

Story: Helen Galley
Picture: Simon Dack

SUSSEX was the last place in England to accept Christianity — and today interest in witchcraft is flourishing again in the county.

It is only in the last 30 years, since the last of the Witchcraft Acts was repealed in 1951, that the occult has become common knowledge.

Witches have literally felt free to come out in the open and covens have sprung up all over the country.

Sussex witches have come out of the closet

"Brighton Evening Argus" April 25th, 1984.

Brighton witch Mrs Doreen Valiente knows personally of four groups in Brighton and is sure

there are many more.

Speaking from her tiny, incense-perfumed council flat in Tyson

Place, Grosvenor Street, Brighton, Doreen says the renewed surge of interest may be due to the influence of the Age of Aquarius.

The astrological Age of Aquarius, which came into full force in the early 1960s, is the age of science.

Hypnosis

Many techniques connected with witchcraft, like alternative medicine and hypnosis, have now become widely accepted.

Books on the occult, including Doreen's own, have flooded the market and people are becoming increasingly open-minded and tolerant.

An elder in witchcraft circles and a widow, Doreen is a youthful 62-year-old. She said: "People think more for themselves these days and are not so easily impressed by the voice of authority from the pulpit."

"I think that a lot of prejudice in the past was artificially whipped up by religious extremists."

Stake

Her most recent work is a reprint of *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present* which was originally published in 1973.

In it she describes the basic beliefs, rites and practices of witches through the ages.

Doreen, who first moved to Brighton with her Spanish-born husband in 1956, was first initiated as a witch at the age of 30 by her mentor and author Joel Gardener.

He was one of the last members of a coven in the New Forest. But since then there has been a revival in witchcraft and covens are now common throughout this country, America, Australia and the Continent.

A century ago Doreen would have been hung and buried with a

stake through her heart for admitting to being a witch.

These days the reaction is far less violent and perhaps sceptical.

"Most people around here know I am a witch and it doesn't bother them," she said.

She regards witchcraft as the craft of the wise — which is the Anglo-Saxon translation of the word.

She says it is the old religion of Western Europe that was driven underground by Christianity and is based on a belief of the powers of the mind latent in everyone.

Sabbath

There are four Greater Sabbath meetings and four Lesser Sabbaths.

The next Sabbath is on Monday April 30 and is known as May Eve or Walpurgis Night. The other Greater Sabbaths are on February 2 (Candlemas), August 1 (Lammas) and Hallowe'en.

The Lesser Sabbaths fall at mid-summer and midwinter and the two equinoxes in spring and autumn.

In the past these meetings have been regarded by outsiders as orgies of food, drink, dancing and sex.

Spells

But the sex, scandal and sorcery view is outdated and incorrect, says Doreen.

She says it is true that if the meeting is held indoors coven members in some groups will be naked and if the meeting is held outside a bonfire will be lit if possible.

The witches chant at these meetings, call up pagan gods and drink a toast to them.

And yes, says Doreen, they do sometimes work spells.

Looking at this tall, grey-haired woman it is difficult to imagine that

she has dealings with the occult.

She sits calm and relaxed in her crammed room. Shelves laden with books on all forms of witchcraft line the walls, which are also adorned with posters and ornaments used in her craft.

Reincarnation

Yet in a quiet voice she speaks of the time she and a friend put a binding spell using a waxen image tied with consecrated cord on a man attempting blackmail.

The spell was intended to render the blackmailer harmless and Doreen gleefully reports that soon after they had cast it the man packed his bags and left town for no known reason.

She finds it difficult to explain why she was drawn to witchcraft but witches believe in reincarnation and she feels this may have something to do with it. She personally believes she was involved in witchcraft in at least two previous lives that she remembers.

In one past life she was an Egyptian High Priestess and in another a Romany woman in Britain during the Roman conquest.

Midnight

Historically witches are believed to have some kind of familiar, usually a black cat, which helps them with their magic.

Doreen's familiar lives in one corner of her room in a hollowed out nutshell with a gargoylesque face carved on it.

Sussex still has many strong links with the world of magic and mystery where midnight meetings were held.

There is the famous Chanctonbury Ring, which is no longer used because it is too well known, Thundersbarrow Hill above Shoreham, Puck's Croft near Ruspur and Faygate, north of St. Leonard's Forest.



Doreen Valiente examines the wisdom of Tarot cards