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*for* THE FOLK-LORE SOCIETY

TEN SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

# The Witches of Dengie

by ERIC MAPLE

IN the year 1960 I completed an investigation of the witchcraft traditions of the Dengie Hundred of South-East Essex, a district lying to the north of the river Crouch and bordered on the east by the North Sea. Its population was, in the past, almost entirely agricultural with the exception of the fishermen and boatmen of the waterside villages, and until the construction of the atomic station at Bradwell the district was in most respects a good fifty years behind the times. Even today an atmosphere of pre-war calm pervades the whole area.

Like its southern neighbour, the Rochford Hundred, the Hundred of Dengie was until comparatively modern times regarded as 'Witch Country', to use a local term for any district where the traditions of witchcraft were very strong. The heart of this tradition was the village of Latchingdon where, until the middle of the nineteenth century, a family of witches named Hart had lived for generations.

Possibly the earliest reference to this tradition concerns a Witch Hart who lived in Latchingdon in the sixteenth century and who, according to popular legend, stole a bell from Latchingdon Old Church and tried to deliver it to the witches of Canewdon over the river Crouch. She was drowned in the attempt and afterwards haunted the river and sea walls as the parish ghost.<sup>1</sup>

The last and best remembered of these Hart witches was Harriet Hart who lived in the first half of the last century. There is a reference to the baptism of her son in the parish registers for 1834. She was notorious for having committed the commonplace crimes of witchcraft, causing storms, blighting crops in the field and bewitching pigs. Unlike others of her kind, however, she seems to have been blessed with a sense of humour.

This is illustrated in a letter (1960) from Mr J. A. Thorogood, now of Wickham Bishops.

<sup>1</sup> The legend has been described in my article 'The Witches of Canewdon' (*Folklore*, Vol. 71, December, 1960).

'My grandfather was going by one night when the witch came out and said, "Where you going, Joe?" so my grandfather said, "It's nothing to do with you." "Yes, it is." said the witch. "You're going down to Police Station corner after that girl . . . but there is another chap coming after the girl, but he shall not come." So as the other chap was going down the road he got as far as Butterfields Chase and he was taken like somebody drunk and could not proceed any further.'

Unable to overcome this magic the rival gave up in disgust and for the Rutherfords the affair had a happy ending.

This is possibly the only occasion upon which a good word has been said on behalf of Harriet Hart. Generally she was hated and there is a tradition to the effect that the villagers once lit a great bonfire in the open as a ritual to break her powers.

Like other witches of the Essex marshlands she was said to have the power of flight, her method of transvection being not a broomstick but a hurdle. She was also accused of casting spells on horses and wheeled vehicles. There is a well-known anecdote told of her lurking in the hub of a waggon wheel and halting the waggon. The drover began to lash the horses but a passer-by shouted, 'Don't hit the horses, hit the wheel.' The drover lashed the wheel and suddenly old Witch Hart materialized, covered with blood. After this the waggon was able to resume its journey.

Mr Adams of Latchingdon remembers a macabre story which was in circulation when he was a boy seventy years ago. Old Harriet Hart was lying dead in her cottage by Deadaway Bridge when her grandson passed on horseback. As he drew abreast of the cottage a horde of white mice poured out of the garden and pursued him up the road. Realising that these were her imps he forced the horse into a gallop and escaped, breaking the entail whereby the powers of a witch were passed on from generation to generation.

Several other villages of the Hundred boasted their witches towards the close of the last century. At Ostend, near Burnham-on-Crouch, lived Mary Cockley, a woman who was feared for her power of ill wishing. Mr Playle of this village remembers how as a boy he refused to run an errand for her and was threatened with: 'You'll come home wetter than when you set out!' In fact he fell into a pond and almost drowned. On returning home he was met by the jeers of the witch which so enraged his mother that she struck her with a house flannel. His mother was immediately taken

ill, but whether from an evil spell or merely the effect of terror Mr Playle cannot be sure.

Occasionally the traditions of Dengie witchcraft break fresh ground. One witch named Fanny Bird, who lived at Tinkers Hole, a devil-haunted wood near Ostend, was said to have bewitched a farmer's steam threshing machine causing it to break down. The labourers in revenge smashed all the windows of her cottage and she narrowly escaped personal violence. It was said that she had trafficked with the Devil and during one of these rituals a sheet of lightning had come down, setting her arm on fire. This was the local explanation for her withered arm and incidentally for her husband's club foot. It was said that on her deathbed Fanny Bird attempted to pass on her powers by handing over her imps to her daughter, but she, 'though the living image of her mother, was a good woman and refused to take them.'

