

## The Coven of Atho

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British Witchcraft in the 1950s and 60s attracted a cast of colourful characters including Gerald Gardner, Doreen Valiente, Alex Sanders, Robert Cochrane and Charles Cardell. There were various skirmishes and ‘Witch Wars’ over the ancientness and origins of their practices and arguments about who did and did not hold the true secrets. Some things don’t change.

This article is about one particular group of ‘Wiccens’<sup>1</sup> that courted the attention of the media in the 1960s due to revelations about secret rites, shrunken heads and levitation. There was also the appearance of a mysterious, horned, wooden head with glowing red eyes, adorned with strange symbolism and which was reputed to be over two thousand years old.

This may all sound a bit like something out of a Dennis Wheatley novel but I invite you now to enter the world of Charles and Mary Cardell, Ray Howard, and the Coven of Atho.

### Charles and Mary Cardell

Born in 1892, in East Sussex, ‘Major’ Charles Cardell (originally Charles Maynard) had been in the Army and served in India. He was also a stage conjurer and psychologist (without any formal qualifications) who, in this latter capacity, operated out of ornately decorated consulting rooms at Queens Gate, London, during the 1950s and 60s. His ‘sister’ Mary, was not actually his sister at all. Twenty years his junior and the daughter of a preacher from Cornwall, she chose to change her surname by deed poll from Edwards to Cardell at the same time as Charles changed his surname from Maynard to Cardell.

Fostering this sibling illusion, Mary lived with Charles on a large estate called ‘Dumbledene’ in Charlwood, Surrey, for many years. From there, they ran ‘Dumlecott Magick Productions’ a company that, among other things, produced ‘Moon Magick Beauty Balm’; ‘Made from a genuine old witch



formula – generous value with advice and witch beauty-rune. 10/- post free.’

No-one especially noticed them until, in 1958, Charles wrote an article, published in *Light* magazine, entitled ‘The Craft of the Wiccens’ which had an accompanying advertisement inviting all genuine members to get in touch.<sup>2</sup> This was seen by Doreen Valiente who, having recently split from the Gardnerian circle due to Gardner’s excessive publicity-seeking; set out to investigate the Cardell’s.

Doreen first met with Charles and Mary in mid 1958 and was initially fairly impressed by the credentials they proffered. They told her that Cardell’s mother, Lillian, had been a genuine member and had passed Charles her athame and his ‘sister’, her bracelet. These were shown to Doreen who subsequently wrote to ‘Dafo’ (Edith Woodford-Grimes); ‘*They are not the same as ours, but bear sufficient resemblance to be worthy of our attention.*’<sup>3</sup>

A short while later Cardell invited Doreen to visit him at his consulting rooms in London. She described them thus; *'They were quite splendidly appointed as a sort of private temple; but when Cardell showed me a bronze tripod which was obviously nineteenth century and tried to tell me that it had been dug up from the ruins of Pompeii, I became rather unhappy. When he showed me a bronze statue of Thor and tried to tell me that it was of a Celtic horned god. I couldn't help myself pointing out that Thor was not a Celtic god - and then he became rather unhappy.'*<sup>4</sup>

Rumour had it that there was a secret underground temple at Dumbledene which had been made by converting an old air-raid shelter. In a woodland glade, on their 40 acre estate, there was an altar and a tree with seven wooden 'D's on it, underneath which, was nailed a wooden fish engraved with the words 'Moon Magick'.

Esoteric and Pagan symbolism was scattered around their house. This included antlers above doors, an Ankh buried in the thatch and a large seven-pointed star (septagram) on the ceiling in one of the rooms; this same symbol could also be found freely decorating Charles' consulting offices in London. The metalwork gates of Cardell's estate also had large 'D's on them. This all seems to relate to the 7 'D's of Moon Magick'; a list of principles, associated with strange words all starting with the letter 'D' and connected with the geometric symbol of the seven-pointed star. Charles had once written about the 7 'D's in one of his articles and it is clear that for him, they summed up his personal philosophy on life.

