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Witches Are Riding High

By TOM A. CULLEN

BRIGHTON, Eng. (NEA)

—Witchcraft is now enjoying its biggest boom in Britain since the Middle Ages.

Hundreds of men and women are now claiming to be witches and to have the power to heal or to cast spells. Some of these are genuine pagans.

Others are cranks or thrill-seekers, with a few out-and-out racketeers thrown in.

Witches and warlocks (as male witches are called) have been interviewed on television.

Witches in Cornwall, who specialize in curing warts and minor ailments, are said to be operating their own clinic along National Health Service lines.

Why the present interest in witches and black magic?

THE REVIVAL dates from 1951, when the last of Britain's anti-witch laws was repealed, according to Mrs. Doreen Valiente, an authority on witchcraft, whom I interviewed here in Brighton.

"Now witches are coming more and more into the open," she claims. "Their main trouble is finding premises. Ordinary apartments and houses are out, for witches like to make lots of noise."

At the same time Mrs. Valiente warned that some covens (witches' meeting places) are being run as rackets.

"Some of them attract members by promising exotic practices. Then the member is trapped into a compromising situation and afterwards blackmailed."

One Brighton coven is said to have charged American tourists large sums to witness so-called "Black Masses," and other rituals.



Tools of the trade—"Witch" displays black magic items

"MANY PEOPLE think that I, myself, am a witch," said dark-haired Mrs. Valiente, who has just completed a book on sorcery.

Certainly, Mrs. Valiente's basement flat in Brighton contains one of the most

amazing collections of witchcraft bric-a-brac to be found in the British Isles.

As for Mrs. Valiente, I noticed that she was wearing a necklace of "witch stones," tiny fossils found on Brighton beach.

IN FACT, Mrs. Valiente has breathed the atmosphere of witchcraft from childhood, having been born in New Forest, Hampshire, a region noted for its sorcerers. "My family was notorious for their abil-

ity to commune with fairies," she said.

A favorite diversion of Sussex witches, according to legend, was to turn themselves into hares and run about the countryside at night.

Another specialty was known as the "Tanglewood Charm," a spell which caused people to wander out of their way and get lost.

"All of this may sound like nonsense," Mrs. Valiente conceded, "but how can one explain what happened to the group of teen-agers who visited Chantebury Ring recently?"

Chantebury Ring is the site of an old pagan temple on the Sussex Downs, and is ringed around with beech trees. Legend says that it one runs three times around the ring of trees at midnight and calls upon the Devil he will appear.

"RECENTLY, some teen-agers decided to put the legend to a test.

"At first they contented themselves with doing the Twist and conventional rock 'n' roll. But as midnight approached they danced more and more wildly around the ring invoking pagan powers.

"Suddenly an eerie silence descended upon the place followed by a feeling of terrible tension. It was as though one were being sucked up in the vacuum created by a nuclear explosion, as one of the teen-agers expressed it.

"Without consulting among themselves, they fled in panic down the hill. Today, nothing would induce those youngsters to go back to that spot," said Mrs. Valiente.

NEXT: A witch who answered a classified ad.