



Nickie Wilson, known as 'The Lady Olwen', only Queen among Britain's 2,500 witches, arbiter of coven disputes and spellbinder extraordinary. This month she will Draw Down the Moon. In today's magazine we inquire into the unexpected revival of magic and witchcraft as —

THE WITCHES RIDE AGAIN

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE
CYRIL RAY'S WINE PRIMER/LIZ SMITH ON PERFUMES/INFLUENCE: WHO DO THE BRITISH LOOK UP TO?

The witches ride again

Since the repeal in 1951 of the 233-year-old Witchcraft Act, British witches — free from the fear of prosecution — have been forming covens all over the country. What are their motives? How potent are their spells and cures? COLIN CROSS met three leading spellbinders.

Even at first sight, the basement flat in which Mrs Doreen Valiente lives at Brighton looks like a witch's parlour. She has her broomstick in the corner, a ram's head above the fireplace and a miniature cauldron standing on the television set. At the windows she hangs witchcraft balls (they look like Christmas tree ornaments) to ward off the evil eye. Outside she has a little herb garden.

'I don't think the neighbours mind that I'm a witch,' she says happily. 'The best thing about this country is the sense of individual liberty and not interfering with someone else's business.'

Spells, magic and talismans dominate her life and she has done original work in testing and developing old herbal mixtures. When she wants something she sets up a 'magical current' to get it.

'For instance, I'm very fond of crocodileskin handbags but I'm not rich enough to buy them at the full price. In one way and another I've managed to acquire 20 of them; I don't know exactly how the magic worked but I know I've got the handbags.'

But I once made an awful mistake — real sorcerer's apprentice stuff. I wanted a pair of crocodile shoes and set the magic current going. One day I was out doing my ordinary shopping in Brighton when the thought came into my head that if I went to a certain shop I'd find the shoes. I realised that this was the magic working and went straight off to the shop and there, sure enough, was a pair of secondhand crocodile shoes at a very cheap price. But they were size six and I take size eight and so they were useless. 'You see I had forgotten to be absolutely specific about what I wanted. That's a typical beginner's error in magic.'

How does she set the magic current going?



Colin Jones

Above: Mrs Doreen Valiente and her broomstick. It's sometimes used as a hobby horse when the witches dance round the magic circle on a night out. Right: 'Queen of the Witches', Nickie Wilson (alias Lady Olwen, our cover witch) and her husband 'Scotty' Wilson, performing the annual Drawing Down the Moon ceremony on the Isle of Man. 'I never make love potions,' says Mrs Wilson. 'When anyone asks for one I recommend a dozen oysters.'

'Oh, I draw a circle and put various objects into it and say certain words. Perhaps I burn incense. I can't tell you the details because they are secret — we witches don't like our rituals becoming known to outsiders. In the wrong hands they can be dangerous.'

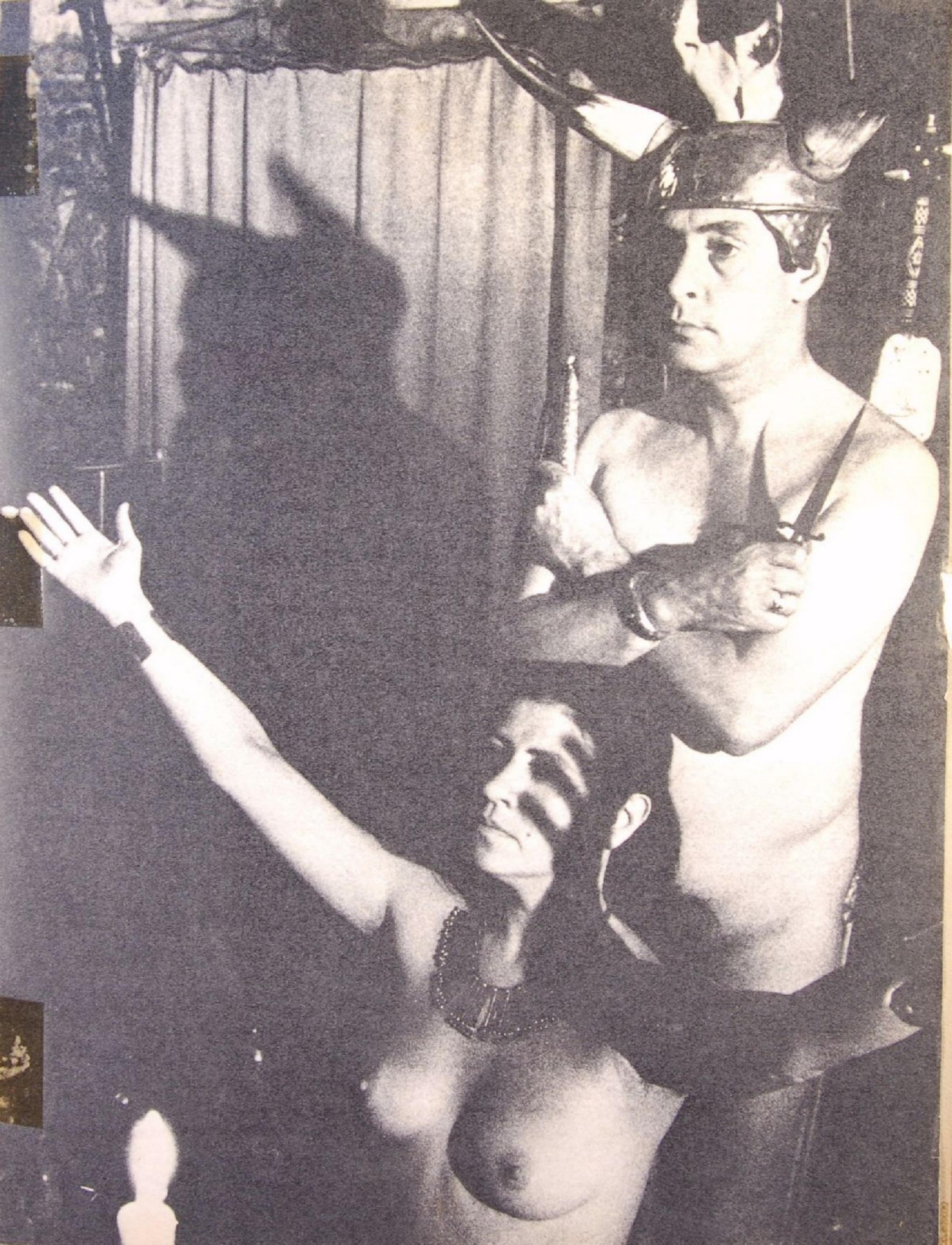
For her friends, Mrs Valiente makes magical talismans and purifies their houses from evil influences. 'You know how it is,' she says, 'sometimes you enter a house and for no very obvious reason it seems to be an evil or unhappy place. This has to do with the influences left behind by people who formerly lived there. I use garlic — it must be peeled garlic — to clear away the evil. I put it around the house in the evening, saying certain words, and in the morning I pick it up and burn it. It always works — I don't know why; it is just that garlic somehow soaks up evil. Onions can be used in the same way.'

