Witchcraft, history and children: interpreting England's biggest witch trial, 1612

— Robert Poole

Witchcraft is serious history. 1612 marks the 400th anniversary of England's biggest peacetime witch trial, that of the Lancashire witches: 20 witches from the Forest of Pendle were imprisoned, ten were hanged in Lancaster, and another in York. As a result of some imaginative commemorative programmes, a number of schools in the region have begun teaching the history of witchcraft, opening an unusual window on life in Tudor and Stuart Britain.

Ever since Keith Thomas's classic *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, English witchcraft has been understood largely as a by-product of 'village tensions'. It typically involved begging with menaces, festering feuds and clashes between neighbours in which old, poor, insecure and quarrelsome women were most at risk. Witches were prosecuted through the ordinary criminal justice system, usually singly, and sentenced to stand in the pillory or, at worst, to be hanged. The charges were usually brought by their wealthier neighbours. English witchcraft was thus quite unlike the large-scale top-down witch-hunts of continental Europe, where teams of inquisitors conducted heresy-hunts which often ended up with 'witches' being burnt at the stake by the dozen.

This picture is now being modified. To start with there is Scotland, where (as listeners to Radio 4's *Shakespeare's Restless World* will know) the godly King James VI believed he was the victim of a conspiracy of witches to raise a storm and sink his fleet as he was sailing home from Denmark with his new bride in 1590. James became King of England in 1603 and was greeted with a flurry of witch-related homage: an English edition of his treatise on witch-hunting, *Demonology;* a new and harsher English witchcraft act; and Shakespeare's play *Macbeth,* performed at court, with its famous three witches.

Several English witch prosecutions seem to have been aimed at currying favour with King James I, chief among them that of the Lancashire witches in 1612. It was not only England's biggest peacetime witch trial but also the best-documented. The official account of the proceedings was published soon afterwards as *The Wonderful Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster*, compiled by the clerk of the court Thomas Potts. Potts claimed that the investigation followed King James's guidelines, and the book in turn provided an important set of legal precedents: for the use of witches' own testimonies in court (supergrass evidence, as it were), and for the use of children's evidence.

It is the use of children's evidence that makes the trial of the Lancashire witches such a fertile source as historical story. The incident that sparked off the whole episode was a meeting between young Alison Device and a pedlar. She asked him for pins, he refused to open his pack for her, and shortly afterwards he collapsed in a mysterious fit which we can now recognise as a stroke. Alison's evidence shows that she believed herself to be tainted by a family history of witchcraft, having somehow inherited the supernatural powers of her notorious grandmother, 'Old Demdike'. In a dramatic courtroom scene Alison confessed before the crippled pedlar and begged his forgiveness. He did forgive her, and the prosecution had to move quickly to ensure that the jury's sympathies did not lead them to acquit.

Alison's younger brother James (probably aged 12-14) and younger sister Jennet (age 9) were key witnesses for the prosecution. Early testimonies in the process had told stories of low-level magic and neighbourhood disputes – sick cattle, arguments over payments and family feuds pursued through the threat of witchcraft. Things were moved on to a new level however when James and Jennet were questioned about a neighbourhood meeting that took place at the Device family home of Malkin Tower at Easter 1612, apparently in order to plan how to help those in prison awaiting trial. Under interrogation this became a far-reaching conspiracy of witches to take revenge on their persecutors, blow up Lancaster castle, kill the gaoler and rescue the prisoners. A few years after Guy Fawkes, this episode was paraded by the prosecution as Lancashire's Gunpowder Plot. As Thomas Potts put it:

> *This county of Lancaster now may lawfully be said to abound in witches of diverse kinds as* [in] *seminaries, Jesuits, and papists. … What hath the King's majesty written and published in his* Demonology *… which hath not here been executed, put in practice or discovered?*

James and Jennet's evidence about those who were at the Malkin Tower meeting sent several people to their deaths. Challenged in the courtroom to substantiate her stories, nine-year-old Jennet several times picked out those she had named from identity parades, convincing one sceptical husband that his wife had indeed been a witch. In August 1612 Jennet saw her brother, sister, mother and grandmother hanged at Lancaster. Perhaps only then did she understand the consequences of the stories she had told.