The 7'D'S are; Humility - DALEN (Moon), Respect - DONNA (Saturn), Trust - DELLO (Jupiter), Kindness - DOVEN (Venus), Truth - DESSA (Mercury), Honour - DORRAN (Mars), Dignity - DETH (Sun).<sup>5</sup>

Five of the seven 'D' words, with the exact same associations, can be found on an undated list of 'Witch Words' that Gardner appears to have loaned to Jack Bracelin. There is a small note on the top of the first page; *'Dear Gerald, I don't think I shall want this again. If I do, I shall let you know. BB Jack [Bracelin].'*<sup>6</sup>

Other words on the list include 'Atho' defined as 'The God or visual image' and 'Qwoss - haunt by vision, bedevil,' a word that Charles Cardell uses with this intended meaning several years later, in 1967.<sup>7</sup> This would seem to indicate that the ultimate source of this document was almost certainly Charles Cardell. Certainly, he had once been quite friendly with Gardner. In the mid 1950s they had discussed the possibility of bringing Gardner's Witchcraft museum to London<sup>8</sup> and Jack was later to tell Doreen that there had also been an exchange of material between Cardell and Gardner, at that time.<sup>9</sup>

Cardell parted ways with Gardner towards the end of 1958, indicating that it was because he was tired of Gardner's publicity-seeking activities. The hostility between Cardell and Gardner intensified when, shortly after the latter's death in 1964, and much to the annoyance of some of the Wica, Cardell self-published 'Witch,' a defamatory pamphlet that included large chunks of the Gardnerian Book of Shadows and denigrated the names of both Gardner and Doreen Valiente. But that is another story.

Another possible source of the 'Witch Words' document, could have been Raymond Howard (no relation of 'The Cauldrons' fabulous editor), who, in 1959, had been employed for about a year as the Cardell's handyman and who also had a strong connection with Atho, for it was the name of a large and reputedly very old, horned, wooden head, which he owned.

### Raymond Howard.

Ray Howard and his first wife lived just up the road from Dumbledene, in Ricketts Wood Cottages but in 1960, Ray and the Cardell's had a parting of ways. Divorcing from his wife soon after, Mary Cardell sided with Howard's wife and gave evidence against Ray. I would imagine that it was animosity borne at least in part from this incident, which led Howard to alert journalists to the Cardell's Witchcraft activities nearby.

William Hall of the *London Evening News* subsequently witnessed one of the Cardell's rituals and promptly wrote a story 'Witchcraft in the Woods'<sup>10</sup>, which was printed in March 1961 triggering a libel-case against the newspaper which was to drag on for several years.

Hall stated that he had been witness to a two-hour long Witchcraft rite which involved Mary Cardell, playing the part of a Witch Maiden and dressed in a red cloak, sitting in a five pronged tree with Charles Cardell, dressed in a black cloak adorned with a pentagram, casting a circle with a sword, blowing a horn and shooting a long bow. A 'shrunk head' was said to be present on the altar, an act of levitation was performed and ten other people, reputedly also took part!

Doreen Valiente, fascinated by the report, did an investigation of her own as to who the other members of the Coven of Atho were. She tentatively concluded that there were several fairly well-known occultists and witches present, as well as the record-breaking land and water speed racer, Donald Campbell and his wife.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after the London Evening News expose, Cardell invited journalists to a press conference at his estate with view to dispelling some of the bad press. The *County Post* reporter W. J. Locke was the only one to attend. He took some photographs of the scene of the ritual including one of an ominous looking circle inscribed in sand on a stone altar and straddled by two, large, fake spiders. The circle contained a shrunk head and the word 'Ramoh', Howard's magical name. There was also a bone, a bowl of water and a crystal ball completing this eerie scene.<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later, Cardell who clearly and understandably had developed quite a malevolent streak against Howard, was summoned to court accused of sending an effigy, pierced by a needle and a mirror to Ray Howard.<sup>13</sup>

