

Y8 Historical Enquiry:

What can the 'witch craze' tell us about England in the 16th and 17th centuries?

Witchcraft

Suzannah Lipscomb



A Ladybird Expert Book

Witchcraft timeline

7th Century BC - Homer writes the Odyssey which includes stories of Circe the witch.

10th Century - Frau Perchta myth created

1440 - Printing Press invented. Leads to mass distribution of books.

1486 - Malleus Maleficarum ("The Hammer of the Witches) written. Mass hysteria ensues.

1529-1536 – Reformation (break from Rome)

1542 - Witchcraft becomes a crime in England.

1566 – The first 'witch' executed in England, Agnes Waterhouse.

1558 - (Bloody) Mary I - famous for her persecution of Protestants - dies

1597 - King James of Scotland writes his book on witchcraft, called 'Daemonologie'

1603 - Elizabeth I dies & James I becomes King of England and Scotland

1612 - Pendle Witch Trials

1642-46 - English Civil War

1644-46 - Matthew Hopkins Norfolk witch hunts

1682 - Last execution of a witch in England.

1782 -Last Execution of a witch in Europe (in Switzerland).

2012 - Most recent execution in Saudi Arabia of a person convicted of 'witchcraft'.

2010s & 2020s -Laws passed in Malawi, Uganda & other African countries to protect children, the elderly and especially albinos from accusations and attacks for 'witchcraft'.

Lesson 1 - Why was the early modern period an 'era of superstition'?

DO NOW

Pre knowledge check: On your mini whiteboards write down anything you already know about the witch trials in the 16th/17th centuries, or the history of witchcraft beliefs/practices.

Key terms:

Early modern period – A time period, defined by historians as approximately 1500 – 1750.

Witchcraft – The practice of magic, usually to control people or events.

The 'witch craze' – A historical period in which thousands of people were accused of witchcraft across Europe.

Supernatural – Anything that is not of the 'natural' world, e.g. magic, ghosts, demons, fairies.

From the mid-15th to the 18th century there were approximately 90,000 trials held across Europe in which a person was accused of practising magic or causing harm to others through **witchcraft**. Historians estimate that over half of these trials ended in the execution of those accused of 'witchcraft' and we know that 80% of the victims were women. This explosion in the number of people being accused and executed for 'witchcraft' is known as the 'European **witch craze**'.

This unit will explore why people in the **early modern period** had such a strong belief in witchcraft, how the persecution of people accused of witchcraft began and what the '**witch craze**' can tell us about life in the **early modern period** - and life today.

Task - What are some stereotypical features of a 'witch'? Do you know any famous representations of witches from books/plays/films? What are they like? Add your thoughts to the diagram below.



As we will see, many of these modern stereotypes of witches and witchcraft have their roots in historical representation of witches. Although today witches are mainly associated with Halloween or fairy tales, it is important to know that in the early modern period, a belief in witches, magic and the **supernatural** was often as strong as people's belief in God, heaven and hell.

Task: As we read the text, highlight the different factors that led to **supernatural** beliefs being deeply established in the culture and mindset of people living in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Add a title to the box on the right-hand side that summarises the reason and create a symbol on the left-hand side to represent it.

Title	Explanation	Symbol
	During the early modern period, scientific understanding was limited compared to what we know today. People didn't have access to modern technology or scientific methods to explain natural phenomena just as bad weather or illness. As a result, they often turned to supernatural explanations to make sense of the world around them. For example, if there was a sudden thunderstorm, they might attribute it to magic or the wrath of God rather than understanding the scientific principles behind weather patterns.	
	Education was limited during these periods, and literacy rates were generally low. Without access to books or formal education, people relied on folklore, superstitions, and oral traditions to explain the world around them. The belief in magic, witches and spirits was often passed down in tales from generation to generation, reinforcing the belief in the supernatural world.	
	Religion played a significant role in the lives of people during these periods. The dominant religion in Europe, the Catholic Church, held great influence over society. The Catholic Church preached the existence of powerful spiritual beings, such as God, angels, demons and saints. People saw the supernatural as an important and accepted part of their religious worldview. Witches were thought to be people who had made pacts with the Devil, and many religious people feared the Devil.	
	Life during the early modern period was filled with uncertainty and hardship. People faced frequent challenges such as disease, famine, and war. They had limited control over their lives, and natural disasters or unexpected events could have devastating consequences. In such an unpredictable world, a belief in magic and supernatural forces offered a sense of comfort and explanation. People would turn to magic to bring good luck, find love or cure the sick. Belief in the supernatural gave people hope.	

Challenge: Which of the factors do you think would have been the most important reason that people often believed in the supernatural during the early modern period? Why?

Lesson 2 - What did people believe about witches?

DO NOW - Mini Whiteboards

1. When was the early modern period?
2. What does 'supernatural' mean?
3. Why did people in the early modern period have a strong belief in the supernatural?

