



Witches



Who were the witches?

Witches and healers had existed and been accepted as members of society for centuries. During the later years of the sixteenth century, though, it was commonly believed that these people received their power from the devil. The essence of witchcraft was held to be entering into a pact with the devil, rather than the deeds, good or bad, which could be attributed to a witch. Women were most likely to be accused of witchcraft: eighty percent of cases recorded in Scotland involved women. In Aberdeen and the surrounding areas during 1596 and 1597 two men and 45 women were charged. These women were often the poor, elderly women of a community 'whose poverty, sour temper or singular habits made them an object of dislike or fear to their neighbours'. Such a woman might or might not have a reputation for healing, as well as harming, but above all else she was deemed to have malevolent supernatural powers.

Some of the most common misfortunes for which witchcraft was deemed responsible were sudden illness, certain accidents, lingering illness for which no cause was clear, strokes, unexpected deaths, failure of crops (especially if others were doing well), strange behavior in animals and disasters at sea.

Influence of the Church

Prior to 1563, witchcraft was deemed a crime in ecclesiastical law. The belief that individuals could make a face-to-face pact with the devil, and pay homage to him in nocturnal gatherings, led to theories of diabolical conspiracy, thus providing the intellectual foundation for witch hunts in which the Catholic clergy played a part. After the Reformation, the Protestant ministers and elders of individual parishes were actively involved in the initial interrogation of suspects and, through their role as members of the General Assembly, applied constant pressure on the Government to establish a godly state through seeking out and prosecuting those believed to be in communion with Satan.

Influence of James VI

In 1563 the Queen's Act against witchcraft was introduced in Scotland. The Act stated that no person should 'use any manner of witchcraft, sorcery or necromancy, nor give themselves forth to have any such craft or knowledge thereof'. The penalty for being convicted as a witch was death. There followed two main periods of witch persecution in Scotland, the first of which was in the 1590's and the second in the 1640's. The late 16th-century craze was encouraged by the return journey of King James VI and his wife from Denmark when bad weather put the convoy of ships at risk. One of the King's attendant ships was lost and it was widely believed that the high winds were caused by a number of witches assembled at North Berwick Church and in Copenhagen. Many were made following rumours of a conspiracy between the witches of the two countries against the King.

Whilst James VI was in Denmark he was influenced by discussions about witchcraft and witch hunting which had already begun in that country. His power to influence had a major effect on the number of witch persecutions and in 1596 and 1597 the highest ever figures for persecutions were recorded. His views quickly permeated to the ruling classes and the clergy. James insisted that all witches, all ages, all ranks and even bairns deserved death by fire.

Aberdeen

In Aberdeen, those accused of witchcraft were committed to ward as suspect and guilty of 'witchcraft, sorcery and other diabolical and detestable practices'. The Justice Court, which presided over these trials, consisted of the Provost of Aberdeen, four Baillies and a jury. The trials were held in the Tolbooth.

Dittays - lists of charges against a witch read out before the court - often went back 25-30 years and included accusations from neighbours and, occasionally, family members. The 'dittays' were compiled as the first step in bringing witches to trial. At the trials witnesses would testify to seeing or being involved in certain events corresponding to the charges listed. Many of the dittays were written to a common formula and contained dates and times of day when acts of witchcraft supposedly happened. The accusations are nearly all concerned with a curse or casting a spell. As a result of the spell, untoward things happened to those cursed families, homes or animals.

There are many fascinating accounts relating to the trials of the women, and the few men, who were both accused and tried for witchcraft and sorcery within the burgh of Aberdeen and the surrounding areas.



16th Century

One of the most interesting cases in Aberdeen happened from 1596 and concerned a whole family. The mother, Jane Wishart, was brought to trial and eventually convicted on 18 points of witchcraft, although the total number of charges brought against her exceeded 30 and covered a period of over 20 years. The charges included casting a spell on a fisherman who then took to his bed and 'lay bedsick for one month'. The earliest charge related to an incident when five men caught her coming out of the yard of Adam Mair, one of her neighbours, at two in the morning. The men woke up Adam's wife to tell her what they had discovered and, later that day at about two or three o'clock in the afternoon, two of the men were found drowned in the Auld Wattergang at the Links where they had gone to wash themselves. Two others who had seen Janet leave her neighbour's house subsequently offered the testimony against her. Janet's son-in-law, John Allan testified against her following an incident when he hit his wife and was chastised by

Janet. Following this, a brown dog started to come into his bedroom and attack him, although it left his wife alone. This continued until John threatened to complain to the minister and the Kirk Session. Eight days before Janet was apprehended there was heard a rumbling noise in her house which frightened her next door neighbour who thought his house might fall over. This, too, was attributed to Janet's supernatural powers and formed one of the points of witchcraft on which she was convicted.