The so-called witches appear to have been active for 20 years or more, using a mixture of charms, curses and old half-remembered Catholic prayers to do magic. By their own account they were often asked to do magic by their neighbours: to cure a sick cow, to fix a batch of tainted beer, to further some family dispute or to protect against the magic of others. Some may have had the reputation of being 'wise' or 'cunning women': local helps, herbalists and healers. By the same token they were naturally suspected when misfortune struck, as it inevitably did. But the point is that they were used by their neighbours and had long been part of the normal fabric of bad community relations. They were only identified as organised enemies of society, as a separate class of 'witches', when something happened to provoke a witch-hunt.

In seeking to understand persecution, the explanation must focus on the persecutors. In the case of the great Lancashire witch-hunt of 1612, the puritanically-inclined authorities, led by the magistrate Roger Nowell – 'God's justice' as Potts calls him – seem to have been anxious to equate witchcraft with 'popery' and open alliance with the devil. Roman Catholics and religious backsliders were thus warned of the dangers of resisting religious reformation. This makes Lancashire's great witch trial look rather more like the top-down witch-hunts of continental Europe than was once supposed.

This remarkable trial provides a wealth of evidence for many of the themes of Tudor and Stuart history: religion, politics, social tensions and family life. Events are seen in part through children's eyes, but the children's magical beliefs are shared by the adults around them. Stories of menacing black dogs and tempting devils, offered by way of excuse and explanation, are turned by the prosecutors into incriminating accounts of pacts with the devil. Where do stories end and history begin? Perhaps today's children are as well qualified as anyone to judge.

Designing enquiries to make pupils think about interpretations of witchcraft

History is impossible without generalisations – about time 'periods' defined by patterns of thought, action and behaviour posited as 'typical' or about the characteristic features that distinguish events and phenomena in one context ('English witchcraft') from analogous phenomena elsewhere ('contintental witchcraft'). Exploring problem cases that challenge established models can be a fruitful way into thinking about how generalisations are formed and how other heuristics are developed in order to help make sense of the complexities of the historical record. Introduce *Key Stage 3 (11–14-year-old)* pupils to Keith Thomas' English model and then present them with Jacobean evidence: how far does the Lancashire case – which started, after all, with a curse and a pedlar but which was subsequently driven by witch-hunting gentry versed in *Demonology* – challenge Thomas' model? How serious is the challenge and what is the appropriate response – a new model or a series of models reflecting change over time? *Advanced Level (16-19 year old)* pupils could be asked to explore these issues in greater depth and to explain matches and mismatches between Thomas' model and Potts' story. What was changing in the first half of the seventeenth century that might explain shifts in elite responses to 'witches'? How does having a Scottish king change the English picture and why?

Examples of school-based work are available at the Lancashire Witches 400 website, below.

The Editors

Further reading

Works of history:

Lumby, J. (1998) *The Lancashire Witch-Craze,* Lancaster: Carnegie.

Poole, R. (2011) *The Wonderful Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster,* Lancaster: Carnegie.

Poole, R. (ed.) (2011) *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thomas, K. (1973) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Children's fiction:

Akinyemi, R. (1994) *The Witches of Pendle,* Oxford: Oxford Bookworms.

Michael, L. (August 2012) *Malkin Child*, Lancaster: Foxtail.

Websites:

www.lancashirewitches.com The original 1612 book of the trial, modernised and bitesize, available summer 2012.

http://lancashirewitches400.org/ The Lancashire Witches 400 programme, including a 'witches in schools' section.

www.bbc.co.uk/radio4 *Shakespeare's Restless World, part 10: Toil and Trouble* on James I and witchcraft.

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Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.