

WITCHES  
IN  
BRITAIN

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# BRITAIN'S WITCHES MAKE A COMEBACK

Witchcraft is reviving in Britain. ROBERT GRAVES tells why and traces the ups and downs of witches over the centuries. The pictures on the following pages were taken at a meeting place in Hertfordshire

**W**ITCHES have made headlines recently both in Germany and England. Mob violence is reported from Franconia, a Catholic province with a somewhat backward peasant population, against half-crazed old women accused of bewitching their neighbours. Farmer Sepp's best cow dies mysteriously, lice infest his house, his well dries up, his wife miscarries. Who is to blame? Old Mitzi, of course, who lives at the end of the lane and once mumbled something nasty when Farmer Sepp accused her of stealing his apples. Nobody likes Old Mitzi, and the cat is doubtless a demonic familiar.

Julius Streicher, Nazi editor of *Der Sturmer* and Gauleiter of Franconia, exploited these old-fashioned witch-hunting instincts when he blamed the Jews for all Germany's ills. Now that the Jews have all gone, peasants vent their spite on witches again.

The sudden spread of organized witch groups in modern Britain follows naturally from Dr. Margaret Murray's anthropological studies, *Witchcraft in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches*, published a generation ago. She surprised her readers by presenting witches as members of an ancient British fertility cult—akin to those of Greece, Italy and Germany—whom the Christians persecuted for their stubborn traditionalism and who, despite all witness to the contrary, were harmless enough.

Until then, the popular view of witches had been the semi-comic Victorian one of the old crones in steeple hats riding through the moonlit air on brooms. Witch-hunts were ascribed to mass-hysteria, like the frequent reports of flying saucers a few years ago; and lawyers could smile at our famous legal authority, Blackstone of *The Commentaries*, who wrote: "To deny the possibility, nay, the actual existence of witchcraft, is to contradict the revealed word of God."

Blackstone had in mind 1 Samuel xviii. 7-25, when the Witch of Endor

raised up Samuel's ghost for Saul. But he can have placed little reliance in the confessions of supposed witches, extorted under the Witchcraft Act of 1541 by inquisitors armed with the official handbook, *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*. Witch trials had been a public scandal at the time, although Elizabeth's inquisitors did not use the rack, hot tongs, tooth-drawing, or other crude Continental methods which violated English Common Law. The witch's alleged crimes—of blasting crops, producing abortions in women and impotence in men, causing murrain among cattle, raising gales to wreck ships, killing by use of wax images or direct means—were all subsidiary to a greater sin of a pact with the Devil. Confession of this sin was readily obtained by anticipation of modern brain-washing techniques.

The word witch derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wicca*, "a magician who weakens the power of evil"; and it was held that these "powers of evil" could be identified and weakened only by a priest. A witch was taking too much on himself by his spells. Before the Norman Conquest, however, a proved witch had merely to do penance, though in some cases for as much as seven years; it was not until 1562 that he could be condemned to death. Many thousands of witches were then hanged; most charges being prompted by fear, malice, revenge, hope of gain, or sheer fanaticism—just as, in wartime, spies are seen everywhere.

King James I intervened personally at the trial of the North Berwick witches, who confessed that they had attempted to wreck his ship by throwing a christened cat into the sea.

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Witchcraft in Britain today emulates as closely as possible the practices of medieval times.

Here, naked except for a veil and holding a rose and a lily, a girl receives a spell to protect her from harm, in a reconstruction of an early ceremony





In a cottage outside London, Mrs Ray Bone's coven meets on Saturday nights. Mrs Bone, who lives at Trinity Road, Tooting, was initiated at a coven in Cumberland. Below: She prays before the altar where an incense burner smoulders to create atmosphere and a candle represents fire. Right: The witches dance naked around the altar to produce "vibrations" designed to achieve some object, such as helping people in trouble or curing disease



Photographed for Weekend Telegraph by Michael Busselle

This offended his common sense, and he shouted out that they lied. But Agnes Sampson, a leader of the coven answered quietly that she did not wish him to think her a liar. Drawing James aside, she repeated word for word the conversation which had passed between him and his Danish queen in bed on their wedding night. Such manifest proof of second sight filled him with fear; and the witches were accordingly hanged.

