

# Witches

## in and around Suffolk

In April 1890, an inquest was held at Fressingfield in Suffolk on the body of a child who had died at the age of just eleven weeks. The parents were convinced that their daughter, **Edith Margaret Hammond**, had died due to the witchcraft of **Mrs. Corbyn**, the child's step-grandmother. The Daily News reported the case as follows: -

*This woman died a few hours before the child, and stated that the child would not live long after her. The child was taken out in a perambulator, and the father stated that he saw smoke issue from the perambulator, and that the child died upon being taken home, the mother stating that it was hot and dry and smelt of brimstone. The medical evidence went to show that death was due to shock caused by the external application of some irritant, and the jury, in returning a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence said there was not sufficient evidence to show the nature of the irritant. **George Corbyn**, the child's grandfather said he was of opinion his late wife had the powers of a witch and he always tried to do what she wanted in consequence.*

For as long as history itself, we've been a superstitious lot in East Anglia. It is nearly 300 years since our elected representatives told us to stop persecuting witches, but old habits die hard. After all, if the Bible and Shakespeare recognised witches, who are we to disagree?

The trouble is, in a confusing world, it is comforting in a way to have an explanation for the inexplicable. Be it sickness or infestation, storm, blight or sudden death, then sorcery could just be the answer.

And magic can have its advantages... a little bit of advance warning of what the future is about to throw at you could be worth its weight in a palm crossed with silver. Spells and concoctions could be designed to make you more attractive, more successful, more fertile; or just incapacitate the opposition, leaving your way open to the success you seek.

A whole folk-lore has grown up around the ‘wise ones’ of Suffolk, so that in most of our towns and villages, you can still find someone who will tell you tales of their local ‘*witch*’.

The Kettlebaston village web-site contains a faded photograph of **Mumphsy Brett** taken outside the stone cottage where she lived less than a century ago. Tradition has it that her powers of witchcraft were never more obvious than when her husband and son defied her wishes by setting off for Bildeston without her. In her anger, she worked a spell that left the pair of them unable to move from their donkey-cart for the rest of the day.

But truth to tell, the history of witchcraft in and around Suffolk is an altogether darker story, about suffering, persecution and death. It reached into the hearts of families and communities and created a fear and a hysteria that lasted until recent times.

### **Early cases of witchcraft in Eastern England**

Throughout the Middle-Ages, both Christianity and folk-witchcraft existed side by side without giving rise to the inquisitions that plagued Europe. White witches, working as herbalists and midwives enjoyed the air of mysticism that surrounded them, and even kings took their advice.

Also, in the eyes of the public, such people were no better, no worse, than many of their clergy. Though priests were meant to observe a vow of chastity, clearly, many did not. Extraordinary numbers of them found themselves indicted at

the Assizes in the early 15th century for rape and for being ‘*common ravishers of women*’. In 1401, **John Davy**, vicar of Brent Eleigh; **John Cosyn**, parson of Gedding; **Stephen Ganen**, the chaplain of Fornham St. Genevieve; Nicholas, chaplain of Culford and **John**, parson of Aldham were all summoned to answer this charge. In 1405, four more Suffolk priests met the same fate, including **Stephen Nycole** of Hepworth, who was accused of raping three servants.

If the priests were bad, what about the witches?

Accurate evidence, especially regarding early witchcraft cases, is very hard to obtain. Take for example **Margery Jourdemaine** of Eye, supposed by some writers to have been consulted by Henry VI when Parliament met at Bury St. Edmunds in 1447. She had ‘advised’ a number of eminent men and women of her day including Eleanor Cobham, wife of the Duke of Gloucester, who was banished for conspiring to take the life of the king by magic. It is possible that the king felt it was safer to have Margery Jourdemaine on his side rather than against him. However, the truth appears to have been rather different. A known diviner, ‘*The Witch of Eye*’ was first arrested with two priests in 1432 for sorcery, but released. According to several sources she was tried in 1441 with Thomas Southwell and Roger Bolingbroke, accused of using sorcery in seeking to know the date of the death of Henry VI.



