

Witches, Warlocks and Apparitions in Lothian and the Borders

By Jean Blades

Fala, Soutra and District History and Heritage Society

Ever since the world was created, woman has been blamed for every sin and trouble. It follows, therefore, that witches must be women. Indeed in 1627 Richard Bernard wrote that women were the worst offenders because they were “more credulous, impatient and superstitious, and, when crossed, more malicious. Being tongue-ripe they couldn’t keep anything to themselves.” Even worse, across the world women were described as witches because they were “more wanton, more weak, and more wicked.”

Burns blamed the Devil:

O thou whatever title suites thee,
Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick or Clooties;
Who in you cavern grim and sooty
Clos’d under hatches;
Barges about the brunstane cootie
To scaurd poor wretches!

It seems appropriate to find in Ormiston a cottage named ‘Auld Nick’, an appendage apparently frequently given to former police stations.

But now ‘tis the witching hour, the darkest time of the year when the summer suns have set and winter’s sun is low in the sky. At midnight on All Hallow’s Eve, Hallowe’en, the graves will open and the spirits of the dead will rise to haunt the places where they lived, and the witches and warlocks come into their own. Thus the fears of the superstitious. Many writers have vividly described the folk lore of bygone days and the various uses of wood, fire and water to protect the farm, the family and their future from the witches and the devil himself.

A light-hearted study quickly becomes more serious when the tragedies inherent in the witch-hunt era are revealed. Politics, religious turmoil, war, famine and poverty all played a dramatic role. The Reformation created devastating destruction and a major upheaval in the way of life of the Scottish nation. Into the front line came the all-powerful Kirk Sessions of the Presbyterian Church. As Roman Catholicism disappeared, it was replaced by Calvin’s preaching of the literal interpretation of the Bible. Action automatically followed the much-quoted text from Exodus: “Thou shall not suffer a witch to live”, or, as the Good News Bible states: “Put to death any woman who practises magic.” The Act was passed in 1563 stating that witchcraft was a criminal offence carrying the death penalty. Who could be plainer? And if you have no witches go forth and find them, the original ”Neighbourhood Watch”.

And so the great waves of witch-hunting started, linked with periods of famine and plague with constant fears of the return of Episcopacy and Roman Catholicism. Alongside, came invasions throughout the reigns of Charles I and II. Some 300 ministers left the Church because they refused to acknowledge the King as head of the Church. It was a feudal society with 90% of the population in agriculture and very dependent on the land-owners. Poverty was rife and the Church's Poor Box was often the only source of livelihood. Witchcraft added excitement and colour to their lives. The witch was feared and thus felt important. Sexual fantasies and imagination held sway. Fortunately although many were strangled and burned at the stake, many more were dealt with directly by the Kirk Sessions who ordered the humiliation of spells at the stool of penitence, the pain of the jugs, or, more drastically, excommunication which could lead to banishment from the parish.

Christine Lerner has given us a map of Scotland highlighting the horrifying number of witches in our area: Eastern Borders 231; East Lothian 297; and Lothian and Edinburgh 331. Numbers in the rest of the country were comparatively very small. Professor Smout's estimation of the witches burned in Scotland between 1563 and 1707 was around three thousand. There are at least twenty places in the South of Scotland associated by name with witches – Witches Knowe, Witches Syke, Witch Craig. Near Thirlstane Castle at Lauder is to be found the Witches Pool where it is reputed that suspects were cast into the water. If they sank, they were innocent but if they floated, they were guilty because they must be light enough to fly – an essential attribute! Mackie states: "if she floated it was a sign of that the pure element would not receive her guilty body." Other methods used to provide evidence was by 'pricking' the suspect, the notorious John Cunningham, schoolmaster at Prestonpans, known by his Devil's nickname as Dr Fian, being the best known perpetrator, even as far away as Lauder. Mostly, witches were discovered by word of mouth but torture was frequently and horrifically used to obtain confession. The accused victim was expected to name around a dozen others whether justified or not – a great chance for revenge often for trifling insults or trumped-up hurts of one sort or another. It gave landowners an opportunity to get rid of unwanted tenants; doctors who might be jealous and felt threatened by herbal knowledge and witch doctor medicine being practised – often quite successfully albeit by faith or psychological. Even Kirk Sessions could seize the chance of getting rid of perhaps some cantankerous lady continually being brought before them for swearing, drinking, fighting or simply for miscalling her neighbours.

In Lauder the local minister in the 1660s was so successful that the hateful Earl of Lauderdale at that time had to order a cease-fire as the Tolbooth was already full; either to acquit some, let the Kirk Session deal with some or burn a number. One victim was Margaret Dunham, the innkeeper at Burncastle on the old Herring Road to Dunbar. The details of her execution highlight how many people profited financially from these events. The total cost of her burning was £92 14s less £27 of her own money acquired to meet part of the expense. Costs included the gaolers, the hangman and Burn castle his transport from Haddington, sackcloth for the prisoner, food for all involved for her 30 days imprisonment, and finally the cost of two trees and labour in preparing the fire. Stow Kirk Session minutes confirm this story.

