

Witches

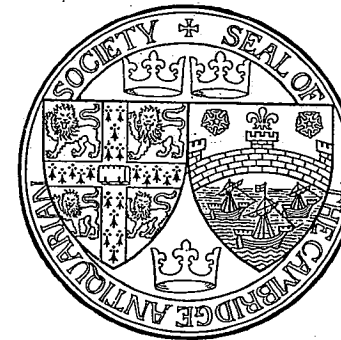
- **'Notes on Cambridgeshire Witchcraft'**
by Catherine Parsons, 1915

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- **Press cuttings**

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NOTES ON CAMBRIDGESHIRE WITCHCRAFT.

By CATHERINE E. PARSONS.

(Read February 1, 1915.)

When collecting these few local notes on witchcraft, possibly the only witches of my acquaintance were the witch of Endor and those who mixed such a medley of ingredients in Shakespeare's boiling caldron. Yet, I did not allow myself the privilege of reading a single book on the subject, knowing that a slight knowledge on my part might destroy the local colour. But when I had been told many extraordinary stories and began to wonder the why and the wherefore of their origin, it seemed only natural to turn to such a source as the *Gaol Delivery Rolls* at Ely, to see how this craft was exercised in Cambridgeshire years ago, and the notes from these rolls just give a few early examples by way of explaining witchcraft as it unfortunately exists to-day, in one small parish in this county. In order to avoid any personality, I am not using my informants' interesting names, some of which have survived in the parish over six hundred years.

The antiquity of witchcraft is well known. Its establishment in England by the middle of the fourteenth century, the legislation it necessitated, the influence of Continental opinion upon it—brought home by the Marian exiles, how the craft increased when the country was occupied by the Civil War, the leniency with which it was treated under Cromwell's government, and the literary war it occasioned, which Francis Hutchinson practically ended by his *Essay on Witchcraft*, in 1718, are points of interest beyond the scope of these notes.

In Horseheath witchcraft is by no means a lost art. In this parish we have ghosts as real as ever they were, superstition is rife, the wise woman is fresh in our memory, we have

our folklore, certain interesting customs, and cures for almost every ill. The parishioners tell us that there always were witches, and that there always will be, because they are mentioned in the Book. Unfortunately, it is the biblical references to demonopathy which seem to make this particular phase of superstition hard to die. One is told that the chief difference between a witch and an ordinary woman is, that if the latter wishes her neighbour misfortune, her wish has no effect, but the same wish in the mind of a witch has effect, because the witch is believed to be in league with the devil, she having made a contract to sell her soul to him in return for the power to do evil.

At Horseheath we are informed that, in making these contracts, the devil usually appeared to some person or other in the shape of an animal, such as a rat, mouse or toad. Perhaps this is why if either a toad or newt is found in a house at Horseheath, the creature must at once be put upon the fire, or it is supposed the inmates of the house would have bad luck. Many contracts, said to have been made between the devil and Cambridgeshire men and women, are recorded in the *Gaol Delivery Rolls* in the Diocesan Registry at Ely. For example, on the twenty-sixth of May, 1647, when John Bonham¹ was hedging in Stacie's cherry yard in Sutton the devil is said to have come to him in the form of a mole, and demanded Bonham's soul, which, at first, Bonham refused to surrender. "But," said the mole, "if you will not let me have your soul, will you not let me have two drops of your blood? and I will hereafter be at your command." And to this bargain Bonham agreed. So with his hatchet he cut his finger and gave it to the mole to suck, and he named the spirit mole or imp, John, and at once sent it to kill some horses, which we are told it did. Then he sent the spirit to bewitch the baker's cattle, and later, to bewitch the bullocks that belonged to Charles Freeman, the thatcher, because they had broken down some of Bonham's newly-made fences.

In this same year, on the first of June, Adam Sabie², of

¹ Ely, *Gaol Delivery Rolls*, E, 5, 1606-36.

² *Id.*

Haddenham, was brought before the justices at Ely, and declared that he had a spirit in the likeness of a child, which came to him in a flame of fire in Somersham wood, and said to him, "Fear not Sabie, I am thy god." Then it is stated there appeared a sudden darkness, it being about noonday. The spirit told Sabie to go to the house of Lady Sandys, from whom, he informed the justices, he received the sum of twenty pounds, but we are not told why. This lady would be residing at the Rectory at Wilburton, which parish adjoins Haddenham. The Rectory had been appropriated to the Archdeacons of Ely, and was once their country seat, but in 1632¹ was rented to Sir Miles Sandys. This case of witchcraft shows how both rich and poor alike were made to suffer under this craft.

