

Female power: witchcraft and gender in Elizabethan England.

“loane Cunny, liuing very lewdly, hauing two lewde Daughters, no better then naughty packs, had two Bastard Children: beeing both boyes, these two Children were cheefe witnesses, and gaue in great euidence against their Grandam and Mothers, the eldest being about 10. or 12. yeeres of age. Against this Mother Cunny the elder Boye gaue in this euideoce which she herselfe after confessed, that she going to Braintye Market, came to one Harry Finches house, to demaund some drink, his wife being busie and a brewing, tolde her she had no leysure to giue her any. Then loane Cunnye went away discontented: and at night Finches wife was greeuously taken in her head, and the next day in her side, and so continued in most horrible paine for the space of a week, and then dyed.”¹

In 1589 Joan Cunny and her two daughters, Avice and Margaret, all from Stisted, Essex, were brought before the Summer Assizes in Chelmsford charged with witchcraft. Undoubtedly the two daughters, by having illegitimate children, lived outside the “norms” of Elizabethan society: a society where it has been estimated that only one to four percent of the population were illegitimate². Joan and Avice were charged with causing people to die by witchcraft – a crime punishable by the death penalty and Margaret



1589 Joan Cunny, Joan Upney and Joan Prentice¹

was accused of the lesser offences of two counts of bewitchment. All three women were found guilty: Joan and Avice were sentenced to hang and Margaret sentenced to one year (and six appearances in the stocks). Joan was hanged immediately after her trial but Avice had pleaded pregnancy and, as she was found to be pregnant by a jury of matrons (which included Joan Robinson who had been implicated in the St

¹ Anon; (1589) *The apprehension and confession of three notorious witches. Arreigned and by iustice condemned and executed at Chelmes-forde, in the Countye of Essex*

² Munro, J; (2004) *The economic history of later-Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*
<http://www.economics.utoronto.ca/munro5/03Popme.pdf> p28

Oysth witch-trials of 1582³), she was hung the following year after the birth of her child.⁴ Joan's crime, along with two other convicted Essex witches, was duly retold in a contemporary pamphlet "*The arraignment and execution of three detestable witches*"¹.

The Cunny "family of witches" was just one small example of the witchcraft trials that took place within England at the regular county Assizes between the first Elizabethan witchcraft statute of 1563 (an "*Act against Conjurations Inchantments and Witchecraftes*"⁵) and the harsher 1604 Jacobean witchcraft act (an "*Act against Conjurat[i]on Witchcrafte and dealinge with evil and wicked Spirits*"⁶) which was finally repealed in 1736. Today, these witchcraft cases are much studied by historians and anthropologists both through official records such as the Assizes and Quarter Sessions accounts and "unofficial" accounts, such as contemporary treatises and pamphlets, in the quest to provide a picture of life and relationships within sixteenth and seventeenth century communities of England.

Contemporary people throughout England and Europe were fascinated by witches and the perception of malicious harm caused to both people and animals by people practising witchcraft. It seems that all levels of society believed in "witches" from King James I of England (who, as James VI of Scotland, wrote "*Daemonologie*" (1597), an influential treatise on the subject) to the victims and witnesses who reported their former friends and neighbours as witches to the authorities. In addition to the contemporary pamphlets that appeared after "notorious" and "high profile" cases such as the 1566 pamphlet describing the Hatfield Peverel witches, there were also tracts written by influential writers and contemporary clergymen. Some, such as Reginald Scot were highly sceptical about witchcraft: in 1584 he wrote "*The Discovery of Witchcraft*" putting over his opinion that "*If it were true that*

³ Harris, A; (2001), *Witch-hunt: the great Essex witch scare of 1582*; p63

⁴ Rosen, B; (1991) *Witchcraft in England 1558-1618*; p182

⁵ MacFarlane, A; (1970) *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A regional and comparative study*; p14

⁶ Ewen, C L'Estrange; (1929) *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials : The Indictments for Witchcraft from the Records of 1373 Assizes held for the Home Circuit A.D. 1559-1736*; p19



A bewitched ship as portrayed in Reginald Scot's 1584 *"The Discovery of Witchcraft"*

witches confesse, or that all writers write or that witchmongers report, or that fooles believe, we should never have butter in the chearne, nor cow in the close, nor corne in the field, nor faire weather abroad, nor helth within doores."⁷ Others, such as George Gifford, the vicar of Malden, writing in 1593 confirmed the view that witchcraft existed: *"there be two or three [witches] in our town which I like not, but especially an old woman. I have bene as careful to please her as ever I was to please mine own mother, and to give her ever and anon one thing or other, and yet methinks she frownes at me now and then*"⁸.

In recent times, witchcraft in early modern England has been much studied by many eminent historians and anthropologists such as Alan MacFarlane⁹, Keith Thomas¹⁰, Robin Briggs¹¹ and James Sharpe¹². An explanation for witchcraft that modern historians such as Thomas and MacFarlane have put forward is that the accusations occurred when there were disputes between people. Thomas observed: *"[this was a] tightly-knit, intolerant world with which the witch had parted company. She was the extreme example of the malignant or non-conforming person against whom the local community had always taken punitive action in the interests of social harmony."*¹³ He further remarks that when there was a breakdown of the mutual help

⁷ Scot, R; (1584) as quoted in Haining, P; (1974), *The witch-craft papers: contemporary records of the Witchcraft Hysteria in Essex 1560-1700*; p68

⁸ Gifford, G; (1593), as quoted in Haining, P; *The witch-craft papers*; p78

⁹ *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*

¹⁰ *Religion and the decline of Magic*

¹¹ *Witches and neighbours*

¹² 1) *Witchcraft in early Modern England*; 2) *The bewitching of Anne Gunter: A horrible and true story of football, witchcraft, murder and the King of England*, 3) *English witchcraft 1560-1736; Volumes 1 to 6* (Gen Ed)

¹³ Thomas, K; (1991), *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p632

that many English villagers relied on during this period, accusations of witchcraft often followed.¹⁴

In addition to these socio-economic based questions, questions about gender relations within these tight-knit communities have been asked. These gender questions have ranged from the Marxist and feminist view that the witchcraft trials were “a ruling class campaign of terror against the female peasant population¹⁵” to the view that witchcraft was “something which operated with the female social and cultural spheres, or, at least, as a specifically female form of power”¹⁶.