Key terms

Scapegoat – Someone who is blamed or punished for the actions of someone else.

Catalyst – Something that causes another thing to happen or to change.

Maleficium – Harmful magic.

People in the early modern period lived in a 'supernatural world', but what did they believe specifically about witches? And where did these beliefs come from?

Add a title for
each paragraph



Highlight the KEY information



Summarise in 3
bullet points



The modern idea of a witch has its roots in ancient mythology, folklore, and religious texts. One of the earliest representations of a witch can be found in Greek mythology, with the enchantress Circe. Circe is portrayed as a powerful and beautiful sorceress who tempts men and turns them into animals. Religious and traditional folk tales then led to the stereotypical depictions of witches as old and evil. For instance, Frau Perchta, a character from German folklore, was described as an old hag who rewarded children's good behaviour with coins, but who punished bad behaviour by slitting open their bellies and filling them with pebbles!

In the superstitious early modern period, people believed in the power of magic. 'Magic' could be used for good purposes, such as curing infertility, finding lost items or even making someone fall in love with you! People would often turn to a local 'Cunning Women' for help, these were local women who had medical knowledge of herbs and plants and claimed to be able to help those in need with their abilities. Some common methods used by 'Cunning Women' include burying animals alive, boiling eggs in urine or simply drinking certain herbs and teas.

However, if magic could be used for good, it could also be used for harm. According to popular belief, witches were people who had the power to communicate with the devil and enter into pacts with him. It was believed that they attended nocturnal meetings where they engaged in sinister rituals and unholy acts. Furthermore, witches were believed to be capable of causing harm through **maleficium**, or harmful magic. They were thought to have the power to invoke supernatural forces to bring about sickness, terrible storms, crop failures, or other disasters within the community.

Add a title for
each paragraph

Highlight the KEY information

Summarise in 3
bullet points



Although people had believed in 'good' and 'bad' magic and the supernatural for centuries, in 1542 England's Parliament passed the Witchcraft Act which defined witchcraft as a crime punishable by death. A further law was passed in 1604 during the reign of James I. King James had a strong hatred and fear of the supernatural and witchcraft, attending many witch trials in person and publishing a book on the topic. The belief in, and persecution of witches, was now approved by the monarch and the government.

The early modern period had the perfect combination of supernatural beliefs in magic and a new legal framework to punish witches. The final ingredient was often a '**catalyst**' event that would spark accusations and persecution.

Task: Read the below extract from historian Susannah Lipscomb.

1. Highlight the 'catalyst event' in this scenario.
2. Highlight the personal qualities of Agnes that might have led to her being accused of witchcraft.

What was needed for a witch-hunt to happen was a catalyst. Agnes Browne of Guilsborough in Northamptonshire was 'ever noted to be of an ill nature and wicked disposition, spiteful and malicious, and many years before she died [was] both hated and feared among her neighbours'. Mistress Belcher, a 'godly gentlewoman' of the town, argued with Agnes's daughter, Joan, and hit her. Four nights later, Mistress Belcher experienced pain 'gripping and gnawing her body', and blamed both Joan and her mother, publicly denouncing them as witches. In July 1612, both mother and daughter were found guilty of the bewitchment of Mistress Belcher and hanged on the Abingdon gallows.

People accused of witchcraft were often old, poor women, isolated from or disliked by their communities. Often, they did not conform to the ideal of a 'normal woman', they might be very outspoken, impolite or have no children. They could have a facial deformity or birthmark. These women were often made **scapegoats** for anything that went wrong within the community, such as crop failures, sudden deaths, illnesses or bad luck.

Challenge: What other '**catalyst**' scenarios do you think could have sparked witch hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries?

Lesson 3 - What created the perfect conditions for a witch craze?

DO NOW - Mini Whiteboards

1. What acts did people think witches were capable of?
2. What did people think caused the 'Black Death'?
3. What was the Reformation?

Key terms

Mass Hysteria - A condition affecting a large group of people characterised by excitement or anxiety, irrational behaviour or beliefs.

Heresy – The crime of holding a belief or opinion which is not the accepted religious beliefs of the country.

The *belief* in magic and witchcraft is very different from the **mass hysteria** and widespread legal persecution of witchcraft seen during the **witch craze**. It had never happened before, and it has never happened since. So why did it happen in the 16th and 17th centuries?

Task: Read the below extract from historian Susannah Lipscomb and highlight the problems in the 16th and 17th centuries that contributed to the witch craze.



"Witchcraft had become a crime in law and people believed in magic. But there's a missing link: how did witchcraft beliefs become *accusations* that became prosecutions? What was happening in this time period to make so many people accuse others of witchcraft?

