

The following was included as a true seventeenth account in WH Bernard Saunders *Legends and Traditions of Huntingdonshire*(1888). Mr Saunders included the exact text from a pamphlet published in 1662, and it is this that I have translated and edited as I don't think I can improve on the truthful tone of the account.

MR LEECH AND THE DEVIL

Mr John Leech of Raveley in Huntingdonshire was going to a Fair with a resolution to drink there with some of his friends, but before he had got even two miles from his own house, he met a neighbour, and persuaded him to go along and drink his mornings draught with him.

The neighbour was reluctant and pleaded that he had a great deal of business to do that day, but Mr Leech was not satisfied with that answer, and forced him into the ale house.

The two men started drinking together, and Mr Leech being almost drunk, began to behave very merry, until his friend asked the people of the House what time it was.

When they were told that it was almost eleven, Mr Leech replied, "then let the Devil take him who goes out of this House today,"

A short while after this, Mr Leech changed his mind, and said he must go to the Fair, which was to be held at Whittlesey, but his friend said to him, "Do you not remember the oath you made just now?"

"Ha, ha, ha," said Mr Leech, "I'll warrant you the Devil will not trouble me, besides I am so heavy, he will not be able to carry me half way to the Fair."

"But he will be able to carry you to your journeys end somewhere else," replied his neighbour.

"I'll risk it," said Mr Leech, who called for his Horse and took his leave of his friend.

Mr Leech then rode on towards the Fair, but he had not got more than two miles from the alehouse, when he began to remember the Oath that he had sworn and broken, and became extremely troubled in his conscience, and began to consider turning round and riding home.

He continued thinking like this and arguing with himself, and riding back and forth, for some time, with his conscience sorely troubled at the damnable Oath he had taken, and then broken.

As night began to fall, he continued to ride backwards and forwards, but by then he had no idea of his whereabouts until, at about one or two o'clock in the morning, he saw two grim and terrifying Creatures before him, in the likeness of Griffins.

He then heard a terrible voice, which said three times, "Remember your sins and the Oath you have broken this day."

As he heard this, Mr Leech fell from his Horse to the ground, as if he were in a trance, and then he felt himself very roughly handled, between the two Griffins, who carried him swiftly through the Air for more than 12 miles from that place, over a great water called Whittlesey Mere, and Ramsey Mere

to a town called Doddington, and there dropped him in the Patrons Yard, without either clothes or sense.

The next morning the servants who were going to make their ploughs and harrows fit for work, found Mr Leech, a sad spectacle, apparently all bloody and gored by the Harrows. Being very much astonished at the sight, the people demanded to know how Mr Leech came there, what he was, and where he lived.

Mr Leech was unable to answer them with anything but sighs and groans, and the Servants very much disturbed by the poor man's condition, ran in and informed their Master who came out to look for himself.

On seeing the condition of Mr Leech, the Master ordered that a bed be made up, and the poor man laid in it, and for him to be covered and kept very warm.

When this was done, Mr Leech began to recover his senses and told them the whole story of who he was, where he lived, where he had been going, and how he came to be there. He also expressed his desire that he might be allowed to rest for another day or two there, and his wish was granted by the good gentleman.

In the meantime some of the Servants of the House, who were going about some business about two miles away, by chance found some torn clothes, which they brought home, supposing them to be his.

But when they showed the clothes to him, he recognised them and grew into a frenzy so desperate, that they were afraid to stay in his Chamber.

The Gentleman of the House asked Mr Leech if he would like them to send for the Minister to pray by him, but he was given a very desperate answer.

When Mr Leech said "I am past his recovery", the Gentleman very much troubled at this answer, sent privately to the Parson of the Town, and desired him to come to him presently.

The Minister arrived in all haste at the Gentleman's house, and was told about the sad case. On hearing the details, the Minister desired that he might be allowed to go up to see Mr Leech alone, so that he could see what he could do towards the recovery of the mans soul, which he feared at that time was in very great danger.