Janet's son, Thomas Leyis, was found guilty of being a ringleader and convicted on three accounts of witchcraft. He is said to have presided at a meeting held at midnight in the Castlegate when many witches convened at the mercat and fish cross 'under the conduct and guiding of the devil present with them'. These people all danced and played instruments about the crosses and Thomas was accused of being foremost amongst them and of hitting Kathren Mitchell 'because she spoilt the dance and ran not so fast as the rest'.

Both Janet and Thomas were strangled and burnt as the following accounts show.

"Item, the xxiii. Of Februar, 1596, for peatis, tar barrellis, fir and cillis, to burne the said Thomas [Leyis], and to Jon Justice, for his fie in executing him, 3lib. 13s. 4d."

On the 22nd of March the same year John Leyis (Janet's husband) and their three daughters, Elspet, Janet and Violet were also accused of sorcery. They were absolved on all counts of witchcraft but found guilty of being in the company of Janet and Thomas and acting as their accomplices. As a result they were banished from Aberdeen and the surrounding area and were forbidden to come within 10 miles of the burgh.

Unfortunately the dittays for each of these trials no longer exist but Aberdeen's City Archives do still have the original dittay for the trial of Isobel Strathauchyn - also known as Isobel

Skuddie. She was found guilty of witchcraft and burned in March 1597. The charges against her included making up a love charm and gathering up bones in Dyce churchyard, boiling them in water and then taking the water and washing William Symmer of Hatton of Fintray. Thereafter she caused William's mother to take the bones and throw them in to the River Don, which when she did 'caused the water to rumble in such a manner as [if] all the hills had fallen therein'.



Transcription and Translation of Charges Two and Four in the Dittay Given Against Isobel Strathanchyn, February 1597.

Secundlie thou art Indyttit for cu[m]ming to elspet mutray in vodheid vodes and askng fra hir to len the a pennie, q[ui]lk quhen sche had gevin the, thou tuik the pennie and bowit it, and than tuik a clout and a piece reid wax, and sewit the pennie and the wax within the clout, and thereafter thow having Inchantit that clout thow gawe it to the said elspet mutray, Bidding hir hing the same about hir craig, and quhen sche saw the man sche luffitt best, baid hir thin tak the clout w[ith] the pennie and the wax and straik hir face thereft[er] and she sua doing suld atteane to the mariage of the man quhom sche luffit best, and the s[ai]d elspet understanding that thy said directioun to hir was plane witchcraft and devilrie she keist that clout in the fyre, q[ui]lk had almaist birnt all hir hous, and this you can not deny

Secondly, you are indicted for coming to Elspet Mutray in Woodhead woods and asking her to lend you a penny, which when she had given you, you took the penny and bent it, then took a cloth and a piece of red wax and sewed the penny and the red wax inside the cloth, and then having enchanted that cloth you gave it to the said Elspet Mutray bidding her to hang the same about her neck, and when she saw the man she loved best, bade her then take the cloth with the penny and the wax and stroke her face thereafter, and she so doing should attain to the marriage of the man whom she loved best, and the said Elspet understanding that the said direction to her was plain witchcraft and devilry she cast the cloth in the fire, which had almost burned all her house, and this you can not deny

Fourlle thou art Indyttit for passing to the kirk of dyce and then gathe Ring of a numer of deid folkis banes, and seything thame in watter, and tacking of That watter and thereft[er] wasching willea[m] sy[m]mer in the haltoun of fyntrie (he Than being lyand deidlie seik) and thereafter causing the said willia[m]is gude Mother tak the saids banes and cast thame in the watter of doyn, q[ui]lk Quhen sche had done, the watter ru[m]lit in sic a sort as all thehillis had fallin therin and this sich you can not deny

Fourthly you are indicted for passing to the Church of Dyce and there gathering a number of dead folk's bones and boiling them in water, and taking that water and thereafter washing William Symmer in the Hatton of Fintray (he then being lying deadly sick) and thereafter causing the said William's good mother take the said bones and cast them in the River Don, which when she had done, the water rumbled in such a manner as [if] all the hills had fallen therein and this you can not deny

For my love for the first time
I have been to see you in the
month of the year, and I
will be with you for ever
and ever. I have been to
see you in the month of
the year, and I will be
with you for ever and
ever. I have been to see
you in the month of the
year, and I will be with
you for ever and ever.