The possession of imps or spirits having been obtained, they were supposed to live upon the body of their respective owners and assist them in their varied evil practices, and were handed down from one generation to another. Unless given plenty of work to do they are said to be a terrible torment to their owners.

The history of the Horseheath imps is happily—and naturally—veiled in mystery. Their present owner, who came from Castle Camps, received them from her sister D. We are told that when this poor creature was dying, no one could stay in the room with her on account of the sulphur which came from her nose and mouth. Such is the imagination of Castle Camps folk. But it was said that D. would never have died when she did had it not been for the woman who was nursing her, whom D. had cautioned not to open a certain hutch in her room, or she would die, but the old nurse turned a deaf ear to the caution, being overcome by curiosity to examine a certain red underskirt kept in the hutch, in which imps had been wrapt. It is said that our imps were brought to Horseheath in a box, upon which their owner sat during the journey. Although the box was securely corded no one was allowed to touch it, not even in assisting to lift the box in or out of the cart, for imps are curious creatures, and no cords

¹ Lysons' *Cambridgeshire*.

or even iron bars can keep them in bounds unless they are solely under the control of their owner.

We think the names of the Horseheath imps, five in number, are interesting: Bonnie, Blue Cap, Red Cap, Jupiter and Venus. As to their appearance opinions differ, but they are generally said to be something like white mice. Mrs B. has described one sitting on the top of a salt box in old Mrs C.'s chimney corner, as being something like a mouse, with very large eyes, which kept getting large, then small, though she had but a poor view of the creature owing to the curtain which hung across the chimney shelf. In fact she scarcely had time to realize what it was, before the imp turned quickly round and scuttled up the chimney calling out "Wee, wee, wee." But, as it turned she did notice that "it had a little mite of a tail about two inches long." It was believed that this particular imp had been sent down the chimney to see what was going on in the cottage, in order to report any item of interest to the witch, for it is useless trying to conceal anything from a witch. What one does not choose to tell, can always be discovered by the parish witch or wizard with the aid of an imp.

We have heard how Mr E., the late rag and bone man of Horseheath, was asked one day by the witch where he was going, and how he told the old lady to mind her own business. Before this man got half a mile from his house, he heard something coming along in the hedge behind him, and on looking to see what it was, he discovered an imp had been sent by the witch to watch his movements. Mr E. chased the imp back and tried to catch it, but the faster he ran the faster the imp ran, till at last it reached its owner, who, standing in the doorway of her cottage, quickly caught the creature up and put it in her bosom. Here, or in the armpit, witches are said to carry their imps in safety. We are told, that it is in this way their owners take them to church to attend the Communion Service, the witch keeping the bread in her mouth to give the imp when the service is over.

In olden days, not only the possession of imps, but a mark on the body of a supposed witch or wizard, said to be caused

by the sucking of imps, was sufficient evidence of witchcraft for the witchfinder, so that many an innocent creature must have suffered injustice, through perhaps a small tumour, mole, wart or even a pimple on the body, and other tests to which these unfortunate people had to submit were equally fraudulent. It is an extraordinary fact that these poor people frequently did plead guilty to such fraudulent charges.

Here is a specimen of the evidence given against Ellen Garrison¹, a supposed witch at Upwell in 1645, by a witchfinder who was working under the direction of that celebrated conspirator, Mathew Hopkins, who for two years surpassed any record of prosecutions in England for witchcraft. His life is recorded in Seccombe's *Twelve Bad Men*. It was said that Ellen had been a witch for a long time, and her mother before her, that she had caused much harm and damage amongst her neighbours, and had had differences with them. So Mathew Hopkins' witchfinders tell the justices that they had watched Ellen in her house at Upwell, where they saw a thing in the likeness of a beetle running in the room where they watched, and it ran round about the chair where the woman sat, and under her feet, and immediately after it went under her table. Then, what became of it they did not know, but it went much faster than ever they saw any such thing before, so these men were of the opinion that the beetle was an imp. We must remember that they did not profess to be naturalists.

Some of the early depositions by reputed witches and wizards make deplorable reading, and one grieves for the unfortunate person, who, perhaps innocently enough, incurred the displeasure of a neighbour, an offence whereby the accusation of witchcraft was made, and the offender was brought into court to plead in vain, "not guilty," against evidence collected by such a man as Mathew Hopkins. Energetic as he was, alone he could never have caused the suffering he did. He found an accomplice in John Stearn, and here is some of this man's evidence, given on the twenty-fourth July, 1647, against Thomas Pie², of Ely. John Stearn said that there were "two

¹ Ely, *Gaol Delivery Rolls*, E, 3, 1640-52.

