

The Witches of Selwood Forest

The Witches of Selwood Forest:

*Witchcraft and Demonism in the
West of England, 1625-1700*

By

Andrew Pickering

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



The Witches of Selwood Forest:
Witchcraft and Demonism in the West of England, 1625-1700

By Andrew Pickering

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2017 by Andrew Pickering

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5188-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5188-6

[In] other cases, when wicked or mistaken people charge us with crimes of which we are not guilty, we clear ourselves by showing that at that time we were at home, or in some other place, about our honest business; but in prosecutions for witchcraft, that most natural and just defence is a mere jest, for if any cracked-brain girl imagines (or any lying spirit makes her believe) that she sees any old woman, or other person pursuing her in her visions, the defenders of the vulgar witchcraft [...] hang the accused parties for things they were doing when they were, perhaps, asleep on their beds or saying their prayers

– Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718), vi-vii.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations, Maps and Tables.....	ix
Preface.....	xv
Acknowledgements.....	xxvi
Notes on the Text.....	xxviii
Chronology.....	xxix
Chapter One.....	1
The Devil's Cloister	
Chapter Two.....	16
The Demon Drummer	
Chapter Three.....	44
A Book of Examinations	
Chapter Four.....	62
A Hellish Knot of Witches	
Chapter Five.....	91
Pandaemonium	
Chapter Six.....	112
The Bewitching of William Spicer	
Chapter Seven.....	134
The Bewitching of Mary Hill	

Chapter Eight	185
Credible Ministers	
Chapter Nine	213
Credulity and Incredulity	
Postscript	230
Appendix A	235
May Hill and the Hills of Selwood Forest	
Appendix B.....	248
Witchcraft Cases in Somerset and Wiltshire in the Later Seventeenth Century	
Appendix C	254
Richard Alleine and the Devil of Ditchat	
Bibliography	258
Index.....	272

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS, MAPS AND TABLES

Illustrations

- Fig. 1-1 Detail from the frontispiece of *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), depicting the Devil and witches in Selwood Forest.
- Fig. 2-1 Detail from the frontispiece of *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), depicting the demon “Drummer of Tedworth”.
- Fig. 3-1 Detail from the frontispiece of *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), depicting the levitation of Richard Jones.
- Fig. 4-1 “Elizabeth Style of Bayford, Widow” in *The History of Witches and Wizards* (1720).
- Fig. 5-1 Illustration in Richard Bovet’s *Pandaemonium* (1684).
- Fig. 6-1 Seventeenth-century woodcut showing witches and familiars.
- Fig. 7-1 Contemporary engraving purporting to show Mary Hill bewitched and vomiting. John Ashton, *The Devil in Britain and America* (1896), v.
- Fig. 8-1 Detail from the frontispiece of *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), depicting a meeting of a man in black with witches in Selwood Forest.
- Fig. 9-1 Woodcut depicting the swimming of Mary Sutton, Bedford, 1613.

Maps

- Map 1 The West of England.
- Map 2 The Selwood Forest region of Somerset and Wiltshire.
- Map 3 Detail from Andrews and Dury’s map for Wiltshire, 1773, showing the location of Hill family homes at Brookway Gate and Short Street.