Witch-hunting in England was largely the sport of Puritans. They took to heart the Mosaic command in Exodus xxii. 18: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!" Though a distinction had been hitherto made between "white witches," who did cures or told fortunes in the name of the Virgin or the Saints, and the "black witches," who followed their own dark devices, a witch's colour made no odds to the Puritans. After the Reformation their

madness slowly cooled, but it was not until George II's reign that the various Witchcraft Acts were replaced by one making the crime punishable only if used for monetary fraud.

In 1950, this was superseded by the "Fraudulent Mediums Act," when a confession of witchcraft became no more dangerous than that of atheism. Three or four covens seem somehow to have survived in England when Dr. Murray's sympathetic reassessment of organized witchcraft made a revival possible. It was helped by Britain's rapid de-Christianization, which did not imply a moral decline, but rather a criticism of church-going as inadequate to spiritual needs and out-of-step with history and science. Some of the younger generation took to ideal Communism or Nuclear Disarmament. But the witch cult, presented by Dr. Murray as a more ancient form of worship than Christianity, attracted the daredevils.



Its revival allowed full play to the stronger human emotions. Witches met secretly in wooded country, not in cold Gothic cathedrals or red-brick chapels. Women took as important a part in the dancing, singing, and feasting as men. Each "coven" consisted of six pairs, either husbands and wives, or engaged couples, and an officiating priestess. All went naked. Tests of fortitude under flagellation and horrific danger, the raising of spirits, cauldron stirrings, incense-burning, love feasts, round-dances performed back to back, served one main purpose: that of reaching an ecstatic state in which the magnetic force of the whole coven was focused on some unanimously chosen object. Strange phenomena were then experienced—among them, it was said, visions of past and future. To concentrate this force, the rites were formed in a magic circle cut on turf.

I am not a witch myself and have

never assisted at any Sabbath. Although most English witches of my acquaintance are honest idealists, the craft attracts hysterical or perverted characters and, there being no longer a Grand Master or Chief Devil to discipline them, schisms and dissolutions are frequent in covens.

**T**HE main architect of this revival was an elderly Scottish anthropologist, now dead, Dr. Gerald Gardner, curator of a Witchcraft Museum in the Isle of Man, and author of *Witchcraft Today*, a popular apology for his fellow-witches. Dr. Gardner was first initiated into a Hertfordshire coven whose traditions had, it seems, been reinterpreted by a group of theosophists before being aligned with his own views of what young witches need in the way of fun and games. A female deity whom Dr. Gardner identified with the ancient

European Moon-goddess, was preferred to Dr. Murray's Horned God.

*Witchcraft Today*, with foreword by Dr. Murray, excited immediate attention. Sensational attacks made on Dr. Gardner by the British Press as "a devil worshipper who puts around the dangerous idea that witchcraft is not evil" seem to have been based on Montague Summers' highly coloured accounts of diabolism and blood sacrifice in his *Witchcraft and Black Magic*. Dr. Gardner who believed in neither the devil nor in blood sacrifice received hundreds of fan-letters and applications for admittance to witch covens.

Apparently the equal division of the sexes in modern covens is Dr. Gardner's contribution to the craft; for Dr. Murray shows that although every medieval coven had its Maiden as assistant to the Chief, men were in the majority. That witches existed in Britain from

early times is undeniable. Members of a surviving Somersetshire coven still carry small blue tattoos in woad pricked below a particular finger joint, which stands for a letter in the pre-Christian Celtic alphabet. They call themselves "Druids," worship a neolithic British god, and meet at cross-quarterdays—Candlemas, May Eve, Lammas, and Hallowe'en—in a Druidic stone circle. Nevertheless, I suspect that their traditions are based on reforms made by some late eighteenth-century antiquarian of the Edward Davies school.