As Marion Gibson observes “The stories in the pamphlets make it hard to escape the conclusion that witch prosecution was often an expression of fears of supposed female power as well as a distaste for the uneducated, impious and criminal “worse sort” and an expression of frustration from the young to the old”¹⁷.



The ability to be able to stand on water – an example of the threat of female power? From the 1643 pamphlet, *A most certain, strange, and true discovery of a witch*.

From the records of the witchcraft trials, can a modern day historian ask gender questions of the data such the attitudes towards women both from other females and males? Perhaps more specifically, can enquiries be made such as, if there were problems within the village and within that community was a female who lived outside the “norm” of contemporary society (for example, having illegitimate children or were fornicating with men outside of marriage), were they the type of person more likely to be accused of performing acts of witchcraft? Or, was an act of “witchcraft” one of the few ways that a contemporary female asserted her power over

¹⁴ Ibid; p662

¹⁵ Eirenreich, B and English D, (1973) *Witches, Midwives and nurses, a history of women healers* as quoted in Sharpe, J. A; (2001) *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* p10

¹⁶ J. A; (2001) *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* p10

¹⁷ Sharpe, J. A; (2003) *English witchcraft 1560-1736; Volume 2 Early English trial pamphlets*; pxi



An example of male power over women? From Richard Galis (1579) "A brief treatise"

her fellow neighbours. Or were the witchcraft persecutions "*an officially sanctioned bid to control... and to reassert male power over women*"¹⁸? Looking at the relatively few males accused of witchcraft, can the data from the Assize records be used to establish that males only practised witchcraft in conjunction with other (female) witches or were they also "*being accused for independent acts of malefic witchcraft*"¹⁹?

My study is to examine this rich area of the English witchcraft trials to perform an analysis of gender and female power within the sixteenth century and attempt to answer the questions posed above. Two principle sources for providing information about the accused witches have been used; the first is research undertaken by Professor C L'Estrange Ewen in the 1920s and published in his book "*Witch Hunting and Witch Trials: The Indictments for Witchcraft from the Records of 1373 Assizes held for the Home Circuit A.D. 1559-1736*" and the other source are the contemporary pamphlets and treatises. Whilst Ewen's work is the main basis for the data for the tables within the database, the contemporary pamphlets and writings have been used to gain further data for inclusion.

The information from the pamphlets has to be handled with some caution as they are often accounts that were written for contemporary people and thus are prejudiced towards the accused witches (as can be seen in the extract at the start of this essay). Moreover, the accounts may be written by more than one person and might have been written from second-hand information with the writer(s)' own bias evident, for example, the 1582 trial pamphlet for the St Oysth's trials is thought to have been written by the local JP, Brian Darcy, who examined the accused before

¹⁸ Jackson, L; (1995) *Witches, Wives and Mothers: witchcraft persecutions and women's confessions in seventeenth century England*; Women's History Review Volume 4, Number 1; p71

¹⁹ Sharpe, J. A; (2001) *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*; p68

sending them to trial at the Assizes²⁰. However they do provide us with contemporary attitudes and more details about some of the witches than the Assize records alone can provide.

Turning now to the main source of data: Ewen was a historian working in the 1920s when he transcribed and calendared from the original documents details of indictments from Assize trials held in the counties of Essex, Surrey, Sussex, Kent and Hertford for witchcraft for the period 1563 to 1736 (although his book does detail two acquitted witches from 1560²¹). Keith Thomas comments that Ewen was “*The first scholar to go beyond the printed sources to the actual records of witchcraft prosecution ...[his work] was very high scholarly quality and the essential starting-point for any analysis of English witch-prosecution.*”²² Alan MacFarlane extensively used Ewen’s work as the basis of his 1960s historical and anthropological study “*Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*”. James Sharpe commented on the validity of Ewen’s work: “*Neglected during his lifetime, Ewen’s researches are now regarded as path breaking*”²³. Therefore, there is soundness in using the results of research (in effect, a secondary source) carried out nearly eighty years ago to be the basis of a database and study to examine gender and witchcraft in early modern England.

Ewen’s work has limitations: he was only able to calendar approximately 77% of the original documents²⁴. Also, as he was obviously only able to transcribe records of trials that physically took place, there are not any records of people accused of witchcraft but who were not subsequently brought to the Assizes (although some of this people can be found in the pamphlets). Also, Ewen only calendared the Assize records and not records from other courts such as the Quarter

²⁰ W. W; (1582) *A true and iust recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches, taken at S. Ofes in the countie of Essex*

²¹ Ewen, C L'Estrange; *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*; p117. Indictments number 1 & 2.

²² Thomas, K; *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p517

²³ Sharpe, J. A; *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*; p11

²⁴ Ewen, C L'Estrange; *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*; p100

Sessions, Ecclesiastical or Borough Courts as detailed by MacFarlane²⁵. Another weakness is that according to Ewen “*Before the reign of Charles I it was not the practice to file bills thrown out by the grand jury*”²⁶; therefore if an accused witch’s charges were dismissed by the court, s/he would still have been held and charged as a witch but no record would have been retained in the record offices and the existence of these people can only be gleaned from the pamphlets.

A further complication is that the indictments for Essex “*outnumber those of the four counties of Herts, Kent, Surrey and Sussex combined*”²⁷. Ewen’s original comments were that the Essex Assize rolls and gaol records survived better²⁸ but MacFarlane refutes this when he conducted further analysis of files at the PRO and found that the number of records “missing” for each county were Surrey (thirty-six), Kent (forty-two), Essex (forty-three), Sussex (fifty-one), Herts (sixty-five)²⁹ prompting his comment “*Within the Home Circuit, [prosecutions in] Essex was exceptional, though other counties all had their prosecutions*”.³⁰

For the purpose of this study, only to be used are the indictments for the county of Essex for the years 1560 (the date of the first trial that Ewen records) to 1603 (the first year of James I’s reign and the final year of the Elizabethan witchcraft act before a new harsher Jacobean act was passed in 1604). These years have also been chosen because, in James Sharpe’s words, “*Despite the passing of the 1604 Witchcraft Act, witch trials were in decline in England by the early seventeenth century*”³¹. Moreover the activities of Matthew Hopkins in 1645 would distort the results of many of the questions if data from these years were included. Table 6 in Appendix 2 shows the various witchcraft statutes.

