

## Witchcraft



Up until the 1700's most people in England believed in witches and witchcraft. This way of life was related to Pagan (non-Christian) beliefs, and had been tolerated for many years. But from the mid 1500's religious leaders tried to stamp out these beliefs to make sure that people were following the right religious practices.

This led to a period of witch hunting where people were tried and often executed for being witches. This was happening all throughout Europe and America too, and the witch hunts lasted for more than 150 years.

So if people behaved in a slightly odd way or were around when bad things happened, they were likely to be accused of being a witch. Suspected witches were burnt at the stake or drowned.

King James I wrote a book called *Daemonologie* in which he supported and encouraged the trials of witches. He believed the witches were being controlled by the devil.

### The North Berwick witch trials:

The North Berwick witch trials took place in 1590 in Scotland, when a number of people from East Lothian were accused of witchcraft. They ran for two years and implicated seventy people. This was the first major witchcraft persecution in Scotland.

One of the reasons for these trials was a suspected attempt on King James VI's life. He sailed to Copenhagen to marry Princess Anne. During their return to Scotland they experienced terrible storms and had to shelter in Norway for several weeks before continuing. Very soon more than a hundred suspected witches in North Berwick were arrested, and many confessed under torture to having met with the Devil in the church at night, and devoted themselves to doing evil, including poisoning the King and other members of his household, and attempting to sink the King's ship.

One of the accused in particular, Agnes Sampson was examined by James VI at his palace of Holyrood House. She was fastened to the wall of her cell by a witch's bridle, an iron instrument with four sharp prongs forced into the mouth, so that two prongs pressed against the tongue, and the two others against the cheeks. She was kept without sleep, thrown with a rope around her head, and only after these ordeals did Agnes Sampson confess. She was finally strangled and burned as a witch.