

witch county

Matthew Hopkins, the self-titled Witchfinder General, sent endless people to their death for allegedly practising witchcraft. But what made Essex such a target of accusation during the 17th century? By **Chris Penhall**



Matthew Hopkins and his victims, 1647. Suspected witches were subjected to physical and mental torture in order to extract their confessions

In the depths of winter, when the days are short and the nights are long, look out of your window as darkness falls on the eerie Essex landscape and remember... you are in Witch County, hunting ground of the infamous Witchfinder General. This is the place where more witches were put on trial than anywhere else in England during the period of persecutions from the mid 1560s to the end of the 17th century.

Between 1560 and 1580 alone, approximately 2,300 people were involved in cases in Essex, either as a victim or suspect. Over 500 of these were prosecuted. But the medieval image of the black-clad hag with a pointy hat and broomstick is far removed from the more mundane reality of those accused of practising the 'black arts' during this period. It was in Chelmsford that the first witchcraft trial in England took place in 1565, and concerned two Hatfield Peverel women, Elizabeth Francis and Agnes Waterhouse. Francis was accused of causing her cat (her 'familiar') to kill Andrew Byles, a wealthy local who had made her pregnant, yet refused to marry her. She had then caused a man to die who had agreed to marry her, but, having apparently changed her mind, put a toad in his sock, making him first lame, then paralysed, then dead. Her cat was then lent to Agnes Waterhouse who used it to cause the death of farm animals, and then her husband. Both women were hanged.

Matthew Hopkins, 1647, was a self styled Witchfinder General

This was the first of many trials which followed the 1563 Act which stated that those using magical means to bring death or physical injury to people, or the destruction of farm and domestic animals, goods and property should face capital punishment.

Soon after the Hatfield Peverel witches came the trial of Elizabeth Lewis of Great Waltham, accused, amongst other things, of causing the death of two of her neighbour's pigs, and her husband's lameness. She was only saved from the gallows by the fact that she was pregnant.

But these were relatively small incidents compared to the prosecution of a group of women in St Osyth 15 years later. It all started with Ursula Kemp who was accused of causing a baby girl to fall from her cot, making her very ill, and of putting a spell on the child's mother, Grace Thurlow, which made her go lame. Agnes Leatherdall then blamed the sickness of her children on Ursula, and Ursula's own eight year old son said she kept four 'familiars': two cats, a toad and a lamb, and suckled them all.

Ursula eventually confessed, but the hysteria and accusation spread unabated throughout this small village, culminating in the trials of 13 women in Chelmsford, six of whom were hanged.

A second Act on Witchcraft was passed in 1604. It drew in all kinds of magic – putting the 'harmless' kind on the same level as that which would cause harm. The floodgates were now open. The new Act had the backing of James I who wrote a book on witchcraft which was studied by



¶ **The Apprehension and confession**
of three notorious Witches.
Arreigned and by Iustice condemned and
executed at Chelmsford, in the Countye of
Essex, the 5. day of Iulye, last past.
1589.

¶ With the manner of their diabolish practises and keeping of their
spirits, whose fourmes are heerein truely
proportioned.



This woodcut illustrates executions which took place in Chelmsford

professional witchhunters, such as Matthew Hopkins, self-styled Witchfinder General.

Until 1644 Hopkins was an unsuccessful lawyer with a practice in Manningtree. His new career began when he claimed to have discovered a coven of witches who held meetings close to his house. He focused on an elderly woman who only had one leg, Elizabeth Clarke, and decided to 'prove' her guilt. He kept her awake for three days and nights, and employed other forms of psychological torture to extract a confession from the exhausted and disorientated woman. She also implicated five other women, all of whom were eventually hanged.

Spurred on by his first success, he called himself the Witchfinder General, recruited enthusiastic assistants in John Stearne and Mary Phillips, and travelled the eastern counties discovering witches. He charged a fee for consultation, initial survey and for every witch tried and sentenced. When he thought he had found a witch, he'd attempt to make her confess using psychological torture, but when the water test – if you sank you were innocent, if you floated you were guilty – became the acceptable yardstick throughout the country, he adopted that method enthusiastically. Hopkins put to death more than the combined totals of all other witchfinders during his 18 month reign of terror. He disappeared in 1647 into relative obscurity, although it has been claimed that he, too, was charged with witchcraft. What is known is that he died in bed of consumption shortly after his retirement.

He and his kind flourished during the last stages of the Civil War when the Puritan influence was strong and the counties were in chaos. There was no strong official body to prevent him from whipping up local animosities: the Assize Courts were suspended and being replaced by makeshift courts – anarchy was on his side.

In Essex as a whole, the uneasy political climate combined with intense superstition fuelled the witchhunts. But what made Essex such a boiling pot of hysteria and accusation?

One factor was the geographical make-up of the county: there were few towns and a great many villages, generally comprising only a few hundred people living in 40-50 households. Ignorance and isolation made the people intensely superstitious and fearful of anything they could not understand. Also, doctors were usually based in towns and not accessible or affordable to the rural poor, therefore elderly people and those known as 'cunning men' were turned to for help

with illness. It is not difficult to see how things could go wrong – an argument, followed by an unexplained lameness, or back pain. All easily and rationally explained in these more knowledgeable times, but to an uneducated and unworldly person in the 16th century, fed on a diet of extreme Puritanism, superstition and fear, easily construed as the work of the Devil.

Witches were almost always women – less than five per cent of those accused were men, and the majority were aged between 50 and 70. If the evidence at the trials was too outrageous even for the magistrates, it was not unusual for an unruly mob to hand out their own rough justice – most often when the suspect was a widow or an unmarried woman, as repercussions were less likely. Most at risk of accusation were those elderly people, particularly women who did not live with relatives within communities. Any unconven-

tional behaviour could be misinterpreted, and they had no one to protect them.

Records from the time show accusations often arose from quarrels between friends and neighbours; 70 per cent of the accusations related to the death or illness of human beings, while the remainder were mostly due to injuries to animals.

The hysteria did eventually die down with more political stability after the virtual anarchy of the Civil War, although there were witchcraft trials during the Cromwellian regime.

The final execution in Essex was in 1646, while the last in England was in Exeter in 1684. However, we should not forget that the last recorded witchhunt which ended in the death of a suspect was in 1699 in Coggeshall during the reign of Charles II. Widow Corman had been accused of witchcraft, and one day a mob took the law into their own hands and threw her in and out of a pond several times in their version of the water test. She died of influenza shortly afterwards.

It is easy for us to view such ignorance and intolerance as almost unbelievable and unconscionable in these more enlightened and liberal times. But just take a look out at the more remote parts of the Essex landscape and ask yourself if it was so surprising that magic was seen everywhere, and that fear of the unknown could be whipped up into hysteria and prejudice by those with something to gain. If you think that could not happen now, just look back at the 20th century, or even have a read of the daily papers. □