



Lancashire Witches Walk

Background to the Lancashire Witches Walk

The route from where the witches lived near Pendle Hill to the place of their trial and execution in Lancaster is approximately 50 miles across the beautiful Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, taking in some breath-taking scenery.

The route has been broken down into seven sections, but you may wish to combine some of the days. This 'Lancashire Witches Walk' is a legacy of the 400th anniversary programme.

Along the length of the Lancashire Witches Walk you will discover 10 **Tercet milestones** each with one 'tercet' from a Carol Ann Duffy poem inspired by the plight of the Pendle Witches. Carol Ann's poem is made up of ten 'tercets' (the term used to describe a group of 3 lines of poetry); the number ten resonating with the fact that there were ten Pendle Witches. Originally from Scotland, Carol Ann became the United Kingdom's first woman Poet Laureate in 2009.

Stephen Raw has worked with Carol Ann's poem to design a contemporary cast iron 'marker' sited at ten locations along the route for the 'Lancashire Witches Walk'. Each 'Tercet' or marker displays prominently one of the 10 tercets of the poem in Stephen's beautiful and distinct script. The design allows for people to take a rubbing of each tercet on an A4 sheet. The full poem is also incorporated into the 'Tercet' design and each one also has the name of one of the ten witches inscribed on the spine of the 'Tercet'.

The Lancashire Witches Walk was developed as part of the Lancashire Witches 400 project Produced by Green Close www.greenclose.org www.lancashirewitches400.org

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History of the Lancashire Witches (1612-2012) by Robert Poole

In the spring and summer of 1612 no fewer than twenty Lancashire witches were imprisoned and committed for trial at Lancaster. Most were from the Pendle area but also from Clitheroe, Padiham, Samlesbury and Windle, near St Helens. Of these, one died in prison, three were declared completely innocent, five were acquitted but bound over, and eleven were found guilty, of whom ten were hanged. To this death toll we should add Jennet Preston of nearby Gisburn (then in Yorkshire, now in Lancashire) who was tried and hanged in York for a related case based on some of the same evidence.

At a time when witch trials were uncommon and generally happened singly, a mass trial generated high interest. The proceedings were written up by Thomas Potts, the clerk of the court, as a warning to would-be witches, as a caution to the public, and as propaganda for the achievements of the authorities in foiling a conspiracy of witches in one of the 'dark corners of the land'. Thanks to this unique book, *The Wonderful Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster*, the trial of the Lancashire

witches has been remembered and discussed ever since.

It all began in mid-March 1612 when a pedlar from Halifax named John Law had a frightening encounter with a poor young woman, Alizon Device, in a field near Colne. Refusing her request for pins he was seized by a fit that left him with "his head ... drawn awry, his eyes and face deformed, his speech not well to be understood; his thighs and legs stark lame." Alizon Device surprised all by confessing and begging for forgiveness. 'With weeping tears' she explained that she had been led astray by her grandmother, 'old Demdike', well-known in the district for her knowledge of old prayers, charms and cures – as well as curses.

The local magistrate, Roger Nowell of Read Hall, was called in. He quickly interviewed Demdike as well as Alizon's younger brother James and her mother Elizabeth. They told tales of misfortune, mistreatment and retaliation in which they themselves were essentially victims, their use of magic provoked – and occasionally even commissioned – by their wealthier neighbours. But they also told of a long-standing rivalry pursued



by magical means with a neighbouring family, the Whittles, headed by another grandmother, Demdike's supposed rival, 'old Chattox'. Demdike and her granddaughter Alizon, along with Chattox and her married daughter Anne, were committed to Lancaster castle on charges of witchcraft.

The net was widened further at the end of April when James and his younger sister Jennet, only nine years old, came up between them with a story about a 'great meeting of witches' at their grandmother's house, Malkin Tower, on Good Friday just past. Their muddled accounts of a family gathering to discuss what to do about those imprisoned were elaborated under questioning into a plot to rescue the imprisoned witches by (most improbably) blowing up Lancaster castle with gunpowder. Among the alleged conspirators were Alice Nutter, 'a rich woman; [who] had a great estate, and children of good hope', Jennet Preston, a female servant of the Lister family of Gisburn, and various friends and neighbours. The authorities rounded up many of those involved, including Alizon's brother James Device and their mother

Elizabeth. By the time of the trial in August the Pendle accused had been joined in the dungeons by other alleged witches from Padiham, Samlesbury and St Helens. Old Demdike had however died in the castle.

