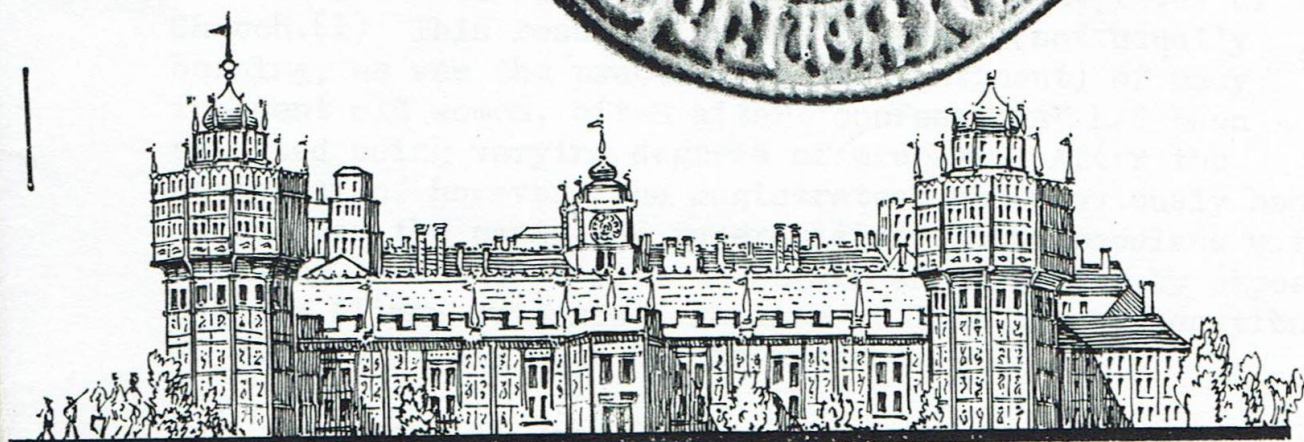

NONSUCH ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

FOR
REFERENCE ONLY



OCCASIONAL PAPER

3. TRIAL OF JOAN BUTTS FOR WITCHCRAFT, 1681

NONSUCH ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

For Epsom, Ewell, Cheam and Banstead

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The Trial of Joan Buts for Witchcraft.

English thought and opinion were changing rapidly in the second half of the seventeenth century, due to the work both in England and in Europe of scientists like Newton and philosophers like Descartes. The founding of the Royal Society was one manifestation of the spirit of inquiry, which was widespread among the more educated classes. In particular, men holding public office were beginning to lose many of the wilder superstitions which had been handed down through the ages.

One such superstition was the belief in witches. It was with the encouragement of James I, backed by a credulous judiciary, that the age-old fear of witches intensified into a full scale witch hunt, with the approval of the Church.(1) This resulted in the hanging, (not usually burning, as was the practice on the continent) of many innocent old women, often after "confessions" had been extorted using varying degrees of cruelty. After the Restoration, however, the magistrates, who previously had encouraged the panic and superstition of the populace with learning, began to strive to obtain an acquittal by exposing the flimsy evidence. Because of this the persecution of witches slowly died out in England.

The trial of Joan Buts was practically the only trial for witchcraft in or near London in the last quarter of the seventeenth century of which details have survived. At this period there can be no doubt that the courts in the London area had begun to ignore cases of witchcraft.(2)

Two accounts of this extraordinary affair have survived:-

- a) Strange and wonderful News from YOEWEL in Surry;
Giving a True and Just Account of One ELIZABETH
BURGISS, Who was most strangely Bewitched

Printed for S. Clarke Seignior; at the Bible and
Harp in West-Smithfield, 1681. Small 4^o. (3)

- b) An ACCOUNT of the TRYAL and EXAMINATION of JOAN
BUTS

London, printed for S. GARDENER, 1682. Single
leaf. (4)

The first mentioned work, in common with most contemporary works of this nature, is very carelessly written and printed. It was produced in a hurry, as it was something in the way of a "scoop" for the printer, pamphlets of this type taking the place of newspapers in the modern world. Some evidence of the speed with which the book was produced is afforded by the fact that the writer states that even more remarkable things occurred, but "I must get time to acquaint you with".

The back of the title page bears five woodcuts, of very different styles. None of them appear to have any connection with the subject matter of the pamphlet, but they occur in the same relative positions on all three copies I have examined.

The short (5) account is well worth quoting almost in its entirety. (I have used the original spelling, but I have revised punctuation, as the whole account consists of only one sentence!)

"Let not the Incredulous question the verity of the Sequel, since divers ocular and auricular witnesses can, and will upon occasion, testifie the truth of what shall be hereafter asserted, though I doubt not to meet with many, who, being conscious of their own Romances,

may suppose Writers to be (like themselves), composd of nothing but deceit and Forgery, but to proceed to my purpose."

This is an illuminating opening paragraph. It reveals the journalist as a writer with a smattering of education, who is trying to back up his account by adopting the style of the contemporary serious authors. If it were not an anachronism this passage might be described as Johnsonese!

"On Thursday the 5th of October^(a), one Mr. Tuers, a Gentleman, living at Yowell, in the County of Surry, together with his wife, went forth upon occasion, leaving their Servant Maid Elizabeth Burgiss at home to officiate in their absence, as she found occasion. In the mean time or interim, one Joan Butts a person that hath been for a long time suspected to be a witch, came to the house of the aforesaid Mr. Tuers, and framing some discourse to the Maid before named, she at last asked her for pair of old Gloves. The Maid knowing her to be a person of ill repute, and being willing to be rid of her company, gave her a very short and sharp answer; telling her she had no Gloves for her, or if she had she could not spare time to look for them. Whereupon this Joan Butts went away. But in a little time returned, asking the aforesaid Maid for a Pin to pin her Neckcloth, which she furnished her with, and so this Joan Butts departed, leaving the Maid without dread or fear of any harm. But about fourteen days after, there happened strange and miraculous wonders, amazing and frightening all the Spectators, for stones flew about the Yard at such a strange rate, as if it had rained down showers of them, and many of them were as big as a mans fist, and afterwards flew as thick about the house as before they did about the Yard, notwithstanding the doors were close shut. Yet for all they flew so thick about, they hit nobody but the Maid, to the great astonishment of her Master, Mistris, and others. But more to be admired, the next day this maid was suddenly attacqued with intolerable pain in her back, and such

(a) Actually a Wednesday

unsufferable pricking of Pins, that she was not able to endure, or without lamentable complaining undergo. The groans and skreeches she sometimes suddenly parted with would have moved a stony heart to pity her distress."

At this, Mr. Tuers, asked her if he could investigate the cause of the pain in her back. On putting his hand down her back he found a large piece of clay, filled with pins (6), and exhibited this to all the spectators. After a moment of peace, the maid was again seized with the same pain, and this time one of the bystanders drew out the lump of clay and pins.

The next day as she was going a Milking, she saw in Nonsuch Park this wretched old Caitiff^(a) sitting amongst the Thorns and Bushes, bedaggled^(b) up to the knees in Dew, and looking like one that had lately had converse with some Infernal Fiend and wondring to see her there so early in that pickle^(c), (being as it were doubtful of her wickedness) and supposing her to be the cause of her (before mentioned) pain and misery, returned home to her Masters house, telling him how she saw this Joan Butts in the place before named, adding in what a strange garb and posture she sat in, which added to the suspicion of the (before doubtful) Master.

But the same night, the Maid going into the chamber where she lay, to fetch a Trunk which was intended to be sent to London, all on a sudden cried out, "Master, Master, here is the old Woman". The master running hastily to see whether it were so or no, could see no old woman, but the Andirons^(d) thrown after the maid, and all her own Linnen thrown about at such a rate as it is hard to believe. But that it will on occasion be attested by unquestionable Evidence. And likewise a Wooden Bar (7) which belonged to the street door, was strangely removed and conveyed up stairs, and came tumbling down after the maid in the sight of her master.

