

THE WITCH CRAZE IN ESSEX, 1560-1660

Christopher Thompson, Essex Local Historian

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Report by Philip T Beeton

Christopher Thompson came to address us on the persecution of so-called witches in the 16th and 17th centuries with special reference to Essex. The belief in witches--individuals with devilish powers to affect the world--was as common in Britain as elsewhere in Western Europe. There was a widespread belief in the Devil at this time and witches were believed to make a pact with him and use magic to further his evil plans. This was a profoundly superstitious era and with major religious upheavals in the form of the Reformation underway, scapegoats were often looked for in such difficult times. Some churchmen were undoubtedly behind this new process especially after the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486. This book, written by two members of the Inquisition, with the Pope's encouragement, was to help 'root out the abominations and enormities of witchcraft'. The Biblical admonition from Exodus, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' was never far from their thoughts.

The persecution in England was less severe than on the Continent but may have resulted in up to 1000 executions. Victims were often single women or widows who lived alone and may have provided primitive medical services in their villages at some time. They may also have been the victim of grudges or score settling in very small communities. Many had pets known as 'familiars', which were thought of as agents of the Devil.

King James 1 was particularly exercised about witches, so much so that he wrote a book entitled *Daemonologie* condemning the practice. On becoming King he enacted a new and more stringent Witchcraft Act, which replaced one that Elizabeth 1 had passed in 1562. This new Act was designed for 'the better restraining and more severe punishing of acts of conjuration, witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits'.

The most significant increase in the activity against so-called witches occurred during the years of the Civil War in England when the name of Matthew Hopkins came to the fore. He was born around 1620 in Great Wenham, Suffolk, the son of a Puritan clergyman. He began his witch finding in 1644 after he had moved to Manningtree in Essex and overheard women discussing their meetings with the Devil. With his assistant Stearne he toured East Anglia allegedly commissioned by Parliament to seek out witches in an area strongly supportive of the parliamentary and

Puritan cause. His most notorious case was that of 1645 when 5 witches from Manningtree were accused, examined and sent to Colchester castle (then the local goal). Local magistrates also visited other villages to seek out more witches. As a result 30 women were sent for trial at Chelmsford, 17 were duly hanged there, 4 at Manningtree and 9 died while still in custody.

Matthew Hopkins died at Mitley in 1647 aged 26. With his passing the steam seemed to go out of the witch-hunting craze. Although prosecutions continued during the Commonwealth, with the restoration of the Monarchy and a more settled condition in the country the practice largely died out. The Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1736.