

A black and white photograph of a person wearing a dark, hooded robe, standing in a wooded area with bare trees. The person is seen from behind, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the robe and the branches of the trees.

***JOHN LINWOOD
PITTS***

***WITCHCRAFT AND
DEVIL LORE
IN THE CHANNEL
ISLANDS***

John Linwood Pitts

Witchcraft and Devil Lore in the Channel Islands

**Transcripts from the Official Records of the Guernsey
Royal Court, with an English Translation and
Historical Introduction**

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WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN GUERNSEY,

From 1563 to 1634, a period of 71 years.

THE STORY IN BRIEF

OF THE

GUILLE-ALLÈS LIBRARY,

GUERNSEY.

GUILLE-ALLÈS LIBRARY SERIES.

EDITED BY J. LINWOOD PITTS.

FOREWORD.

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In presenting to the public another little volume of the "Guille-Allès Library Series," it affords me much pleasure to acknowledge various kindnesses experienced during its preparation. From Edgar MacCulloch, Esq., F.S.A., Bailiff of Guernsey, I have received several valuable hints and suggestions bearing upon the subject; and also from F.J. Jérémie, Esq., M.A., Jurat of the Royal Court. I am also particularly indebted to James Gallienne, Esq., Her Majesty's Greffier, for his uniform kindness and courtesy in allowing the fullest access at all times to the Archives under his care, not only in respect to the subject-matter of the present publication, but also in other historical researches which I have wished to make. I am equally obliged to Mr. E.M. Cohu and Mr. H.J.V. Torode, Deputy-Greffiers, and to Mr. A. Isemonger, Bailiff's Clerk, for various information and much ready help, which materially facilitated my investigations. All these gentlemen have my cordial acknowledgments and best thanks.

J.L.P.

Guernsey, December, 1885.

NOTE.—The [Seal](#) represented on the title page is that of the Guernsey Bailiwick. It was first granted by Edward I. in the seventh year of his reign (1279), and bears the inscription: S. BALLIVIE INSULE DE GERNEREYE.

INTRODUCTION.

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The Witchcraft superstitions of the Channel Islands, sad as they were in their characteristics and results—as is abundantly evidenced by our judicial records—were but a part and parcel of that vast wave of unreasoning credulity which swept across the civilised world during the Middle Ages, and more or less affected every class of society, and all sorts and conditions of men. From the lists given in the following pages (pp. 28-32), it will be seen that in about seventy-one years, during the reigns of Elizabeth, James I. and Charles I., no fewer than seventy-eight persons—fifty-eight of them being women, and twenty of them men—were brought to trial for Sorcery in Guernsey alone. Out of these unfortunate victims, three women and one man appear to have been burnt alive; twenty-four women and four men were hanged first and burnt afterwards; one woman was hanged for returning to the island after being banished; three women and one man were whipped and had each an ear cut off; twenty-two women and five men were banished from the island; while five women and three men had the good fortune to be acquitted. Most of these accused persons were natives of Guernsey, but mention is made of one woman from Jersey, of three men and a woman from Sark, and of a man from Alderney.

With regard to the gatherings at the so-called Witches' Sabbaths, there can be no doubt that—quite apart from the question of any diabolic presence at such meetings—very questionable assemblies of people did take place at intervals among the inhabitants of many countries. Probably

these gatherings first had their rise in the old pagan times, and were subsequently continued from force of habit, long after their real origin and significance had been forgotten. Now, it would be very easy for these orgies to become associated—particularly in the then superstitious condition of the popular mind—with the actual bodily presence of the Devil as one of the participants; while it is also not improbable that, in some cases at least, heartless and evil-minded persons worked upon the prevailing credulity to further their own nefarious purposes. Our esteemed Bailiff has offered a suggestion or two of considerable value on this point with regard to certain Guernsey phases of the superstition. He thinks it highly probable that some of these deluded women were actually the dupes of unprincipled and designing men, who arrayed themselves in various disguises and then met their unfortunate victims by appointment. This idea is, indeed, borne out to a great extent by some of the particulars stated in the following confessions. For instance, some of the women assert that when they met the Devil he was in the form of a dog, *but rather larger*; he always stood upon his hind legs—probably the man's feet; and, when he shook hands with them, his paw *felt like a hand*—doubtless it *was* a hand. Another suggestion of the Bailiff's is also worth notice. It is that the black ointment so often mentioned as being rubbed on the bodies of the so-called witches, had a real existence, and may have been so compounded as to act as a narcotic or intoxicant, and produce a kind of extatic condition, just as the injection of certain drugs beneath the skin is known to do now. These suggestions are certainly worth consideration as offering

reasonable solutions of at least two difficulties connected with those strange and lamentable superstitions. In one way or other there must have been some physical basis for beliefs so widely extended and so terribly real. Imagination, of course, possesses a marvellous power of modification and exaggeration, but still it requires some germs of fact around which to crystallise. And it is to the discovery of the nature of such germs that a careful and conscientious observer will naturally turn his attention.

While speaking of the burning of Witches in Guernsey, I may also refer for a moment to the three women who, in Queen Mary's reign suffered death by fire, for heresy, because the reason of their condemnation and punishment has caused some controversy, and is often associated in the popular mind with a charge of sorcery. Dr. Heylin in his *Survey* (page 323), says:—

Katherine Gowches, a poor woman of St. Peter-Port, in Guernsey, was noted to be much absent from church, and her two daughters guilty of the same neglect. Upon this they were presented before James Amy, then dean of the island, who, finding in them that they held opinions contrary to those then allowed about the sacrament of the altar, pronounced them heretics, and condemned them to the fire. The poor women, on the other side, pleaded for themselves, that that doctrine had been taught them in the time of King Edward; but if the queen was otherwise disposed, they were content to be of her religion. This

was fair but it would not serve; for by the dean they were delivered unto Helier Gosselin, then bailiff, and by him unto the fire, July 18, 1556. One of these daughters, Perotine Massey, she was called, was at that time great with child; her husband, who was a minister, having in those dangerous times fled the island; in the middle of the flames and anguish of her torments, her belly broke in sunder, and her child, a goodly boy, fell down into the fire, but was presently snatched up by one W. House, one of the by-standers. Upon the noise of this strange incident, the cruel bailiff returned command that the poor infant must be cast again into the flames, which was accordingly performed; and so that pretty babe was born a martyr, and added to the number of the holy innocents.

Parsons, the English Jesuit, has asserted that the women were felons and were executed for theft, while other apologists have described them as prostitutes and generally infamous in character. The original sentences, however, which still exist at the Guernsey *Greffé*, and which I have examined, conclusively settle the question. Both the ecclesiastical sentence, which is in Latin, and the civil sentence, which is in French, distinctly describe the charge as one of *heresy*, and make no mention whatever of any other crime as having aught to do with the condemnation.

It has been questioned too whether a child could be born alive under such circumstances. Mr. F.B. Tupper, in his *History of Guernsey* (page 151), says: "We are assured by competent surgical authority that the case is very possible";