At about this time, Howard moved to Norfolk where he established an antiques shop in the small, but suitably quaint village of Field Dalling. He also had a second home in an old Mill, in Cornwall. In 1964, the Craft Priestess Lois Bourne, met Howard whilst holidaying in the nearby Cornish village of Crantock, and he had shown her a mysterious wooden Head.<sup>14</sup>



In 1967, Howard was in the press again, pictured alongside this large, horned, Head which he claimed was 'Atho', the 'Horned God of Witchcraft'. Howard claimed that it was given to him, along with other old Witchcraft items, by an aging Romany gypsy called Alicia Franch who also taught him traditional Witchcraft.

Standing about 3 feet tall with silver and gemstone detailing<sup>15</sup>, the newspaper reports that laboratory tests had proven the Head to be made from English Oak approximately 2200 years old. This, however, says nothing about when it may have been carved and decorated. The article further describes it thus; *'It is hollow and has many witchcraft symbols carved on it.*

*When a small crucible of water with a lighted candle under it, is placed in the back of the head, the result is awe-inspiring. The red glass eyes of the head light up and steam emits from the tips of the horns.*

*The late Donald Campbell, who used to visit Mr Howard, when he lived in Norwood Hill, Surrey, was interested in the occult and touched the wooden head for luck before his successful attempt on the world land speed record.'*<sup>16</sup>

The head of Atho is reminiscent of the enigmatic Dorset Ooser, another large, horned, wooden head which disappeared in 1897 but was later found rotting away in a doctor's attic. I personally suspect that

the head of Atho might have been inspired by the Ooser and there is an unproven rumour that Ray Howard's son, said that he saw his father making it! (Update: Since first writing this article, I have made contact with Ray Howard's son, Peter, who personally informed me that the head was indeed a fake.)

The full truth behind the Head of Atho may never be known for it was mysteriously stolen from Howard's antiques shop in April 1967. No other item, which included a cash box and other valuable artefacts, had been touched suggesting that the thief was only interested in Atho. The ultimate fate of the Head is for now at least, a mystery, for the crime has never been solved.

Fortunately, pictures have survived of the Head of Atho and Doreen Valiente painted a detailed picture of it. One of the more interesting symbols on it can be seen on Atho's forehead. This image of five concentric rings is associated with the five circles of Witchcraft – a teaching that can be found in the Coven of Atho material. Furthermore, it is also highly reminiscent of Plato's description of Atlantis as having been comprised of a central island surrounded by two zones of land and three of water. This is quite interesting for it ties in nicely with some of the other Atho material which refers to the trident, sunken lands and the 'Water City'.



#### The Coven of Atho material

After applying to do Ray Howard's course on Witchcraft, which he started publicly touting in the early 1960s, the ever-questing Doreen Valiente was initiated into the Coven of Atho attaining the lowest rank of Sarsen in 1963. She dutifully copied material that Raymond Howard gave her, into some notebooks.<sup>17</sup>

Howard, in his apparent capacity as head Pooh-Bah for the Coven of Atho, would refer to himself as 'The Fish', which again tied in nicely with its watery theme and yet also seems to tie back somehow to Cardell's wooden 'Moon Magick' fish. Furthermore, the 7 'D's of which Cardell was openly a huge fan, were also in Howard's material although the list of virtues had been changed in his version to Presence, Truth, Kindliness, Tolerance, Awareness, Strength and Perception.

