

Scotland's most infamous witch trials



Women accused of witchcraft being beaten in front of King James VI of Scotland. Picture: Getty

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RECORDS of Scotland's witch trials, the majority of which stretched over a period of 200 years during the 16th and 17th centuries, shed light on a [dark](#) period in Scottish history, exposing a culture of fear and panic that cast a cloud over much of Scotland and Europe. Here, we recount some of Scotland's most infamous - and brutal - prosecutions for witchcraft

The North Berwick Witches

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Witches are prepared for execution on the gallows. Picture: Getty

North Berwick saw Scotland's first mass witch trial take place in the late 16th century, at a time where a climate of fear surrounding magic had already compelled the Scottish justiciary to put into [law](#) the Witchcraft Act in 1563.

The case of the North Berwick witch trials bears out not only the scope of misdeeds that would constitute witchcraft, but also the terrible lengths to which [prosecutors](#) would go to extract confessions from witches.

Moreover, the involvement of King James VI, which was to prove instrumental in the execution of many of those suspected of witchcraft in these cases, illustrated that fear of sorcery transcended class barriers.

After having tried and failed on numerous occasions to bring his prospective bride, the 14-year-old Anne of Denmark, to Scotland due to storms at sea, he suspected witchcraft at work. Suspicion initially fell on Geillis Duncan, a local maid who had been seen practicing healing (from which it was deduced that she could also harm). Under torture, she implicated three others in sorcery, and proof of her witchcraft had been established via 'the Devil's mark' discovered on her neck.

Alleged witches and warlocks from across Edinburgh and East Lothian were implicated, including Agnes Sampson, Agnes Thompson, Doctor Fian, Robert Grierson, Barbara Napier and Euphame Macalyean.

Most or all of the accused were tortured into confessing witchcraft, with the Devil's mark found on their necks. The presence of Satan at a gathering that the accused had attended had also been recounted; a man dressed in black had allegedly instructed the witches that the king should be killed, an oath that was sealed by a kiss on the Devil's buttocks.

Macabre rituals were relayed in confessions given to the king, including meetings where a cat had been thrown out to sea in order to prevent the king's ship's safe arrival. In another account, a wax likeness of the king had been made in order to aid the witches' plot against him. Most bizarrely, venom from a toad had been extracted and mixed with urine along with a foal in an [oyster](#) shell, again concocted to aid the monarch's demise.

Some of the witches were well-connected individuals in their towns and cities, often mingling or associated with gentry, but they nevertheless, [saw](#) their end at the hands of the hangman, with only the man alleged to have orchestrated the entire affair, Francis Stewart, the Earl of Bothwell, acquitted of the charges brought against him.

Bothwell's acquittal came about after it was argued that Richard Graham, one of the accused sorcerers who was executed in 1592, gave testimony against Bothwell that was concluded at trial to be unreliable given his reputation as a sorcerer, and hence his unreliability as a [witness](#).

Isobel Gowdie

The case of Isobel Gowdie, in contrast to many other Scottish witch trials, was marked by the accused's readiness to confess her crimes. The extent of Gowdie's confessions were also remarkable: under seemingly little duress, she confessed details of [meetings](#) with the Devil and of various witchcraft practices familiar to the general public.

Among her many confessions upon apprehension on the suspicion of witchcraft in 1662, Gowdie had claimed that she had renounced her baptism and given herself to Satan: "I denyed my baptism, and did put the one of my hands to the crowne of my head, and the other to the [sole](#) of my foot, and then renuncit all betwixt my two hands, to the Devill."

Other activities that Gowdie confessed to included sexual encounters with the Devil, changing straws into horses, meeting with the Queen of the Fairies, stealing milk from cattle using magic, and, worst of all, the attempted destruction of the Laird of Park's children through witchcraft.

Other confessions included how she and other witches had charms for various uses, from transmogrification to curing ailments and diseases, and even charms for killing or maiming others. She recounted one man, Harry Forbes, a minister of the Auldearn parish, whom she and other witches wished prolonged suffering upon. A noxious concoction of gall's flesh, toads' guts, barley, finger and toenail clippings, a hare's liver and cloth pieces had been made to aid the endeavour, with a song also recited by the conspiring witches.

Gowdie, who also offered lascivious details of her encounters with the Devil detailing his sexual prowess and physical appearance, is a difficult case to square: not enough information exists to know the degree to which she was prompted to give these answers by her interrogators, nor is it known in what mental state she was in when giving these confessions. It can be said that she had a certain amount of pride in the activities she described, outwith the murders she admits to (it is noted that she expressed regret for these acts).

No record exists of what happened to her and the many witches implicated by her testimony, but it can be reasonably deduced that she and the others named were executed.

The Witches of Bo'ness

One of the last major witch trials in Scotland took place in Bo'ness, where six people were tried and executed for partaking in witchcraft as well as associating with the Devil.

By 1679, scepticism was growing among the general public about witchcraft, and instances of witchcraft were not as widely reported as they once were. Moreover, prosecutions that did come about seemed to amount to little more than drunken or libidinous behaviour, which, when framed in the context of the time, was concluded to be the product of sorcery or some similar evil.

The accused, five women and one man, were said to have been in the Devil's company as they all drank [ale](#). Some of the women were also alleged to have had sex with the Devil.

The group were also charged with conspiring to bring harm to a man named Andrew Mitchell, but details on whether they succeeded in the alleged endeavour, as well as any record of what became of the man, are scant, and therefore hard to verify.

It is thought that William Crow, one of the co-accused, may have been playing a confidence trick on the women, many of whom were vulnerable and lonely, in partnership with 'the Devil,' likely an accomplice of his. Or, it may be that the group merely took refuge from their lives by way of alcohol and partying, the [indulgence](#) of which may have been tantamount in the eyes of a jury to being involved in witchcraft.

All six were executed in Corbiehill, strangled and burnt at the stake.

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