² *Id.* E, 5, 1606-36.

marks upon the body of Thomas Pie, sucked or drawn by evil or familiar spirits called imps, and by the experience he hath found in searching of others, who have confessed themselves guilty, whose marks, being compared, are alike." Elizabeth Foot¹, of Stretham, when accused of witchcraft in this same court cried, "Woe, woe, was the time that ever, I was born of such accursed mother, for my mother is but a dotard woman gammer." This Elizabeth also said, "that she never hurt any person, or any man's cattle, and saith if she is a witch, it is more than she knows." When Joan Slater² was accused of being in possession of imps, she told the justices that the marks she had upon her body were "not the marks of a witch, but came as it pleased God."

Such cases as these are common enough. Many cases are pathetic, some are almost too nauseating for perusal, whilst others are amusing and incredible, as for instance in the case of a girl, who was sent by her mother to fetch water from a particular pond. The girl however went to some other pond, where a black horse, which the girl "believed to be the devil in the likeness of a horse, did lay down till she did get upon its back," and the horse carried her through the air upon his back to her own door, and there set her down³.

There is a curious mention of horses in a case in 1647, in which Jeremiah Biggs⁴ accuses his mother-in-law of witchcraft. This man said that he had great losses amongst his cattle seven years since, especially amongst his horses, divers of which suddenly died, they being well over night, and being found dead the next morning. Other of his horses would lie in a most strange manner, beating their heads against the ground, until they died.

When any cattle died, it appears to have been quite the usual thing to do, to send for a farrier to pronounce upon the cause of death. When John Scrimshaw⁵, of Wisbeach, was called up to give evidence about some horses that had died, belonging to John Cuthbert, of Wisbeach, he told the justices that, being a proper farrier, he was sent for to know what the

¹ Ely, *Gaol Delivery Rolls*, E, 5, 1606-36.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

horses died of, and to the best of his knowledge he could find no disease that they should die of, for they were very sound in their bodies. And so, the theory of witchcraft received support.

These people were supposed by the professional witchfinders to have been very dependent upon imps in the execution of their craft. At Horseheath it is believed that, if an ordinary toad be put into a tin pierced with holes and buried in an ant-hill until the ants have devoured all the toad's flesh, and the bones be taken out of the tin at twelve o'clock at night and thrown into a running stream, the bones which float up the stream can be used for witching purposes.

Although no longer a crime in our penal code, no self-respecting person in Horseheath now cares to admit any knowledge of witchcraft, and I experienced considerable difficulty in collecting the belief that remains, owing to the dread, even to this day, of offending the parish witch, to whom every one must be extremely courteous. One must not even pass her without some pleasant remark or other. Particulars concerning the ceremonial of witches, when magic circles are made, have been most difficult to collect; they appear to be altogether too mystical for our ears. But we are told that a circle is drawn on the ground, with perhaps a piece of chalk, and that the Lord's Prayer is said backwards, and the devil suddenly appears within the circle, perhaps in the form of a cockerel, but all kinds of things are said to suddenly spring out of the ground. And if the person standing within the circle becomes so frightened that he steps out of the circle, we are told the devil would fly away with him. We have heard how naughty boys at Horseheath have been severely chastised for mimicking some such practice as this.

This kind of ceremonial has perhaps survived from the day when Robert Barker¹, of Babraham, sought all too dearly to make himself rich on an outlay of two pounds six shillings and eightpence, in the year 1465, when he was found to be in possession of a book, and a roll of black art containing characters, circles, exorcisms and conjurations, a hexagonal

¹ *Bp Gray's Register*, f. 133.

sheet with strange figures, six metal plates with divers characters engraved, a chart with hexagonal and pentagonal figures and characters, and a gilded wand. When this Robert Barker was brought before the Bishop, in the Lady Chapel at Ely, on the ninth of January, 1465-6, he said that a certain John Hope had promised him wealth if he would give him the two pounds six shillings and eightpence for the books and instruments, and said he had great hopes of certain spirits appearing to him, who would answer his questions, direct him to gold and silver in abundance, and impart to him all secrets. To this end he found a secret place in a close next William Clerk's house at Saffron Walden. As these things seemed to savour of idolatry and heresy, the Bishop commanded Robert Barker to abjure them, and enjoined as a public penance that Robert should, on the next two Sundays, walk round the market places of Ely and Cambridge, with bare feet and uncovered head, carrying the said plates and charts round his neck, the wand in his right hand and the books in his left hand. Afterwards all the books and instruments were to be burned in Cambridge Market Place. By way of private penance the Bishop ordered that Robert should fast on bread and water the whole of every Friday for a year, and say the seven penitential Psalms, with the Litany, every Sunday throughout the year.