From Doreen's personal notes, she concluded that much of the Atho material was heavily inspired by Dion Fortune's *Sea Priestess* and Rudolf Koch's *Book of Signs*. Other potential sources seem to have been Gardner's *Witchcraft Today*, Leland's *Aradia* and Lewis Spence's books on Atlantis.<sup>18</sup> Her notes also indicate that Howard freely admitted to Doreen that he had acquired some of the courses ideas from Charles Cardell, who would later fiercely claim that Ray Howard had stolen his magic from him! Doreen seems to have believed this for in 1983, in connection with the Atho material she says of Cardell *'I regard Charlie Cardell, as another of the tragedies of the occult world, like Roy Bowers. He had such wonderful talent and potential. He wrote really beautiful things.'*<sup>19</sup>

The magical language in the Coven of Atho book was, in Doreen's opinion, reminiscent of the Romany language and Doreen believes that the name Atho is *'evidently a Sassenach version of the Old Welsh Arddhu, 'The Dark One.'*<sup>20</sup>

Other noteworthy inclusions include the use of the alchemical and astrological symbol for Mercury to represent the bearer of the old teachings; the messenger who bought with them the knowledge from

Atlantis. The Atho material also uses the spelling 'Magick', just like Cardell always did (and of course, Aleister Crowley before him!). There are also 'Eight Paths of Magick' which are fairly similar to the Gardnerian Eightfold Path, though there is no scourging in the former.

The main roles in the Atho material are those of the maid, or Witch Maiden, who wears a red cloak and silver bracelet, and the High Priest, who wears a black cloak and carries a horn and sword. There is also reference to a 'Witches Seat', a tree which has five shoots growing upwards, upon which the Witch Maiden sits. Of course, this was all precisely what the *London Evening News* reporter, William Hall, had seen that fateful night near Dumbledene, which had prompted him to write his article declaring that Mary Cardell was a 'Witch Maiden.'

### Mary Cardell – The 'Witch Maiden'

In 1967, the libel action that Mary Cardell had started against the *London Evening News*, following their 'Witchcraft In The Woods' story six years earlier, came to its crescendo. Doreen, intrigued, personally attended the hearing. Mary firmly denied that she was involved in Witchcraft and claimed that Dumblecott Magick Productions was really just a cunning ploy, a front through which they could attract followers of Witchcraft; thereby gaining access to material which they could use to reveal the truth behind Gerald Gardner and his Witchcraft books, which they felt were responsible for damaging young and vulnerable people. Charles' role in this saw his skills as a psychologist being utilised by people who had suffered at the hands of Witchcraft and the Occult.

Mary further proclaimed that the ritual in the woods was in fact a spoof; a set-up merely designed to help promote their Moon Magick company, which ultimately assisted with their aims. However, the *London Evening News* reporter, Mr William Hall, insisted that in no way was it merely an elaborate advertising skit.

It was pointed out by the defence counsel that 'Dumblecott Magick Productions' openly advertised services that involved the making of 'robes, unguents and perfumes for Magick'. Furthermore, they had produced a magazine called 'Witchcraft'<sup>21</sup>, a limited edition reprint of 'Aradia, Gospel of the Witches'<sup>22</sup> and had also written an article entitled 'The Craft of the Wiccens' in *Light*.<sup>23</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Cardell's lost the court case. Ray Howard was also recognised as having been responsible for the whole affair in the first case and he subsequently sidled back to his antiques shop and to relative obscurity.

A year later, in 1968, Charles was found guilty of circulating defamatory statements about a certain firm of London solicitors; the ones that defended Mr Hall and the *London Evening News*.

Cardell certainly seemed to have a darkly passionate relationship with the legal system and by the late 1960s he was declared bankrupt due to all the court costs he had amassed. This left Charles no option but to sell some of his land and property, forcing him and Mary to live in caravans in a corner of his once quite grandiose estate.

As for Mr Hall, the reporter whose story had started the whole chain of legal events, well, he was later to receive a wooden fish, with its tail broken off. It was addressed simply to 'Mr William Hall, almost a reporter.'<sup>24</sup>

### The Final Analysis

This is indeed a fishy tale, with many twists and turns. In some ways, we still know little about the true origins of the Coven of Atho material. In my opinion, the evidence suggests that some, if not most, of the Atho material, originated with Cardell who could have simply derived it himself from extant material such as *The Sea Priestess*. The 7 'D's were probably influenced by Gurdjieff's and

Ouspensky's ideas about the numbers three and seven and whose ideas were in-vogue at that time. However, the use of a horn and long bow do seem to be reminiscent of traditional Witchcraft practises.