Before the coming of the atomic power station the village of Bradwell was an isolated backwater rarely visited by the outsider. Even today strangers are resented and I found it almost impossible to obtain admittance to any of the poorer houses. However, with the assistance of a friendly milkman, I discovered on the outskirts of the village Mrs Argent, aged eighty-five, who had vivid memories of her mother's stories about a witch named Diddy Horn who she informed me had once bewitched some butter. The local remedy was the well-known one of thrusting a red-hot poker into the churn. Suddenly Diddy Horn came running from her cottage crying, 'Don't burn the butter.' to which the reply was 'No, we'll burn you!' after which, said Mrs Argent, Diddy Horn ran away and was never seen again.

From this old lady I discovered a little more of the local witch lore, delivered to me in the form of a homily.

'The power of the witch is born in them. There's a bit of the devil about them, you see. Witches always had white mice. They would sit and talk to them. We always thought that about white mice. The time to see ghosts and witches is breakaday . . . but only when the witches are ghosts.'

I also learned about the Evil Eye although the term itself was quite unknown to Mrs Argent. A woman who possessed this faculty would be discussed thus: 'Well, you know what she is by the look in her eyes!'

The belief in the white mouse as the witches imp was once common all over Essex, although it has only rarely been recorded. It is a curious sidelight upon the last legends of witchcraft that they generally refer to the breaking of the entail and the final destruction of the witch power. Possibly this is a symbolic reflection of the end of the age of witch belief and the beginning of rationalism in the countryside. The perpetual theme of these legends is the refusal by the heirs of the witch to accept their grim legacy. In the case of witch Hart the grandson escaped from the imps; while the daughter of Fanny Bird rejected them. Several legends collected in the Rochford Hundred indicate other methods of breaking the entail, one by destroying the mice in a kitchen fire, another by burying them in the same grave as the witch.

I recently received a letter from a clergyman's wife which contained a curious witchcraft anecdote, collected in 1904. At Saffron Walden, Essex, it seems that a reputed witch, having no heirs, was therefore unable to pass on her powers and that those who passed her cottage as she lay dying heard the dreadful screams of her imps who realized that they, too, must die.

Among the strangest traditions of Dengie were those concerning the White Witches or wizards as they were called. An older term for these Cunning Men, 'The Curren' is no longer remembered. These magicians were invariably farm labourers and were thought to possess the power to stop and start farm machinery with their eyes. The best known of these were 'Silly Bill' Spearman and 'Buzzy' of Latchingdon. The Spearmans were an Essex gypsy family; 'Buzzy' was an ex-policeman. Buzzy's dispute with a farmer over the length of his dinner break is still remembered. To settle the argument once and for all Buzzy bewitched the steam threshing machine so that the belt flew off and could not be replaced until he had completed his meal. This curious power was also possessed by George Pickingill, the wizard of Canewdon.

Another white wizard whose name has been forgotten was often seen driving a cart pulled by two large dogs about the country lanes in the eighteen-fifties. He was particularly secretive about where he lived. One man courted his displeasure by following him home but after trailing the wizard for an hour he underwent the searing experience of being 'chased up-hill by a load of turnips which had fallen from the wizard's cart'.

The letter from the gentleman who described this remarkable incident concluded with the astounding sentence, 'Some people in my grandfather's time used to think that the witchcraft was done somehow by cooking rats.'

An unusual method of combating witches was told to me by Mr Instance of Latchingdon, aged eighty-seven. In the Bradwell of his boyhood the old men would describe how the witches would hide in the handle of a fork or a spade and impede its use and that they could only be expelled by 'hustling' them, that is thrashing the handle with a stick.

A farmer of Latchingdon described the curious methods employed by a neighbour about 1880 when his cows were struck down by disease. He threaded a loop of string through the brisket and cut off the tips of the tail of each animal.

Among the fascinating myths of this countryside is the legend of a woman on a white horse told by Mrs Clark of Althorne. The Spectre could be seen riding through the sky on moonlit nights but only if one looked through the branches of a certain tree, which grew near the village of Mayland. A farmer demonstrated his contempt for the myth by cutting down the tree, after which the strange rider was seen no more.