My

I have been to see you in the
month of the year, and I
will be with you for ever
and ever. I have been to
see you in the month of
the year, and I will be
with you for ever and
ever. I have been to see
you in the month of the
year, and I will be with
you for ever and ever.



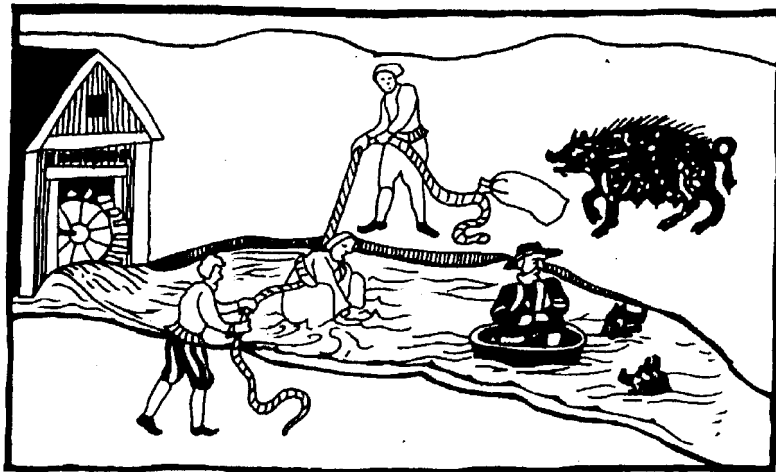
17th Century

During the 1630s and 1640s a further wave of prosecutions for witchcraft were dealt with in Aberdeen. The city's warehouse, completed in 1629 within the walls of the existing Tolbooth, housed several witches awaiting trial.

On 9th August 1630, a commission was made to the Sheriff to hold a court to try Marion Hardie, a vagabond and native of Elgin who had been apprehended in Aberdeen as a suspected witch. She was examined before the Bishop of Aberdeen as well as the Provost and Baillies and confessed to several points of witchcraft. She was then strangled and burnt. The following september, a commission was made to search for, and try, Margaret Lumsden, Mallie Cowper and Marion Rodgie, who had all been implicated in Marion Hardie's confession. She had confessed that she 'and the persons named came from Fraserburgh in May last and convened with the devil at the water mouth of Dee beside the block house, plotted the death of Richard Cadenheids boat in Fitdee, cast a number of stones in the water mouth when the boat was coming in, and by their

devilish encantments the said Richard and all his company died, one man excepted. And this she confessed that she, accompanied [by several other named women], being all convened together in one company at the devil's command by Matthew Wills' wife's instigation, destroyed one boat belonging to Peterhead wherin there perished or died 12 or 13 persons'. All the individuals named were to be apprehended and imprisoned and all were to be examined and the results reported in writing to the council for further instructions.

One woman, Margaret Fraser, suspected of witchcraft in 1636 managed to break ward and flee from the Tolbooth. As late as 1650, enquiries were being made in Turriff as to whether 'Margaret Fraser, witch, fugitive from the Province of Aberdeen, has been resett in this parish'. It was reported that she had died.



Not all witches who were accused or brought to trial were found guilty and some were actually acquitted. Trial by water - 'swimming the witch' - to see if her guilt could be proven by her ability to float, or her innocence assured if she sank below the surface, was one of the more unusual means by which some one might be acquitted of charges. Some sources tell of accusations but no outcomes. The most common punishments were obviously strangulation followed by burning and, for the less serious offences, banishment. In one case Isobel Burnett was exempt from the charge of witchcraft by the direction of the King.

The Treasurer's accounts for the execution of 'Skuddie' are as follows:

"Item, for teuntie sex leadis of peattis to burne thame, 2lib. 13s. 4d.