No sooner had the Minister entered into his Chamber, than Mr Leech rose out of his Bed and ran to him and violently threw him on the ground, (which could have cost the Minister's life) saying "What business have you here?"

The Minister tried, (as well as he could,) to comfort the faithless man, but the noise of what had occurred, had been heard downstairs, and the people were afraid that Mr Leech was going to harm the Minister.

Their fears proved true when they went up to assist, for they found Mr Leech beating the Parson with all the strength he had.

The servants got hold of Mr Leech by both his arms, and bound them, and laid him in his bed; and when he found himself bound, he made a terrible noise, and broke his bindings, whereupon, the people grew afraid of him, and rushed out and locked the door.

No one dared to go into his Chamber that day nor night, and the next morning when they went to the door to listen to see if they could hear him stir, they could not hear any noise.

Supposing Mr Leech to be asleep, they opened the door, but they found him on the bed with his neck broke, his tongue out of his mouth, and his body as black as coal, all swollen, and every bone in his body out of joint.

The sad spectacle was viewed by many of the local people, before the body was eventually buried because the stench of it was too great. The most important men of the Town who saw the sad sight wrote a witness statement to confirm what they had seen. Those who signed it were John **Webber**, Gentleman; Jeffery **Hobkins**, Gentleman; Robert **Shipton**, Gentleman; Francis **Hall**, Yeoman; James **Smith**, Yeoman; Thomas **Cracroft**, Yeoman.

THE WITCHES OF WARBOYS.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, trials for witchcraft were of frequent occurrence in every county in England. Up to the time of the Reformation there was little or nothing of the kind. Trials by ordeal were resorted to at times, but they had been always discountenanced and discouraged by the ecclesiastical authorities, and by means of condemnations of such practices by several of the Sovereign Pontiffs, by the 14th century they had become almost entirely abandoned. But the Reformation brought with it a return to many of the most degrading and extravagant forms of superstition, and thus, in a few years, all the good work which it had previously taken centuries to accomplish, was undone. Belief in witchcraft became popular and wide spread. It was encouraged and fostered not only by the heads of the government, but also by the leaders of the new religion. During the Commonwealth, it is stated that 40,000 women were executed in England as witches. Men made it a profession to hunt out and bring to justice – or rather execution – old women and young girls, on charges of sorcery and witchcraft. One of these, Matthew Hopkins, who has been described as "the celebrated Witch-Finder," published a statement in 1648, of his exploits, and in this pamphlet he declares that he was the means of discovering and hurrying to execution, no less than 200 Witches in Huntingdonshire, the Isle of Ely, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, etc.

Annual sermons were established in various places to be preached against witchcraft. One of these was annually preached at Huntingdon until the present century. An agreement is still preserved in the archives of the Huntingdon Corporation, made between the Corporation and Queen's College, Cambridge. It bears the date Sep: 28. 1593, and it provides that the Corporation shall pay to the Queen's College, the sum of £40, in order that a sermon against witchcraft should be preached in All Saints' church, Huntingdon, upon each Lady Day. The sermon was to be preached by a Doctor or Bachelor of Divinity, who was "to inveigh and preach against sorcery, for which he should have 40/-, but should distribute to the poor 10/- thereof." The witch sermon was annually preached for about 200 years after its institution, and was allowed to fall into dissuetude about the year 1814. Its founder was Sir Henry Cromwell, the husband of Lady Cromwell, who is alleged to have been bewitched by the Samuel family, of Warboys, dying 15 months after having been so bewitched. When the three witches were executed, their goods were forfeited to Sir Henry, who was Lord of the Manor of Warboys, and were estimated to be of the value of £40. Sir Henry handed this sum over to the Corporation, on condition that a sermon against witchcraft should be preached as stated.

"The witches of Warboys,ⁱ as the unfortunate family of the Samwells have been denominated by the credulous votaries of a rank and debasing superstition, occupy a distinguished page in the bloody annals of witchcraft. These miserable victims to popular delusion were John Samwell, Alice, his wife, and Ann, their daughter, all of whom, in defiance of common sense, and in the absence of all rational evidence, were publicly tried and executed. Their history, as given at length in a pamphlet of the time, furnishes a memorable instance of the infatuated credulity in regard to witchcraft, which at that period possessed even the superior ranks of the community ; and shows how strongly the human intellect may be fettered by prejudice and folly. The title of the narrative, as re-printed in London, in 1693, is as follows: ' The most strange and admirable Discovery of the three witches of Warboys, arraigned, convicted, and executed, at Huntingdon, in this county, for the bewitching the five daughters of Robert Throckmorton, Esquire, and divers other Persons, with sundry devilish and grievous Torments; and also for bewitching unto Death, the Lady Cromwell: the like hath not been heard of in this Age.' It will be seen from the opening of the narrative that the whole of the dreadful business sprung from the observation of a child.

"About the tenth of November, 1589, Mistress Jane, one of the daughters of Master Throckmorton, being near the age of ten years, fell upon the sudden into a strange kind of sickness, the manner whereof was as follows. Sometimes she would sneeze very loud and thick for the space of half an hour together, and presently as one in a swoon lay quietly as long; sometimes she would shake one leg, and no other part of her as if the palsy had been in it ; sometimes the other : presently she would shake one of her arms, and then the other. In this manner she had continued to be affected for several days, but without any suspicion of witchcraft, when old Alice Samuel came to visit the sick child, and sat down by the side of her in the chimney corner, having a black knit cap on her head. This the child soon observed, and pointing at her exclaimed: 'Grandmother, look where the old witch sitteth : did you ever see one more like a witch than she is? Take off her black thrumbed cap, for I cannot abide to look at her.' The child afterwards became worse, and Dr. Barrow, a man well known to be excellent skilful in physicke, being applied to, repeatedly tried the effect of his prescriptions without success, and then said, that ' he had had some experience of the malice of some witches, and he verily thought that there was some kind of sorcery and witchcraft wrought towards this child.' Exactly one month afterwards more of the daughters were seized with the same malady and complained in the same manner of Mother Samuel. Six of the servants also who were at different periods afflicted in a similar way brought the same kind of charge against the now strongly reputed witch, who was reported to be confederated with some familiar spirits, whose visits to her were usually paid in the form of dun chickens.

"Just before the ensuing Christmas, one of the children was attacked with a more violent fit than it had yet experienced, and 'was threatened by the spirit with one still more terrible,' though at the same time Mother Samuel, who was present, was so 'affected at the sight that she prayed many times that she might never see the like again in any of them.' The children then entreated her to confess that they might be well, and keep a merry Christmas; and their father also seconded their entreaties, but in vain. He then requested her to charge the spirit, that his daughter might escape the fit with which she was threatened, on which she presently said 'I charge thee spirit in the name of God, that Mistress Jane never have this fit.' And again at the father's request, the old woman charged the spirit in the same manner to leave all the children immediately and never to return there again. 'Scarce had she uttered these words, before three of them, who were then in their fits, and had so continued for the space of three weeks, wiped their eyes and instantly stood upon their legs.' This event appears

to have surprised the old woman herself, who immediately fell upon her knees, and entreating Mr. Throckmorton to forgive her confessed that she was the cause of all his children's troubles ; and on the following day she publicly confirmed this confession in the church. She was then permitted to go home; but her reflections, when in the midst of her family, assumed their natural tone, and she denied everything which before she had been induced to acknowledge.

