

# Solving a sixteenth century mystery!

by Maureen James

On April 4th, 1593, a witchcraft trial took place at the Court Hall, in the Market Place of Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire. Two days later Alice Samuel, her daughter Agnes and husband John, having been found guilty, were hung on the gibbet at nearby Mill Common. Sir Henry Cromwell, the Lord of the manor, received £40 from the sale of the Samuel's property which he bequeathed for a sermon to be preached on the evils of witchcraft every Lady Day (25<sup>th</sup> March) by a Doctor of Divinity from Cambridge.

This case occurred over 50 years before the 'Witchfinder General' Matthew Hopkins carried out his campaign of terror in East Anglia, and it became the subject of a pamphlet which outlined how Alice was accused of 'bewitching' the five daughters of her neighbours, the wealthy Throckmorton family and of causing the death of Lady Cromwell, the wife of Sir Henry.

The whole saga started shortly after the Throckmorton's moved to Warboys, just a few miles from Huntingdon, when their nine year old daughter Jane became ill. She was convulsing so much that she had to be tied to the bed and she claimed that a cat was ripping the skin from her face. Her father, believing that she must have the 'palsy', or epilepsy as we know it today, called the doctor, but after examining the girl he declared that it was not the 'palsy' but that the child must be bewitched.

Alice Samuel, their neighbour, as was the custom of the time, had visited the girl's house to enquire after the sick girl and had sat herself down by the fire. The child, between fits had pointed at Alice and cried "look at where the old witch sits. Did you ever see anyone more like a witch than she is...I cannot bear to look at her". Alice left the house shortly after, not knowing that this was the beginning of two years of persecution during which all five of the daughters and a number of the servants would also show the symptoms which the Doctors from Cambridge University put down to witchcraft.

With the cause identified all the Throckmorton's needed then to do was find the source of the malice. Lady Susan Cromwell as Lady of the Manor visited the family and then went to talk with Alice Samuel. We have no accurate record of the conversation, but it is alleged that Alice said to her "why are you afraid of me for I have never harmed you yet?" With these words Alice as much as signed her own death warrant. Lady Cromwell went home that night experienced terrible dreams during which she alleged that a cat tried to kill her. She never recovered her health and died just over a year later.

By Christmas Eve of 1592, things had escalated to the point that Alice was a virtual prisoner in the Throckmorton house. If she dared go home the girls would convulse and scream as if they were possessed, if she stayed with them they were fine. Eventually the stress got too much for Alice and she began to feel that her stomach was filled with the devils spawn, and that consequently she must be a witch and the cause of the dreadful things that had happened. She confessed to the priest. Her husband and daughter when they heard of her confession, fearing for her life, begged her to recant for they knew that though she was a poor simple old woman she was not a witch. For this they too were implicated and taken into custody.

On April 4, 1593, at their trial, at least five hundred people watched the proceedings as the children vividly continued their fits until each Samuel stated, with slight variation, "As I am a witch and did consent to the death of the Lady Cromwell, so I charge the devil to suffer Mistress Jane to come out of her fit." John Samuel refused to speak, until Judge Fenner threatened him with immediate execution. Alice and Agnes bravely accepted their fate. Upon hearing the Samuels' oaths, the children immediately became well. With their admission of guilt, Judge Fenner ordered that the Samuels be taken away to be hanged.

But now, more than 400 years later, historians and scientists have changed their opinion on what caused such terrible, painful spasms, and it has nothing to do with witchcraft. In 1976

Prof. Linda Caporael, of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York, noticed a link between the strange symptoms reported by the accusers in the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the hallucinogenic effects of drugs like LSD. LSD is a derivative of ergot, a fungus that affects rye grain. Linda did some more research and found that not only was rye the staple diet for the parts of Salem affected but the weather conditions were also ideal for ergot.

Ergotism (ergot poisoning) is believed also to have afflicted the small French town of Pont-Saint-Esprit in August 1951. A number of the residents of 'Pont St. Esprit' a small town in France, were struck by ergot poisoning when a local bakery sold rye bread contaminated with ergot. Four people died, and a large number suffered 'possession' or 'bewitchment'. The victims outlined the symptoms

- Thousands of pin pricks on the skin / insects crawling under the skin
- Seeing all sorts of wild or deformed animals
- Visions of fire and blood running down the walls
- Violent convulsions

The bakery was actually believed to be possessed by the Devil and was exorcised by the local bishop

Following the publication of the research of Prof Caporael, historians began to study demographics, weather, literature and crop records to look for further cases. A link was found between drops in population in communities that had diets of rye bread at times of damp weather. An historian also found links between a large proportion of witchcraft trials in Europe and regions where rye was usually grown.

When the Throckmortons arrived in Warboys, rye had become a staple crop in East Anglia. It is now believed that the family had eaten bread made with rye containing ergot. Within a short time all five of the sisters were suffering from uncontrollable fits and frightening hallucinations. Whether or not the girls, after the toxins had left their systems, feigned the symptoms to bring about the demise of their old neighbour Alice Samuel is more difficult to determine. It may be, as one historian theorises, that they, after exaggerating some of the symptoms, felt they dare not admit that they were now well, or perhaps, I wonder, after the dreadful experience of the poisoning, the impressionable young girls could somehow recreate the 'fits' just by thinking about the experience. Whatever the case, the Lady Day sermon preaching against witchcraft is believed to have continued in All Saint's Church, Huntingdon until 1814. To my knowledge there is no memorial to the three who were hanged on Mill Common.

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