Over Soutrahill at Fala five witches were taken to trial of whom one, Alesoune Jollie, was acquitted although she appears to have made use of a witch, the late Janet Strotton, to carry out "cruel and abominable slaughter of the Stratton late Isobel Hepburne, having

confessed a deadly hatred, rancour and malice” for the alleged redeeming of one acre of land from her husband, which he had possessed for two years. At Borthwick town two women were accused of witchcraft; one of being involved in the death of the late Earl of Lothian while the other was told that “there were clear and pregnant assumptions that she was accessory to the death of the late Lord Borthwick” and others. In 1630 several men and women long suspected of witchcraft are recorded as prisoners in Cousland Tolbooth. No trace of this building have yet been discovered. Crichton is credited (or discredited) with having 18 witches tried between 1630 and 1678. Dalkeith Presbytery minutes record a letter being sent to Lord Buccleuch in 1630 asking that his baillie at Cakemuir “hold fast sundry witches in Crichton”. This date coincides with one of the many epidemics of plague and periods of famine. The next real panic came in 1649 after the execution of Charles 1 and the coronation of Charles II in 1651 with the fear of Episcopacy. Then came a spell under Cromwell’s rule when the number of witch trials dropped and many awaiting trial were released from prison. By 1701 the trial took place of two “indwellers of Crichton”, Euphemia Adair and Isabel Braikenrigg “who confessed the abominable sin of witchcraft”; note a “sin” and no longer a “crime”.

Crichton appears again in the Kirk Session minutes of both Humbie and Crichton when two women were brought before Humbie Session charged with “charming and taking the heavy sickness of a young woman in Costerton” – a euphemism for assisting with an abortion. Had they learned their herbal lore from the best known of all the local witches, Agnes Sampson, the “Wise Woman of Keith”? Another entry in Humbie’s Session minutes cites Agnes Gourlay required to appear “anent the charming of kine”. She confessed that Anna (or Anny as Agnes was often called) had taught her spells to use to affect cattle, “putting salt and wheatbread in the cows’ lugs”. She was ordered to repent in sackcloth. Yester and Samuelston were scenes of the activities of one “Hateraik” who made a profitable living for himself “much given to charming and curing of men and beasts by words and spells”. Sandy Hamilton, his ordinary name, came under the Devil’s power and from then onwards he exploited the use of his charms in return for meal, flesh and money. No house refused him alms in case ill befell them. Eventually justice prevailed. He was arrested at Dunbar and burned on the Castlehill in Edinburgh,

Peaston Muir was the scene of many meetings of covens of witches and the fears and superstitions that must have surrounded the tales at the time were bound to affect those living in the area. It is therefore easy to believe the ghostly apparition which appeared to Isobel Murray in Ormiston. She knew Isobel Heriot of Peaston who had been a servant to the Minister. He had eventually sacked her because he could not persuade her, hard as he tried, to take religion seriously. She became sick, died and then came back to haunt her former employer. Stones mysteriously thrown; a burning coal was thrown under a bed in the manse. Eventually Isobel Murray met the apparition one night in the garden and she confessed to a number of sins. She had stolen a gold coin from the manse and had tried to sell it in Edinburgh. The Devil had appeared to her on the way home and told her to destroy the minister. After this confession, her soul appeared to rest in peace and she was never seen again. At Peaston Mains the farm has a cross on the roof of a building. Was this created to exorcise all the evils that must have been associated with the witches?

And so to the most famous story of all – the North Berwick witches in 1591. The aforementioned Agnes Sampson was the oldest, coming from Nether Keith at Humbie. The

background of her trial was surrounded by political intrigue and plotting. The major characters were no less a person than King James VI, with the role of Devil played by Francis Stewart, Fifth Earl Bothwell, the King's cousin. Relations between them had deteriorated. Bothwell was suspected of collusion with the witches to destroy the King. The King was fascinated by the study of witches and in 1597 published his book on Demonology. He saw the possibility in the forthcoming trial of Agnes Sampson and her involvement with Bothwell of finally getting rid of the Earl and ordered the trial to take place before him at Holyrood.

A full record of this famous trial sums up the incredible gullibility and hysteria which surrounded so many of the so-called witches. Agnes Sampson was a midwife with the great gift of healing. She was charged with fifty-three crimes of which no fewer than twenty-one were because she had used her "magic" to heal people hitherto given up for lost. A further ten were due to her practice of soothsaying. Arnot⁽¹⁾ describes her as being a "grave matron like woman of a rank and comprehension above the vulgar". She stated at her trial that the Devil (Bothwell) had come to her immediately after her husband had died. Little imagination is needed to understand how receptive she must have been to distractions, especially with a promise of money and a good future for her family. Her story links the Borders to the conspiracy against the King ending with the great gathering of witches and warlocks at North Berwick and the raising of storms at sea against the King and his Queen.

Bothwell had met by chance in Kelso with the warlock Richard Graham who told him he was homeless. He found a cottage for him at Crichton and introduced him to Agnes Sampson. She later confessed that Bothwell had inquired of her what should happen to the King, how long he should reign and what should happen after his death. He had then undertaken to "make away the King". Agnes added that after the Devil had failed in his mission she challenged him and he admitted that it was not in his power as the King "is a man of God".

Agnes was executed at Edinburgh Castle, there "bound and strangled until she was dead, thereafter her body to be burned". A similar fate was in store for Dr Fian but only after appalling torture. Graham was also charged believing that the King had promised him acquittal if he would denounce Bothwell but he too was executed. Bothwell denied everything and maintained that all the evidence against him had been obtained under torture and the traitors were now all dead. He was acquitted. He died in exile in Naples in 1612.

Christina Lerner's *Enemies of God* brings a sense of shame and sadness of the utter waste and for the suffering endured by so many women in that terrible period of history.

The crime of witchcraft was abolished only in 1735.

(1) Arnot, H. Ed. 1785, *A collection and abridgement of celebrated criminal trials in Scotland: from AD1536 to 1784*

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