To understand this, we need to think about the conditions of life: times were changing. There were more people than ever before - the population of England rose from 2.5m in 1525 to 4m in 1600 - and the cost of food was multiplying. Inflation (a rise in the cost of everyday items) had been unknown to previous generations, so it was shocking: people found it increasingly difficult to afford bread.

The weather was atrocious. This period is known as the Little Ice Age - from 1560, the temperature dropped substantially. In 1607, the first 'Frost Fair' was held on the frozen River Thames in London, the ice was so thick that people even burnt fires on it.

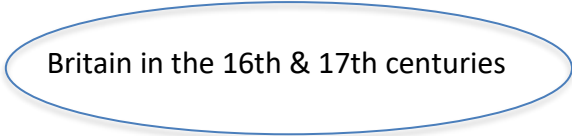
Lower temperatures led to poor harvests, hunger and social unrest. One in four harvests failed, and that meant hunger. If two or three consecutive harvests failed, it meant severe death. In 1594-7, the rain fell nonstop across Europe. Wheat rotted in the fields. The harvests of 1593, 1594, 1596 and 1597 failed, people across Europe starved.

Add to that the plague (which recurred roughly once every sixteen years), influenza, and religious warfare across Europe. The religious changes of the Reformation had shaken Europe to its core, many people believed they were living in the 'end of days' and that brought the Devil and his evil work to their minds. The religious passion of the time, combined with the fear of **heresy** and religious conflicts, provided the perfect conditions for the spread of witch-hunting hysteria.

relating to the total destruction of something, especially of the world

After all, someone had to be to blame for these **apocalyptic** conditions..."

Task: Add the reasons described by Susannah Lipscomb to the diagram below.
Categorise them as social, religious or economic problems.



Britain in the 16th & 17th centuries

Task – Why does Suzannah Lipscomb describe the conditions of the 16th and 17th centuries as apocalyptic?

Discussion: Susannah Lipscomb says that people in the Early Modern period felt that ‘someone had to be to blame’ for the conditions in the 16th and 17th century. Can you think of any other examples, from history or from today, when vulnerable groups are blamed for social/economic problems?

Today, in the western world, a "witch-hunt" metaphorically means an investigation that is conducted with a lot of publicity, to uncover illegal or rebellious behaviour.

It often leads to those being investigated being unfairly blamed or punished and usually involves elements of moral panic or mass hysteria from the public. Often, marginalised groups of people within a society can be blamed during a modern ‘witch hunt’.

In the online world, people are quick to turn on an individual who thought to have been ‘uncovered’ during a witch hunt.

Discussion: Can you think of any examples of metaphorical ‘witch hunts’, today or throughout history?

Challenge: Read the below extract from Dr Brown.

Does she agree with Susannah Lipscomb?

Highlight the sentences that agree with Susannah Lipscomb's argument.

“Studying the European witch hunts today serves as a reminder of how hard times can bring out the very worst in people, turning neighbour against neighbour and brother against brother. The need for a scapegoat, for someone to hold accountable for misfortune, seems to be deep-rooted in the human mind”.

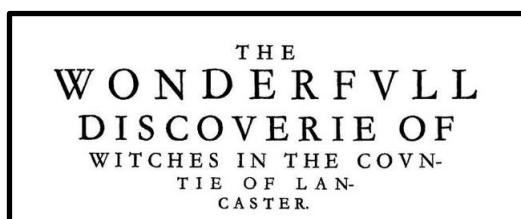


Dr Katie Brown, Dr of Classics and Religion

Lesson 4: Case study - The Pendle Witch Trials.

DO NOW - Mini Whiteboard

In August 1612 ten people from Pendle, Lancashire were charged with witchcraft and sentenced to death. The key witness in the case was a nine year old girl, and three of the people executed as a result of her testimony were her own mother, sister and brother. How could this happen and what can the trial tell us about life in Lancashire during the 17th century?



Task: As we read an overview of the Pendle Witch trials, highlight any reasons why the people involved may have been accused of witchcraft. (E.g where they lived, their role in the community etc)

The most famous witch trial in British history involved a group of men and women from Pendle - a village in Lancashire, about an hour away from Bolton. At the time Lancashire was described as a 'lawless dark corner of the land, full of troublemakers and rebels'. This was because Lancashire was traditionally Catholic, in a country that was now Protestant. The Pendle Witch trials took place 1612, during the reign of King James 1st - a devout Protestant who had an intense hatred and obsession with witches and Catholics.

The people accused were mostly made up of two local families and their friends. These two families were headed by two elderly widows in their eighties called Elizabeth Southernns, known as "Old Demdike" and Anne Whittle, known as "Chattox". Demdike and Chattox were known as 'cunning women' within their community. A 'cunning woman' was a member of the community who was believed to have special skills in using herbs, charms and rituals to heal sick patients, find lost items, protect people from harm and even offer advice on things such as love and marriage. Demdike and Chattox competed for business within the community which led to a fierce rivalry between the families.

The two families were extremely poor, particularly the Demdikes. Demdike was blind and her daughter Elizabeth had a facial deformity. They lived on the outskirts of the community in the shadow of the dark and foreboding Pendle Hill. The younger members of the families would often wander the countryside begging for food or money. Alison, Demdike's Granddaughter, was walking through the countryside one day when she met a wandering salesman. She begged the salesman to give her some charity, but he refused. Alison responded by cursing him under her breath. A few moments later the man collapsed, unable to speak or move. Later court reports describe the man's condition: 'His face was awry, his speech slurred and his arms lame, especially the left side'. Alison truly believed she

had caused the old man to collapse, tearfully visiting the man on his sick bed to apologise and attempt to 'cure' him. When Alison was questioned by the authorities she confessed to the 'crime', but as well as her own confession she also accused the rival Chattox family of being witches who had caused the death of her Father years before! Multiple members of each family were arrested and brought to trial. The local authorities were keen to show off to King James that they had uncovered a large conspiracy of Northern witches. The Pendle Witch trials had begun.

Watch a re-enactment of Alison's encounter with the salesman

The key witness of the trial was Jenet Device, the granddaughter of Demdike and the sister of Alison. In court, nine year old Janet Device denounced her own mother as a witch saying: "My mother is a witch and that I know to be true. I have seen her spirit in the likeness of a brown dog, which she calls Ball. The dog did ask what she would have him do, and she answered that she would have him help her to kill. She killed three men this way.". Jenet then accused her brother of also being a witch, saying she had seen the spirit of her brother "kill three people ". The courtroom was impressed by Jenet's detailed and convincing evidence against her own family. King James had recently published a book in which he praised the use of child witnesses in witch trials, thinking them to be particularly incriminating. At trial, Jenet's sister Alison tearfully confessed to being a witch, still believing she had caused the injuries to the salesman with her 'curse'. Others, including Elizabeth (Jenet's mother), fiercely protested her innocence until the end. Elizabeth even had to be removed from the courtroom as she was screaming at her daughter Jenet whilst she was giving evidence. The court reporter stated that many people were 'disturbed' by Elizabeth's behaviour and her facial deformity. In total nine women and two men from Pendle were found guilty of causing death or harm by witchcraft- all were hanged for their 'crimes'.

Watch a re-enactment of the trial

Task: Complete the table with key information from the trial. Focus particularly on the significance of each category - why could this have led to the 'Pendle Witches' being found guilty?

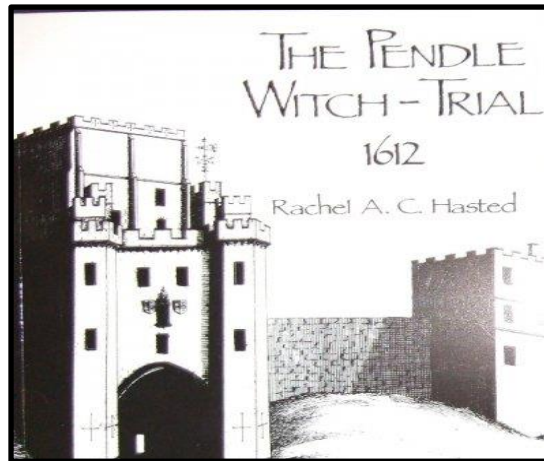
	Information	Why was this significant in the conviction of the Pendle Witches?
The location	<i>Pendle, Lancashire</i>	<i>England was a Protestant country but Lancashire was a traditionally Catholic and it was seen by many people as being 'wild and lawless'. The fact that the two families were from Pendle would have led to an increased suspicion of witchcraft.</i>

The date	<i>1612 - during the reign of King James 1st.</i>	
The 'crime' of Alison.		
The two families - Age, marital status, physical appearance, status in society etc.		
Jenet's testimony.		

Challenge: Read the modern interpretation of the Pendle Witches on page 13. Highlight the different reasons given by the author for the persecution of the Pendle 'witches. Which factor do you think was most significant?

“The ‘Pendle Witches’ were vulnerable due to their age, religion, and social status and they were made scapegoats in an anti-witch, anti-Catholic, and (arguably) anti-northern era. This religious, cultural, and social conflict adds a whole new depth to the tale of the Pendle Witches, who were almost certainly innocent members of the community.”

Rachel AC Hasted - Author of ‘The Pendle Witch Trials’.



Lesson 5 – How did new methods of communication contribute to the witch craze?

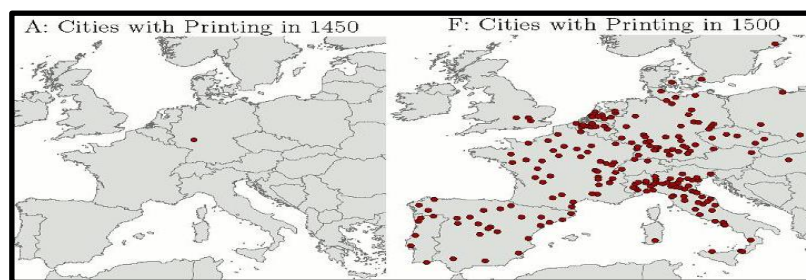
DO NOW –What were some of the factors that led to the Pendle ‘witches’ being accused of witchcraft? List as many reasons as you can.

Key Terms:

Printing Press - a machine for printing text or pictures, invented in 1440.

As we have seen, the 16th and 17th centuries were an era of superstition and of supernatural beliefs. Social and economic problems led to people looking for someone to blame for their problems - but why was it ‘witches’ who were blamed for society's problems? One influential book and a new method of spreading information could hold the answer....

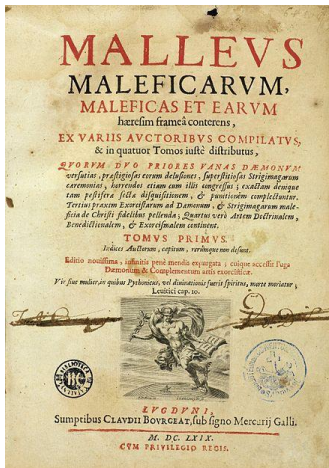
The **Printing Press** was a device used to mass produce books and was first used in Europe in 1440, in Germany. Before the printing press, if you wanted to publish any new ideas, you had to hire scribes who would carefully write out each word by hand. This made books very expensive and rare. Most people didn't have access to knowledge and the ability to spread new information was limited.



The invention of the printing press soon revolutionised the way in which knowledge and information was spread. The printing press allowed books to be printed much quicker and at a lower cost. New knowledge was suddenly much more widely accessible across Europe. Estimates claim the printing press was able to create over 20 million copies of different books between 1455 and 1500.

Task: How did the invention of the printing press change the way that information was spread in the 15th and 16th century?

Discussion – How easy is it to spread information today? What are the positives and negatives of how we spread information or share knowledge today?



After the invention of the Printing Press, the Bible soon became the bestselling book in Europe, followed by a book printed in 1486, called the ***Malleus Maleficarum***, "The Hammer of the Witches")

Malleus Maleficarum was a book that claimed to prove the existence of witches and drew a connection between women and witchcraft. The author, a German monk, argued that women were 'spiritually weaker' than men, so more susceptible to evil and the Devil.

Although previously the Church had officially denied the existence of magic, the ***Malleus Maleficarum*** was accepted by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike as an authoritative source of information concerning the very real dangers of witchcraft.

"Before the 1400s it was rare for anyone to be prosecuted for witchcraft. However, Malleus Maleficarum convinced people that witches were everywhere and that they needed to be found and punished. Torture was recommended for extracting confessions; the death penalty was revealed as the only remedy against witchcraft and burning at the stake was suggested as a suitable method of execution. With one fell swoop, the persecution of witches was begun and a method to do so was established. The book was a bestseller and strongly influenced the obsession with witchcraft and witch hunts for two hundred years."

Task - How did the *Malleus Maleficarum* contribute to the witch craze in Europe?

Include: The definition of the witch craze, Key dates, 'the Printing Press'.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Discussion: Can you think of any examples of alarming or dangerous information like the *Malleus Maleficarum* being widely distributed today? What reaction did it cause?

Challenge Task: Read the below extract and answer the question: **Why did witchcraft pamphlets in England use pictures as well as words? How did this contribute to the image we have of witches today?**

In England witchcraft pamphlets were written and printed with everyday people in mind, and they had a strong visual element as well as their text, because not everybody could read. Our image of what a witch looks like—the hooked nose, the hat, the black cat, the broom and the cauldron—comes directly from some of these pamphlets. It's hard to know exactly where the pointy hat or broomstick originally came from, but once they started being represented in mass-produced pamphlets, they stuck. Without the transformative power of cheap printing that arose in the 16th century, it's hard to know if the coned hat and broomstick would be the iconic picture of a witch, or if the 'witch craze' would have even spread throughout Europe as quickly and thoroughly as it did.



Lesson 6: Why were most people executed for witchcraft women?

DO NOW – What was the significance of the invention of the Printing Press in 1440?

Key definitions:

Misogyny - The prejudice, discrimination or hatred of women.

Patriarchal society – A society in which positions of authority and privilege are mainly held by men.

Task: Look at the table. What does it tell us about who was persecuted for witchcraft?