This being communicated to Mr. Throckmorton, he threatened to take her before the Justices; and on her steadily persisting in her innocence, he gave the constables a charge both of her and of Agnes her daughter, and on the same day they were taken before the Bishop of Lincoln at Buckden. Here on her different examinations she was led to confess that 'a dun chicken did frequently suck on her chin before it came to Mr. Throckmorton's house, and that the ill and trouble which had come to his children, had come by the means of the said dun chicken, that she knew that the said dun chicken had gone from the children, because it was come with the rest unto her, and they were then in her belly, and made her so full that she could scant lace her coat ; and that on the way as she came, they weighed so heavy that the horse she rode on did fall down, and was not able to carry her.'

These insane ravings with many others of similar import, were thought sufficient by the sapient prelate, and two Justices, his assistants, to warrant her committal to the gaol at Huntingdon, together with her daughter, against whom as yet there appears to have been no specific charge.

"Previous to these latter events however the children were visited by the lady of Sir Henry Cromwell, and she had not been long with them, when they fell into their usual fits, 'an occurrence which invariably took place when any strangers came to see them.' 'Where-upon she caused Mother Samuel to be sent for: and taking her aside she charged her deeply with this witchcraft, using also some hard speeches to her; but she stiffly denied all, saying ' That Master Throckmorton and his wife did her much wrong so to blame her without cause.' Lady Cromwell unable to prevail with her by good speeches, suddenly pulled off her kercher, and taking a pair of sheers, clipped off a lock of her hair, and gave it privately to Mistress Throckmorton to burn ; upon which Mother Samuel in resentment, operated upon Lady Cromwell, bewitching her in like manner. Her Ladyship's fits were much like to the children's; and that saying of Mother Samuel's 'Madam I never hurt you as yet' was never out of her mind.'

"At the quarter sessions following the committal of the girl and her mother, Mr. Throckmorton requested the High Sheriff and the Justice to suffer him to 'bail this maid, and to have her home to his house, to see whether any such evidences of guiltiness would appear against her as had before appeared in the children against the mother.' After some demur this was consented to. And within a few days after Agnes Samuel had accompanied him home 'the children fell all of them into their fits, and then the spirits did begin as plainly to accuse the daughter as ever they did the mother, and to tell the children that the old woman hath set over her spirits to her daughter, and that she had bewitched them all over again.'

"On the suggestions of the spirits various proofs of the guilt of the hapless girl were afterwards tried, and as the narrative affirms, always with 'instant success ' as was ' repeatedly proved by different people, and even by the Judge himself, the day before the trial of the culprits.' One of these was a charm or formula, conceived in the following words: 'I charge thee, Devil, as I am a witch, and a worser witch than my mother, and consenting to the death of Lady Cromwell, that thou suffer this child to be well at present.' Encouraged as it were by the attention paid to their remarks 'the spirits now began to accuse the father, John Samuel, as they had before done the mother and daughter, and appealed to similar charges in

attestation of the truth of their accusation,' but from the perversity of circumstances, and the 'obstinacy of the old man' this was only once proved previous to the trial of the three delinquents."

"On the 5th of April, 1593, these three wicked offenders were arraigned before Mr. Justice Tanner for the bewitching of the Lady Cromwell to death; and for bewitching of Mistress Joan Throckmorton, Mistress Jane Throckmorton, and others ; when Master Dorrington, Doctor of Divinity, and Parson of the town of Warboys ; Thomas Neet, Master of Arts, and vicar of Ellington ; the father of these afflicted children, and others of their relations, appeared as evidence against them. By these the before related proofs, presumptions, circumstances, and reasons, with many others of the same species, were at large delivered, until both the Judge, Justices, and Jury, said openly that the cause was most apparent, and that their consciences were well satisfied that the said witches were guilty, and had deserved death.

During the trial Mistress Throckmorton was brought into court, and there in her fit was unable to speak, or to see any one, though her eyes were open, till old Samuel, intimidated by the threat of the judge, that if he persisted in his refusal to pronounce the charm 'the court would hold him guilty of the crimes whereof he was accused,' said in the hearing of all that were present : 'As I am a witch and did consent to the death of Lady Cromwell, so I charge thee Devil to suffer Mistress Jane to come out of her fit at this present;' which words were no sooner spoken by the old witch, but the said Mistress Jane, as her accustomed order was wiped her eyes, and came out of her fit."

"On such puerile and contemptible evidence," continues Brayley, "were these ill fated beings adjudged guilty, and condemned to die. At the place of execution, the mother, who was nearly eighty years old, and whose faculties were impaired by age, and still further by the brutal reasonings of those who had supported the accusations of witchcraft, 'confessed her guilt, and asserted that her husband was her associate in ' these wicked proceedings ; 'at the same time she strongly exculpated her daughter. The father resolutely denied the charge against him, and the daughter with equal warmth protested her own innocence; but 'being willed to say the Lord's Prayer and creed, when as she stood upon the ladder ready to be executed, she said the Lord's Prayer, until she came to say, 'but deliver us from evil,' the which she could by no means pronounce,' and in the creed, she missed very much, and could not say that she believed 'in the Catholic Church.' "

The following particulars of the trial and execution are extracted from Dr. Hutchinson's Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft. "Three persons, old Samuel and his wife, and Agnes Samuel, their daughter, were condemned at Huntingdon by Mr. Justice Fenner April 4, 1593, for bewitching as was supposed, five of Mr. Throgmorton's children, seven servants, the Lady Cromwell, and the gaoler's man &c. The father and daughter indeed maintained their innocence to the last; but the old woman confessed. It ought to be observed that this prosecution was not founded upon any previous acts of sorcery that these people had been taken in, but upon experiments and charms which the prosecutors compelled them to use, and tried upon them.

"One of Mr. Throgmorton's daughters had fits and was ill; but there were no signs or thoughts of witchcraft, till this Old Mother Samuel living near them, came in to see her, and set in the chimney corner, with a black knit cap on her head; and when the child in her fit saw her, she said she looked like an old witch, and from that time took a fancy that she had bewitched her. And after that the other children had the same fears and fancies, and fits like hers. After this the Lady Cromwell to whose husband these Samuels were tenants, came to Mr. Throgmorton's house. She sent for the old woman

and called her a witch, and abused her, and pulled off her kercher, and cut off some of her grey hair, and gave it to Mrs. Throgmorton to burn for a charm. At night this lady – as very likely she should after such an ill-day's work – dreamt of Mother Samuel and her cat, and fell into fits; and about a year and a quarter after died. It was stated further in the trial, that there were nine spirits (or familiars) that belonged to these people, and called Mother Samuel their old dame. Two of their names I have forgot, but the other seven were Pluck, Hardname, Catch, three Smacs (that were cousins), and Blew. The children were said to talk with these spirits in their fits. The standers by however never saw any shapes, nor heard any voices, but only understood what the spirits said by the children's answers, and by what the children told them afterwards. The following is a specimen of one of these delectable dialogues: it took place between the familiar, Smac, and Mistress Joan, the eldest daughter of Mr. Throgmorton, about sixteen years of age.

" Mistress Joan : From whence come you, Mr. Smac, and what news do you bring?

" Smac : I come from fighting.

" Mistress Joan : "With whom, I pray?

"Smac: With Pluck.

" Mistress Joan : Where did you fight, I pray?

" Smac : In my old dame's bakehouse (which is an old house standing in old mother Samuel's yard), and we fought with great cowl staves last night.

" Mistress Joan : And who got the mastery, I pray?

" Smac : I did, for I broke Pluck's head.

" Mistress Joan : I would that he had broke your head also.

" Smac : Is this all the thanks I shall get for my labour.

"Mistress Joan : Why do you look for thanks at my hands? I would you were all hanged up one against the other, and dame and all, for you are all naught, but it is no matter. I do not well to curse you, for God, I trust, will defend me from you all."

