

# Yes, I am the forest witch

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THE jackdaw sits on her left shoulder because he prefers that side. He looks a knowing little bird, and his beady, button eyes are bright with secrets.

He pecks sharply at her pendant ear-rings, like a man getting angry because his telephone call hasn't gone through.

She says "Witch? Of course I'm a witch. I practise witchcraft because it's the only True Religion."

Mrs. Sybil Leek gestured at the trappings of her persuasion: a cauldron sitting innocently by the door of her antique shop, a broomstick up against the wall, a black cape and hood hanging on a peg.

## Respected

"There's nothing sinister about it, really," she said. "The coven needs the cauldron because it gets damn cold at night in the forest." (The coven you should know, is 13 witches gathered for their lodge or branch meeting.)

A completely serious, sane, ordinary-seeming woman, Mrs. Leek. Just the sort of person you would expect to run an antique shop in the deep, green centre of the New Forest. A respected villager of Burley, where the famous ponies nuzzle together cheekily in the High Street.

She is a celebrated witch, too. Letters—and there are hundreds of them—reach her addressed simply "The Witch, New Forest."

*Fillet of a jenny snake,  
In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's  
sting,  
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Fire, burn; and, cauldron,  
bubble.*

—Act IV, Scene 1, Macbeth.

By

ANTHONY CARTHEW

At the moment she is fairly angry about an American called Dr. Rossel Hope Robbins who told a meeting of the British Association that witchcraft does not exist and has never existed.

I wouldn't like to be in Dr. Robbins' scientific boots. He may have explained the whole curious phenomenon away as a bit of silly, wrongly-reported history, but he is currently running the risk of having a nasty spell put on him.

His case comes up at the next meeting of the coven, and his ears may well do more than burn.

"He may be a brilliant scientist," said Mrs. Leek, "but he's also a fool. Witchcraft is the Old Religion. It came before Christianity. In fact all the world's religions, like Buddhism and Mohamedanism, come from witchcraft.

"Witches were the first psychologists, the first midwives. They played an important part in society. It's only in the last few hundred years that witchcraft has been driven underground."

For Mrs. Leek witchcraft is a way of life, complete and satisfying. She talks about it as people talk about spiritualism or MRA or the Church of England.

Her god is Nature. For her, spells and incantations to the Fire God and the Earth God are the equivalent of prayers. The clearing in the forest is her church. She believes that the elements control her destiny, and so she worships the elements.

What frightened me was not that she made the whole thing

sound sinister, but her casual manner of introducing spells, incantations, herbal brews, goats' feet and the Devil into her normal conversation.

In the perfectly ordinary setting of jewellery and second-hand books with titles like *The Home Handyman* and *History of Hampstead Cricket Club*, here was a woman for whom the Middle Ages exist as her today and her tomorrow.

## Booming

And she is not isolated in her beliefs. Witchery in Britain is booming. There are four covens in the New Forest alone, and Mrs. Leek estimates there are about 600 covens flourishing in these islands.

Mrs. Leek follows the cult of "white witchcraft," that is witchcraft for good. She is very much against black magic—"It's thrived in the past three years, horrible people, all those orgies, quite wrong"—but she can see the attraction of selling your soul to the Devil "because it has obvious material advantages."

Her coven, which has the traditional 13 witches (women) and warlocks (men) meets in the New Forest every Lesser Sabbath (new moon) and Greater Sabbath (May Eve, Hallowe'en).

Each meeting is at a different place, but the members of the coven, claims Mrs. Leek, never communicate with one another, either by letter or word of mouth. It's all done by thought-transference, says Mrs. Leek, all 13 thinking of

# THAT TAKES YOU OFF THE BEATEN TRACK



Broomstick, jackdaw and a cauldron by the door.: Mrs. Leek admits there's witchery afoot.

PICTURE BY CHRIS BARHAM

the right place at the right time.

Mrs. Leek walks up to 15 miles—it's cissy to take your car. She also carries the cauldron (it always seems to be her turn to carry the cauldron) and has never yet got her thought-transferences muddled and gone to the wrong place.

The New Forest is, of course, ideal for witches.

## Invocation

But covens do meet in much more prosaic surroundings. Mrs. Leek told me of a coven which meets in the living room of a flat in Brighton.

She went there once and the witches played a record of "genuine voodoo music" and the floor burst into flames. The witches discovered later that this particular record was an

invocation to the God of Fire.

Her family react surprisingly quietly. Her husband, Brian, who has a beard and an expression of quiet resignation, said simply: "Look at it this way—I'd rather have her on my side than against me."

Her 12-year-old son Julian drew a crayon picture last week. It showed a witch crouching over a cauldron in the forest. The caption was: "Mummy at work."

But though you might giggle a bit, it is as well not to take liberties with Mrs. Leek. She made it fairly clear to me that she expected this to be a reasonable article.

"As you may know," she said, "we have this system of sticking pins in effigies of people we might want to get at. Sandstone and spit make the best effigies."