

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### Mike Wabe, Witches and Witch Hunting in East Anglia

Mike Wabe gave an entertaining talk entitled *Witches and Witch Hunting in East Anglia* to the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall.

Magic has fascinated many people for centuries as a way of explaining why events happen but it was only in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that witches were persecuted. Most were women who tended to be old, poor and unprotected. During the Elizabethan period from 1558 to 1603, of 270 witch trials in England, 247 involved women. Witches were blamed for misfortunes affecting a family or community, including illness, epidemics, deaths, poor harvests or even milk curdling.

The invention of the printing press was influential as the publication of books such as the Bible, or about magic, alchemy and astrology increased fears of witchcraft and the supernatural. In 1562 harsher laws for punishing witches were introduced as those convicted could be hanged. One of first women to die was Agnes Waterhouse who was accused of sorcery causing illness to people and the death of livestock. She was hanged at Chelmsford in 1566. Other executions followed.

One of the most sensational cases was the witches of Warboys, a village in the Fens, between 1589 and 1593. Soon after the new squire, Robert Throckmorton, arrived in the village, his 9 year old daughter Jane began to have fits. She identified Alice Samuel as the cause. The malady soon affected Jane's four sisters and seven of their servants. Alice was interviewed by Lady Susan Cromwell who then suffered from nightmares and headaches before her death in 1592. Alice, her daughter and her husband were all arrested for murder and hanged. Modern examination of the case suggests that the girls and the servants may have been suffering from mass hysteria.

Prosecutions for witchcraft continued in East Anglia during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the outbreak of civil war in 1642. The disruption allowed Matthew Hopkins to create what amounted to a reign of terror in East Anglia through his witch hunting. He is believed to have been responsible for the execution of about 100 alleged witches between 1644 and 1646. Hopkins is a shadowy figure. He was literate and had a detailed knowledge of the law. He gave himself the title of Witchfinder General and created a team who rigorously investigated supposed cases of witchcraft. Most of his victims were women who were poor and vulnerable. Although torture was illegal, Hopkins had people stripped, starved and kept awake for extended periods during which they were aggressively questioned. Needles were used to examine people for a witches mark. Others were 'swum' which meant being tied up and then pushed into a river or pond. If they person floated they were guilty. Hopkins travelled to a number of places in East Anglia, including Colchester, Stowmarket, Bury St Edmunds, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn in his search for witches. The 'guilty' were hanged. Eventually the terror caused by Hopkins came to an end in 1647 but the reasons why are unknown.

Old buildings often have mummified cats concealed in walls or under the door step. This was done as a protection against spirits. Another method was to put urine, iron nails, hair and nail clippings into a bottle with a stopper. This would then be hidden, for example, in a chimney.

An Act of 1736 against witchcraft was only repealed in 1951. The last prosecution of a witch happened in 1944 but there are still signs that witchcraft is still practised in Britain. A very sad recent case was that of Victoria Climbié who was murdered by her great-aunt in 2000 who believed that she was possessed.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 28 September at Rickinghall Village Hall when Tony Diamond will be talking about *Mary Queen of Scots*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy