

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog
St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

Witchcraft in Seventeenth Century Pembrokeshire
Simon Hancock

With the C17th came the stereotypical witch - wrinkled, crippled, squint-eyed, hook-nose, warty, solitary, anti-social and with a tendency to 'consort' with 'familiar' - newts, toads (warty), crows, cats or dogs or even goats (cloven-hoofed like Satan). Denouncing witches tended to be sexist - the majority accused were women (with few rights - especially an unmarried or widowed woman).

Witches were blamed for anything out of the ordinary - aches-and-pains, sudden death, accidents, death of livestock, failed crops, burning buildings, loss of ships at sea ... and of course the weather. It reflected a breakdown in the social structure within a community and accusations of witchcraft were a way of getting rid of someone from the community who did not conform to the norm.

James I (of England) was obsessed with witchcraft - introducing Acts of Parliament (1542-1604) trying to rid the country of the perceived threat of witchcraft! Coinciding with the spread of non-conformity witchcraft was even linked to the growth of the Quaker movement - accused of spreading witchcraft! There were 40-50 thousand executions across Europe, 500 in England and 1000 in Scotland (90% women). Across Wales just 5 executions 1550-1720 and none in Pembrokeshire. Torture was the accepted means of obtaining a confession but also the 'privy-mark' (skin blemish) or the classic 'trial by water' using the dunking stool - drowning would prove your innocence! 1644-1647, Witch Finder General, Matthew Hopkins, had 300 women executed as witches - with a lucrative £20.00 reward from each community per confession!



Katherine Bowen of Gumfeston (1607) Evidence claimed she demanded milk, flour and eggs and the farmer's wife was too afraid to refuse her - claiming she was of a "sinister countenance"! Their sows went on a rampage and killed all piglets and when prevailed upon to return to remove any curse ... she came with her husband! And that is where the story ends in the records!

Ieuan John Ap Howell of Narbeth (1630) One of the few men on record claims he was tempted by the devil to steal a prize cow, being assured of the devil's protection! His claim failed - he was executed.

Agnes Griffith of Mordeifi (1680) Accused of bewitching livestock she was 'witnessed' sitting in bed surrounded by lights and stabbing something in her hand. She swore any man who crossed her would not cross her for long - she was not executed!

Hugh Lloyd of Haverfordwest (1668) A victim rather than a witch he became 'bewitched' - distracted and raving. Suspicion was cast onto the local Quakers and when he died many were taken into custody and were imprisoned in Haverfordwest Castle prison.

Olivia Powell of Loveston (1693) A widow she appears to have been responsible for a one-woman crime-wave including causing cattle to sicken, a pond-full of ducklings to turn flippers-up, causing a child to fall sick and shape-shifting to walk through walls! She was imprisoned in Haverfordwest Castle.

John Davis of Llanerchaeron (1693) Another 'victim' he claimed a serving-maid bewitched him in order to steal from him. The 'cunning-man' / wiseman was called and dismissed the case.

Dorca Heddin of Haverfordwest (1699) The last of the Welsh Witches to be accused she is supposed to have had the devil appear to her in the guise of a Black-man who gave her the power to curse her step-mother and bewitch 2 sailors, threatening their ship. And that was where the story - ended!

Throughout the Stuart period people became increasingly sceptical and the witchcraft hysteria died down - the last witch-trial in 1717, in Exeter, was thrown out by the judge and the Witchcraft Act was repealed 1736. As it had been the people who had given the power to the 'witches' once belief faded so did the power.