Tables

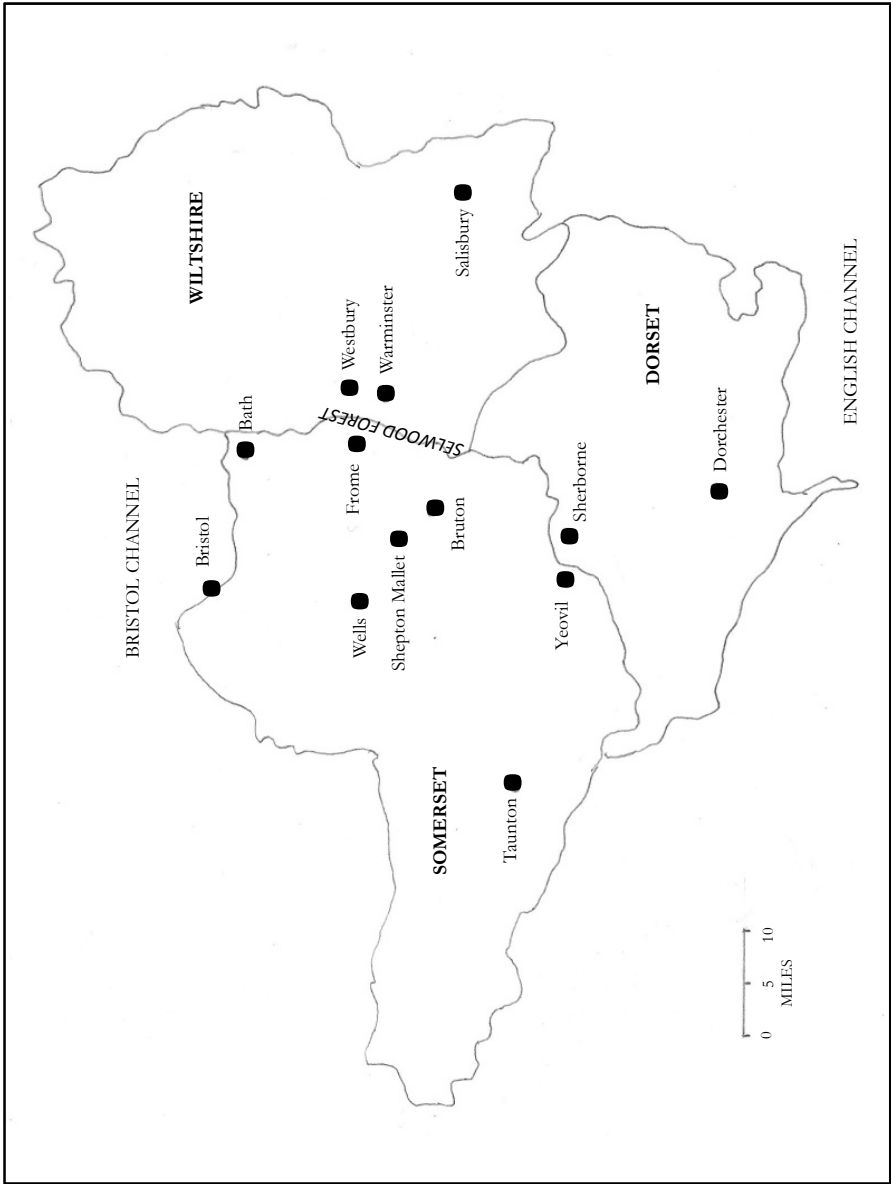
Table 1 Ejected ministers with Selwood Forest associations.

Table 2 Burials in wool, Beckington Register, 1681–7.

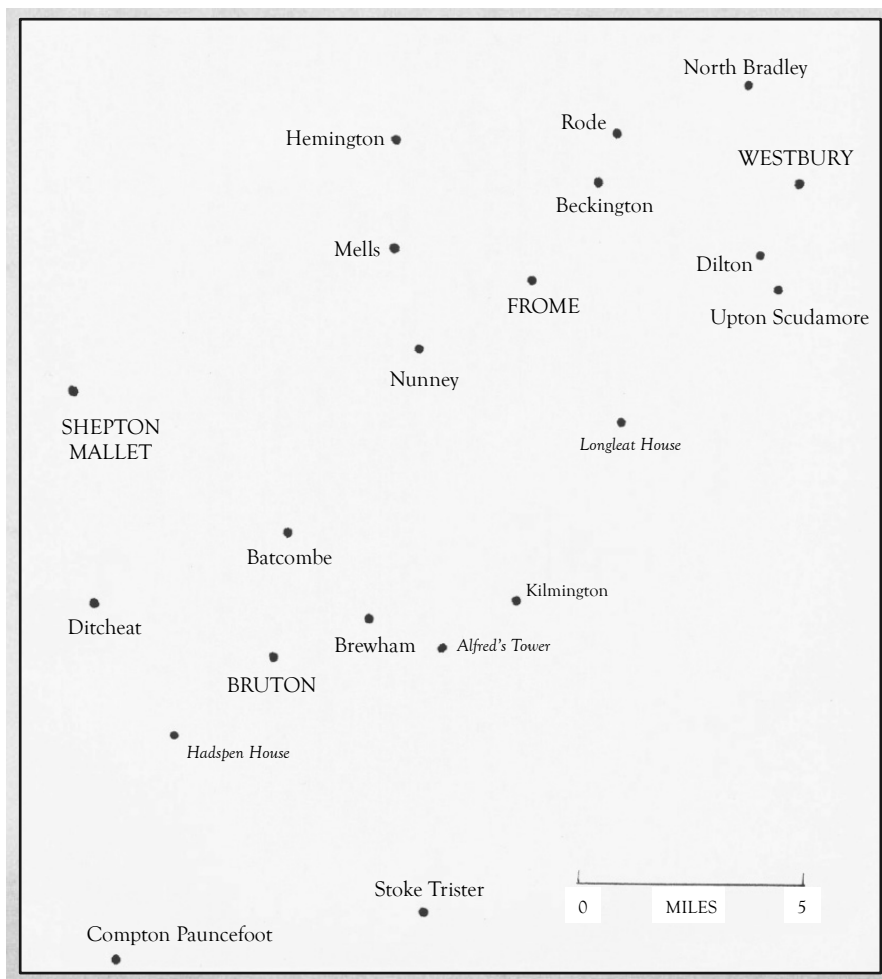
Table 3 Witchcraft cases featuring vomiting of strange objects and other related phenomena.