She was burned for treason, whilst her more noble accomplices were hanged, drawn and quartered.

Though witches suffered far more in Scotland, they were largely tolerated here, but after all, much of the supernatural activity that was their stock in trade was similar to those practices employed by the Roman Catholic Church at the time. An article published in the Suffolk Chronicle, October 20th 1810 described such a ceremony.

***EXTRAORDINARY CUSTOM  
FORMERLY PRACTISED BY THE MONKS  
OF BURY ST. EDMUND'S, SUFFOLK***

*The religious fathers of this monastery had propagated an opinion, that if any married woman that had no children, and wished to become a mother, would but come with a white bull to the shrine of St. Edmund, and make her offerings and vows, she should presently after obtain her desire; and as it was usual to institute processions, to give great dignity and solemnity to the ceremony, it was thought necessary to have a very public one on this important occasion, and for this purpose, a white bull was provided, elegantly adorned with garlands of flowers, ribbons, &c. which being led by one of the monks, the petitioning lady at the same time following him, and often stroking his milk-white side, the procession thus proceeded through Churchgate and Guildhall streets, and along the Cook-Row down to the great West-gate of the abbey, attended by the monks singing, accompanied with a prodigious concourse of people, forming a very numerous cavalcade. - The bull being dismissed, the lady entered the church, advanced to St. Edmund's shrine, said her prayers, made her offering at his altar, kissing the stone, and entreating with tears, the blessing of a child, she then returned from the abbey with full assurance of speedy success. This custom had gained so much credit in many parts of the world, that not only many eminent women of this country had recourse to it, but even several ladies belonging to foreign parts. But as it would be very inconvenient for those distant ladies to come in person to perform these ceremonies, it was pronounced to be equally efficacious for them, if they caused to be offered by any other means, one of these wonder working animals at St. Edmund's shrine. A copy of a deed was formerly, and probably*

at the present time is preserved in the Augmentation Office, to the following effect; “That John Swaffham, sacrist of the monastery of St. Edmund’s Bury, certifies to all Christian people, that on the 2nd June 1474, three religious persons, (whom he names) of the city of Ghent, came and offered, as has been accustomed of old time, in the presence of several reputable people, at the shrine of the blessed king, virgin, and martyr, St. Edmund, to the honour of God, and of the said glorious martyr, one white bull, for the accomplishment of the longing of a certain noble lady.”

Of course, your local friendly witch would have done it all a lot cheaper. But whilst the church may not have cornered the market in superstitious rites, they could be relied on to offer some good ones. The following story comes from Froude’s ‘*Short studies on great subjects*’.

A Suffolk yeoman, **William of Ramsholt**, had invited a party to a feast. A neighbour had made him a present of a cheese and his little daughter Beatrice had been directed to put it away in a safe place. Beatrice did as she was told, but went to play with her brother, Hugh, and forgot what she had done with it. The days went on, the feast was near. The children hunted in every corner of the house, but no cheese could be found. The nearest town was far off. They had no money to buy another if they could reach it, and a whipping became sadly probable. An idea struck little Hugh. “Sister,” he said, “I have heard that the blessed Thomas (à Becket) is good and kind. Let us pray to Thomas to help us.” They went to their beds, and, as Hugh foretold, the saint came to them in their dreams. “Don’t you remember,” he said, “the old crock in the back kitchen, where the butter used to be kept?” They sprang up and all was well.

Finding lost objects was just one of a number of services offered by the church, but also by local ‘*naughty people*’ and their ‘*imps.*’ These are the stuff of folk-tales and legends. Several old stories come down to us today by way of the pen of **Ralph de Coggeshall**, a medieval monk with a fascination

for the bizarre. In one such tale, a grotesque imp called Malekin was sent to haunt a house at Dagworth before it was captured and imprisoned for seven years (Another version describes this house as a castle, in which case, it must refer to nearby Haughley). One tale from the days of Henry II describes how an evil spirit entered the body of a drowned man at Orford and haunted those shores until caught by fishermen. His body was covered with hair and his beard reached his waist. When he was taken to church he never crossed himself or bent his knee before the altar. He only awoke during the hours of darkness and finally escaped back to the open sea.

