only end up harming herself. When the Horseheath witch died in 1926 without any living relatives, it was reported in a local newspaper that a mysterious black man delivered the white mice to one of the villagers, who presumably took on the role of village witch thereafter.\textsuperscript{31}

In the twentieth-century local people attributed the power to tell the future to witches. In 1935 an Ely solicitor recalled a story that he had heard from a local man who saw a witch drifting down the river Cam. She called out a prophecy that he would die in an accident unless he could warn a friend, but he could never remember the details of the prophecy, and died anyway.\textsuperscript{32} Another Ely man went to consult a witch about the future but was told that he would not be able to remember the prophecy until he heard the bells of Great St Mary’s Church in Cambridge strike three times.\textsuperscript{33} A man who saw Bet Cross, the witch of Longstanton near Cambridge riding a flying hurdle was only able to remember it years later.\textsuperscript{34}

Bizarre as it may seem, being a witch in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became a sort of livelihood for some women, who exploited people’s superstitious fear. One witch from Brandon Creek between Ely and Littleport used to deposit grave-shaped mounds of silt on people’s doorsteps in the night, then claim they had been left by the devil. She offered to remove the bad spell in exchange for money. However, being known as a witch carried its risks; in 1904 Barrett’s mother recalled an event that took place when she was a girl, probably in the 1860s, when a witch was swum by four labourers because she told a farmer’s wife that her children would have paws like dogs. The witch agreed to lift the spell, and instructed a blacksmith to make a special metal bottle which she filled with clippings of hair and toenails from the farmer and his wife; she then slaughtered a hen and added its blood and internal organs to the bottle, rubbing the fat of its gizzard on the face of the farmer’s wife. The witch then sprinkled the couple with soot and told them to fill the bottle with their urine, which was stoppered with clay and put on the fire; when the clay stopper burst the spell was broken.\textsuperscript{35}

This ritual resembled the most common method of removing the effects of witchcraft, which was to heat hair, nail clippings and urine in an earthenware or metal ‘witch bottle’, which was subsequently buried. These bottles are still quite found quite regularly, often with their contents still intact. Indeed, a preoccupation with protecting people, animals and houses from witches was widespread. The mumified bodies of cats and other animals are sometimes found between the walls or in the eaves of houses, and no-one has a convincing explanation for them
because no-one ever wrote down a rationale for the practice. It is possible that witch's spells were thought to be drawn to the body of the animal rather than the occupants of the house. Alternatively, the animals represented some sort of offering to evil spirits. The most extreme and ironic example of this practice occurred at Black Horse Drove in 1897, when workmen laying the foundations for the Methodist Chapel buried a horse's head in the foundations, pouring out a libation of ale over the offering.\(^{36}\)

It was widely believed that a witch's power could be broken by drawing her blood, and in the nineteenth century old women were regularly attacked so that they could be scratched or pricked. Witches were also averse to iron; in 1855 an Ely carpenter who thought himself bewitched nailed three horseshoes to his door and declared that he had been bewitched by a certain Mrs Gotobed. Gotobed appealed to the Dean of Ely, the man’s landlord, who laughed at her. Gotobed then stormed into the sick man’s house, crossing the threshold in spite of the horseshoes; supposedly she was able to do this because on later investigation they turned out to have been actually donkey’s shoes.

The isolated nature of Fenland communities and the relatively few roads joining them, even after the drainage of the Fens, may have contributed to the longevity of belief in witches in the Ely area. Poverty, too, seems to have been a reason for women to take up being a witch as a ‘profession’. Before the twentieth century, the greater longevity of women meant that, in a world before the welfare state, many old women found themselves alone and in danger of starvation unless they found an imaginative solution. Some of these women probably believed that they were witches.

Belief in witchcraft survived the First World War in some communities, but generally speaking the disruption to village life caused by the Great War broke the continuity of many folk-beliefs. If the First World War did not succeed in doing this, the Second World War and the post-War expansion of Fenland villages certainly did. The last incident related to belief in witchcraft that Porter reported occurred in East Dereham in Norfolk in 1947.\(^{37}\) When Porter was writing in the 1960 and '70s, older people remembered witchcraft as something that their parents had believed in, but they themselves no longer had any active belief in it. However, at the Ely Diocesan Conference on 13 June 1938, Bishop Bernard Heywood was one of the few clergy in the Church of England prepared to defend something akin to belief in witchcraft when he declared, ‘Discarnate rebellious spirits may have some temporary and limited to power to exercise evil influences as they apparently have in the realm of humanity’. Bishop Heywood blamed these spirits for frosts that had been damaging local fruit trees.\(^{38}\)

However, at the same time that the last vestiges of traditional witchcraft in the Fens were disappearing, witchcraft was reviving in a different form. In 1954 a retired civil servant called Gerald Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, in which he claimed that witchcraft was an ancient, pre-Christian religion that had been persecuted by the church for centuries but survived underground. Gardner claimed to be the discoverer of this secret religion and described some of its rites and
ceremonies. Witches worshipped a goddess and a horned god and gathered together in ‘covens’ on ‘Sabbaths’ to worship naked on the major Celtic festivals of the year. Gardner based his ideas on the faulty research of an Egyptologist, Margaret Murray, who interpreted records of Scottish witchcraft trials as evidence of a surviving Neolithic fertility cult in her book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921).