Table 4 Ordeal by water (“swimming”) episodes.

Table 5 Selwood connections.



Map 1 The West of England.



Map 2 The Selwood Forest region of Somerset and Wiltshire.

Batcombe, Somerset: 1613–41 living held by Richard Bernard, author of *A Guide to Grand-Jury Men [...] in cases of witchcraft* (1627).

Beckington, Somerset: 1689–90 scene of the bewitchment of two eighteen-year-olds, William Spicer and Mary Hill, and the subsequent arrest of three women, Elizabeth Carrier, Margery

Coombes and Ann More.

Bruton, Somerset: location of the 1689 sessions at which the case of Elizabeth Carrier of Beckington was heard.

Brewham, Somerset: setting for witchcraft coven and sabbat activity heard at the trials of Christian Green and Margaret Agar in 1665.

Compton Pauncefoot, Somerset: home of Robert Hunt, JP.

Dilton, Wiltshire: childhood home of May Hill, rector of Beckington at the time of the Beckington witchcraft episode of 1689.

Ditcheat, Somerset: location of a disturbing manifestation of the Devil in an account published in 1584; residence of a cunning man named Compton involved in the 1665 Stoke Trister case.

Frome, Somerset: living held by Richard Baxter's colleague John Humfrey and then, 1662-72, by Joseph Glanvill, author of *Saducismus Triumphatus*; location in 1730 of a fatal witch-swimming episode.

Hadspen House, Somerset: home of William Player - probably the "Squire Player" who visited Beckington in 1689 to investigate the bewitchment of Mary Hill.

Hemington, Somerset: 1678-1736 living held by Stephen Hill, brother of May Hill, rector of Beckington.

Kilmington: location of the alleged bewitchment of a "young maid" in 1665.

Mells, Somerset: 1591-1619 living held by William Hill, author of *The First Principles of a Christian*.

Nunney, Somerset: possibly the home of Julian Cox, executed as a witch at Taunton in 1663.

Rode, Somerset: three women, Anne Haberfield and her daughters Elizabeth Kneall and Margaret Waddom swum here as witches in 1694.

Shepton Mallet, Somerset: 1657 scene of the bewitching of Richard Jones that led to the execution of Jane Brooks.

Stoke Trister, Somerset: setting for witchcraft coven and sabbat activity heard at the trials of Elizabeth Style and Alice Duke in 1665.

Westbury, Wiltshire: 1582–95 living held by Adam Hill, esteemed theologian and author.

PREFACE

A single sheet, printed on both sides, *Great News from the West of England*, published in London in 1689, tells the remarkable story of supposed bewitchment in the village of Beckington in Somerset. The ensuing witch-hunt is the focus of this study.

Beckington is on the edge of an ancient royal forest known as Selwood Forest, which straddled the Somerset-Wiltshire border and extended south of Frome almost into Dorset.¹ The one patch of the original wooded forest that remained – known to this day as Woodlands in the parish of Frome – was remembered in about 1800 as having been “within the memory of man, the notorious asylum of a desperate clan of banditti, whose depredations were a terror to the surrounding parishes”.² The poverty and disorder in parts of Selwood Forest in the seventeenth century were notorious.³ On its southern edge at Stoke Trister, soon to become notorious for its witchcraft, a great crowd attended a bull-baiting, defying orders to disperse.⁴ Disafforestation schemes in particular provoked riots in the region. Several Selwood communities, including the parishes of Beckington, Batcombe and Mells, were puritan strongholds in the bitter political and religious struggles of the Civil War period.⁵

This is the first time the extraordinarily rich history of witchcraft in and around Selwood Forest in the seventeenth and

¹ See Michael McGarvie, *The Bounds of Selwood* (Frome: Frome Society for Local Study, 1978) for a full examination.

² George Alexander Cooke, *Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Somerset* (c.1800), 167.

³ David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

early eighteenth centuries has been the subject of a comprehensive study. This is somewhat surprising given that it comprises several dramatic cases for which detailed records survive, and it is also the place in which two of the most important demonologies in the English language were written. Here Richard Bernard, the moderate Puritan pastor of Batcombe, produced his highly influential manual for those hearing witchcraft cases, *A Guide to Grand-Jury Men*, published in 1627. Here too Joseph Glanvill, an eminent scholar and Restoration-era vicar of Frome Selwood, wrote in the 1660s most of what would eventually become his famous *Saducismus Triumphatus, or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1681). The formal accusation for maleficent witchcraft⁶ of almost thirty women and men can be identified for the Selwood Forest region between 1658 and 1690. Of these at least nine were examined by a local magistrate and some had their cases heard at the assizes. Between 1694 and 1730 at least four so-called witches, who did not receive a formal hearing, were subjected to the trauma of an extra-judicial public “swimming” – a lynching, in effect – that left one of them dead. In the broader history of witchcraft the Brewham and Stoke Trister episodes of 1664, recorded by Glanvill, are of exceptional importance in providing the most detailed and unequivocal accounts of alleged sabbat meetings in early modern England.

The much better-known version of the Beckington case, written by May Hill, the rector of Beckington, was published in Richard Baxter’s *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* in 1691. There can be little doubt, as I have explained in Chapter 8, that May Hill was also the anonymous author of *Great News from the West of England*.

Balthasar Bekker, a Dutch pastor, was deeply disturbed by the case when he read it (presumably in Baxter’s book), and it informed his repudiation of popular beliefs in spirits in his subsequent *The World Bewitched* – a hugely influential work published in four

⁶ Harm caused by supernatural means.

volumes between 1691 and 1694.⁷ In 1697 Hill's letter to Baxter was included in William Turner's *A Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences*.⁸ The Baxter account has been reproduced and referenced on a number of occasions since its first publication in 1691, but, apart from a brief mention in Jonathan Barry's *Witchcraft and Demonology in South West England, 1640–1789* (2012), *Great News from the West of England* appears to have eluded, or at least been neglected by, historians of witchcraft, including the important pioneer George Kittredge. Kittredge noted that "Chief Justice Holt is to be commended for procuring the acquittal of a dozen witches between 1693 and 1702" and, in so doing, ignored Holt's acquittal of the Beckington witches in 1690.⁹

Hitherto, a telling of the Beckington case that fully explores the immediate context in which it was set, and investigates the identity and lives of its protagonists, has not been attempted. In so doing I have endeavoured to heed Marion Gibson's warning that "Those who work with stories about witches should regard them as a fascinating and important resource, but must avoid the pitfalls of regarding them as if they were objective and unproblematic, of taking them as read."¹⁰ I have had unusual good fortune in having not one but two contemporary accounts of the case – one from

⁷ Andrew Fix, "Angels, Devils, and Evil Spirits in Seventeenth-Century Thought: Balthasar Bekker and the Collegiants", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50:4 (1989), 539. Fix, erroneously, refers here to "published reports of the trial and execution of the so-called "Beckington witch" in England" – in fact not one of the three women accused in Beckington in 1689 was executed.

⁸ William Turner, *A Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (1697), 30–31. It is interesting to find the author of this compilation coupling the Beckington case with the other Selwood Forest cases discussed in this book. Turner took these directly from Joseph Glanvill's 1681 *Saducismus Triumphatus*. In *A Compleat History* Glanvill's entries directly precede Hill's letter; they are all contained within a chapter headed 'Of the Appearance of Bad Angels'.

⁹ George L. Kittredge, *Notes on Witchcraft* (Massachusetts: The Davis Press, 1907), 55.

¹⁰ Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10.

directly before it was heard at the Taunton assizes and one straight after. Then again, unlike several other Selwood Forest cases – those recorded in Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* – there is no record of how the “witches” represented themselves when examined by their judges.

The better-known Selwood Forest cases were considered by Walter Scott in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1884), but of the equally significant Beckington case there was no mention. In 1851 Thomas Wright had provided, in two sentences, a muddled précis of the Baxter/Hill narrative, arriving at the important conclusion that “This case seems to have been the first check put upon the courts of law”.¹¹ Howard Williams in *The Superstitions of Witchcraft* (1865) cited the case, somewhat inaccurately, in his consideration of factors in the decline of witch-hunting:

A recognition of the claims of common sense (at least on the subject of diabolism) seemed to begin from that time; and in 1691, when some of the criminals were put upon their trial at Frome, in Somersetshire, they were acquitted, not without difficulty, by the exertion of the better reason of the presiding judge, Lord Chief Justice Holt. Fortunately for the accused, Lord Chief Justice Holt was a person of sense, as well as legal acuteness.¹²

The trial was not conducted at Frome but reached the assizes held at Taunton that year; more importantly, Williams depicted it as a landmark event, a turning point, even, as the first witchcraft case heard by the influential Judge Holt who replaced, as Lord Chief

¹¹ Thomas Wright, *Narratives of Sorcery and Magic* (New York: Redfield, 1852; first published London: 1851), 383; Ewen, in 1933 (*Witchcraft and Demonism*, see n. 17), found Wright's compendium flawed but, nevertheless, acknowledged it as the most comprehensive collection of witchcraft narratives to date.

¹² Howard Williams, *The Superstitions of Witchcraft* (London: Spottiswoode and Co., 1865), 249.

Justice, the considerably less sceptical Sir Mathew Hale. After all, Williams wrote, “The great revolution of 1688, which set the examples of Protestantism on a firmer basis, could not fail to effect an intellectual as well as a political change.”¹³ More recently, Malcolm Gaskill has noted that, after 1689, “judges paid an increasing amount of attention to rules of evidence”, making witchcraft harder to prove thereafter.¹⁴ The views of Holt, the prosecuting JPs and the juries are all considered in this book.

A summary of Baxter’s account of the Beckington case appeared in Francis Hutchinson’s *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718). Assuming, like Williams, that the trial was held in 1691, the year in which Baxter’s *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* was published, he named just one of the three witches, “Moor” (i.e. Ann More), “committed for supposed witchcraft upon Mary Hill of Beckington, by Frome, in Somersetshire”. He continued, “one of them died in gaol; the other two were tried before the Right Honourable the Lord Chief Justice Holt, and were acquitted. And the maid that was thought to have been bewitched, in a little time did well, and was fit for service.”¹⁵

The full Baxter version (1691) of the case was told in John Ashton’s *The Devil in Britain and America* (1896), a substantial collection of sources “bringing to light very many cases never before republished”.¹⁶ It is accompanied by an undated and unreferenced engraving, in the style of the period, purporting to show a bewitched girl vomiting. In 1933 Cecil Ewen also summarised Baxter in his *Witchcraft and Demonism*, to which he added the corroborative Gaol Delivery record for the Beckington

¹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁴ Malcolm Gaskill, “Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England”, *Past and Present*, 198 (2008), 64–5.

¹⁵ Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718), 42.

¹⁶ John Ashton, *The Devil in Britain and America* (Adelphi: Ward and Downey, 1896), v.

witches at Taunton on 1 April 1690.¹⁷

The story appeared as an appendix item in Ruth Tongue's important and influential *Somerset Folklore* (1965), largely drawn from Cuming Walters's version in *Bygone Somerset* (1894).¹⁸ It is a severe abridgement of Baxter's account and erroneously places the case in the early eighteenth century.¹⁹ This was a slight improvement on Walters who located the "quaint record" at some unstated point "in the last century".²⁰ In both accounts the principal "witch", Elizabeth Carrier, appears as "Currier". The inaccurate Walter-Tongue rendition continues to inform the work of local historians.

Involving at least twenty-four named participants, the alleged witchcraft conspiracy in villages around Bruton and Wincanton at the start of the 1660s bears comparison with the supposed gathering of witches at Pendle, Lancashire, who were tried in 1612. Until its suppression by higher authorities, the Selwood Forest panic looked set to become one of the most severe witch-hunts in English history.

Much has been written about Hopkins and the many cases with which he was associated including Malcolm Gaskill's excellent *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth Century English Tragedy* (2005). The region in which he operated was also the focus of Alan Macfarlane's pioneering *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (1970). Numerous books, including a few novels, the first appearing in 1848, have been written about the Pendle witches. Their story is the focus of a collection of essays contributed by experts in the field such as Marion Gibson and

¹⁷ C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonism* (London: Heath Cranton, London: 1933), 376.

¹⁸ Cuming Walters, *Bygone Somerset* (London: William Andrews & Co., 1897), 115.

¹⁹ Ruth Tongue, *Somerset Folklore* (Glasgow: The University Press, 1965), 226.

²⁰ S. Burgess and E.H. Rann, "Superstitions and Curious Events" in Walters, *Bygone Somerset*, 115.

James Sharpe: *The Lancashire Witches: histories and stories* edited by Robert Poole (2002). By comparison, while a good deal has been written about Joseph Glanvill and his place in the contemporary discourse regarding theology and “mechanical philosophy”, the available literature, academic and popular, concerning witchcraft beliefs in seventeenth-century Selwood Forest is sparse. Admittedly there were few executions in connection with the ensuing witch-hunts but there is still a dramatic and shocking series of tales to tell.