(a) despicable wretch.

(b) bemired, soiled, splashed, cf bedraggled.

(c) condition, state.

(d) the iron framework on which wood for a fire was burnt.

About three days after, they were suprizd with new wonders, for there was to be seen such sights as they never saw before, viz. The Bellows flew about the house, and the Candlesticks and other things thrown after the Girl as she passed to and fro in her masters house, and going to her Mothers house, which was at Astead about three miles distant from Yowel, such numberless stones were thrown at her that she found it hazardous to Travel, but had she returned it might have been the same, and so she continued till she came to her mothers house, where on Sunday the 9th of^(a) October, they were possest with admiration as well as those of her Masters Family, for her Grandfathers Britches were strangely found to be on top of the house, as near as can be imagined over his Bed, and besides such great quantities of Nuts and Acrons /sic/ flew about, that the Spectators never beheld the like before. The pewter danced about the house in a strange manner and hits a Gentleman such a blow on the back, that I suppose he will have but little stomach hereafter to go to see the Devil dance. But the same day happened another Wonder no less strange, than what is before recited, for there was a Fiddle close laid up in a Chest, which was strangely and unknown to any of the house, hung up in the room, and after was removed to the top of the Beds Tester^(b), and the third time carried quite away, and ath no more been seen since. But on Thursday the 18th^(c) of this present October, there being a fair kept at Yowel, the mother of this afflicted maid came thither, and meeting with this old suspected Witch (whom she had great reason to imagine so to be) fell foul upon her, and so evilly Treated her, that she fetcht out some of her Hellish Hellish /sic/ Blood, but the effects and event thereof, I must get time to acquaint you with."

The strange lapse into the present tense in the previous paragraph describing how a gentleman is hit on the back by a piece of pewter indicates that the author was probably present when this took place. The whole of the

(a) correct this time!

(b) although the beds tester was originally used for the board at the head of the bed, here it probably has its later meaning of a canopy.

(c) The 18th. was a Tuesday.

affair is rather curious. It reads very much like the classic cases of poltergeists reported throughout the ages, with one exception - the finding down the girl's back of lumps of clay stuffed with pins. Moreover, a spectator is allowed to come forward and find one in a similar manner. It is this point which leads me to believe that the whole thing is a hoax, involving the girl and Mr. Tuers. The purpose of this hoax is not clear, for it seems unnecessary to implicate Joan Buts, unless they were trying to use the fact that she was a well-known witch to give added weight to the story.

Unfortunately, I have not traced an account of what happened when the witch was attacked.

It is quite remarkable that three dates are mentioned in this work, and none of them tally with each other:- Thursday, 5th October, Sunday 9th October and Thursday, 18th of the same month. The last mentioned date is supposedly that of a fair held at Ewell. Now a weekly market was held in Ewell in the middle of the seventeenth century⁽⁸⁾. This was held on a Thursday. Also two fairs were held in Ewell every year, May 12th for horses and bullocks, and October 29th for sheep and toys⁽⁹⁾. But the trial took place on Monday, March 27th, 1682, which makes October 29th a Saturday. The days and/or dates given are incorrect, and here the writer could easily check them. Also the name Burgiss is used instead of Burrige. Thus it is evident that very little reliance can be placed on the rest of his account.

The second pamphlet describes how Joan Buts was tried on March 27th, 1682 at Southwark, before the Right Honourable Sir Francis Pemberton. She was charged with "Being a common Witch and Inchantress, and not having the fear of God before her eyes", and bewitching Mary Farmer, so that she died, and also Elizabeth Burrige (Burgis). To both these charges she pleaded not guilty.

The parents of Mary Farmer told how, when their child fell ill, on the advice of a neighbour, they visited a Dr. Bourn. He told them that the child was bewitched,

and that they should bury a bottle, and burn the child's clothes, when the witch would walk in. They did as advised, when in walked Joan Buts, with a "ghastly countenance". She told them that she had been ill for some time, but could not help coming to see them at this time. She then fell in a fit to the ground. Several other people who were present at the time substantiated this.