²⁵ MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p271-303

²⁶ Ewen, C L'Estrange; *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*; p99

²⁷ Ibid; p99

²⁸ Ibid; p97 & p99

²⁹ MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p64, footnote 32

³⁰ Ibid; p61

Indictments 1560-1603		
Verdict	Number	% of total
No verdict	1	0.3%
Unknown	2	0.6%
Bill not endorsed	16	4.7%
Not guilty	111	32.8%
Guilty	206	61.5%
<i>Total</i>	<i>336</i>	<i>100%</i>

Table 1 Verdicts of Essex indictments

The indictments for this time span gives the result of approximately 178 people (18 males and 159 females) accused of witchcraft from a total of 336 indictments³². A full breakdown of the verdicts for the 336 indictments is shown in Table 1. For those found guilty, fifty-eight were executed, another two were sentenced to be hanged but died of the plague in gaol³³ and a further three were sentenced to be hanged but were reprieved before execution and their sentence commuted to imprisonment³⁴. The

percentages also show that only 4.7% bills were not endorsed (ie the case was dismissed) – possibly a false percentage with the real number being a lot higher as the majority of non-endorsed indictments were not kept.

To gain an overall picture of witchcraft within Essex of this period, Figure 1 shows the five yearly numbers of people tried and subsequently hanged for witchcraft. From this graph, it can be seen that there were three main crisis periods for both the number of indictments and executions: 1590-94, 1580-84 and 1600-03. 1582 was a peak year for prosecutions when fifteen people were tried at Chelmsford for witchcraft practised in St Oysth and its surrounding villages³⁵. Thomas quantifies this figure further with: “*At the Essex Assizes in the 1580s, a peak period, witchcraft cases formed thirteen per cent of all the criminal business*”³⁶. Whilst these figures do

³¹ Sharpe, J. A; (2003) *English witchcraft 1560-1736; Volume 1 Early English demonological works*; pxiii

³² My figures vary between 175 to 178 people accused of witchcraft as my database tables might contain duplicates where Ewen or MacFarlane have not identified two people with similar details as being the same person such as Agnes Duke of Hatfield Peverel and Agnes Whilland/Agnes Whitland of Dagenham and Joan Cock of Kelvedon/Hatfield Peverel (the two villages are nearby to each other).

³³ MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p256 (Ewen indictment number 58) & p260 (Ewen indictment number 233b)

³⁴ Ewen indictment numbers 155-157, 159 and 160 (all three were part of the St Oysth trials of 1582)

³⁵ W. W; *A true and iust recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches*

³⁶ Thomas, K; *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p536

show a large majority of witches as being female, this graph only starts to answer some of the questions regarding female power in connection with witchcraft.

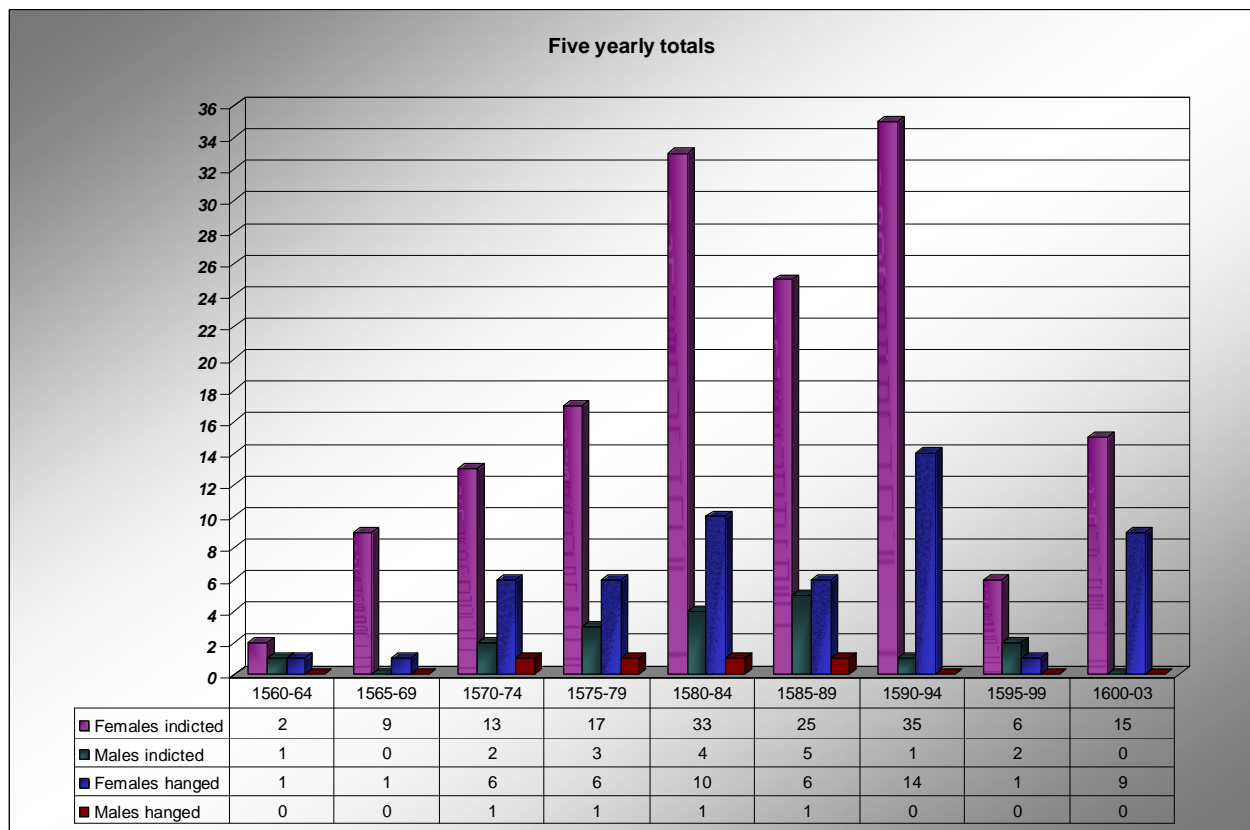


Figure 1 People tried for witchcraft with the number hanged

It has been estimated that in early modern England, only 20 to 25% of accused witches were male³⁷. In the time period of this study, eighteen male witches were found in the Assizes records – a little over 10% of the total number of accused witches perhaps showing that it was only after the harsher Jacobean witchcraft act of 1604 that more men were accused. These figures have to be used in conjunction with the figures for female witches to provide some answers as to the sphere of female power within sixteenth century England.