'Of course for a real poltergeist I won't use the garlic method. A poltergeist is the spirit of some unhappy person who, perhaps, doesn't even realise he's dead. It's no good just driving him out as if he were an evil power. He needs sympathy and understanding and in such cases I always recommend that a good medium should be brought in to make contact.'

Talismans?

'I make quite a lot of them — they can be directed to almost anything — there are love talismans, money talismans, even talismans for passing examinations. They work because they influence the wearer's mind.'

She described how she made a Jupiter talisman for a friend who had fallen behind with her mortgage payments. It involved writing a formula on a piece of parchment on a Friday night during full moon. 'When she went to the office wearing her talisman, they were most/con



THE WITCHES RIDE AGAIN

continued/understanding and sympathetic and gave her time to pay. You could say it was just coincidence if you like, or that the talisman just gave her extra selfconfidence, but the point was that it worked.'

And black magic? Attempts to harm people through spells?

Mrs Valiente described a spell involving a sheep's heart buried in the ground at a place where the victim would walk over it.

'Whatever you do, don't give the details of that one in *The Observer*,' she said. 'It's really nasty and I'd never use it myself. I avoid all contact with the black powers. There was once a woman who wrote and asked me to put on a spell to damage her sister-in-law. I don't think I ever bothered to write back - I think that the only legitimate use of witchcraft is to help people and to do them good.'

Mrs Valiente refuses to take money for witchcraft and says her spells work best when she feels some emotional involvement with the person she is trying to help. 'I think people who treat it as a business very often find that their power becomes less,' she says, 'and that is how charlatantry begins. It is against the spirit of witchcraft to use it for personal profit.'

Mrs Valiente was initiated into witchcraft more than 20 years ago by the late Gerald Gardner, the man who pioneered modern British witchcraft in the years after the last war. Today, she says, she belongs to three covens. They sometimes meet on the Sussex Downs but normally the meetings are indoors. Her broomstick is really a jumping pole, carved with a phallic symbol, which witches use as a hobby horse while dancing around the magic circle; the custom of converting it into a broom, the twigs being used to conceal the phallic carving, grew up as a disguise in the days when witches were persecuted and burnt.

'In the old days,' she says, 'the village witch was the village wise woman. She was the only source of medical advice for ordinary people and she was usually the midwife. She had a stock of spells and remedies, based mainly upon herbs. Of course with modern medicine, a lot of it is now out of date - I'd never dream/*continued*

Nickie Wilson at a favourite witches' stomping ground, the ruins of an old mill at Castleton, Isle of Man - used by generations of witches.



Colin Jones

Margaret Bruce at home in Co. Durham. Her £4,000 supply of 'dragon's blood' is used alike by unrequited lovers and lithographers - at 5s. an ounce.

continued/typical example of magical thought. She says she has studied magic, especially Egyptian magic, since childhood.

One of her books gives what is called 'a simple traditional love talisman'.

Does she think this really works?

'Well it would obviously be a help if the person using it believed that it worked,' she says. 'Magical incantations are really just a way of building up emotional force. If you ask whether it could affect the person who was the object of the talisman you are entering into matters of thought-transference and telepathy. But magic is difficult to discuss in this intellectual way - magic is opposed to intellectual thought, it springs from the emotions.'

She thinks magic is a dangerous subject which can ruin people's lives.

'I have had all kinds of odd people calling here. One man waited outside half the day, saying he couldn't enter until the hour of Jupiter. There have been self-styled grand masters of the cabala. What they all have in

common is that they are miserable, broke and living on national assistance. I don't see how their magic can be any good if it can't give them a living, but they keep on and on with their studies thinking that at last they're going to find something really wonderful.

'My view is that if a thing works, it is magic; if it doesn't work, it is superstition.'

Miss Bruce generously gave me a phial of aphrodisiac perfume, as used to influence women by Aleister Crowley - the self-styled 'beast' who attracted publicity for magical rites in the interwar period - 'Those responding to its irresistible fascination are blissfully unaware that they are being influenced' says her publicity material. It smells rather like after-shave lotion.

'You can't pin down magic,' she says. 'The old alchemists knew that they were never going to turn base metal into gold but they knew they would discover valuable things in the attempt. You never achieve anything by magic by aiming directly at it: the results are always by-products.'