Country	Total Number of Witches Tried & Executed	Number of female witches	Number of male witches
England	500	450	50
American Colonies (British)	30	25	5
Germany	25,000	20,000	5,000
Iceland	22	2	20

It is a common misconception that only women could be persecuted as witches, but many men were tried and executed for witchcraft too. Men, however, were tried and executed significantly less than women and it was often due to them having an association with a convicted woman (for example a husband or son). There was a total of 6,000 men executed for witchcraft during the early modern period - approximately 10-15% those tried and executed.

In this lesson we will focus on the other 85-90%. We are going to explore why witch hunts were focused mainly on women and what this can tell us about English society at the time.

Task:

- Read through the table on the page 21, it presents different historian's interpretations as to why most people executed for witchcraft in England were women.
- Make links between the different reasons on page 22 – how are they connected?

ECONOMIC STRUGGLES. Many of the women tried for witchcraft were widowed, unmarried, old or infertile – meaning they could not economically contribute to the community. Some of these economically poor and vulnerable women, like ‘Old Demdike’ and ‘Chatto’ begged for charity and might have been seen as a strain on the community. People may have grown resentful of their inability to contribute to the community during times of economic struggle and looked for an opportunity to remove them from society.	PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY. Many witch hunters received payments for catching ‘witches’ and they were looking for easy targets. In a patriarchal society men hold the main positions of power and women are secondary to men. This time period was deeply patriarchal - no women held positions of legal, religious or local authority and so when they were accused of witchcraft, they had little power to fight back. Women were also seen as needing the protection and control of a man and so many of the widowed or unmarried women accused of witchcraft were seen as socially ‘unnatural’. They were also much easier targets than men or married women.	RELIGIOUS STEREOTYPES. The religious stereotype of a woman in this period was of a morally weaker person who was more tempted to sin than a man. This stereotype came from the Bible story of Adam and Eve. Eve was born from Adam’s rib, and she then convinced Adam to eat the ‘forbidden fruit’ against God’s wishes, leading to humans being expelled from paradise. Greek mythology had a similar creation story in which Pandora (a woman) gives in to temptation and opens a box from which all the evils of the world escape. These harmful stereotypes of women as spiritually weak and sinful led many to believe only women could be capable of engaging in the sin of witchcraft.
WOMEN HEALERS. In medieval England, ‘cunning women’ held respected roles within the community. A cunning woman used traditional knowledge of plants and herbs to provide medical assistance and advice to the community. They would act as midwives and healers and provide advice on matters such as love or family troubles. Some were thought to be able to communicate with spirits. During the witch craze these traditional practices, that had been passed down through the generations, became associated with heresy and witchcraft. Because it was women who were most associated with this role, they were the ones persecuted for ‘witchcraft’.	MISOGYNY. Misogyny is the prejudice, discrimination or hatred of women. Some historians argue that women were most accused of witchcraft because of the misogyny of early modern society. Women persecuted for witchcraft often did not conform to the ideal of a ‘normal’ woman, they might be very outspoken, impolite or have no children. They could have a facial deformity or birthmark. Women’s position as the most vulnerable people in society led them open to prejudice and persecution – they were the perfect scapegoat when things went wrong.	

**Economic
struggles**

**Women
healers**

Misogyny

**Patriarchal
Society**

**Religious
Stereotypes**

Task – Why do historians think most people executed for witchcraft in England were women?

Were women always the majority accused of witchcraft?

No, as the graph from earlier shows, Iceland provides an exception where 90% of those executed for witchcraft were men. 20 men were executed and 2 women. Historians believe the reason for this was the fact that the magic openly performed in Icelandic society had come to be associated with men. With the arrival of witch hunts in Iceland many turned against the men that had before been well respected and important members of the community. Iceland provides a curious exception and contrast to the witch hunts seen in the rest of Europe.

Challenge: Another unique case was Norway, where the men executed were all indigenous members of the Sami community. The Sami community were often persecuted by the Norwegians as they had different religious beliefs and practices. What does this tell us about the link between witchcraft persecution and marginalised communities?

Lesson 7 – What do you think were the main causes of the witch craze in the 16th and 17th centuries?

DO NOW – Most people executed in England for witchcraft were women because, but, so....

Task: Place the different factors in the diamond. The factor you think was most important should go at the top and the least important at the bottom. Be ready to discuss your choices!

A traditional medieval belief in magic and the supernatural.	The Little Ice Age (15th – 17th century).	The invention of the printing press in 1440.	Witchcraft made a criminal offence in England in 1542.
Misogynistic stereotypes of women as being morally weak.	A lack of scientific understanding and medical knowledge.	The publication of Malleus Maleficarum in 1486.	The religious turmoil of the Reformation. 1529-1536

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Challenge: Categorise the factors as long- and short-term factors.

What led to the 'witch craze' and what can it tell us about England in the 16th and 17th centuries?

