

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC
CHARACTERISTICS OF WITCHCRAFT
ACCUSATIONS IN SIXTEENTH- AND
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT¹

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In recent years historians have begun to delineate the social and economic characteristics of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English witchcraft accusations. Macfarlane's study of accusations in Essex and Thomas's more general examination of witchcraft as a part of popular belief have opened new avenues of witchcraft research.² The purpose of this paper is to further extend this research by providing a preliminary analysis of the social and economic characteristics of witchcraft accusations in Kent. Kent was, after all, second only to Essex in terms of the number of witchcraft indictments which appear in the surviving Assize court records for the Home Circuit.³ In addition, it was the home of Reginald Scot who was one of the principal contemporary commentators on witchcraft, and who undoubtedly drew much material from his experiences in the county.⁴

¹ This paper is based on Chapter 3 of my Ph.D. dissertation 'Regions of Evil: A Geography of Witchcraft and Social Change in Early Modern England', University of Michigan (1977), 40-68. For their helpful comments I would like to thank Dr. J. D. Clarkson and Dr. G. Kish of the Department of Geography, University of Michigan; Dr. W. A. Hunt of the Department of History, University of Michigan; Dr. G. Olsson of the Nordic Institute for Studies in Urban and Regional Planning, Stockholm; and my wife, Dr. Shelley P. Haley, of the Department of Classics, Luther College.

² A. D. J. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, Harper Torchbook Edn. (1970); K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Penguin Edn. (1971), 515-698.

³ Witchcraft indictments in the surviving Assize court records for the Home Circuit: Sussex 32, Surrey 70, Hertford 81, Kent 130, Essex 477; from C. L. Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (1929), 117-265.

⁴ R. Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft*, Dover Edn. (1971, original 1584).

WITCHCRAFT AND WITCHCRAFT SOURCES

The term 'witchcraft', as used here, refers to *maleficium*, or:

'supernatural activity, believed to be the result of power given by some external force (for instance, the Devil) and to result in physical injury to the person or object attacked by it. There is not necessarily any outward action or words on the part of the "witch". It is basically an internal power.'⁵

We are concerned with witchcraft as the use of supernatural power for malevolent purposes, not for benevolent purposes such as finding lost goods or buried treasure.

The sources of information on Kentish witchcraft accusations are much the same as those for Essex.⁶ The records of a variety of courts—Assize, Quarter Session, ecclesiastical, and central—are of primary importance for obtaining statistical data on accusations. In particular, the Assize records provide a temporally and spatially uniform set of data, generally consisting of: the place of residence, sex, marital status, and occupation of witch and victim; the nature, location, and date of the crime; the defendant's plea, the verdict of the jury, and the sentence passed.⁷ Literary accounts of witchcraft accusations provide a different type of data. Pamphlet accounts of court cases, general works on witchcraft, and references in other contemporary writings frequently provide generalizations on witches and witchcraft accusations, and specifics of the behaviour, attitudes, and statements of the people involved in accusations.

TABLE 1: TEMPORAL DISTRIBUTION OF WITCHCRAFT INDICTMENTS AT KENT ASSIZES, 1560-1700

Period	Number of indictments
1560-79	16
1580-99	23
1600-19	13
1620-39	8
1640-59	45
1660-79	15
1680-99	10

⁵ Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, in n. 2, 4.

⁶ For a detailed account of the sources for Essex, see Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, in n. 2, 14-93. A more detailed account of the sources for Kent can be found in Pollock, *op. cit.*, in n. 1, 21-39.

⁷ The source for the Assize records is the abstracts published in Ewen, *op. cit.*, in n. 3, 117-265.

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In the present study, literary accounts and the Assize and Quarter Session records are the principal sources. The records of the ecclesiastical and central courts have not been examined in detail, although published extracts from some ecclesiastical records have been used. These sources provide information on 179 cases in which at least 126 people were accused of witchcraft or a related offence. Of these cases, 130 are from the Assize records. The temporal distribution of indictments at the Assizes indicates that the periods 1560-99 and 1640-59 had the highest number of indictments, while the first four and last four decades of the seventeenth century had the fewest (see Table 1).