An instance of this drawing of circles occurs in 1615, in the case of 'Dorothy Pitman', of Haddenham, where strong faith in witchcraft appears to have existed. Dorothy was asked whether she had at any time made any circle, or did she know of the making of any circle by "charmer, or enchantment," to do any mischief? This woman after a family quarrel appears to have had a little difference with a neighbour, when she had the misfortune to remark that she would be even with her before seven years went by. About six months later this neighbour's little girl fell ill. Her father took her to one, Hillers, an accounted wizard who lived six or seven miles from Newmarket, to seek a remedy. Hillers said that if the child lived till the spring, she would either "amend or end." In the

¹ See Appendix, p. 45.

spring the child died and innocent Dorothy was believed to be the cause of the child's death.

Henry Douglas¹ had previously brought a case against this Dorothy Pitman, who was supposed to have been a witch for more than twenty years. This man charged her with making a circle in his house at Haddenham, and shortly afterwards his daughter was ill, but a "woman wizard," near Royston, was said to have given her a remedy which saved her life.

The earliest witch remembered by my fellow parishioners at Horseheath, went by the name of Daddy Witch. It is said she was an ancient bony creature, half clothed in rags, who lived in a hut by the sheep-pond in Garret's Close, and that she gained much of her knowledge from a book called *The Devil's Plantation*. When Daddy Witch died, her body was buried in the middle of the road which leads from Horseheath to Horseheath Green, just where the road passes the close opposite the sheep-pond. Her grave is marked by the dryness of the road, said to be caused from the heat of her body. But whether the County Council will be as generous with its granite, as our old world road-mender was with his flint, at this particular spot, remains to be seen. Daddy Witch in her prime would be amongst the many witches and wizards who flocked for miles round Horseheath to attend the frolic and dances held at midnight in lonely fields by the master witch of the neighbourhood. We hear that the witch from the neighbouring parish of Withersfield was often seen by Horseheath people riding through the air to attend these revels upon a hurdle, and that witches and wizards returning in the early hours of the morning were seen to be in a terrible state of perspiration. But these creatures riding during the night upon their broom-sticks or hurdles could scarcely endanger themselves or the public as do some airmen, of to-day with their complicated machinery.

As for dancing, all men, young and old, were eager to dance at Horseheath fair with a witch, who, it is remembered, danced the hornpipe better than any man or woman for miles round.

Superstitious people may live in comparative security from

¹ Ely, *Depositions and Informations*, F, 10, 1615.

the ills of witchcraft if they can be assured that no witch possesses anything belonging to them to work upon. But it seems a difficult matter to tell when a person is liable to be bewitched, or in bad hands, for who knows that the witch has not picked up a piece of one's broken crockery, or perhaps taken a sprig from the garden hedge? The smallest thing of yours in possession of the witch is supposed to be sufficient to start the bane of terror. Then to offend the witch spells sure misfortune.

Under certain circumstances, it is believed that one is actually obliged to make presents to the witch. Only a short time ago an old lady at Horseheath, who is supposed to have been a witch or "something in that way," admired some turnips and said she would like to have one. The owner promptly sent the old lady several of his very best, in order to be on the safe side. Girls in service, who return to Horseheath for their holidays, sometimes think it advisable to give the witch a few pence before leaving the village, in order to avoid bad luck. So that it would seem almost impossible to do what is believed to be the right thing, and still keep out of evil hands. We know of a charitable woman who made a skirt for a poor child connected with the witch's family, who gave the skirt to a neighbour to give the child, because she had not the courage to do so herself.

It is thought that a person can be bewitched by accepting a gift from a witch. For instance, in a generous mood our old lady sent some fine currants, that she had grown in her garden, to a Horseheath girl staying in London. The girl however did not dare to eat them, fearing that by doing so she might have been bewitched.

There is perhaps one easy way to guard against witchcraft, and that is to go to the village shop and buy a halfpenny worth of salt without saying either "please" or "thank you" for it. Another precaution is to put a piece of steel under your door mat, for a witch cannot cross steel, and a knife put under a chair will prevent the witch from sitting down if she should come into your house. But this precaution is not so good as the former, as standing visitors often stay longest.