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22

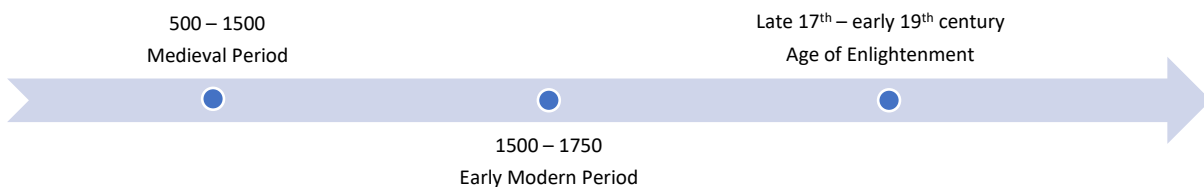
Lesson 8 - How did the witch craze end, and have we learnt our lessons from it today?

DO NOW – What was the most important cause of the witch trials in 16th/17th century England and why?

Key Terms:

Age of Enlightenment – A period of intellectual change in Europe between the 17th – 19th centuries. Defined by reason, critical thinking and scientific enquiry over superstition.

The last execution of a ‘witch’ in England was in 1682 and, exactly 100 years later, the last person executed for witchcraft in Europe was executed in Switzerland. This was partly due to the legal system in Europe starting to require more evidence for a prosecution, however most historians agree that the dawn of the **‘Age of Enlightenment’** played the most significant role in the decline of the ‘witch craze’.



The scientific discoveries of the Enlightenment led people to question traditional beliefs and seek rational, logical explanations. People began to realise the importance of evidence and critical thinking rather than superstition. As a result, many people started to doubt the existence of witches and the truth of witchcraft accusations. Advancements in science and medicine also helped people to gain a better understanding of natural phenomena that they may have previously blamed on witchcraft. It was the beginnings of our modern world based on logic and understanding rather than superstition and fear.

Task: How did the Enlightenment contribute to the end of the witch hunts?

Today, in the western world, a "witch-hunt" metaphorically means an investigation that is conducted with a lot of publicity, to uncover illegal or rebellious behaviour.

It often leads to those being investigated being unfairly blamed or punished and usually involves elements of moral panic or mass hysteria from the public. Often, marginalised groups of people within a society can be blamed during a modern 'witch hunt'.

In the online world, people are quick to turn on an individual who thought to have been 'uncovered' during a witch hunt.

Discussion: Can you think of any examples of metaphorical 'witch hunts', today or throughout history?

Religion, war, conflict, new mass media, climate change, and economic recession are all some of the factors that influenced the witch hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries – an alarming number of these are still issues facing us today. It is important to realise that 'witch hunts' in the true sense of the term do still occur today as well.

Task: Read the below extract from National Geographic and the answer the question on page 25.



Organizations like the United Nations and have found that the number of witch trials around the world is increasing. This is especially true in places with poor medical care or few educational opportunities. Although belief in witchcraft is not limited to the **developing world**, witch trials occur more frequently there. They are almost always violent, and sometimes they are deadly.

In 2008, rumours that a successful football player was using witchcraft triggered a riot in Congo (Africa). The riot and stampede killed 13 people. In India, landowning women are sometimes accused of witchcraft. The women, often older widows, are forced out of their home and their neighbours then take their land. In 2009 an Egyptian pharmacist was executed for witchcraft in Saudia Arabia and Saudi Arabia currently has an 'anti witchcraft' police force.

So, what can be done to stop witch trials or accusations of witchcraft today? There has never been a proven case of witchcraft in all of human history. On the other hand, there are thousands of victims of witch hunts. In the end, it is the witch hunters who should be feared more than the people whom they accuse of witchcraft. Trying to stop a witch hunt by saying witches don't exist doesn't work. People project their fears onto unfortunate victims.

Medical and scientific education is often key in preventing witchcraft accusations as well as quick action by respected authority figures to stop witch hunts. In 2005, an eight-year-old girl in London, England, was accused of being a witch by a family member. The girl's family abused her and rubbed chili peppers in her eyes to "beat the devil out of her." British authorities immediately acted to remove the girl from the home. Studying the history of the witch craze serves as a reminder of the dangers of mass hysteria and the consequences of unchecked prejudice and superstition.

What lessons for today can we learn from studying the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries?

Try to include the following three words in your answer:

Scapegoat	Discrimination	Mass hysteria
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Challenge: Scotland is considering pardoning (an official act of ‘forgiving’) the thousands of women who were executed for witchcraft during the witch craze. Do you think this is the right thing to do? Explain why or why not.

SMART NEWS

Scotland Considers Pardon for Thousands of Accused ‘Witches’

Advocates are calling on leaders to exonerate the thousands of women and men targeted in witch hunts during the 16th through 18th centuries



Nora McGreevy

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 horizontal grey lines spaced evenly apart, typical of notebook paper. The lines extend across the entire width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical lines or other markings present.