Also, at Mayland, walked the ghost of a headless white calf. Fathers would warn their daughters, 'Don't be late. The headless calf is about tonight.'

Wart cures were an integral part of Dengie magic, but the most remarkable of these, told by a cobbler of Burnham, was one in which a chalk mark was drawn inside a chimney and as the mark faded so the wart would disappear.

Devil lore was once as common as witch lore in Essex country districts. Mr Harrington, a bedridden farm labourer, of Tillingham told me this story of the devil who haunted the local crossroads. This devil had a grudge against a particular farm-worker and waited for him at the crossroads to give him a good hiding. When the farm-labourer appeared the devil assumed invisibility and attacked him with flailing hooves. The onlookers were treated to the astounding sight of a man sparring all over the roadway with some unseen presence and every now and then falling to the ground with yells of anguish. In the end the countryman lost his nerve and fled down the road pursued by the sound of hooves.

The devil did not always have things his own way. On one occasion he went to collect a soul which had been mortgaged to him but discovered to his disgust that his client, a greengrocer, had fled. He tracked him to Tillingham village where he discovered him selling turnips from a barrow. At the sight of the devil the greengrocer took sanctuary in the church and mocked him from within. The now furious devil kicked a hole in the brickwork of the church and finally vented his rage on the barrow, upturning it on to the road and kicking the vegetables to pulp.

A very common superstition among the children of this district and, for that matter, most of south-east Essex concerned the oldest grave in the churchyard. It was believed that this was the burial place of the Devil and that those who ran around it seven times would hear him rattling his chains. Few children dared to stay in the game beyond the sixth round.

The people of the Dengie Hundred greatly feared the witches of Canewdon on the far side of the river, yet there were occasions when they actually consulted them. Mr M. Burton of Dengie village remembered how two labourers decided to consult the 'Old Man Witch', George Pickingill of Canewdon<sup>2</sup> over a wages dispute. As they set forth, one said to the other, 'I wonder if the old b . . . is at home.' On arriving at the wizard's cottage they knocked at the door and suddenly the window flew open and the wizard thrust his head out and hissed at them, 'Yes, the old b . . . is at home.'

This study began with the legend of the sixteenth-century witch Hart who ended her career at the bottom of the river Crouch and for a time haunted the Canewdon side of the river as a ghost. One of the most persistent traditions about her was that she was headless. Until recently I was under the distinct impression that the spectre had not been seen for at least a generation since it had all but faded from the memories of the local people.

However, I was told by Miss Jacobs who lives in the old Ferry House on the Dengie side of the river, that within the last few years an apparition had appeared before her fireside. It was a woman floating in the air and without a head. Miss Jacobs had hitherto been unaware of the old legend of the witch-ghost and had

<sup>2</sup> Died 1909.

imagined her own ghost to be that of Anne Boleyn who once lived in the district.

These discoveries present a picture of the last days of witch-belief in one remote district of South-East Essex before the old dark myths had capitulated before the more powerful magic of scientific medicine and education. In the main they belong to the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

By 1900 the Cunning Men had disappeared and had become little more than a folk-memory although as in the case of the two wise men of Latchingdon their powers were still occasionally ascribed to fresh characters who lived well this side of the age of magic.

I think that an interesting example of the evolutionary process in folklore is provided by the supposed transference of the power of the magician over the waggon wheel to the steam threshing machine. It is a far cry from the horse-drawn vehicle to the powered machine yet the belief is not entirely dead today. I recently discovered a descendent of the well-known white wizard Cunning Murrell of Hadleigh, Essex, who claimed that the power over mechanical objects was still retained in the family who, it seems, are 'natural mechanics'.

While much of the witch-lore will be familiar to students of witchcraft I think that the legends of the white mice, the curious imps of the Essex marsh witches, will add to our understanding of the nature of the traditions of English witchcraft and the role of legend in reflecting social change.

In conclusion I would add that I am convinced that witchcraft was no more than a hideous legend enslaving generation after generation in its toils. White witches and wizards there undoubtedly were, but as for black witchcraft, this, like the mythical white mice of the Essex witches, was part and parcel of the inheritance of the past in which disease and death were believed to be of diabolical agency.