Witches are extortioners, and their craft is remunerative. Whenever anything went wrong on the Church Farm, at Horseheath, a former tenant used to promptly send the witch five shillings, firmly believing that she had been up to some of her pranks. One poor woman, who had made several batches of heavy bread, believed that it was bewitched, so in order to remedy the trouble she sent for the witch, paid her a fee, and asked her to break the spell. This we are told she did by burning a piece of heavy dough in the fire, when at once the evil went into the witch's cap which caught fire at the same time as the dough. Such assistance always means a fee for the witch. We frequently hear that a spell has been cast on someone's coal, and that nothing will induce it to burn until the spell is removed, and much inconvenience has been caused when horses have been bewitched. We have heard how, one day, a waggon and horses were set fast in a field in Horseheath, near Money Lane. The driver, realizing that evil influence was at work, sent for the witch to break the spell. On arriving, the old lady told the man not to whip the horses, but to whip the wheels of the waggon, which he did, and the horses at once moved on with their load.

On another occasion, a man was taking a load of corn to the malting with a pair of black horses, but as they passed the witch's house the horses suddenly stopped, and nothing would induce them to go on till the witch came out and patted them, and called them "pretty dears," then they quietly went on their journey without further trouble. But this patting and coaxing sometimes appears to be injurious. For instance, Mrs C., of Horseheath, had two good pigs that she was fattening in her sty, and was feeding them one day when the witch in passing patted one of them on the head, and remarked as she did so what a good pig it was. But, she had no sooner gone than the pig stopped feeding, and it would not eat anything the next day or the next. So in despair Mrs C. had her pig bled. This was done by cutting a little piece out of one of its ears, and a little piece off its tail. However, as the pig was no better for this treatment, it had to be killed, because it was bewitched, though it was said, the spell might have been broken simply

enough by burning a little of the pig's blood, and by doing so, the witch would be supposed to suffer from the burn. For although witches and wizards are said to be the devil's own people, he takes little personal care of them.

Mrs H., formerly of Horseheath, tells how her mother had a beautiful brood of young ducks, and when only a fortnight old, they were bewitched and covered with vermin. These young ducks just turned on their backs, kicked up their little feet, and were dying fast. Fearing she might lose the whole brood, the good woman sent to the shop for an ounce of new pins, and stuck them into one of the dead ducks. Then she made up a good fire, and at twelve o'clock at night, without telling anyone what she was going to do, she put the duck well into the middle of the fire, and before the duck had been burning ten minutes her fears were affirmed. The witch came screaming to the door, making the most agonising noise, for the pain caused by the pins in the burning duck had entered the witch, and we are told the rest of the ducks in the morning were found to be cured of their pest. A swarm of fleas, or other insects, supposed to be sent by a witch, may often be destroyed by burning a piece of linen or flannel which has been worn next the skin and stuck with new pins. The burning must take place secretly at midnight.

Such instances of this craft at Horseheath are numberless, and repetition is useless. Of course if one of the usual methods failed to cure some ill or other that was supposed to have been sent by the parish witch, the sufferer would then pin his faith on some well-known cure, or even consult a doctor. However, if a doctor's treatment failed to effect a cure, even such an eminent physician as Dr Isaac Barrow, of Cambridge, would ask his patient if witchcraft was suspected, which shows that the craft of a doctor was considered useless against the craft of a witch.

A very usual method used by a so-called bewitched person at Horseheath to draw a witch, is to get a pint and a half glass bottle and half fill it with water, and put in a lock of hair from the noddle of the neck, also an ounce of new pins—heads downwards—some rusty nails from an old shoe and some parings of

finger and toe nails. Then cork the bottle, which must be put on the fire at midnight when the bewitched person is quite alone, and if that person does not speak, when the bottle bursts, whatever is bewitched will be cured, and the witch will come to the house screaming with the trouble that has affected the bewitched person. But unfortunately, we find it so often happens on these occasions that, perhaps through nervousness, the bewitched person does speak.

A witch or wizard and the person or thing bewitched, are considered by some people at Horseheath so closely allied, that by killing that which is bewitched, it is believed that the witch or wizard who wrought the evil will also be killed. For instance, we hear there was a cow that would not give any milk. Her master after giving her several blows on the head, was implored by his man not to hit her any more, because he believed the witch would feel the blows and send them other troubles. And a man whose horse and cart was set fast in Silver Street, Cambridge, threatened to fetch a gun to shoot the horse, believing that by doing so he would rid himself of the witch who wrought the misfortune.

However, some men had no fear of witches, and Mr J. of Horseheath was one of them. Driving in the village one day, he saw a woman sitting by the side of the road, whom he took to be a witch, and wishing to make her move on out of the parish, he gave her a flick with his whip, and told her to be off. She refused to move, so Mr J. gave her a little more of his whip. She then got up and said, "Whip away young man, your horses will never do you any more good," and we are told, one after another his horses died. In fact we have heard of some people in Horseheath, suffering so much from the spite of witches, that life there has become unbearable for them, and that after a time, they have been obliged to go "abroad to Wales, or somewhere."