Druids are chosen, after puberty, for certain natural powers of intuition and diagnosis, second sight, and thought control. Their membership, though tending to run in local families, includes professional men and women from London and Bristol. Their practices are very different from the spell-casting, love-philtres, poisonings and blackmail of ancient Franconian, or indeed

present-day Majorcan, witches! There is a village carpenter, living not many miles from my home in Majorca, whose wife, hearing that he was in love with the baker's daughter, once put a spell on him. He could no longer cross the doorstep into the street without fainting; not for 13 years. Then his wife died, he followed her coffin across the threshold and is now happily married to the baker's daughter.

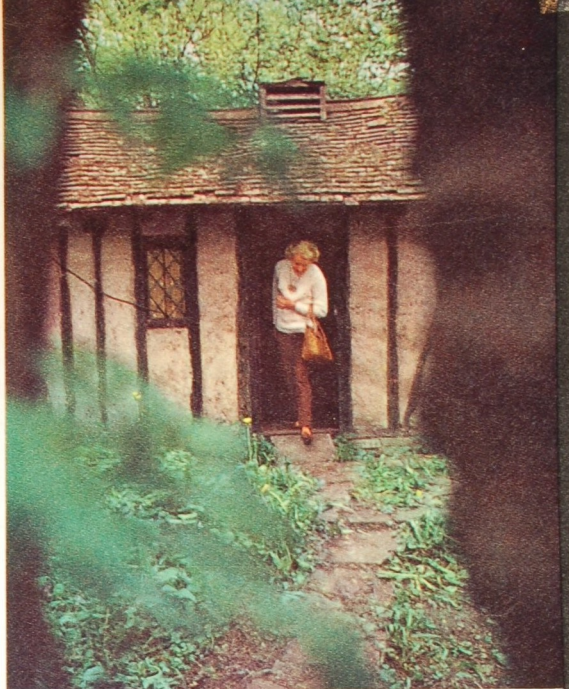
Dr. Murray, Miss Christina Hole, Mr. Mervyn Peake, the late Charles Williams, and other investigators seem to have ignored one important fact about the medieval witch cult: that it was brought to Europe by the Saracens, and grafted on a pagan Celtic stock. The Saracens had seized Spain in 711 A.D. (and were not expelled until 1492), controlled southern France by 889, and soon added to it Savoy, Piedmont, and part of Switzerland. Their witch groups, like the dervishes, were devoted to ecstatic dancing, miraculous cures, and the pursuit of wisdom personified as a Divine Woman, from whom comes The Queen of Elphame, beloved by Thomas the Rhymer and other Scottish witch-men.

**T**HE God of the witches is held by Dr. Murray to be a lineal descendant of a paleolithic Goat or Stag-god who later became the Caulish Cernunnus, and Shakespeare's Herne the Hunter. Yet the lighted candle which every Grand Master, disguised as a black he-goat, wore between his horns on the great Witches' Sabbath—whether in England or in France—points in a very different

direction. Idries Shah Sayed, the Sufi historian, has shown that a candle set between two horns emblemised the ninth-century Aniza school of mystics, founded by Abu-el-Ataahia. Abu came from the powerful Arabian Aniza (Goat) tribe, to which our contemporaries, Ibn Saud's sons and the Sheikh of Kuwait both belong. The candle therefore meant "illumination from the head of Aniza."

"Robin," the generic name for a Chief or Grand Master, represents the Persian *Rab-bin* ("he who sees the road"). A Berber off-shoot of the Aniza school was known as "the Two-Horned," and in Spain lived under the protection of the Aragonese Kings, who intermarried alike with the Prophet's royal descendants at Granada and with the English monarchy.

It is evidently this particular cult that reached the British Isles. An illustration on the cover of *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, a 1681 chap-book, shows Robin Goodfellow, horns on his head and candle in hand, capering among a coven of witches, who number 13 like the Berber groups. A Two-Horned devotee wore his ritual knife, the *ad-dhamme* ("athame" to present-day witches) unsheathed and, as a reminder of his mortality, danced in a *kafan*, or winding-sheet (which is the most probable derivation of coven), at a meeting known as *az zabat*, "the Powerful Occasion." Hence the "Witches' Sabbath," or "Esbat." Two beautiful young French witches told De Lancre, an examiner at La Bourd, that their Sabbath was a paradise of