" The old woman confessed ; but, I pray take notice bow her confession was drawn from her. For about 2 years after the first accusation, she maintained her innocence strictly, and said they were wanton children. But by long ill-usage, her husband on one side swearing at and beating her ; and on the other side Mr. Throgmorton and the children, scratching and playing unfair tricks, and keeping her from her own house amongst his children ; for, contrary to all other cases, her presence was their preservation : I reckon her health was so impaired, that one night she was vapoured to that degree, that they thought the Devil was in her. Then observe how very forcibly they drew her confession from her. The children with tears begged that she would confess. They said they should be well if she confessed, and they would forgive her from the bottom of their hearts; and besides that they would entreat their parents and friends, so much as in them lay, clearly to forgive and forget all that had passed. Still this would not do. She would not confess, she said, what was not true. But Mr. Throgmorton prevailed upon her to charge the spirit in the name of God that they might have no more fits. She yielded to him and then the children grew well. This surprised the poor woman and very likely made her believe,

that all had proceeded from her ill-tongue; and having been told so often, that if she would but confess, all would be well, and they forgive her, she cried and confessed ; but in a day or two she denied all again. Then Mr. Throgmorton was angry, and threatened to carry her before the Bishop of Buckden ; and upon condition that she might not be carried thither, she promised to confess again, provided that it might be to Mr. Throgmorton alone ; but he secretly placed men under the window to hear what she said ; and by this threatening promise and contrivance, he gained a second confession."ⁱⁱ

"But this confession was not sufficient for the tender and scrupulous conscience of Mr. Throgmorton. He, consequently, invented a charm, which he declared had been revealed to him by spirits; and so great was the influence he had gained over the mind of this poor old woman, that he made her repeat it 'a hundred times over.' It was as follows: ' I charge thee, thou Devil, as I love thee, and have authority over thee, and am a witch, and guilty of this matter, that thou suffer these children to be well at present.' The children for whose benefit this damning exhortation was uttered, had the faculty it appears, of immediately recovering from their indisposition, so soon as they heard this invocation; and it seems very evident from a narrative of this trial, published the same year, that these children of Mr. Throgmorton's were nothing more nor less than a pack of malicious and wicked impostors, instigated, no doubt by their father, for some purpose best known to himself. The writer of the narrative who was clearly no friend of the delinquents, confesses with much naivete that the children would 'come out of their fits' at many other absurd experiments, as 'carrying them abroad or into the church yard, or even turning their faces one way rather than another.' It appears, however, that these urchins never failed to display their pretended afflictions in the presence of strangers, and that they derived a great deal of pleasure from the wonderment of those silly persons who believed all they saw and heard. "The Judge (Fenner) seems also to have been fully determined upon the destruction of this ill-fated family. Old Samuel sturdily declared his innocence, and as no positive proof of his guilt had appeared in evidence against him, this precious expounder of the law told him, that, 'if he would not speak the words of the charm the court would hold him guilty of the crime, he was accused of ; ' and thus this poor old man was urged to a confession, which, untrue and unjust as it was, occasioned his condemnation and death ! A circumstance occurred during the trial, which ought to have convinced everybody of the innocence of the daughter, Agnes Samuel. This young girl seems to have been a girl of more than usual virtue and intelligence. The only crime of which she was guilty, was hiding herself when the officers came to apprehend her; and repeating, by compulsion, the damnatory charm already pronounced by her father and mother. She strenuously maintained her innocence to the last ; and some persons near her advised her, as the only means of prolonging and perhaps of preserving her life, to plead that she was with child. But she heard the proposal with indignation and replied: 'No, I will never do that. It shall never be said that I am both a witch and a _____. ' But even this honourable resolution had no effect upon the bigoted minds of her accusers, nothing but the death of herself and her aged parents, would satisfy their bloodthirsty persecutors ; and the parents and their child were consequently executed at Huntingdon a few days after their condemnation."

ⁱ Brayley's Huntingdonshire, 503.

ⁱⁱ * The remainder of the story is taken from Mr. Carruthers' History of Huntingdon, in which the extract from Hutchinson is quoted.