

# Hallowe'en—and the witches gather in force

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Britain's 400 practising witches will be out in force next Thursday evening for Hallowe'en, one of their four big festivals of the year. In a wood near Watford I met some witches from the St. Albans coven. This is one of the strongest in the country, drawing most of its 30 members from the London area.

The other main covens are in Brighton, Folkestone, Warwickshire, Norfolk, Yorkshire, Sheffield and Glasgow. Mr Jack Bracelin, high priest of the St. Albans coven, said there may be others, but since medieval times (or the "burning days" as they call them) witches tend not to know the details of other covens, just in case the information should be forced out of them.

## Pagan gods

Mr Bracelin, who was formerly in the Palestine police and is now a representative of a paint firm, has been a witch for many years. He soon corrects anyone who calls him a warlock. "Witches can be male or female," he says. "The word witch comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'wica,' meaning the wise ones."

But witches are matriarchs and it is always the high priestess who conducts the ceremonies. The St. Albans high priestess did not want her name mentioned. She was not ashamed of being a witch, but her husband was a pillar of her local Anglican church and for his sake she did not want publicity.

She explained that witchcraft is just another religion, a minority one, so they are used to some sort of persecution. They worship pagan gods like Herne the Hunter and the Earth Mother. "We are

## By Hunter Davies

not anti-Christian," she says. "We just have another means of spiritual satisfaction."

The St Albans witches include a doctor, an economist, a factory foreman, a university lecturer, two school teachers, a retired Army officer and a man of independent means who travels to meetings from Ireland. He does not travel by broomstick, as this is considered a bit old-fashioned. The high priestess keeps a broomstick on the front porch of her house, but this is more to amuse the neighbours than anything else.

The coven meets once a month. Every witch takes an oath not to reveal the rites, but a typical meeting begins with the high priestess describing a 9 ft. wide circle in the woods with her "athame," the ceremonial black knife which all witches are always supposed to carry.

When she has consecrated it she divides it into four quarters. In each there is a candle. In the middle is another candle on top of an altar. Also on the altar are the ceremonial sword, salt, water, a wand, a white-handled knife, and an incense burner. She "purifies" each member with her knife, then brings them into the circle.

The rules for these rituals are laid down in a rule book. This goes back thousands of years, but has never been printed, only copied out by hand by each witch as he or she passes through the stage of probationary, or apprentice, witch to first, then second, then third class witch.

## Good people

Mr Bracelin dislikes people trying to sensationalise witches, accusing them of black magic or casting evil spells. He says witches are good people, they take part in nothing evil. The high priestess adds that as you get good and bad Christians, so you can get good and bad witches, which means that some might have ritual killings and blood-letting, though she has never heard of them.

Neither minds being known as a witch, in fact they are rather proud of it. Both feel it is iniquitous that there is still intolerance, though it is less than in medieval times.

All covens get hundreds of applications from people wanting to be witches, but most are from men with some furtive sexual motive. Although witches are naked (women wear beads), there is no sexual aspect to the ritual.