Item, for sex lead of fir, 1 lib. 10s.

Item, four tar barrellis, 6s. 8d.

Item, for tua irne barrellis, 6s. 8d.

Item, for a staik, careing and upsetting thairof, 13s. 4d.

Item, for sex fadome of towis, 6d.

Item, for careing the barrellis, fir and coillis, to the staik, 6s. 8d.

Item, to Jon Justice for his fie, 13s. 4d.

Item, the xxi. Of March, 1596, gevin to Gilbert Bairnis, be vertew of ane ordinance of counsall, for satisfaction of the expensis maid be him in sustenatioun of the witches preceding that dait, induring thair remaining in prisoun, 20 lib."

In one busy day at the Justice Court held in the Tolbooth on the 25th April 1597 -

Bessie Paull was charged with witchcraft.

Thomas Ego was charged with using witchcraft and sorcery, declared a fugitive from justice and had all his belongings confiscated.

Elspeet Strathauchyn, of Warthill, and Beak Taiss at the Burnside of Logie, were declared fugitives from the law 'attachit to this day as witches' and had their belongings confiscated.

The Assize absolved Isobel Forbes of Glenmullocht of the charge of bewitching Gilbert Malcolm, and of two charges against her.

The Assize absolved Margaret Clerauche of the whole dittay against her.

John Ross became cautioner for Elspeth Findlay, at the cost of 200 merks and for Agnes Frame at a cost of 90 merks.

Katherine Ferries was convicted as a rank witch on 8 points of witchcraft contained in her dittay.

In Aberdeen there were quite considerable numbers of accusations, trials and burnings. The total numbers for the years 1536 to 1703 - during which period witchcraft was deemed a criminal offence in Scotland - for Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire are as follows:

Year	Number of Cases	Year	Number of Cases
1536	1	1631	1
1580	1	1636	2
1590	6	1637	1
1596	7	1643	1
1597	31	1644	1
1601	1	1649	2
1607	1	1650	2
1613	1	1662	2
1626	2	1669	1
1627	3	1670	1
1629	1	1676	1
1630	5	1703	1

Aberdeen suffered from a 'witchcraze' just like all of Europe, in the years of 1596 and 1597 when there were in excess of 40 cases in total, and, to a lesser degree in the 1630s and 1640s. After 1703, witchcraft was no longer considered to be a criminal offence and no further cases are recorded from Aberdeen after this date.

Glossary

assise	trial by jury
barrellis	barrels
dittay	list of charges against a witch
fadome	fathom
fie	fee
fir	fire wood
fyllis	find guilty
irne	iron
leadis/lead	a measure of quantity varying according to district and commodity
lib	a pound in monetary terms
merk	a monetary unit; 2/3 of a pound of Scots
peatis	peat
staik	stake
tar	tar
towis	a rope, cord or length of strong twine, string etc

Further Reading

Aberdeen

Maxwell-Stuart P.G., 1998, 'Witchcraft and the Kirk in Aberdeenshire 1596-1597', in Northern Scotland Vol.18

Stuart J. (ed), 1891, Miscellany of the Spalding Club, Vol.I [includes information on witch trials in the city]

Stuart J. (ed), 1896, Selections from the records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery and Synod of Aberdeen, Spalding Club

General Reading

Larner C., 1981, Enemies of God: The Witch Hunt in Scotland

Larner C., Lee C.H., and McLachlan H.V., 1977, A Source Book of Scottish Witchcraft

Levack B.P., 1992, Witchcraft in Scotland. Vol.7 of a 12 vol. Anthology of Scholarly Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology

Acknowledgements

Text:

Tracey Adams

Layout:

Tracey J Caldwell ,
Illustrator,
Aberdeen City Council

**Transcription and translation of Dittay Given Against
Isobel Strathanchyn:**

Siobhan Convery and Iain Gray,
Archivists,
Aberdeen City Council.

In the 17th century, witches were often imprisoned in the Tolbooth. This building is now open to the public from April to September as a Museum of Civic History. It is situated on Castle Street, opposite the Bank of Scotland. Castle Street runs as a continuation of Union Street from the east (King Street) end, accessible on foot and by bus.



ABERDEEN
CITY COUNCIL

ARTS & RECREATION DEPARTMENT