Little is known of the scale and nature of witchcraft trials in Somerset in the period before the Civil War (1642–1651). Jonathan Barry has summed up the paucity of the available evidence for the South-West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: “Before 1670”, he has written, “we have only some bail books (1654–1677) and the orders of the courts (largely administrative though occasionally mentioning witchcraft cases), and even after 1670, when we have the gaol books, we do not have indictments or depositions, so we have only a minimal amount of information about each case.” Legal records detailing assize court trial proceedings have not survived.²¹

However, there are numerous unexplored indictments for Somerset for the period after 1670. The Q/SI catalogue reference leads the researcher to sixty-eight files of this material covering the period 1571–1971. The file for 1689–90 is a box containing a dozen or so rolls of documents, each comprising a considerable number of parchments tightly bound in ancient ribbons and string. They are filthy to handle, covered in the accumulated dust of ages, and some required the assistance of the Somerset Heritage conservators to untie them for my perusal. Among many other points of interest they include, in addition to indictments, bastardy cases, recognizances and the like, lists of JPs and jurors, the signed oaths of constables, and details of the crimes of named individuals from

²¹ Jonathan Barry, *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England, 1640–1789* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9.

all over Somerset recently released from local houses of correction such as Shepton Mallet gaol. Unfortunately I have found nothing that seems pertinent to the Beckington case in the surviving Bruton Sessions records for 1689.

Building on Ewen's work, James Sharpe was able to produce a valuable summary of patterns of witchcraft accusation in the region using the evidence of the gaol deliveries after 1670 recorded for the Western Circuit (Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset, Southampton, Devon, Cornwall). In this period of decline he found these records "especially tantalizing as they show that levels of prosecution [...] were higher in the South-West than in the South-East, possibly pointing to a peak of indictments, now lost to the historical record, in the middle of the seventeenth century".²² From the seventy indictments for the period after 1670, Sharpe was able to conclude that thirty-five occurred before 1679, twenty more in the next ten years up to 1689, the year of the Beckington case, eleven between 1690 and 1699, with a final four culminating in 1704. The most common crime with which they were charged appears to have been harming people, more commonly females than males, and sometimes (but less frequently) killing them. The vast majority of those accused (94 per cent) were female. The gaol delivery record regarding the Beckington case is absolutely typical for this region in this period with its chief protagonists being female witches and a female victim who suffered terrible physical afflictions but eventually recovered.

A great deal has been written about the witch-hunting phenomenon in early modern Europe over the last forty years. For students of the period the subject provides an ideal vehicle for exploring different historical approaches and modes of interpretation. For the academic historian, it is a battlefield of conflicting ideas. For the lay reader, it is a fascinating mystery and a shocking illustration of the capacity of individuals and communities to persecute.

²² James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 120.

Although witchcraft accusation accounts for a tiny fraction of the punishments meted out by courts in the period, this crime has received a disproportionate amount of attention. Jonathan Barry has identified in recent work on witchcraft “three themes or approaches [...] of particular importance in our understanding”; these are the nature and extent of the decline of belief, the need for the close analysis of case studies, and the language of witchcraft narratives that involves “an interest in the intertextuality of witchcraft cases, that is their shaping by reference to previous stories, authorities or cultural models”.²³ These three elements are at the core of my own enquiry into the subject.

At first sight the Beckington case of 1689 appears as an isolated, relatively insignificant episode at the tail-end of the witch-hunting enthusiasm of earlier decades. What the following analysis reveals is that it was very much part of an entrenched local tradition – it had close connections with the more celebrated and infamous Selwood Forest cases of the late 1650s and early 1660s recorded by Glanvill, and it was of great interest to those engaged in the continuing debate regarding the reality of witchcraft and the writing of demonological texts. For a short while, in the pages of Richard Baxter’s *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, the case took centre stage in the 1690s, when, as Jacqueline Pearson has observed, ghost stories and other supernatural phenomena gained a new lease of life because of their “didactic usefulness” in confuting “an alleged epidemic of atheism”.²⁴

In writing this book I have frequently made reference to James Sharpe’s *Instruments of Darkness* (1996) – the best single-volume

²³ Jonathan Barry, “Public infidelity and private belief? The discourse of spirits in Enlightenment Bristol” in Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (eds), *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 117.

²⁴ Jacqueline Pearson, “‘Then she asked it, what were its Sisters names?’: Reading between the lines in seventeenth-century pamphlets of the supernatural”, *The Seventeenth Century*, 28:1 (2013), 64.

