

## **A brief history of witchcraft in England.**

Popular belief in witchcraft (persons who were supposed to have entered into a compact with the Devil) prevailed in England throughout the Middle Ages and was entertained by many eminent men. During the reign of James 1st (1566-1625) He earned the unenviable reputation of being, "the wisest fool in Christendom" for his ill judged favouritism. He tightened the witchcraft laws and regarded those who doubted witchcraft as being witches themselves. The pact with the Devil and the keeping of imps was given renewed emphasis. Witches were to be executed by hanging.

And so the new turbulent scene was set as Shakespeare's witches chanted...

*...Double double toil and trouble  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble...  
(Macbeth 1606)*

And now unravelled in a short space of time (1642-1645) the painful trials and deaths of almost 300 alleged witches.

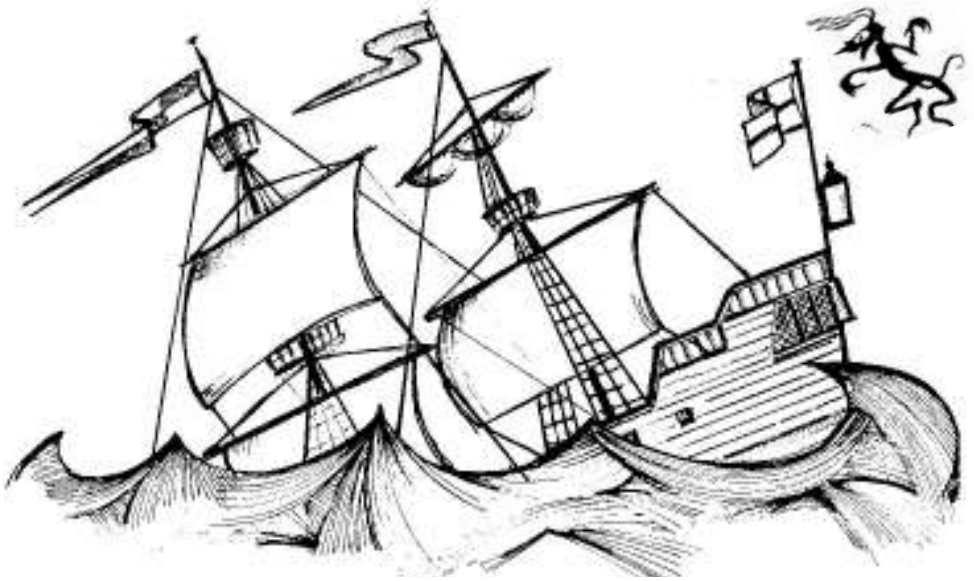
*...the keeping of imps  
was forbidden*



## **John Lowes, Rector at Brandeston**

Lowes was accused by his own parishioners of having Papist leanings, many of his flock detested him for being vexatious and turbulent, there being one occasion the rector gave a parishioner a bloody nose during a row in the churchyard. Tempers were further inflamed when he took the side of a woman who had been accused of witchcraft thus gaining an unjustifiable reputation of being a witch himself.

Petitions by his parishioners to the Church Authorities to have him removed, met without success but all this made the rector an eventual target of the self appointed Witch Finder General Matthew Hopkins. In 1642 at Framlingham, Hopkins extracted confessions from two suspected witches, who, under extreme duress linked the rector to witchcraft. Seized by Hopkins and his men, the old rector had his toes tied to his thumbs and was thrown into Framlingham mere to see if he would float. Later this 80 year old man was continually run backwards and forwards until totally exhausted, denied sleep for nights on end that he became weary of life. He confessed his guilt to all the charges that his accusers laid before him, including the accusation that, he instructed an imp to cause a storm to blow and sink a ship with the loss of many lives off the Harwich coast.



*... that he sent an imp to sink a ship*

At his trial at Bury St Edmunds the validity of the ship story was accepted by the court without investigation and the Rector along with 17 other witches (other charges) were hanged on the 27th August.



## **The Witch Finder General, Matthew Hopkins, tormenter of John Lowes**

Self styled witch finder son of a Vicar (born between 1619 and 1622) he received a Parliamentary commission to discover witches for which he was paid twenty shillings per visit and similar sum for each conviction. Hopkins always claimed that he never did it for the money but for a far nobler cause of defending the faith and Parliament. His earnings however, in his short life and career that probably only spanned 5 years were significant, his assistant John Sterne thought that they had discovered and convicted up to 300 witches. Given that the average wage for a skilled craftsman at that time was about 1 shilling and sixpence (8p) a day his earnings must have been considerable by comparison.

# Demise and the myth of Hopkins death.

Contrary to popular myth Hopkins was not hacked at and then shot by a vengeful Parliamentary soldier as the film of *Matthew Hopkins–Witch Finder General* would have us believe. Instead he died in his home in Manningtree after a long illness of consumption in 1647 aged 28 years or so. To avoid controversy he was buried...

*....by night  
at Mistley,  
12th August 1647.*



**In All Saints Church.** There is a plaque in memory to the wronged Rector and against the names of incumbents of the church is the name..  
**John Lowe, *hanged for witchcraft.***

*Further reading:*

*The Witch Finder and the Devils Darlings, Simon Peters, Lucas Press, ISBN 1-903797-21-7*

*A true arraignment of witches, Published in London in 1645, Available in the church.*

*The English Civil War. Diane Purkiss, Harper Collins, ISBN 0-00-715061-X.*

*The Journal of William Dowsing, Boydall Press, ISBN 0-851-158-331.*

*The History of Suffolk Volume 2 by Rev Suckling. Available from Suffolk Libraries.*

Research and illustrations by Peter Farley

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