The belief in this craft is unfortunately all too real in Horseheath. Only a short time ago we heard that a conveyance was coming over from Linton to take an old lady—supposed to be a witch, or something in that way—to the "great house," where she might end her days in more comfort than she

was enjoying at Horseheath. This news made little impression upon the village public, who care little for that residence, for they were sure the old lady would stop the conveyance from coming, or, if it did come, that the horse would never move when she got into the carriage. When the conveyance actually did arrive, and the old lady was comfortably driven off, words cannot describe the wonder in the minds of those who witnessed the sight.

But the day comes when the parish witch ceases to find any charm in her craft, and she longs to be at rest. Then the question arises as to what can be done with her imps? For we are told, a witch cannot die until she can dispose of her imps, and unless she has a relation who is willing to take them, it is a difficult matter in these days to dispose of them in any other way. One seldom finds that the ordinary rustic is brave enough to undertake such a responsibility. One way out of the difficulty is to burn the imps, but this is a terrible business, and was tried only a few years ago when the witch at West Wickham wanted to die. In this case, it is said, the imps were put into a well heated brick oven, but they screamed to such an extent that they had to be taken out of the oven, and were returned to the witch who was found to be covered with burns, whilst the imps themselves were uninjured. So we are told the imps were put into the old lady's coffin and were buried with her in West Wickham churchyard. On another occasion, we are told, some imps were burned in a brick oven where no more bread was to be baked, and when they were in the oven it was as much as two strong men with great pitchforks could do, to keep the imps from bursting the oven door open, and the men were terrified by the strength of the imps, who screamed and cried like a lot of little children.

APPENDIX.

The Examination of Dorothy Pitman, of Haddenham, widow, taken before Sir Thomas Steward, Knight, the thirteenth day of January, 1615¹.

She being demanded whether she had at any time made any circle, or did she know of the making of any circle thereby by charmer or enchantment to do any mischief. She said she never made any, neither did she know of any that was made by any. And denyeth that ever she said to Bird or his wife that she would be even with them, or ever said so much to Bowman his wife, neither did she ever hurt Bird his child or any other. And further sayeth that she do not know what doth belong to witchcraft, or anything there unto belonging.

Tho: Steward.

Information of Mary, wife of John Vipers, of Haddenham. She sayeth that when the daughter of the said widow Pitman was sick, there was a falling out between widow Pitman and her daughter, and that the wife of Martin Bird and Joan Soale told this informant of the falling out, which, when Pitman understood, she came to this informant to know what Bird and his wife and Joan Soale had reported unto her, which, when this informant told her, widow Pitman answered and said "Well, I will acquit her kindness before 7 years go about."

Tho: Steward.

Information of Martin Bird, of Sutton, labourer, who says that, about one and a half years since, there was a falling out between Dorothy Pitman, of Haddenham, and Ann, wife of Thomas Cooper, daughter of the said Dorothy. This informant then dwelling in the said town, his wife being in the street with a little girl named Joan Soale, did hear Ann cry, "Murder,

¹ Ely, *Depositions and Informations*, F, 10, 1615.

The story of Horseheath's potent 20th century witch

CEN 30 6. 1984

THERE is a spot on the road which leads from Horseheath to Horseheath Green which, even after heavy rain, is almost instantly dry. Horseheath people know the reason why — that is the spot where "Daddy Witch" is buried.

An ancient bony creature half-clothed in rags, she lived in a hut in Garret's Close and, when she died, was buried in the middle of the road opposite the sheep-pond. It is the heat from her body that keeps the road dry.

Daddy Witch was no medieval monster — she lived in the nineteenth century. She was the earliest witch the village people could remember in 1915.

This was when a Horseheath woman, Catherine Parsons, sat down to record notes on the village's witches in 1915 — less than 70 years ago.

In a talk she gave to the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, she spoke on witchcraft that existed in the village at that time.

"In this village we have ghosts as real as ever they were, superstition is rife, the wise woman is fresh in our memory, we have our folklore, interesting customs and cures for almost every ill," she told them.

"The parishioners tell you there always were witches and there always will be — the difference between a witch and an ordinary woman is that if the later wishes you misfortune her wish has no effect but the witch

is in league with the devil — she has the power to do evil."

Superstitious people ascribed various powers to the wise woman and generally went out of their way to stay in her good books. When one lady admired some turnips growing in his field, a farmer sent her several of the best; girls in service who returned to Horseheath for their holidays often left the witch a few pence before leaving — but you could also be bewitched by accepting a gift from her.