account of the rise and decline of witch-hunting in early modern England, the evocative title of which, incidentally, is derived from Glanvill. The wide variety of approaches found in the most admired publications of the last twenty years, notably Robin Briggs's *Witches and Neighbours* (1996, 2002), Wolfgang Behringer's *Witches and Witch-hunts* (2004), and Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons* (1997), have influenced my own approaches to, and interpretations of, the Selwood Forest cases. Barry's essay on Robert Hunt in his *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England, 1640–1789* (2011) has been invaluable as a stimulus for my own research. Several micro-histories also have proved very helpful. These include James Sharpe's fascinating account of a case in Oxfordshire in 1604, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Football, Witchcraft, Murder and the King of England* (1999, 2000), Philip C. Almond's analysis of the famous late Elizabethan Throckmorton case *The Witches of Warboys* (2008), Gilbert Geiss and Ivan Bunn's study of accusations at Lowestoft in 1662: *A Trial of Witches* (1997), Tracy Borman's study of the Belvoir Castle case of 1613, *Witches: James I and the English Witch-hunts* (2013), and, most recently, David L. Jones's *The Ipswich Witch: Mary Lackland and the Suffolk Witch Hunts* (2015), and Stacy Schiff's *The Witches: Salem, 1692, a History* (2015), published as this book was being written. Further afield, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie undertook a most inspiring piece of historical detective work when he hunted for the origins of a witchcraft case in south-west France commemorated by a poem penned over 200 years later in 1842; he published his findings as *La Sorcière de Jasmin* (1983), subsequently translated into English as *Jasmin's Witch* (1987).

Among other lines of enquiry, I have engaged, quite literally, in witch-hunting. While my namesake and, possibly, distant ancestor, Sir Gilbert Pickering of Titchmarsh, hunted for evidence of the diabolical pact and proof of maleficent magic as he examined the "witches" of Warboys in late Elizabethan Huntingdonshire, I have hunted mine in the parish registers and other records for the

Selwood Forest region in the seventeenth century. Time and time again these records, despite their incompleteness and the numerous problems inherent in their handling, have turned up “sufficient proofs” that narratives such as that of the Beckington witch-hunt in 1689 are firmly rooted in historical fact.

This book began as an investigation into a hitherto isolated, little-known and little understood episode of alleged witchcraft and persecution in what is now a small village bypassed by the modern road system and dwarfed by the subsequent growth of Frome and other more successful one-time manufacturing centres in its vicinity. The close analysis of the contemporary accounts in this volume corroborates modern historians’ characterisations of, and explanations for, witchcraft accusation in the close-knit communities of early modern England. The further investigation into the lives of the chief protagonists and their families has helped explain the social and economic contexts in which accusations were made. It sheds further light on motivational factors including tarnished reputations, social conditioning and popular beliefs. It has prompted consideration of patterns of witchcraft-related phenomena such as swimming tests and strange vomiting. In taking the enquiry beyond the specific events in Beckington in 1689 I have discovered all manner of certain, and many probable, connections between those involved in this late Selwood Forest case and the better-known ones that preceded it by a quarter of a century. Like those that came before, it ended up in court because of the will of the local elite – bound together by kinship and common culture – to take it there. It entered the historical record because of the philosophical wars that were waged through the printed works of members of the Royal Society, churchmen and other academics. This book reveals the Beckington witchcraft case not as an insignificant footnote in the history of witch-hunting but as a last blast of the trumpet in the recent campaign against atheism that had first been sounded in Frome Selwood by Joseph Glanvill in the 1660s.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was launched with a first perusal of the Beckington parish records at the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton on 31 October, All Hallows Eve, 2014. I am most grateful to the librarians and archivists there who, like their counterparts at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham, have been courteous and consistently helpful in response to my many requests. The time I spent in the search room treasure trove of the Somerset and Wiltshire Family History Society in Sherborne proved most rewarding. I have welcomed the encouragement of my Plymouth University colleagues, Dr Elizabeth Tingle, Chris Groucott and Dr Sean McGlynn, and enjoyed discussing witchcraft with dozens of students, past and present, studying for the Plymouth University FdA and BA (Hons) degrees I manage at Strode College in Street. Dr Richard Nate, Professor of English Literature at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, in that part of Germany widely regarded as the epicentre of the early modern witch-hunts, has followed my studies with considerable interest and invited me to speak at conferences and participate in seminars on several occasions. His careful reading and annotation of the work-in-progress has been greatly appreciated. I am grateful to the editors of the Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic series for taking the time to read my manuscript, for their encouragement, and for their expert advice. The final version has been expertly proof-read by Elisabeth Ingles and I thank her for her pains-taking examination of the text. Along the way, I have been given the opportunity to air my thoughts in public talks and courses delivered in association with a wide range of organisations; these include the Wessex Centre for Archaeology and History (University

of Winchester), the Historical Association (Wiltshire branch), the South Somerset Archaeological Research Group, the Westbury-sub-Mendip History Society, the Frome Family History Group, the Witham Friary History Society, Somerset County Council (Dillington House), Wiltshire County Council, the University of the Third Age, and the Workers' Education Association. Alastair Macleay, vice-chairman of the Frome Society for Local Study and editor of its excellent journal, commented on an early draft and provided another platform for my developing ideas by commissioning and printing my article, "The Witches of Beckington", in the *Frome Society Yearbook* (Volume 18, 2015). The team at Cambridge Scholars Publishing has proved remarkably supportive and efficient in bringing this book to print. Most of all my gratitude is extended to my wife, Lisa, who has shared my witch-finding adventures with me with great interest and enthusiasm since we first looked at the Beckington registers together in Taunton. It is to her that this book is dedicated.