From the point of view of witchcraft accusations as social phenomena, the information in the sources describes several personal, social, and economic characteristics of witches and their victims. The remainder of this paper will document these characteristics.

THE PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF WITCHES AND THEIR VICTIMS

Witches, according to contemporaries, were elderly, unsociable females. Reginald Scot, our Kentish authority, claimed that 'One sort of such as are said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old', and 'whose cheefe fault is that they are scolds'.⁸

Although it was possible for witches to be males, the majority were females. Kent Assize indictments show that 91 per cent of those accused were women, whereas only 9 per cent were men (see Table 2). Furthermore, 4 of the 7 men accused of witchcraft appeared in a joint accusation with a woman, or were the husbands of accused witches and were indicted with their wives. This suggests that men were accused only when they had a close connection with a suspected female witch. The victims of witchcraft, on the other hand, were more equally divided between male and female, although more women than men were involved (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: SEX OF ACCUSED WITCHES AND THEIR VICTIMS
AT KENT ASSIZES, 1560-1700

Sex	Witches		Victims	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Male	7	9	45	45
Female	73	91	54	55

⁸ Scot, *op. cit.*, in n. 4, 4, 19.

It is difficult to establish the exact age of witches because age is not recorded in indictments. From incidental information, Macfarlane estimated that Essex witches were generally between 50 and 70 years old.⁹ No such information is available for Kent, although the fact that 24 of the 73 women accused at the Assizes were described as 'widows' does suggest that they were older women. Nearly 50 per cent of those accused were either married or widowed, whereas only about 25 per cent were definitely identified as spinsters or unmarried women (see Table 3).¹⁰ This indicates that younger women, who were more likely to be unmarried, were less likely to be suspected of witchcraft. The advanced age of witches is also evidenced by the fact that witchcraft suspicions were not short-lived phenomena, but apparently took a number of years to develop. Scot considered that 'in tract of time the witch waxeth odious and tedious to hir neighbors; . . . Thus in processe of time they have all displeased hir.'¹¹ In addition, at the time of their accusation, several witches appear to have possessed evil power for many years. At Faversham in 1645, Joan Williford confessed that 20 years had passed since she promised her soul to the devil, Jane Hott claimed that a familiar had visited her 20 years previously, and Elizabeth Harris maintained that the devil had appeared to her 19 years earlier.¹² The accusers of Jone Cason deposed that she had entertained a familiar 'not latelie but diuerse years since'.¹³

If the witches were older women, then their victims were somewhat younger. At the Assizes only 2 victims were described as 'widows', whereas 25 were children under the age of seventeen.¹⁴ In addition to these children, there were 17 victims described as 'son' or 'daughter', perhaps indicating that they were children also. However, although many victims were children, it seems that their parents were the indirect victims of the witch's malice. For instance, George Cheeseman and Edward Hodge felt that their sons had been bewitched by women who, in the course of a dispute, had vowed revenge on their wives.¹⁵ It seems

⁹ Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, in n. 2, 161.

¹⁰ The median age of marriage for the wives of yeomen and husbandmen was 23, for the wives of urban and rural tradesmen, 22: C. W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent* (1965), 37.

¹¹ Scot, *op. cit.*, in n. 4, 5.

¹² *The Examination, Confession, Triall, and Execution of Joane Williford, Joan Cariden, and Jane Hott* . . . (1645), 2, 7, 10. Hereafter this pamphlet will be referred to as '1645 pamphlet'.

¹³ R. Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1807-8), iv, 892. A 'familiar' was a small creature believed to be an evil spirit in corporeal form.

¹⁴ In the Assize records the ages of two adult victims are given: Thomas Holland was 23 years old and John Lancaster was 'about' 40 years old.

¹⁵ Kent Archives Office (hereafter KAO): Q/SB 2/14, Q/SB 4.