Dead

Once an old lady sent some fine currants that she had grown in her garden to a Horseheath girl staying in London but the girl did not eat them, fearing she might be bewitched.

HISTORY

Revisited

Rodney Tibbs is on holiday this week, so we asked librarian MIKE PETTY to dip into the Cambridgeshire Collection. He came up with this story of 20th century witchcraft at Horseheath, near Haverhill.

People believed they were safe provided the witch did not possess anything belonging to them — but could you be sure she had not picked up a piece of your broken crockery or taken a sprig from your garden hedge? That would be enough to give her power. Witches were extortioners and their craft remunerative. Whenever anything went wrong on Church Farm the tenant would send the witch five shillings, believing her to be up to her tricks.

A poor woman whose bread would not rise likewise paid for its release. A witch could cast a spell on our coal so that it would not burn and of course she could influence animals. Horses would stop dead in their tracks and only move after she had spoken to them. Pigs would go

off their feed. She could send swarms of fleas to pester you and prevent cows giving milk.

But you could fight back — it was believed that there was a very close link between the witch and the thing bewitched. A farmer who beat his cow on the head when it mysteriously stopped producing milk was implored by his man not to hit her any more because he believed the witch would feel the blows and send other troubles. "So if I get a gun and shoot the cow I shall kill the witch, an' all," he said.

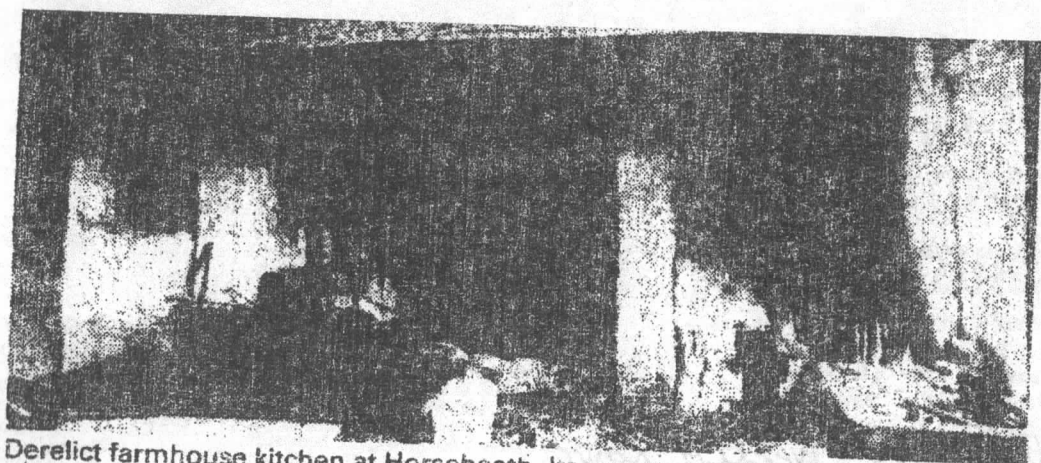
Ducks

To protect themselves against witchcraft, Horseheath folk in 1915 believed there was any easy way. "You just go to

the village shop and buy a ha'penny worth of salt without saying 'please' or 'thank you' for it; or you can put a piece of steel under your door mat — for a witch cannot cross steel. Putting a knife under the chair will stop the witch from sitting down if she does come to your house.

"Mother had a brood of young ducks and they were bewitched and covered with vermin. They just turned on their backs, kicked up their little feet and were dying fast — she sent to the shop for an ounce a new pins and struck them in one of the dead ducks; then she made up a good fire and at midnight, without telling anybody what she was going to do, she put the duck right in the middle of the fire and afore the duck had been burning 10

WITCHES



Derelict farmhouse kitchen at Horseheath. Its occupants may have feared the witch's curse.

minutes, the witch came screaming to her door, making the most terrible noises for the pain caused by the pins in the burning duck had entered the witch — in the morning the rest of the ducks were cured.

"You can get a pint and a half glass bottle, half fill it with water, put in a lock of hair from the noddle of your neck, also an ounce of new pins, heads downwards, some rusty nails from an old shoe and some parings of your finger and toe nails. Then cork the bottle and put it on the fire at midnight when you're quite alone and boil it until that bursts — but you must not speak whatever happens. The witch will come outside screaming and ranting — and sometimes you just can't keep quiet; soon as you make a

sound before the bottle bursts that ain't no good," said Catherine Parsons.

Work

To make a contract with a witch the devil usually appeared to the person in the shape of an animal such as a rat, mouse or toad — "Perhaps this is why if either a toad or newt is found in a house at Horseheath, the creature must at once be put upon the fire, or the inmates of the house will have bad luck."