³⁷ University of Essex, (2005) *Witchcraft and Masculinities in the Early Modern World*, <http://www.essex.ac.uk/history/witchcraft-conference/conferencehomepage.shtm>

Table 2 shows that 77.36% of female witches were working independently³⁸ and only 4.4% of female witches worked with men. In comparison, 44.44% of male witches worked independently and 44.44% had female accomplices. Could these percentages be interpreted that contemporary people viewed English witchcraft as a crime that was mainly perpetrated by women working alone and if a witch was male then he would possibly have a (female) accomplice? If this was the case then this evidence would bear weight to an argument that witchcraft in England was viewed as a female crime and by women's ability to "manipulate" males into joining their "craft" then witchcraft was a very strong form of female power.

Male witches relationship to others		
No relationship	8	44.44%
Male/Male	2	11.11%
Male/Female	3	16.67%
Wife/Husband	4	22.22%
Wife/Husband/Other Female	1	5.56%
Total number of male witches	18	100.00%
Total number of males accused with female(s)	8	44.44%
Total number of male witches accused with male(s)	2	11.11%
Total number of male witches working independently	8	44.44%
Female witches relationship to others		
No relationship	123	76.73%
Male/Female	3	1.89%
Wife/Husband	4	2.52%
Wife/Husband/Other Female	1	0.63%
Female/Female	18	11.32%
Mother/daughter(s)	8	5.03%
Sister/Sister	2	1.89%
Total number of female witches	159	100.00%
Total number of female witches accused with female(s)	30	18.87%
Total number of female witches accused with male(s)	7	4.40%
Total number of female witches working independently	123	77.36%

Table 2 Relationships between accused

³⁸

There is difficulty with finding female-related witches as often women were related but did not have the same surname. For example, it is only through the 1582 pamphlet that we know that Margery Sammon was Alice Hunt's sister. This case has further complications in that the Margery Sammon was held without charge in 1582 but then there was another trial two years later by which time she was known as Margery Barnes.

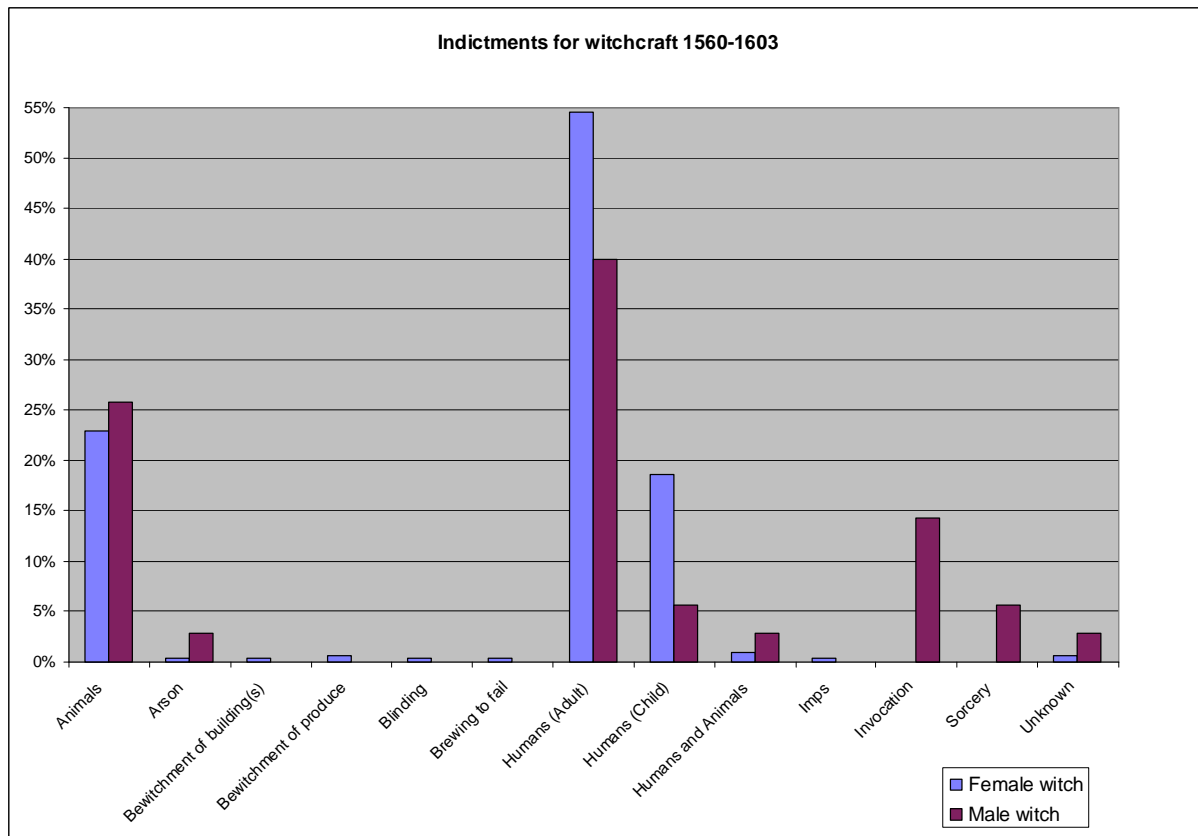


Figure 2 Types of witchcraft

James Sharpe has commented that “*when male and female witches are being contrasted, it is essential to be specific about exactly what form of occult activities they were suspected of*”³⁹. Did women perform different types of witchcraft to men and thus their differing acts show the type of power that females had during the Elizabethan age? Figure 2 shows the breakdown of types of witchcraft performed by each sex. This shows that males and females had roughly the same amount of indictments for witchcraft involving animals – 22.9% for females and 25.7% for males. As the England of this period had a market economy based on agriculture and many men and women had occupations based within agriculture, perhaps these figures show that one way to get revenge over a neighbour who had denied charity was to bewitch or kill his animals. This substantiates Thomas and MacFarlane’s thesis of witchcraft being sometimes a desire for revenge.⁴⁰ An interesting feature

³⁹ Sharpe, J. A; *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*; p69

⁴⁰ MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p623

shown in the graph is that, despite a female witch's curses and mutterings, she did not practise invocation and sorcery – there were not any recorded instances of these acts by females whereas 20% of male indictments were for these two distinct forms of witchcraft.