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TABLE 3: MARITAL STATUS OF ACCUSED WITCHES
AT KENT ASSIZES, 1560-1700

Marital status	No.	Per cent
Married	11	15
Widowed	24	33
Spinster	19	26
Married and spinster*	13	18
Married or spinster*	1	1
Widowed and spinster*	2	3
Widowed and married*	1	1
Unknown	2	3
Total	73	100

* These categories are as they appear in the indictments. It is not known exactly what they refer to.

likely that the parents of young children who were the victims of witchcraft would be somewhat younger than their malefactors.

Suspected witches were regarded as having bad tempers, and as generally being unsociable. When George Walcot was presented before the ecclesiastical authorities for the 'sin of witchcraft', his wife was also presented for being 'a common scold and blasphemer of God's holy name'.¹⁶ At the borough court of Faversham in 1645, Elizabeth Harris claimed that several supposed witches had 'very bad tongues'.¹⁷ Indeed, accused witches apparently bore malice towards their neighbours. At the Faversham trial, Joan Williford confessed that 'shee had a desire to be revenged upon Thomas Letherland and Mary Woodrufe now his wife', and that Goodwife Argoll had 'cursed Mr. Major [Mr. Mayor], and also John Mannington, and said that he should not thrive, and so it came to passe'.¹⁸ At the same proceedings, Joan Cariden claimed that when the devil came to her he 'required this examinant to deny God and leane to him, and that then he would revenge her of any one she owed ill will to', and Elizabeth Harris confessed that 'she had a desire to be revenged, and that the divell told her that she should be revenged'.¹⁹

Certain types of anti-social behaviour might also have been associated with witchcraft. In 1598, Henry Norwood's widow was

¹⁶ A. Hussey, 'Archbishop Parker's Visitation, 1569', *Home Counties Magazine*, v (1903), 12-13.

¹⁷ 1645 pamphlet, *op. cit.*, in n. 12, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6, 9.

presented before the ecclesiastical authorities on suspicion of witchcraft; one year later she was presented because she 'hath not received the communion this year and half'.²⁰ Similarly, both 'one Jode's' widow, suspected of witchcraft, and 'old Baseis' widow, suspected of sorcery, were presented because they had not received the communion.²¹ Margaret Dale was suspected apparently because she 'liveth from her husband'.²² Mary Brice was not only indicted on two charges of witchcraft, but also on charges of assaulting Mary Wirral with a broom, and of burning goods belonging to Nicholas Burwash.²³ Quite understandably, suspected witches were not the most popular people in their communities, as in the case of Wilman Worsiter who claimed that 'she was destitute of freinds to helpe or assist her, her husband being then out of y^e towne abroad at worke'.²⁴ However, not everyone who had anti-social characteristics would be suspected of witchcraft. A number of people were presented at the ecclesiastical courts for being scolds or for not receiving communion, but not all of them were suspected of witchcraft.²⁵ Nevertheless, there are some grounds for believing that suspected witches were known for their short tempers and anti-social dispositions.

PERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN WITCHES AND THEIR VICTIMS

Although the unsociable character of suspected witches is not firmly attested to, it is clear that disputes between neighbours were at the root of witchcraft accusations.

Of 130 indictments at the Assizes, only 11 involved inter-village accusations, indicating that witches and their victims lived in the same neighbourhood. Even in inter-village accusations, the distances involved were not great, the longest straight-line distance being 6 miles, and the average distance $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Reginald Scot was cognizant of the short distances over which witches could exert influence: 'their furthest fetches that I can comprehend, are but to fetch a pot of milke, &c: from their neighbors house, halfe a mile distant from them'.²⁶ Thus, the

²⁰ A. Hussey, 'Visitations of the Archdeacon of Canterbury', *Arch. Cant.*, xxvi (1904), 46.

²¹ Hussey, *op. cit.*, in n. 16, 117; A. Hussey, 'Archbishop Parker's Visitation, 1569', *Home Counties Magazine*, vi (1904), 109.