Then Elizabeth Burrige gave evidence which is almost identical with that given in the previous account, but it ends with the Andiron being thrown at them. Several people then swore that they had removed, or seen removed, numerous pins from the arms of Mary Farmer. As one of the witnesses swore, Joan Buts was heard to say that "if she had not bewitched her before, if all the devils in Hell could help her, she would bewitch her now".

Strangely enough, she pleaded not guilty, and when the judge asked her why she spoke the last words, she said that she was provoked, and intended no such thing. Then she claimed that one of the witnesses, Hakeing, reputed to be a very respectable man, had given himself body and soul to the Devil. At this, the Lord Chief Justice asked her how she knew, to which she gave no reply. The judge then reprimanded her, and told her not to abuse the witnesses. In all nineteen or twenty people testified against her in a hearing which lasted for three hours. The jury, which was out for some time eventually returned a verdict of "not guilty". "To the great amazement of some who thought the evidence sufficient to have found her guilty, yet others who consider the great difficulty in proving a witch, thought that the jury could do no less than acquit her."

And thus ends the Joan Buts affair. The verdict illustrates the fact that the public were not so ready to persecute witches as they had been earlier in the century, for she practically admitted to being a witch twice during the trial, yet still the jury would not convict her.

Although the so called bewitching of Mary Farmer is typical of many cases of witchcraft, where suspicion has fallen on an old woman in a small community due to superstition and circumstantial evidence, the bewitching of Elizabeth Burrige was very strange. I am convinced that this was a fabrication between Elizabeth Burrige and her Master, Mr. Tuers, and possibly some others, but whether the purpose was to fabricate evidence for the conviction of Joan Butts, or for reasons of gain it is impossible to say.

1. G.M. Trevelyan, England under the Stuarts, Pelican edition, p.333.
2. Notestein, A History of Witchcraft in England 1558-1718. Washington, 1911.
3. I have traced 3 copies of this book:-
 - (a) British Museum. 8630. dl1. Catalogued under Burgiss.
 - (b) Minet Library.
 - (c) Harvard College, U.S.A. The account given here is based on a microfilm of this copy. A print of this microfilm has been deposited in Ewell Library. I am very grateful to Nigel Seeley for tracing these copies.
4. The only copy I have traced so far is in the British Museum. 515. 1. 2. (59).
5. Short, that is, in relation to the title, which is almost a reprint of the pamphlet being 246 words long!
6. Clay is, of course, found in great abundance in the Ewell area. Pins of this period were identical in appearance and size with modern dressmaking pins. Many of this period have been found in recent exca-

ventions in Ewell.

7. The street door would have been fastened by having brackets to the door jamb, and to the door itself, and dropping a wooden bar such that it fitted into these brackets. An alternative arrangement would be to have a wooden beam sliding between closed brackets on the door and on the jamb in the manner of a bolt.
8. Brayley. History of Surrey. 1850 vol. IV, p.381.
9. Walpoole, G.A. The New British Traveller, 1782, p.56, 65. B.M. 10348. 1. 3.
These fairs were held within living memory in a field near the Green Man. Victoria County History of Surrey, Vol. III. p.278.

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for EPSOM, EWELL, SUTTON, CHEAM & BANSTEAD.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

1. DOCUMENTARY GROUP REPORT
 2. THE UNNATURAL FATHER, 1625
 3. TRIAL OF JOAN BUTTS FOR WITCHCRAFT, 1681
 4. EPSOM'S EAST END (Buildings)
 5. EWELL BUILDINGS
 6. BELLS OF ST. MARYS
 7. EWELL VILLAGE 1930
 8. CONSERVATION IN CHEAM
 9. BUILDINGS OF CHEAM
 10. N.A.S. EXHIBITION 1973
- } Available
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