### Witchcraft in Tudor Times

Whilst magic was merely a cause for wonder it appears to have been accepted in this part of the world. However, during Tudor times Kings, Queens, and those close to them became ever fearful of any force that might be used against them. The unpopularity of Anne Boleyn came about in part from the belief that she had bewitched King Henry VIII. She was reputed to have six fingers on one hand and even a third teat, believed to be signs of a witch.

Witchcraft in itself had never been a crime, though causing death by magic clearly had. After Henry VIII's reformation, heresy and superstition became big issues, reaching the point of public paranoia. The following tales come from a book published in 1562 by **Dr. William Bullein**, entitled '*Defence against all sickness, sornes, and woundes that dooe daily assaulte mankinde*'. Dr. Bullein was rector of Blaxhall in Suffolk before turning his talents to medicine and making his name as a surgeon in London.

*I dyd know wythin these few years a false Witch called **M(other) Line**, in a town of Suffolk called Parham, which with a payre of Ebene beades and certain charmes, had no small resort of foolysh women when their chyldren were syck. To thys lame Witch they resorted to have the Fairie charmed and the Spyute*

coniured away: through the prayers and the Ebene beades whych she sayd came from the holy land and were santified at Rome. Through whom many goodly cures have been don, but my chaunce was to burn ye sayd beads. Oh! That damable witches be suffered to lieu unpunished and so many blessed men burned: witches be more hurtful in this realm than either quarter, pox, or pestilence. I knew in a towne called Kelshall in Suffolk a Witch whose name was **M(other) Didge**, who with certain Aue Maries upon her Ebene Beades and a waxe Candle, used this Charme folowyng for S. Anthonies fyre, having the sicke body before her, holding up her Hande saying: there came two Angels out of the North east, one brought fyre the other brought frost, out fyre and in frost. In nomine patris, etc. I could reherse an C of sutch knackes of these holy gossips, the fyre take them all, for they be God's enemies.



Though there were attempts to draft anti-witchcraft laws, it took until 1563 for the Witchcraft Act to appear on the statute books.

Almost immediately three women in Chelmsford were accused, tried and received dramatically different sentences.

**Elizabeth Francis** was said to have conspired with her familiar, a black cat called Sathan to seduce young men, one of whom she married. According to her confession, Sathan was responsible for the death of her child and the laming of her husband with whom she had '*become dissatisfied*'. She received one year's imprisonment, but hanged three years later after facing trial for witchcraft again.

**Agnes**, known as **Mother Waterhouse** admitted to purchasing the cat Sathan, with whose help she had killed a number of animals belonging to people she did not like. She also admitted to the killing of one William Fynee. She was found guilty and hanged two days later.

**Joan Waterhouse**, her daughter, was accused by somewhat unconvincing witnesses of training a black dog to open doors with a magic key and stab people with a knife held in its mouth. The court did not believe the accusations and she was released.

The 1563 act did not link witchcraft with the devil or with religious heresy, and only condemned to death those who committed murder. Though the rest of Europe burned witches, this act prescribed death by hanging for... *“who shall use practise or exercise any witchcrafte enchantment charme or sorcerie whereby any person shall happen to be killed or destroyed”*. Lesser witchcraft offences were punishable by up to a year’s imprisonment and a spell in the pillory.

A copy of a document at Bury Record Office dating back to the 1580s, lists punishments to be administered to offenders in St. Mary’s parish in Bury, whereby anyone... *“proved to be a witche, inchaunter or sowthesayer is to be punished according to the law.”* Those merely accused publicly were to be imprisoned until sureties were lodged with the magistrates to ensure their good behaviour. In this document, witchcraft appears to be classed with such misdemeanours as blasphemy, fornication, drunkenness & absence from church on a Sunday.

In 1582 at St. Osyth (written St. Oses in old documents) in Essex, what started as a series of village quarrels led to 13 women being tried for witchcraft and belonging to a witches’ coven. This trial, the details of which were published at the time, introduced a number of the features that were to become common at witch trials over the next hundred years or more.