

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

At its November meeting the Society welcomed back Dr. Simon Hancock to give an illustrated lecture on 'Witchcraft in Seventeenth Century Pembrokeshire.'

A belief in witchcraft can be found in ancient myths, in the Bible, in Greek legend and in literature. In Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, belief turned in to persecution, becoming something of a craze across the continent, particularly after the publication of the witchfinders' manual, *Malleus Maleficorum*. Why at this time witchcraft should have obsessed both the authorities and the public imagination is uncertain but the Reformation, Counter Reformation, wars, famine and social dislocation would all have contributed to a sense of fear and uncertainty. In Scotland and England trials and executions of witches were widespread, where there were some 4,500 burnings in the former and in the latter around 1,000 hangings took place, but in Wales there is scant evidence to show any general oppression and an uncertainty as to whether any witches were hanged.

Superstition and simple beliefs fed into a system of social fears and possibly social control: the witch may be blamed for illness, pain, death of livestock and failure of crops. Witches could curse those who offended them by refusing help, not giving food and withholding charity. Witches were stereotyped: they were old women, haggard, ugly and deformed; they could fly and kept familiars. Curiously, aside from the old woman as a witch the Quakers were often accused of practising witchcraft and persecuted accordingly.

The principal judicial source for prosecutions for witchcraft in Wales are the goal files of the Court of Great Sessions but there are substantial gaps in the records. Depositions submitted to the Court by accusers and witnesses provide a secondary line of research. The depositions show some seven allegations of witchcraft were made in Pembrokeshire in the 1600's but in six of them no further action was taken, suggesting that there was little appetite for witch trails in the county. Katherine Bowen of Gumfreston was accused of bewitching pigs in 1607, Agnes Griffith of Manordeifi of bewitching cattle in 1618, Hugh Lloyd of Haverfordwest enchanted by Quakers in 1668, Olivia Powell of Loveston of witchcraft in 1693, John David of Llanychaer of being a cunning man in 1693 and Dorcas Heddin of Haverfordwest of witchcraft in 1699. None of the accusations were pursued to trial. Only Ieuan John ap Howel on Narberth was hanged. He was actually tried for stealing a cow and in his defence he claimed a drinking partner had urged him to commit the crime, later recalling that the companion had horns, must have been the devil and had bewitched him.

The case of Dorcas Heddin appears to have been the last judicial accusation of witchcraft in Wales and in 1736 the Witchcraft Act was finally repealed. Nevertheless, in country areas the recourse to the wise man or woman has persisted even into the present day.

The speaker was warmly thanked for an intriguing lecture by Mrs Rosemary Hayes. Members were also reminded that the Society's Christmas Party would take place at the Wiseman's Bridge Inn on 14 December, beginning at 7.00pm.