With regard to female power, of particular interest is that 58% of female acts of witchcraft had children as the victims, whilst only 5.7% of indictments for males had child victims (the figures are fifty-six indictments for the former and only two indictments for the latter). Raising children in the sixteenth century was very much the sphere of the female(s) of the house. By having child victims, despite the sex of the victim, can it be perceived that witchcraft against children was an act from one woman (the witch) to another (the victim's mother)? Males perhaps would not have been interested in child victims as this act could be seen as an act of witchcraft from a "superior" male to an "inferior" female. Unfortunately the indictments do not give any indication as to whether the child victim's mother was dead or still alive at the time of the witchcraft – if this information was available this theory could be given more credit. Further proof of this sphere of female power can be seen in the 1582 account of the St Oysth trial. Grace Thurlowe gave evidence against Ursula Kemp and related how she (Grace) gave birth to a child nearly a year previously. Grace refused to allow Ursula to wet-nurse her child and the child at the age of three months fell out of its crib and broke its neck. This would appear to be a two-way process of "female power". Ursula was annoyed with Grace so used her "powers" to "murder" Grace's child: Grace was perhaps not looking after her child properly, and had to blame someone for the accident, and not wanting to blame herself, accused Ursula of the child's murder. Strong female power emitting from both the perpetrator and the victim?



Figure 3 The body of Ursula Kemp executed in 1582 & dug up in 1921. Before burial iron rivets had been driven through her ankles, knees and wrists.

The use of child witnesses related to the accused witch also provides an interesting slant to the hypothesis that witchcraft was an act of female power.

Unfortunately the Assize records for this period do not list the names of witnesses: if they did, they would list a great number of children under the age of eighteen whose testimony was used against their mother⁴¹. These child witnesses can be found in the majority of the trial pamphlets without any contemporary comments on the unsuitability of such young witnesses. At the start of this paper, it was related how the illegitimate children of Avice and Margaret Cunny testified against their grandmother and mothers. In 1579, Ellen Smith's twelve year old son was called as a witness against his mother⁴² and in 1582 several of the witnesses St Oysth witchcraft were very young – Cecilia Celles' two sons were aged nine and "six and three-quarters" and both were called as witnesses against their mother⁴³. Perhaps the use of children as witnesses against their mother can be seen as further evidence as to the way a female exercised her power as a witch when she was going about her daily duties thus giving more evidence to the supposition that the "classic image of a witch was that of the bad mother. She was supposed to kill children rather than protect and nourish them."⁴⁴ A corruption of female power? Incredibly, the St Oysth trial used the evidence of a babe in arms "*the saide childe beeing an infante and not a yeere olde, the mother thereof carrying it in her armes, to one mother Ratcliffes a neighbour of hers, to haue her to minister vnto it, was to passe by Ursley this examinates house, and passing bye the wyndowe, the Infante cryed to the mother, wo, wo, and poynted with the finger to the wyndowe wardes: And likewise the chyld vused the like as shee passed homewards by the said window*"⁴⁵. This "abuse" of a woman's power by her being a witch had to be stopped by whatever means or method.

⁴¹ Interestingly, Robbins in his 1964 *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft* preferred to use the term "informers" as opposed to "witnesses" perhaps to support his thesis that witchcraft came "from the top down"

⁴² Anon; *A detection of damnable driftes, practized by three vvitches arraigned at Chelmissforde in Essex*

⁴³ W. W; *A true and iust recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches*

⁴⁴ Briggs, R; (1996) *Witches & Neighbours: The social and cultural context of European Witchcraft* ;p241

⁴⁵ W. W; *A true and iust recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches, taken at S. Ofes*

As has been discussed, from Figure 2 it can be seen that witchcraft, in the main, was practiced by females: in contrast “cunning folk” appeared to be chiefly male. Cunning folk were practising acts such as soothsaying, healing, finding lost goods and anti-witch activities, which can perhaps be termed by modern day commentators as “white” or “good” witches. From analysing MacFarlane’s table of *“Cunning folk whose names are mentioned in the Essex Records”*⁴⁶ for the period 1560-1603 are following figures: forty-two people are mentioned in the table of which twenty-eight were male and fourteen were female (66% males and 33% females). Two female cunning women were eventually charged with witchcraft and hanged (Margery Skelton executed in 1571 and Ursula Kemp in 1582). Four cunning men were also subsequently charged with witchcraft, none of which were hanged and two were acquitted. This raises the question that did contemporary people consider a man’s part in “cunning/witchcraft” activity more acceptable so he was less likely to be prosecuted as a witch? Another possible cunning woman that does not appear in MacFarlane’s table was Elizabeth Lowys of Waltham who has hanged for witchcraft in 1564. According to the deposition of Agnes Devenyshe, “[Agnes] went to the said Lewys’ wife’s house, and they talked about a sore arm of hers. And she, Lewys, counselled her to go to a woman under Munckewood, and going there, the folks told her that she was a witch....”⁴⁷ So she was a women that had seemingly over stepped the line of being a cunning women and had become a witch. Whilst cunning folk might have been more tolerated in Elizabethan times, this changed so that the 1604 statute (as detailed in Appendix 2, Table 6) had more severe penalties for crimes that might have been carried out by “cunning folk”. This was in line with the view of “Protestant theologians that “good” witches drew their powers from the devil as certainly as did the wicked ones, and should suffer accordingly”.⁴⁸ But certainly during the period 1563 to 1603 the figures appear to show that male cunning folk were relatively acceptable but female witches were not.

