

The Witch Report 1600—Yorkshire headed the list

June 8 2016



Credit: University of Huddersfield

Was 1600s Yorkshire a good place to be a witch? A history researcher at the University of Huddersfield has been finding out, and her investigations have resulted in a new online article.

In England as a whole there were 2,000 arraignments for witchcraft between 1560 and 1706. But many were acquitted and just 300 were

executed, meaning that the country escaped the full frenzy of the witch hunts that took place in other parts of Europe.

"Belief not only varied from country to country, but also from county to county," according to Amelia Sceats in her article, which appears in the new issue of *Postgraduate Perspectives on the Past*, the University's journal for standout work by postgraduate students of history, heritage and archaeology.

"On the surface, Yorkshire did not have a witch hunt, even though the Pendle witch trials of 1612 took place nearby," continues Amelia. But she did discover that there was a greater propensity in Yorkshire than in other regions to believe in the existence of covens of witches.

For example, she has analysed a 1621 book titled *Deamonologia*, written by Edward Fairfax, who lived in Knaresborough. He was a highly-cultivated gentleman... but he believed in witches and that a group of six women had bewitched his daughters.

"This shows that Fairfax believed in covens, organised groups of witches - an idea that was not as popular in the rest of England," writes Amelia in *Belief, Influence and Action: Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Yorkshire*.

The women accused by Fairfax and his daughters were acquitted at York Assizes, and *Deamonologia* was the indignant response. Fairfax believed he had been treated unfairly and that "hardness of heart" meant judges did not believe his daughters.

He repeated his witchcraft accusations in the book and for this he could have been sued for defamation. Amelia discovered that between 1600 and 1700 a substantial number of people in Yorkshire claimed compensation for loss of their reputation after they had beaten

accusations of witchcraft.

Sometimes those accusations were made for fraudulent purposes. For example, landowners might use witchcraft as an excuse to evict tenants. "In these cases, the Yorkshire gentry were able to use the courts to their advantage by accusing those of lower status than themselves," writes Amelia.

But the common people were well aware of this tactic and in Yorkshire there were many examples of petitions being got up in support of the accused.

The main argument of the article is that attitudes towards witchcraft depended on social class. The educated elite had a powerful influence over the legal system and without their belief in witchcraft, persecutions could not have taken place, argues Amelia, who also analyses the impact made by James I, a keen believer in witches, when he came to the throne in 1603.

The elite were more concerned with the idea that there was "a very real evil on earth", but "the commons concerned themselves with a witch's practical deeds, such as the cursing of livestock and crops", according to the article. But while they had religious faith, common people "also took part in folk rituals and superstitious rites which were denounced by their superiors".

The article also deals with topics such as the searches made on the bodies of supposed witches for unnatural marks and other ordeals that they underwent.

Amelia, who is aged 21 and from Cleckheaton, graduated in history at the University of Huddersfield in 2015. Her Perspectives article is drawn from her BA dissertation. She is currently completing a Masters by

Research in which she examines attitudes towards mental illness in the Tudor period. Her plan then is to study for a PhD, this time concentrating on the experience of being a woman accused of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England.

More information: Amelia Grace Sceats, Belief, Influence And Action: Witchcraft In Seventeenth-Century Yorkshire, *Postgraduate Perspectives on the Past* (2016). [DOI: 10.5920/ppp.2016.216](https://doi.org/10.5920/ppp.2016.216)

Provided by University of Huddersfield

Citation: The Witch Report 1600—Yorkshire headed the list (2016, June 8) retrieved 30 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-witch-1600yorkshire.html>

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