The kingdoms of Scotland and England were united in 1603, when King James VI of Scotland also became James I of England. James certainly had a strange fascination with all things associated with the occult: shortly after assuming the throne, he released his best-selling book, 'Daemonologie' which explored the areas of witchcraft and demonic magic. He was so obsessed with the 'black arts' that he even convinced Parliament to pass the Witchcraft Statute of 1604, which ruled witchcraft as a crime punishable by death.

Such a background led to a heightened public anxiety about witches that would slowly fester in the decades that followed, inspired in no small part by similar concerns across The Channel in mainland Europe. Within the political and religious chaos that reigned throughout the period of the English Civil Wars, one previously unheard of Matthew Hopkins emerged.

Hopkins and Stearne toured the land as 'official' witchfinders, claiming they had parliamentary authority to carry out their investigations. In fact, the two men had no such authority, having made up both their credentials and their titles. 'Witchfinder General', as Hopkins was later infamously known, was a title he gave to himself. At most, it is believed the two men merely possessed papers granting them safe passage as they went from town to town - an essential in a time of civil war.

during the years of 1644 to 1647, a man named Matthew Hopkins made a notorious name for himself in history as the 'Witchfinder General.' Surprisingly, it is believed that he bestowed this title upon himself. In those dark times, England was gripped by witch fever, especially in East Anglia, where the people were devout Puritans and fervent anti-Catholics. They were easily swayed by prejudiced preachers who were on a mission to sniff out any hint of heresy.

Matthew Hopkins, an unsuccessful lawyer, arrived in East Anglia to lend a hand, or so he claimed. He quickly became known as the Witchfinder General, and his methods were nothing short of ruthless. It is estimated that he was responsible for the executions of around 200 to 300 women and men, comprising approximately 60% of all executions in England in the 160 years prior to 1647.

Hopkins began his witch-hunting spree in Bury St. Edmunds, where he had 68 individuals put to death. In Chelmsford, a horrifying 19 people were hanged in a single day. He then moved on to Norfolk and Suffolk, where towns such as Aldeburgh paid him £6, Kings Lynn £15, and Stowmarket a grateful £23 to rid them of supposed 'witches'. This was a huge amount considering that the daily wage at the time was only 2.5 pence.

Hopkins based much of his theories on the idea of Devil's Marks. He believed that even a wart, mole, or flea bite could be a Devil's Mark, and he used a spiked needle to test if these marks were insensitive to pain. The needle, concealed in a spring-loaded handle, ensured that the accused women never felt any pain during this ordeal.

Despite the illegality of most of his methods, Hopkins employed various "tests" that were essentially forms of torture based on superstitions. Upon apprehending a suspect, Hopkins would subject them to days of food and sleep deprivation. Following this, he would search for imperfections on their bodies, which were thought to indicate the presence of the "devil's mark." This mark was believed to be where the devil's familiars would suckle the blood of the accused, forging a connection with the devil. Lastly, the suspect would be tied to a chair and forced to endure uncomfortable positions for hours. Unsurprisingly, under such immense stress, many would confess to anything.

As a result, the confessions obtained by Hopkins were highly unreliable, tainted by the fear of further torture. One tragic example was the case of an elderly man named Pastor Lowes from Suffolk. Deprived of sleep and forced to run incessantly for hours, Lowes was driven to the brink of madness and confessed to using witchcraft to sink a ship off the coast of Ipswich. He was executed for this 'crime.'

Unfortunately (for Hopkins and Stearne, at least), clouds were soon gathering on the horizon for this highly lucrative new business. Ever since the executions in Bury, questions had been raised about the men's activities and the methods they used to extract confessions. A prominent local puritan preacher by the name of John Gaule objected to the methods the men used and began openly preaching against them in his sermons. Gaule also published a book called 'Select Cases of Conscience touching Witches and Witchcraft' which exposed Hopkins' and Stearne's methods and questioned their legitimacy. The book was widely read and led many prominent people to question why two men with no apparent authority were allowed to roam the land torturing the poor for money.

When the two men arrived to give evidence at the Norfolk Assizes where several people had been accused of witchcraft, a group of local gentlemen who had read and been troubled by Gaule's book presented Hopkins with a set of probing questions about the methods he used to extract confessions. They accused Hopkins of subjecting his victims to 'an abominable, inhumane and unmercifull tryall of those poore creatures, by tying them, and heaving them into the water; a tryall not allowable by Law or conscience.'

Realising that their reign of terror was coming to an end, Hopkins retired to Manningtree in 1647. During his fourteen months on the road, it is estimated that Hopkins was responsible for the deaths of two to three hundred people.

Although it may be tempting to blame Matthew Hopkins alone for instigating the bloodiest witch panics in English history, the truth is more complex. Hopkins could not have thrived without the environment that allowed such superstitions to spiral out of control. While he played a significant role in the trials during the panics in East Anglia, he was merely continuing a practice that had been historically condoned.