⁴⁶ MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p117-8

⁴⁷ Haining, P; *The witch-craft papers*; p20

⁴⁸ Sharpe, J. A; *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*; p101

Looking now at the ages of witches: ages were not recorded on the indictments so actual ages or an “impression” of a person’s age can only be extracted from pamphlets. Can the ages of witches be used to show female power as “*an expression of frustration from the young to the old*”⁴⁹ (and vice-versa) and/or, as suggested by Sharpe, were there negative attitudes toward post-menopausal women⁵⁰? From Table 3 it can be seen how difficult it is to determine the ages of the accused witches and that from

Age	No
Unknown	134
0 to 19	1
40 to 50	1
50 to 60	1
60 and over	4
Child bearing age (pleaded preg)	4
Had children over 18	2
Had children under 18	5
Term "Mother" is used	7

Table 3 Ages of female witches

the evidence used within this study it would be extremely hard to make any firm analysis. However, it does give an overall impression that witchcraft did not appear to have had any age boundaries: women were practising at all ages – not forgetting also that many women such as Agnes Waterhouse, although 63 years old at the time of her execution, had been practising for twenty-five years and Elizabeth Frances learnt her craft when she was twelve.⁵¹

Marital Status	F
Married	33
Unknown	111
Widow	15

Table 4 Marital status of female witches

Marital status of witches could also be used to understand female power during the sixteenth century. Similar to ages, this is also another category that is hard to quantify as many of the indictments show the words “spinster” then detail the name of the “spinster’s” husband. However, as Table 4 shows, of the forty-eight women where the marital status is known, 69% were married and 31% were widowed. This finding would correlate with MacFarlane’s conclusion that, over the longer period of 1560-1680, 40% were

⁴⁹ Sharpe, J. A; *English witchcraft 1560-1736; Volume 2 Early English trial pamphlets*; pxi

⁵⁰ Sharpe, J. A; *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*; p68

⁵¹ Phillips, J; (1566) *The Examination and confession of certaine wytches at Chensforde*

widows and would confirm his opinion that widowhood was a serious problem but that widowhood alone was not enough to make villagers accuse someone of witchcraft⁵².

Furthermore, the figures in Table 4 show that having the “male protection” of a husband was not enough security against the accusation of witchcraft. So witches exercised their female power over other people even if a husband was present. This appeared to be the case of Cecilia Celles whose husband believed his wife was a witch: when his son told him that he had seen imps, he said to his wife “*why thou whore cannot you keepe your impes from my childre~[...] whereat shee presently called it away fro~ her sonne*”⁵³ Unfortunately for Henry Celles, believing that his wife as a witch was not enough to save him from the same accusations: he was also accused of witchcraft (arson) and held in gaol in Colchester but was released on bail before the Assizes took place. He is an example of a male that became implicated through the actions of his wife.⁵⁴

Having examined the larger picture of all the witchcraft indictments for 1560 to 1603 within Essex, examining a small “pocket” of witchcraft can give further insight into sixteenth century female power. The small village of Hatfield Peverel appeared to be a strong hold of either witchcraft practices or the belief in witchcraft (or perhaps both). Table 5 shows the ten witches accused of witchcraft over a twenty-three year period, all of whom were living in Hatfield Peverel

Year	Surname	First Name	Relationship to other accused?
1566	Waterhouse	Agnes	Mother/daughter(s)
1566	Waterhouse	Joan	Mother/daughter(s)
1566	Winchester	Laura	
1567	Osborne	Joan	
1572	Frances	Agnes	
1576	Bromley	Agnes	
1579	Frances	Elizabeth	Sister/Sister
1584	Cock	Joan	
1589	Duke	Agnes	Male/Female
1589	Hoare	John	Male/Female

Table 5 Hatfield Peverel witches

⁵² MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p164

⁵³ W. W; *A true and iust recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches*

⁵⁴ Harris, A; *Witch-hunt*; p65

– 5.78% of the total number of people indicted for witchcraft between 1560 and 1603. Two Essex pamphlets (1566⁵⁵ and 1579⁵⁶) have been used in conjunction with the data from the Assizes to construct a family of four (possibly six) witches that spanned four generations living within Hatfield Peverel – Figure 4 shows their relationships. From these pamphlets we have a small insight into prevailing attitudes both towards religion and the possible heredity nature of witchcraft (or at least that witchcraft was something that could be learnt from other family members).

Looking first at witchcraft being perceived as hereditary: Thomas comments: *“The idea that witchcraft went in families and might be hereditary was often put forward”*.⁵⁷ A 1652 pamphlet stated: *“Some there were that wished rather then they might be burnt to ashes, alleging, that it was a received opinion amongst many that, the body of a witch being burnt, her blood is prevented thereby from becoming hereditary to her progeny in the same evil, which by hanging was not.”*⁵⁸ There is further evidence that witchcraft was not seen to be hereditary in that women who pleaded pregnancy were examined by a jury of matrons and, if found pregnant, had a stay of execution until their baby was born. This opinion that babies were innocent of their mother’s crime had been proved early on in Elizabeth’s reign when a court case was brought against a *“Sheriff in Guernsey who, when Perotine Massey⁵⁹ gave birth to a baby when she was burning at the stake, had ordered that the baby be thrown back onto the fire. The court held that as the baby had not been condemned as a heretic, the Sheriff was guilty of murder, but Elizabeth pardoned him”*⁶⁰. Using the pamphlet of 1566, it can be argued that the writer(s) also did not believe witchcraft was hereditary but rather a taught “art”. The pamphlet makes the comment

⁵⁵ Phillips, J; *The Examination and confession of certaine wythes at Chensforde*

⁵⁶ Anon (1579) *A detection of damnable driftes, practized by three vvitches arraigned at Chelmifforde*

⁵⁷ Thomas, K; *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p 552 and his footnote number 102 regarding Ewen’s *Witchcraft and Demonism* index “heredity in witchcraft”.

⁵⁸ E. G; (1652) *A prodigious & tragicall history of the arraignment, tryall, confession, and condemnation of six witches at Maidstone, in Kent*

⁵⁹ A Protestant Marian martyr

⁶⁰ Ridley, J; (2002) *Bloody Mary’s Martyrs*; p215

that Elizabeth Frances “*learnt this arte of witchcraft at the age of xii. yeres of hyr grandmother whose nam was mother Eue of Hatfyelde Peuerell diseased*”. Agnes Waterhouse wanted to teach witchcraft to her daughter, Joan, “*her mother this laste wynter would haue learned her this arte, but she lerned it not, nether yet the name of the thing.*”⁶¹ These statements by the two women surely gives weight to the argument that witchcraft was considered to be a form of female power that grandmothers and/or mothers could teach to their (usually female) children.