Gardner’s new religion, which he christened Wicca, after the Anglo-Saxon word, soon had numerous enthusiastic followers. Today Wicca is the oldest and most popular form of modern pagan religion. Wiccans make use of imagery associated with witchcraft, and identify with individuals persecuted in the past for being witches, but all the evidence points to Gardner having imagined his secret fertility cult. Most Wiccans accept this, but do not consider their religion any less authentic, and it now has thousands of followers in Britain and America and has developed its own traditions. Perhaps because Wiccans adopt the trappings of an identity associated with evil in popular culture, many people regard them with suspicion, in spite of the fact that Wiccans have a strict ethical code whose first principle prohibits harming another human being. Others imagine that Wiccans are Satan-worshippers (when in fact they reject belief in Satan altogether), or dismiss Wicca as a form of ‘New Age’ spirituality. Wicca pre-dates the New Age movement of the 1960s, which began in America, and Ronald Hutton has described Wicca as the only religion that England has given the world. Wicca is indeed a form of spirituality genuinely indigenous to this country.

In 1983 Tanya Luhrmann, an American anthropologist researching at Christ’s College, Cambridge, came across ‘Mick’, a self-styled witch living in a remote Jacobean cottage in the Fens. Mick kept ten cats, a cauldron near the fire, and a small statue of Pan on an altar next to a ritual knife stained with her own blood. Mick enjoyed her reputation as a witch; her cottage was avoided by small children, and curious neighbours invited her to dinner parties. Luhrmann’s interviews with Mick suggest that she actively chose to define herself as a witch under the influence of Wicca, but she nevertheless fulfilled the role of the solitary Fenland witch in a modern idiom. Like seventeenth-century witches, she also believed she had a special ability to cause harm. Modern witchcraft has become part of local culture; a Wiccan group called the ‘Ely Witches’ existed in Ely in the 1990s and into the 2000s, and in 1999 they organised a ritual centred upon the ancient plane tree in the garden of the old Bishop’s Palace. Until around 2012 a stall selling Wiccan items was part of Ely’s Saturday market.

Whatever we choose to make of the continued existence of people calling themselves witches in the twenty-first century, the fact that they do exist calls attention to the fascination that witchcraft still holds for so many. Truth, however, is often stranger and more interesting than the popular misconceptions that circulate about witches and their history, and it has been my intention in this short book to reveal the role that Ely has played in one of the darker sideshows to the mainstream of English history.
Notes


3 William was supposed to have declared that he put no faith in sorcery after his armour was put on back-to-front (a bad omen) before the Battle of Hastings (Kittredge, G. L., *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, 1928), p. 41).

4 *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake, Camden Third Series 92 (Royal Historical Society: London, 1962), pp. 182-183: *Qua consurgens media nocte, ad fontes aquarum, que iuxta in parte orientali eiusmod domus decurrunt, sequitur, quam ille egressum clam sequebatur, sua carmina attemptare concepit. Audivit namque responsa nescio que inquirere a custode fontium, illi sunt cognito; voluit eam perimere, sed inaudite ipsius interrogationes sui omnemis moras prevenirent.*


6 *Gesta Herwardi*, p. 389: *Qua ascensia contra insulam et habitatores ejus diu termoncina est, plurimas destructiones, similitudines, et ignoria subversionis facti.*

7 *Liber Eliensis*, p. 186: *Predicta quoque illa venefica super cunctos in loco eminentior, ut liberius suis incantationibus vacaret, constituia, a timore velud a turbine percussa, de alto lapsum dedit. Sicque fracta cervice prior hec, que ad aliorum internicionem venerat, exanimata interiit.*

8 Kittredge (1928), p. 125.

9 Cambridge University Library, Ely Diocesan Records, G/I/5, fols 133v-r: *Memorandum quod Robertus Barker captus fuit apud Baberham ... ex causa vebementi suspicione heretici & artis nigramantis cum quo rep(t)erata fuerunt unus liber & unus rotulus eiusmod artis cum caracteribus & circulis ecocoris & coniurationibus ad istam artem p(ert)inentis & etiam una lamina sexagona cum divisis figuris & nomenibus ignotis insculpta ... et una magna carta cum caracteribus eius circulis figuris sexagonis & pentagonis nomenibus ignotis ... ad opus nigramantis ... ordinato.*


11 For a summary of the case see Kittredge (1928), p. 207.


21 ‘Black Annis’ is a hag-like figure in Leicestershire folklore, whom some authors have claimed is a corrupted version of the Celtic goddess Anu. See Alexander, M., A Companion to the Folklore, Myths and Customs of Britain (Sutton: Stroud, 2002), p. 23.
22 Gaskill (2005), pp. 245-249.
23 Ibid. pp. 253-256.
24 Ibid. p. 261.
26 Drage, W., Daemonicmageia, a small treatise of sicknesses and disease from witchcraft (London, 1665), p. 12.
27 Hutchinson, F., An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft (London, 1718), p. 41. Sadly the assize and quarter sessions records for this period do not survive amongst the Ely Diocesan Records in Cambridge University Library.
32 Ibid. p. 162.
36 Ibid. p. 181.