²² Hussey, *op. cit.*, in n. 16, 15.

²³ Ewen, *op. cit.*, in n. 3, 259.

²⁴ KAO Q/SB 2/12.

²⁵ For example, see Peter de Sandwich, 'Some East Kent Parish History', *Home Counties Magazine*, vii (1905), 130.

²⁶ Scot, *op. cit.*, in n. 4, 262.

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majority of witchcraft accusations occurred between people living in close proximity to each other: neighbours.

The victims of witchcraft felt that their misfortunes, such as death, illness, and property damage, were the result of the vengeance of someone with whom they had had a dispute or 'falling-out'. At Rochester Assizes in 1581, John Ferral, vicar of Brenchley, accused Margaret Simons of bewitching his son:

'His sonne . . . passed on a daie by hir house; at whome by chance hir little dog barked. Which thing the boie taking in evill part, drew his knife, & pursued him therewith even to hir doore: whom she rebuked with some such words as the boie disdained, . . . At the last he returned to his maisters house, and within five or sixe daies fell sick. Then was called to mind the fraie betwixt the dog and the boie: insomuch as the vicar . . . did so calculate . . . that his said sonne was by hir bewitched'.²⁷

The deposition of Elizabeth Widger states that:

'aboute seaven weekes agoe the said Dorothy Rawlins came to this examinats house for fire and this examinats late husband said unto this examinats, have nothing to doe with her for shee is naught and said that shee had the eyes of the witches were hanged at Faversham and that upon Thursday last was seavenight, her said husband was taken sicke in the morning with an extraordinary paine in his side . . .'²⁸

Suspensions of witchcraft were strengthened if the witch had threatened her adversary during or after a dispute. The women accused by George Cheeseman and Edward Hodge had threatened revenge on their wives for falling-out with them.²⁹ Similarly, Goodwife Swane was suspected of witchcraft in 1582 because 'she hath threatened one of her neighbours and upon words fell out with her, and told her that she would make her repent her falling out with her. And it came to pass that this same woman her neighbour hath never been well since.'³⁰

For their part, accused witches perhaps felt that they had been wronged or injured, and thus were entitled to revenge or retribution. When Elizabeth Harris's son was drowned in Goodman Woodcot's 'high', 'she wished that God might be her revenger, which was her

²⁷ Scot, *op. cit.*, in n. 4, 3-4.

²⁸ KAO Q/SB 1651.

²⁹ KAO Q/SB 2/14, Q/SB 4.

³⁰ Hussey, *op. cit.*, in n. 20, 19.

watchword to the Divell, and this High was cast away'.³¹ Jone Cason pleaded not guilty to the charge of witchcraft, implying that the witchcraft was justified by 'alleging diuerse matters and instances of the malicious dealings of hir aduersaries against hir, reciting also certeine controuersies betwixt hir and them, wherein they had doone her open wrong'.³²

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS OF WITCHES AND THEIR VICTIMS

The majority of witches and their victims lived in rural areas. Only 27 per cent of the witches indicted at the Assizes were town-dwellers. This is not surprising, because Kent was a predominantly rural county. According to Chalklin, during the seventeenth century the urban population of Kent increased from about 25 per cent to about 33 per cent of the total population.³³ Thus, the preponderance of rural accusations is largely a reflection of the distribution of population.

In rural areas, although witches and their victims were usually neighbours, they were not necessarily of the same social and economic standing, as Table 4 shows.

TABLE 4: OCCUPATIONS OF WITCHES AND/OR THEIR
HUSBANDS, AND OF VICTIMS OF WITCHCRAFT OR
THEIR RELATIVES AT KENT ASSIZES, 1560-1700

Occupation	Rural		Urban	
	Witch and/or her husband	Victim or relative	Witch and/or her husband	Victim or relative
Yeoman	1	6	—	—
Husbandman	2	2	—	—
Artisan and Tradesman	5	5	1	3
Labourer	13	2	6	1

Witches' husbands were mostly labourers, while their victims were yeomen, husbandmen, and artisans and tradesmen. This suggests that

³¹ 1645 pamphlet, *op. cit.*, in n. 12, 10. A 'high' refers, I suspect, to a type of small boat known as a 'hoy'. *O.E.D.* does not list 'high' as a form of 'hoy', but does list 'hoigh': *s.v.* hoy.