From Doreen's 'Coven of Atho' books, we discovered that the attire and regalia of the Coven of Atho was identical with what Mary and Charles had worn that fateful night at the ritual in the woods. Had Howard, from whom Doreen had got the material, simply added this information to his Witchcraft course in order to further undermine the Cardell's somehow? Or were the Cardell's genuinely working with the Atho material which Ray later took and enhanced by the production of the 'Head of the Atho' and was the Alicia Franch story just a ruse?

In this mist of untruths and half-truths the story is not as clear as it could be. Further research will, as always, turn up new pieces of this jigsaw and who knows, maybe one day, the Head of Atho itself will once again raise its intriguing head and scientific techniques would swiftly make light of its true antiquity. I am not sure if that would be something to look forward to or not, for maybe it is best for its mystery to remain just that.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether this is pronounced 'Witchens' or 'Wickens' for in Doreen's notebooks she says the latter, but in her July 1958 letter to Dafo, she says the former.
- <sup>2</sup> Aidan Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft* p87 Thoth 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> Aidan Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft* p88 Thoth 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> Aidan Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft* p90 Thoth 2007.
- <sup>5</sup> Doreen espouses the seven principles (without the associated 'D' words) in her book, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* p184 Hale 1985. Presumably the idea came to her from Cardell or the Atho material.
- <sup>6</sup> The original document is now in the collection of Richard and Tamarra James.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Times* October 11<sup>th</sup> 1967.
- <sup>8</sup> Aidan Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft* p88 Thoth 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> Doreen Valiente's notebooks, now owned by John Belham-Payne.
- <sup>10</sup> *London Evening News* Tuesday March 7<sup>th</sup> 1961
- <sup>11</sup> Information derived from Doreen's personal notebooks, now in the possession of John Belham-Payne.
- <sup>12</sup> *County Post* March 24<sup>th</sup> 1961.
- <sup>13</sup> Unknown newspaper dated 4<sup>th</sup> May 1961
- <sup>14</sup> Lois Bourne, *Dancing with Witches* p29 Hale 1998
- <sup>15</sup> Doreen Valiente, *An ABC of Witchcraft* p24 Hale 1984
- <sup>16</sup> *Eastern Daily Press* March 6<sup>th</sup> 1967.
- <sup>17</sup> Now in the possession of John Belham-Payne
- <sup>18</sup> It should be noted that I have not done a thorough investigation into the sources myself.
- <sup>19</sup> Private correspondence from Doreen to unknown recipient dated 5.10.83. W.C.C. archives.
- <sup>20</sup> Doreen Valiente, *An ABC of Witchcraft* p26 Hale 1984
- <sup>21</sup> There is a small confusion about 'Witchcraft' magazine. Media reports say that the Cardell's produced it, presumably in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but Howard also seems to have been producing a magazine with the same name in the 1970s.
- <sup>22</sup> Doreen has written in one of her notebooks that the reason Cardell published 'Aradia' was so as to spite Gerald.
- <sup>23</sup> *Light* 1958
- <sup>24</sup> *Dorking Advertiser* 1967, precise date unknown.

### Illustration Credits

Charles and Mary Cardell – Undated, unknown newspaper from 1967.

Ray Howard and the Head of Atho - *Eastern Daily Press* March 6<sup>th</sup> 1967.

Painting of the Head of Atho – Doreen Valiente, p 25, *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present*, Hale 1984.

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I am completely indebted to Doreen Valiente (1922-1999) whose super-sleuthing and personal notebooks helped me to pull this article together. By extension, I am also grateful to the late John Belham-Payne and Philip Heselton who shared with me his copies. Thanks also to Tom Clarke at Thoth Publications and finally, 'The Fish'.