Once recruited, the witch became possessed of imps or spirits which live upon her body and assist her — unless they were given plenty of work to do they became a terrible torment to their owner.

The Horseheath witch had five to find work for — their

names Bonnie, Blue Cap, Red Cap, Jupiter and Venus. One woman spotted one on top of a box in the chimney corner — "it looked something like a mouse with very large eyes and a tail only two inches long — as soon as it was spotted it scrambled away up the chimney to report what it had seen to the witch — you cannot keep anything secret from her and her imps."

Sometimes they tried to burn the imps — that happened at West Wickham: "They put them in a well-heated brick oven but they screamed so loud that they had to be taken out and were returned to the witch — and she was covered with burns but the imps weren't marked — eventually they were put in her coffin and buried with her."

and Dec 1918

"BUBBLE AND SQUEAK."

Witchcraft in Cambs. Villages.

PREVALENT SUPERSTITION IN HORSEHEATH.

The first lecture of the session of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society was given by Miss Catherine Parsons at the Archaeological Museum on Monday afternoon. The President (Dr Mannis) voiced the thanks of the Society to Miss Parsons at the conclusion of her interesting contribution—"Notes on Cambridgeshire Witchcraft."

Miss Parsons said she had heard many extraordinary stories of witchcraft and began to wonder as to the why and wherefore of their origin. It seemed only natural to turn to such a source as the gaol delivery rolls at Ely in order to see how the craft was exercised in Cambridgeshire years ago. The antiquity of witchcraft was well-known; it was established in England by the middle of the 14th century. In Horseheath witchcraft was by no means lost at present. In that parish there were ghosts as real as ever they were; superstition was rife, the wise woman was fresh in its memory, they had their folk lore, interesting customs, and cures for almost every ill. The parishioners told them there always were witches and there always would be, because they were mentioned in the Book. They meant the Bible, and perhaps it was because of this that superstition died all the harder. One was told that the chief difference between a witch and an ordinary woman was that if the latter wished her neighbour misfortune the wish was of no avail, but that the same wish in the mind of a witch had effect, because the witch was believed to be in league with the devil, she having made a contract to sell her soul to him in return for the power of doing evil. They were informed that in Horseheath the devil usually appeared to some person or other in the form of an animal. That was why, if ever a toad or gneat was found in a house at Horseheath it must be put in the fire or the people would have bad luck. Miss Parsons quoted from the gaol delivery rolls of the Episcopal Register at Ely and said that witches and wizards invariably had imps in their service. The possession of an imp having been obtained, it was supposed that the imp lived on the bodies of the owners and went from generation to generation. If they were not given plenty of work to do they were said to be of great trouble to the owners. Imps at Horseheath were generally supposed to be something like white mice. Marks on the bodies of

supposed witches or wizards were assumed to be caused by the sucking of the imp; many innocent persons must have suffered in consequence of small tumours, moles, warts, or even pimples. The lecturer referred to the evil work of the conspirators—Matthew Hopkins, and his assistant John Stearn—who posed as "witch-finders," and spoke of several cases which they had "proved." There was one peculiar case in the gaol delivery rolls where one, Jeremiah Biggs, accused his mother-in-law of witchcraft. (Loud laughter.) Even now everyone must be very courteous to the parish witch. The formula of witches varied; they were told that a circle was drawn on the ground, perhaps with a piece of chalk, the Lord's Prayer was said backwards, and the devil suddenly appeared in the circle, perhaps in the form of a cockerel. All sorts of things were said to spring out of the ground suddenly and if the person standing within the circle became so frightened as to step out of the circle, they were told that the devil would fly away with him or her. Boys at Horseheath had been severely chastised for mimicking some such practice as this. (Laughter.) The earliest witch remembered by her fellow parishioners at Horseheath was one known as "Daddy" Witch. She gained much of her knowledge, they were told, from a book called "The Devil's Plantation." Her body was buried in the middle of the road from Horseheath to Horseheath Green, and her grave was marked by the dryness of the road at that point, said to be caused by the heat of her body. But whether the County Council had been as generous with its granite as their old road maker had been with his flint at that particular spot remained to be seen. There was one easy way to guard against witchcraft, and that was to go to the village shop and buy a half porth of salt without saying either "Please" or "Thank you." (Laughter.) Another precaution was to put a piece of steel under the door-mat, because a witch could not cross steel. Another precaution was to put a knife under the chair, and then the witch did not sit down. That precaution was not very strong, however, as standing visitors generally stayed longest. (Laughter.) Belief in witchcraft was only too real in Horseheath.

AMONG THE BOOKS