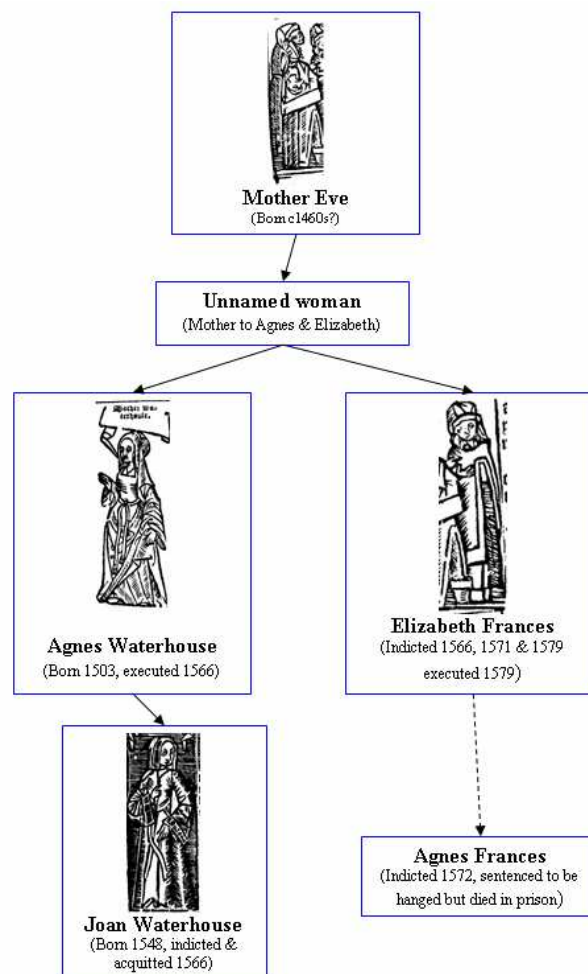


Figure 4 Four generations of witches living in Hatfield Peverel in the 1560s and 1570s. Pictures are from the 1566 trial pamphlet.

Rosen linked Agnes Waterhouse and Elizabeth Frances as sisters via the 1566 and 1579 trial pamphlets. Agnes Frances has not been previously linked to Elizabeth Frances but she had the same surname and was operating as witch at the same time in the same area – were they related by birth or marriage?

⁶¹ Phillips, J; *The Examination and confession of certaine wytches at Chensforde*

If Mother Eve was grandmother to both Elizabeth Frances and Agnes Waterhouse (as has been suggested by Rosen because of the wording of the 1579 pamphlet⁶²), Mother Eve perhaps started practising her “craft” in the second half of the fifteenth century (given that Agnes’ date of birth would have been c1502): a time when, although the existence of witchcraft was acknowledged and people consulted cunning men and women⁶³, there was no witchcraft act on the Statute books. *“In 1549, one suspected sorcerer reckoned “there be within England above five hundred conjurers as he thinketh”. This was probably a substantial under estimate.”*⁶⁴ Moreover, this family would have lived through great upheaval that affected all parts of England because of the Reformation. Christopher Marsh comments that many rituals of the Catholic Church (such as charms, sorcery, enchantments) were banned in 1559 and this ruling was a *“broader campaign to destroy the credibility of traditional religion by exposing its alleged superstition”*⁶⁵. Rosen remarks *“Bitterness, resentment and pain that can no longer be discharged through familiar religious channels will almost inevitably be turned upon others; and in their delusions, such women were aided by the learned and by the religious terms in which they continued to think.”*⁶⁶ Agnes Waterhouse leaves us a tantalising clue about contemporary attitudes towards religion and those who practised outside the State dictated religion *“she was demanded what praier she saide, she aunswered the Lordes prayer, the Aue Maria, and the belefe, & then they demaunded whether in laten or in englyshe, and shee sayde in laten, and they demaunded why she saide it not in engly[...]e but in laten”*⁶⁷

So, Agnes Waterhouse at least, practised some of the “old ways” and perhaps had not converted to Protestantism and therefore operated outside the beliefs and

⁶² Rosen, B; *Witchcraft in England*; p94

⁶³ Marsh, C; (1998) *Popular Religion in Sixteenth Century England*; p147

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Rosen, B; *Witchcraft in England*; p148

⁶⁶ Ibid; p43

⁶⁷ Phillips, J; *The Examination and confession of certaine wythes at Chensforde*

“norms” of her society. Rosen comments that between 1534 and the time of this trial “*there had been eight major religious changes requiring oaths from teachers, ministers and public officials with four total reversals of religious practice enforced by law and death sentence*”⁶⁸. This constant change of religious policy must have had a long lasting effect on many of the inhabitants of the villages, including the community of Hatfield Peverel. Moreover, of the 238 Protestant martyrs burnt during Mary’s reign of 1553 to 1558, 39 had been burnt in Essex and many of the 78 martyrs burnt in London had come from Essex⁶⁹ showing the very diverse nature of the inhabitants of sixteenth century Essex. Agnes Waterhouse’s ability to say her prayers in Latin would have been compulsory during Mary’s reign and yet a few years later this factor was used against her as an indication that she was practising witchcraft and thus, as a witch, was unable to say her prayers correctly in English. Whilst it has long been established by modern day historians such as Keith Thomas that “*in England witchcraft was prosecuted primarily as an anti-social crime, rather than as a heresy*”⁷⁰ Agnes Waterhouse’s case shows that religion must have played a small but significant part in her neighbours’ belief that she was a witch although she was executed as a murderer rather than a heretic.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the subject of witchcraft within England has raised many different questions and theories: from the “refused charity” hypothesis with “*social tensions thrown up by the transition from personal to institutional charity*”⁷¹ as argued by MacFarlane/Thomas to the extreme feminist argument of a “*complex attack by male-dominated authority on dependent or independent women*”⁷². This essay and supporting database has used evidence from the Assize trials and the pamphlets to study the surmise that witchcraft was a form of female power. Through looking at the pamphlets (whilst appreciating their bias and the

⁶⁸ Rosen, B; *Witchcraft in England*; p35

⁶⁹ Ridley, J; *Bloody Mary’s Martyrs*; p216

⁷⁰ Thomas, K; *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p527

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

possibility that they were not eye-witness accounts), it can be seen that many of the accused witches were living outside the “norms” of their society. For example, the Cunny sisters had illegitimate children⁷³; Ursula Kemp had also been known as “Ursula Gray” and had been openly living with a widower and had at least one illegitimate child⁷⁴; Agnes Waterhouse said her prayers in Latin so was perhaps a Catholic⁷⁵. These women and others accused did not live “conventional” sixteenth century lives: perhaps their witchcraft can be perceived as a form of power against “conventional” people within their society. Or perhaps the conventional people had used their “powers” and accused non-conforming people of witchcraft and thus created a “two-way process” of power between “victim” and “witch”. Moreover, as the figures taken from the indictments found by Ewen shows, all ages of women from all marital categories were involved; accused male witches sometimes worked with females rather than on their own, and, whilst witchcraft was not perceived as heredity, (female) witches taught other (possibly related) people their “craft”. Taking these issues into account it would appear that witchcraft can be seen to be a form of female power supporting Sharpe’s theory that *“witchcraft accusations were made by women against other woman”* and that they *“form one of the contexts within which female power was asserted and negotiated”*.⁷⁶

The English witchcraft trails of the sixteenth and seventeenth century are a very complex topic to study. It is hoped that this essay and accompanying database has given realistic consideration to the continuing debate.