Andrew Pickering

Bruton in Selwood

NOTES ON THE TEXT

Abbreviations

DNB: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, First Series (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1885-1900).

ODNB: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Second Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

PRO: Public Records Office.

SRO: Somerset Records Office.

VCH: *Victoria County History*.

Dates

Except where indicated, January, February and March dates have been adjusted to match the modern convention (New Year's Day: 1 January), in place of the pre-1752 custom (New Year's Day: 25 March).

Extracts from early modern sources

In many instances these have been rendered by the author into modern English using modern grammatical conventions. The less obscure archaic terms, especially those that deserve to be revived, such as Richard Bernard's "tongue-ripe" to describe a garrulous woman, have been left intact. In some cases, as Joseph Glanvill did with the reports he received of a Somerset Justice of the Peace, Robert Hunt, "I have shortened the examinations, and cast them into such an order, as I think best fit for rendering the matter clear and intelligible."

CHRONOLOGY

- 1604 Witchcraft Act
- 1612 Trial of the Pendle witches at Lancaster
- 1613 Richard Bernard becomes rector of St Mary's, Batcombe
- 1626 Edward Bull and Joan Greedie indicted at Taunton assizes for bewitching Edward Dynham (Richard Bernard probably in attendance)
- 1627 Publication of Bernard's *A Guide to Grand Jurymen with respect to Witches*
- 1628 Alexander Huish made Rector of St George's, Beckington
- 1636 Beckington communion table riot
- 1640 Indictment in Parliament of Alexander Huish
- 1641 Death of Richard Bernard
- 1642 Start of the English Civil War
- 1644 Birth of May Hill, future rector of Beckington
- 1645 Matthew Hopkins, "Witchfinder General", active in East Anglia
- 1649 Execution of Charles I
- 1650 Alexander Huish formally dispossessed of his Beckington living
- 1651 End of the English Civil War
- 1658 Trial and execution of Jane Brooks of Shepton Mallet
- 1659 Discovery of a mass gathering of Quaker "witches" at Sherborne
- 1660 Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II; Alexander Huish reinstated as Rector of St George's, Beckington
- 1662 Act of Uniformity imposed the Book of Common Prayer and reasserts the principle of episcopal ordination; the Quaker Act could be invoked obliging subjects to take an

- oath of loyalty to the king – something contrary to Quaker principles; Joseph Glanvill (1636–1681) appointed vicar of Frome Selwood; founding of the Royal Society
- 1663 (January) Joseph Glanvill and “Mr Hill” visit Mr Mompesson’s haunted house at Tidworth in Wiltshire; trial for witchcraft of Julian Cox in Taunton (summer assizes)
- 1664 The Conventicle Act suppresses meetings of dissenters; Joseph Glanvill becomes member of the Royal Society; unnamed witch condemned at Taunton assizes (Calendar of State Papers recorded by Notestein: possibly one of those brought before JP Robert Hunt)
- 1665 Trial of Elizabeth Style of Stoke Trister – Style dies in gaol before her execution can be carried out; trial of Alice Duke of Wincanton; trial of Christian Green of Brewham; trial of Margaret Agar of Brewham; Five Mile Act (also known as the “Oxford Act”, the “Nonconformists Act”); May Hill appointed curate of St George’s, Beckington; death, allegedly by witchcraft, of a “young maid” at Kilmington; outbreak of “spotted fever” in Beckington
- 1666 Joseph Glanvill made a rector of Bath Abbey
- 1668 Toleration Act helps emancipate religious dissenters; publication of Glanvill’s *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*; May Hill appointed rector of St George’s, Beckington
- 1670 Anne Slade charged and acquitted in Somerset on two witchcraft charges
- 1671 Ann Blake, wife of Henry Blake, found not guilty at Wells on charges of bewitching an infant, Anne Wrentmore, to death, and laming Elizabeth Penney by witchcraft
- 1672 Joseph Glanvill exchanges Frome living for Street and Walton; Margaret/Margeria Stevens, wife of John Stevens, charged and acquitted in Somerset on charges of laming Jane Bayneham and Mary Bridge by witchcraft