³² Holinshed, *op. cit.*, in n. 13, 892.

³³ Chalklin, *op. cit.*, in n. 10, 32.

although most of the people were agriculturalists, there was a definite distinction in social status, since yeomen, husbandmen, artisans, and tradesmen formed a rural 'middle class', whereas labourers constituted a rural 'lower class'. Thus, when the curate of Goodnestone-next-Wingham replied to the Archbishop of Canterbury's inquiry concerning the number of parishioners in his care, he categorized his answer in the following order: Gentry, Yeomen, Husbandmen, Tradesmen, Labourers, and Poor Men.³⁴

Economically, labourers were less affluent than the other groups. For Kent, the majority of yeomen probably had annual incomes under £100, although wealthier ones were not rare. Husbandmen appear to have had incomes under £50, and a similar figure is probable for artisans and tradesmen. In contrast, labourers seem to have had incomes of about £15 or £18.³⁵ Furthermore, some of the victims of witchcraft owned animals or property of some value, frequently worth more than one half of a labourer's annual income. Of particular note is the yeoman, John Hartley, who accused Sarah Kempsey of bewitching animals worth a total of £31. However, labourers were not the lowest members of their communities, and yeomen were not the highest; as the curate of Goodnestone noted, there were also 'poor men' and 'gentry'. Significantly, these groups rarely appear in witchcraft accusations, suggesting that it was not the very poor and the very rich who were involved in accusations. Instead, witchcraft appears as a phenomenon where the moderately rich accuse the moderately poor.

Accusations in the towns had social and economic characteristics similar to those in the countryside. The victims of witchcraft were artisans and tradesmen, specifically a pewterer, a merchant, and a butcher. Some of them owned valuable property, such as the 'oade'³⁶ worth £60 belonging to Thomas Ferrar of Cranbrook, or the horses worth £12 belonging to William Lambe also of Cranbrook. Most of the accused witches' husbands were described as labourers. Only one witch, Thomas Creede, had a trade of any sort: he was a feltmaker who bewitched the 'oade' belonging to Thomas Ferrar. From sources other than the assizes, we find that a widow of Faversham was accused of bewitching the daughter of a female alehouse-keeper, and a shoemaker's wife of Ashford accused a sawyer's wife.³⁷ Accusations appear to have flowed between the middle ranks of urban society, rarely involving the paupers and the prosperous. As in the rural case,

³⁴ P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, 2nd Edn. (1971), 66.

³⁵ Chalklin, *op. cit.*, in n. 10, 231-4, 244-5, 249-54.

³⁶ According to *O.E.D.*, 'oade' refers to the dyestuff 'woad': s.v. oade.

³⁷ Holinshed, *op. cit.*, in n. 13, 891-3; KAO Q/SB 2/12.

there was a tendency for the moderately rich to accuse the moderately poor.

A number of significant categories are missing from the list of occupations. Clothiers, iron-masters, ship-wrights, and sailors are conspicuously absent, suggesting that direct connections to the clothing, iron, and marine industries were not significant in witchcraft accusations. This is supported by the fact that only one type of industrial property, 'ten setts of oade', is recorded as being bewitched. From another source, one clothier is indirectly involved in an accusation. Stephen Ferral, son of the vicar of Brenchley and apprentice to Robert Scotchford, clothier, was believed to have been bewitched. Significantly, it was his father, the only clergyman to be directly involved in witchcraft, who brought the accusation.³⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis indicates that witchcraft accusations were the outcome of disputes between neighbours in which the woman to be accused of witchcraft felt injured, and, as a consequence, bore malice towards her antagonist. The antagonist, who was to become the victim of witchcraft, felt that because of the dispute he had left himself open to some kind of retribution. Some time later he would suffer a misfortune, deduce that he was the victim of the vengeance of the woman with whom he had had a dispute, and suspect and eventually accuse her of witchcraft. Witches tended to be women who were old, unsociable, and relatively poor. Their victims were wealthier and younger, and were equally likely to be men or women. Socially and economically, witches and their victims came from the middle ranks of society, involving neither the wealthy nor the destitute, but with a tendency for the richer to accuse the slightly poorer.