In an initiation of witches, novices are naked and blindfolded to test their trust in witchcraft. Below: Mrs Bone, as High Priestess, points a ritual sword at the chest of an initiate. Ceremonies are held at Candlemas (January 31), May E'en (April 30), Lammis (July 31) and Hallowe'en (October 31). Mrs Bone's coven meets at a cottage (above) deep in Lucket Wood, Hertfordshire





These dolls, effigies of black magic victims, are exhibits in the Museum of Witchcraft at Bourton on the Water, Gloucestershire. For each stitch of the knitted doll below the knitter recited an incantation. The black lace and hair of the second doll were taken from the witch's intended victim

inexpressible joy, a prelude to still greater glory, and far better than the Mass. The Two-Horned did indeed consider ecstasy no more than a prelude to divine wisdom. Some of them rode sticks, or brooms, like hobby-horses; cantering "widder-shins," against the course of the sun, as around the Kaaba at Mecca; which explains why English witches were accused of causing storms, mildew, and blight by this means. Modern witches are careful to dance in the sun-wise direction.

It is not known at what period the Two-Horned cult entered Britain. The climate was favourable in 1208, when the Pope laid England under an Interdict for ten years, and King John sent an embassy to Morocco with secret promises that he would turn Moslem. And again, 100 years later, when the entire Order of Knights Templars was accused of witchcraft and suppressed at the Pope's orders.

The original school of Aniza achieved a state of ecstasy by beating drums and cymbals, or rhythmic clapping in ever-increasing tempo; but hallucigenetic drugs seem to have been preferred at a later period, lest the noise of Two-Horned revels might come to the ears of Church officers.

The earliest accounts of broomstick rides say nothing of levitation; later ones suggest that an English witch, when initiated, was blindfolded, smeared with toxic flying ointment, and set astride a broom. The ointment contained fog-glove (*digitalis*) to accelerate the pulse, aconite to numb feet and hands, and belladonna, cowbane, or hemlock to confuse the senses. Other witches fanned the novice's face and, after a while, she could no longer feel her feet on the ground. The cry went up:

Horse and hattock,  
Horse and go,  
Horse and pellatis  
Ho, Ho!

and she believed the Chief who told her she was flying across land and sea.

Loathing of the crucifix is attributed alike to Templars and witches, the crucifix being a graven image of the kind which Moses (supported by Jesus himself, and by Mahomed) forbade to be worshipped. Both witches and Templars were, in fact, Christians,

though heretical ones. Robin Hood ballads, sung at May Games around a pagan Maypole, suggest that the Two-Horned cult had been active in the reign of Edward II, who enlisted Robin and his merry men as Royal archers. Robin and Maid Marian belonged to a coven of 13.

**B**UT the Two-Horned did not dance naked; nor did any medieval British witches. The modern cult has borrowed its nudism either from the Far East or from Germany—where souvenir shops in the Harz mountains have long been selling figurines of naked young Brocken *Hexen* astride brooms.

There is no need to worry about modern witches. In fact, they have a great many worries of their own: such as that of finding seclusion for their rites—difficult these days, except in private houses or at nudist camps. Also charges of obscenity and diabolism, still levelled at them by newspapers. The diabolic Black Masses described by Montague Summers are not witchcraft, but intellectual atheism: a revolt from within the Catholic Church against its prime mysteries.

In 1954, Dr. Gardner wrote gloomily about the future of witchcraft:

"I think we must say goodbye to the witch. The cult is doomed. I am afraid, partly because of modern conditions, housing shortage, the smallness of modern families, and chiefly by education. The modern child is not interested. He knows witches are all bunk."

Yet the craft seems healthy enough now, and growing fast, though torn by schisms and Dr. Gardner's death. It now only needs some gifted mystic to come forward, reunite, and decently reclothe it, and restore its original hunger for wisdom. Fun and games are insufficient.

The very latest development is that certain reputable psychotherapists are considering the possibility of curing their more socially inhibited patients by a discipline based on modern witchcraft, after enlisting coven-leaders in their service. But psychological science, even if supported by a prolonged study of primitive magic, is insufficient. Like fun and games. T