

THE BAD OLD DAYS OF WITCHCRAFT

By "BEORCHAM"

A survey of local legends and traditions in two previous articles showed that Berkhamstedians were susceptible to many strange superstitions in years gone by. Nowadays, of course, "old wives' tales" of buried treasure, secret tunnels and ghosts make interesting and sometimes amusing reading, but a false impression of bygone rustic life would be created if we confined ourselves to pleasant stories, ignoring the fact that superstition often took an ugly and violently cruel form. Belief in witchcraft, for instance, was anything but a laughing matter; it was responsible for many stupid tragedies, and darkened the pages of history until comparatively modern times.

Many will find it hard to believe that less than 200 years ago a Long Marston woman was hounded to death by a frenzied mob who were ignorant enough to believe that she had bewitched a farmer and his cattle. That was not an isolated instance. Berkhamsted, Little Gaddesden, Great Gaddesden, Tring and Sarratt also have authentic records of former inhabitants reputed to be either witches or the victims of witchcraft. To this day a dell near Little Gaddesden is called Witchcraft Bottom.

Strange "Cures"

Throughout a superstition-ridden countryside, people who met with great misfortune, suffered from fits, or were mentally unstable, were credited with being under the spell of witches. Typical was Isaac Tockfield, of Tring, who, in 1689, suffered from fits and "spoke strangely and violently." Obviously a victim of witchcraft, thought his friends, so they paid him repeated and tiresome visits to drive out "evil spirits" by prayers, incantations and charms.

The curing of bewitched persons became an "art" practised by learned men, fanatics and rogues alike. At one end of the scale were able, conscientious physicians such as Dr. Woodhouse, of Berkhamsted, who had a high reputation for his "stinking fumigations" and unpalatable concoctions which, as often as not, made the patient swoon. Then there were "quacks" such as Redman, a self-styled astrologer of Amersham, whose cures were so fantastic that one is scarcely surprised to learn that he was gaoled. On one occasion, the parents of a "bewitched" child were advised by Redman to bury a stick of the child's length in a churchyard—an unorthodox expedient which, it was claimed, effected the child's recovery! Redman also prescribed medicines compounded of the most loathsome ingredients.

Burnt at the Stake

Any woman whose husband had died suddenly was in danger of being classed as a witch. In the 17th century, when Berkhamsted was dignified enough to have a mayor and corporation, a townswoman was accused of having poisoned her husband. Rightly

or wrongly, she was found guilty and burnt alive at Hertford as a witch.

Less gruesome, but almost as pitiful, is the story of Mary Hall, daughter of a Little Gaddesden blacksmith. In 1663 she started having violent fits accompanied by "strange ejaculations," making noises like "mewing of cats, barking of dogs, and roaring of bears." Sometimes strange voices, either "shrill and drawling" or "great and sonorous," were heard issuing from her throat, saying that they were from two little imps which had come down the chimney to torment her! The poor girl was obviously demented, but her contemporaries innocently believed she had been bewitched. An authentic story of Mary Hall's strange behaviour and the many ludicrous "cures" that were attempted was told in a booklet published by the late Mr. W. B. Gerish many years ago.

Hertfordshire's Last "Witch"

We have to go to Long Marston for our last story. It is grim, but well worth telling as a reminder of the brutality and gullibility of country folk less than a couple of centuries ago—in 1751, to be exact.

Careless talk started a witch-hunt which eventually cost three people their lives. A farmer refused some buttermilk to an old village crone named Ruth Osborn, adding insult to injury by saying he had not enough to give his hogs. Ruth thereupon expressed the hope that the Pretender would "come and take the hogs and you as well."

Presently the farmer was plagued with fits, and some of his calves fell ill. Putting two and two together, superstitious folk concluded that Ruth had bewitched the farmer, and they took the law into their own hands by holding a trial by ducking. A frenzied rabble dragged the "witch" and her husband to the village pond, wrapped them in sheets, and dragged them through the filthy water. Ruth was drowned, and her husband died shortly after he was taken out of the pond.

A scapegoat had to be found, and it came to the justices' notice that Thomas Colley, the drunken village sweep, had delighted bystanders by prodding the "witch" with a stick, afterwards taking his hat round for pennies in the manner of a street entertainer. Soon it was his turn to provide a Roman holiday for the villagers. Colley was executed near the scene of the drowning, having been escorted from Hertford gaol to Long Marston by the sheriff, his officers, and two trumpeters of the Royal Horse Blues.

This triple tragedy taught country-folk that they could not take the law into their own hands. Belief in witchcraft still continued in some districts, but Ruth Osborn was the very last Hertfordshire "witch" to be hounded to death. If this story has a moral for us, too, it is that the old days were bad rather than good.

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WATTS' STORES

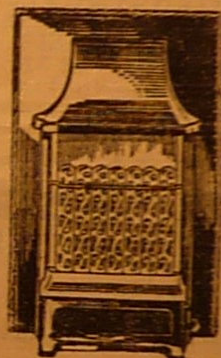
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