These characteristics demonstrate that Kentish witchcraft accusations were deeply embedded in everyday life, a point emphasized by Reginald Scot's description of the archetypical accusation:

'These miserable wretches [witches] are so odious unto all their neighbors, and so feared, as few dare offend them, or denie them anie thing they aske: . . . These go from house to house, and from doore to doore for a pot full of milke, yest, drinke, pottage, or some such releefe; without the which they could hardlie live: . . .

It falleth out many times, that neither their necessities, nor their expectation is answered or served, in those places where they beg or borrowe; but rather their lewdnesse is by their neighbors reprooved.

³⁸ Scot, *op. cit.*, in n. 4, 3-4.

And further, in tract of time the witch waxeth odious and tedious to hir neighbors; and they againe are despised and despited of hir: so as sometimes she cursseth one, and sometimes another; and that from the maister of the house, his wife, children, cattell, &c. to the little pig that lieth in the stie. Thus in processe of time they have all displeased hir, and she hath wished evill lucke unto them all; perhaps with curses and imprecations made in forme. Doubtlesse (at length) some of hir neighbors die, or fall sicke; or some of their children are visited with diseases that vex them strangelie: . . . Which by ignorant parents are supposed to be the vengeance of witches.³⁹

In almost all respects these characteristics of Kentish accusations are identical to Macfarlane's findings for Essex. The personal, social, and economic characteristics concerning the sex, age, behaviour, residence, and occupations of witches and their victims are remarkably similar in both cases.⁴⁰ This indicates that witchcraft accusations, at least in Kent and Essex, and probably in the rest of England also, were more than just local responses to local conditions. As Macfarlane suggests, 'accusations were the product of both general factors and local pressures', and 'similar causes were working in different villages, although those cases [*sic*] were unrelated at a personal level'.⁴¹

Macfarlane and Thomas have argued that these 'general factors' and 'similar causes' were social and economic changes which caused village conflicts and disputes to grow during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

'The decline of the manorial system has not yet been charted by modern historians, and the working of the laws of inheritance also awaits fuller study. But it seems clear that this period saw the decay of many of these traditional arrangements. Population pressure eroded many of the old customary tenancies, and led to the taking in of the commons and the rise of competitive rents. These changes were disadvantageous to the widow. So were the enclosures and engrossing which broke up many of the old co-operative village communities. . . .

At the same time as the position of the poorer members of the community was being exacerbated, the old tradition of mutual charity and help was being eroded by such new economic developments as land hunger, the rise in prices, the development of agricultural specialisation and the growth of towns and commercial

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴⁰ See Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, in n. 2, 158-66, 168-77, 149-54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

values. These trends were accompanied by the disappearance of some of the old mechanisms for resolving village conflicts which had been provided by the manorial courts and by the religious gilds.⁴²

Unfortunately, as yet, we do not know enough about these changes and their effects on sex roles, the problems of the aged, means of resolving disputes, and class distinctions, to be able to specify exactly which changes produced the conditions from which accusations were most likely to arise. Thus, although we are able to describe the social and economic characteristics of Kentish witchcraft accusations, we will not be able to fully understand such accusations until we have a more detailed knowledge of the changing milieu of everyday life in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Kent.

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⁴² Thomas, *op. cit.*, in n. 2, 671–2. Cf. Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, in n. 2, 205–6.