

## Village Echoes

### Witchcraft

Life in 21<sup>st</sup> century Goudhurst bears little resemblance to that of 100 years ago and even less to the lives of its inhabitants several centuries earlier. To those living during the 17<sup>th</sup> century especially, many things we now think of as normal would be incomprehensible: even mundane activities such as the ownership of dogs was sometimes seen as a cause for deep suspicion. Belief in witchcraft was widespread and, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the reigning monarch, James 1<sup>st</sup>, who was a firm believer in witchcraft, wrote and published a book on demonology. In this he confirmed the death penalty for those accused of witchcraft and at the same time widened the scope of the law to include those who were considered to associate with an evil spirit. By the 1640s the hunting and prosecution of witches was exacerbated by the activities of Matthew Hopkins, (nicknamed the Witchfinder General) although his activities were mostly confined to East Anglia. In Kent during the 1650s it was chiefly the members of the Baptist movement who, researchers have shown, played a prominent part in prosecuting those considered to be witches. This zealotry to exterminate witches in Kent led to three women from Goudhurst being accused of witchcraft and prosecuted at the Kent Assizes in 1657 and 1670.

In the first case, Mary, the wife of labourer Stephen Allen, and their daughter, also called Mary stood trial for witchcraft at Maidstone on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1657. Both were accused, although on separate dates in November 1656, *“that they did feed and employ an evil spirit in the likeness of a black dog”* intending to use it in the practice of witchcraft. Several witnesses testified to the truth of accusation, with the younger Mary even testifying against her mother. Both were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged.

In the second case on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1670, it was the misfortune of widow, Sarah French to be accused of bewitching John Allen, the young son of William Allen of Goudhurst, on 1<sup>st</sup> June causing him *“to languish until the 3<sup>rd</sup> June when he died”*. Sarah pleaded not guilty and may have been acquitted (records are unclear at this point). However, the Goudhurst burial records show that John, son of William Allen, was buried on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1670 aged 4½ years and a widow, Sarah French, who may well be the accused, on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1672.

The last execution for witchcraft in England took place in 1685, and in 1735 the Witchcraft Act was passed. This ruled that “witches” should be considered vagrants and con artists and as such they could be fined and imprisoned but not executed. The act was not repealed until 1951.

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