⁷³ Anon; (1589) *The apprehension and confession of three notorious witches*

⁷⁴ W. W; (1582) *A true and iust recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches*

⁷⁵ Phillips, J; (1566) *The Examination and confession of certaine wytches at Chensforde*

⁷⁶ Marsh, C; *Popular Religion in Sixteenth Century England*; p150

Appendix 1 Essex villages

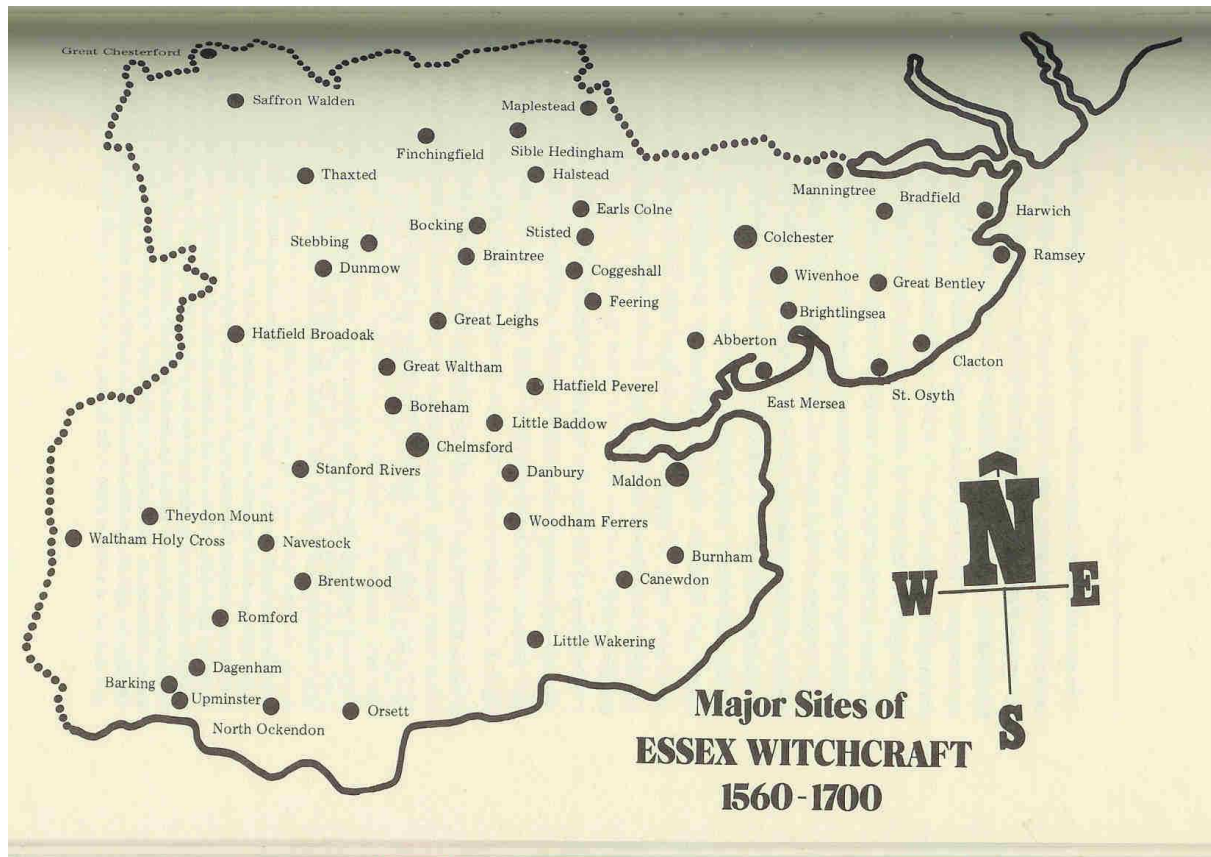


Figure 5 from "The Witchcraft Papers" by Peter Haining

Appendix 2 Witchcraft Statutes

Offence	First Conviction			Second Conviction		
	1542	1563	1604	1542	1563	1604
Using witchcraft to search for treasure or lost property	Death	1 yr	1yr	--	Life	Death
Injuring people or property by witchcraft	Death	1 yr	Death	--	Death	Death
Causing the death of a human being by witchcraft	Death	Death	Death	--	Death	Death
Taking dead bodies out of graves	--	--	Death	--	--	Death
Conjuring evil spirits	Death	Death	Death	--	Death	Death
<i>Intending to</i>						
Injure people or property by witchcraft	--	1 yr	1 yr	--	Life	Death
Cause the death of a human being by witchcraft	--	1yr	1 yr	--	Life	Death
Provoke a person "to unlawful love" by witchcraft	--	1 yr	1 yr	--	Life	Death

Table 6 Punishment in the Witchcraft Statutes 1542-1736. "The 1542 Act ordered the forfeiture of the witch's goods and lands, as by felony, but the subsequent measures of 1563 and 1604 safeguarded the heir's inheritance and the widow's dower, should the accused person be executed"⁷⁷. The 1542 Act was repealed by Edward VI in 1547. As Thomas remarks: "Under the Elizabethan statute persons were executed "rather as murderers than as witches."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ MacFarlane, A; *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; p15 and Thomas, K; *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p525 & p543

⁷⁸ Thomas, K; *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; p532

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-

Collected from the observations of E.G. Gent. (a learned person, present at their conviction and condemnation) and digested by H.F. Gent. To which is added a true relation of one Mrs. Atkins a mercers wife in Warwick, who was strangely caried away from her house in July last, and hath not been heard of since;
London

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51. My thanks also to Steve Hulford of www.hulford.co.uk and his on-going research into many of the Essex witches including his help in finding further information (inquests and indictments) on the Prestmary's of Great Dunmow.