All nineteen Lancashire witches were tried in the space of two days at the next Lancashire assizes in mid-August, amid dramatic courtroom scenes. James Device appears to have attempted suicide beforehand and cut a sorry figure in the dock as his earlier evidence was read out. Young Jennet however proved to be a confident and well-rehearsed witness, impressing the court by identifying some of the alleged conspirators by sight. Alizon was confronted again by the pedlar whom she had bewitched, begging and receiving his forgiveness. None of the adults confessed to anything of significance, save for the sad figure of Elizabeth Device who, confronted for the first time by Jennet's evidence, angrily denounced her and then meekly confessed to everything, willing to say anything that might save her children. Elizabeth, James and Alizon Device were among the ten alleged

witches hanged the next day on Lancaster Moor, somewhere below the present-day Williamson Park.

Various interpretations of the trial have been put forward. The authorities' claims of a satanic conspiracy, so obviously contrived, can confidently be discounted. So can all explanations which assume that the witches were anything other than ordinary people, some of whom practised magic to supplement their meagre livings, and who got involved in feuds with their neighbours. Their belief that old prayers, charms and curses could take effect seems to have been shared by the wider community on whose margins they existed. They claimed to have been put up to it by some of those same neighbours, who were either pursuing feuds themselves or seeking to protect themselves from magic. This sort of thing seems to have been going on in a low-level way for twenty years or more without generating any prosecutions, so the big question is: why did it all blow up in 1612?

The principal explanation for any persecution must focus on the persecutors. The chief of these was

the main investigating magistrate Roger Nowell, described by Thomas Potts as 'God's justice'. He had social connections with local gentry families who believed they had suffered from witchcraft, so may already have been alert to the issue. He was one of the rising generation of godly Lancashire justices of the peace who sought to root out both Roman Catholicism (illegal since the protestant reformation) and the remnants of old-style semi-magical religious beliefs. Significantly, Thomas Potts declared in his book that since the verdict, 'this county of Lancaster which now may lawfully be said to abound in witches of diverse kinds, [such] as seminaries, Jesuits, and papists.' There are also some direct quotations from the witch-hunters' manual, *Demonology*, written by King James VI and I in 1597 when as King of Scotland he believed himself to have been the object of witchcraft. This suggests that Potts's book of the trial was also an attempt to curry favour in high places, although there is no evidence that it was successful.

The Lancashire authorities didn't have it all their own way in 1612. There

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were several acquittals, and there are hints in Potts's book that both these and some of the convictions were controversial. The spectacle of young Alizon Device being hanged after being publicly forgiven by her supposed victim must have excited pity, while the reliance on the evidence of children for several of the convictions is likely to have generated disquiet. The authorities seem not only to have accepted the stories of children but to have intervened to shape them into tales of devilish conspiracy designed to secure convictions. It is in the manipulation of children's stories by designing adults that the events of 1612 provide the closest parallel to modern cases of supposed witchcraft.

The trial of the Lancashire witches has become famous because it fell near the end of England's age of witchcraft trials, which came in the century from the 1540s to the 1640s – that is, in the aftermath of the protestant reformation (and not in the middle ages as often supposed). Thomas Potts's unique account of the Lancashire trial provided a set of legal precedents which supported later

witch trials, including the notorious activities of the self-styled 'witchfinder general' during the civil wars of the 1640s. Another batch of Lancashire witches was tried in 1633, with further convictions and deaths in prison. This time however the case was called in by a sceptical monarch and exposed as the tale of another child witness who had heard about the events of 1612. Potts's account passed into local folklore before being rediscovered in the nineteenth century. It was used as the basis for Harrison Ainsworth's novel *The Lancashire Witches*, which has been in print ever since it came out in 1849 and which in turn has provided many further myths about the events of 1612. Later writers have added their own, such that it has become difficult to tell fact from fiction – which, of course, was the case from the very beginning.

There is no better example of the power of stories to generate history than the trial of the Lancashire witches. Much of the landscape in which these tragic events took place has altered little in four centuries. To walk through it with an awareness of the events of 1612 brings a sense of a

past that is in one way strange and remote, but in another curiously close.

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Robert Poole is the author of The Wonderful Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster (Carnegie Publishing, 2011), a modern English edition of the original trial evidence with an extended introduction. He is also the editor of The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories (Manchester University Press, reissued 2011), a book of essays about the trial. The evidence can be viewed online at www.lancashirewitches.com

