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WITCHCRAFT IN THE WEST COUNTRY

William Wallworth

The following accounts of West Country witchcraft in the 19th and early 20th century were published in various local and national newspapers. I have researched them from The British Newspaper Archive online that can be found at <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> They illustrate how widespread the popular belief in witchcraft was at the time the stories were written and the magical activities of witches.

From the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, November 8th 1856: At the Shepton Mallet Petty Sessions in Somerset a woman called Mrs Bathe made a charge against a Ruth Mashman. The latter was said to be a reputed witch and she was charged with extorting money. It was said that Bathe consulted Mashman for her assistance in breaking a spell placed on her husband by another witch. She agreed to charm away the spell and in return requested a quantity of onions, the greater portion of Bathe's clothes and a large sum of money.

On one of her visits to the witch seeking advice Bathe was given a small box with instructions not to open it or show it to anyone except her husband. Shortly afterwards Bathe became ill and blamed the witch's influence and the box. Two farmers were consulted about the object but when Bathe told them the witch had said if the box was opened her house would blow up they decided to have nothing to do with it. However a man called Rood agreed to open the box and said he would do so even if it contained the Devil himself. On opening the box his prediction came true as there was a coloured painting of Old Nick inside it done by Mashman. There was also a verse from the Bible written backwards and some toads' legs. A policeman who searched the accused house told the court he found a loose stone and under it was a crock containing several toads. The court ruled that Mrs Mashman had obtained money from her client by unlawful means and she was sent to the house of correction in Shepton Mallet for six weeks.

In the *Taunton Courier and Western Advisor* for July 18th 1860 a report of proceedings at the Woodbury Petty Sessions said that a Susannah Sullock, described as 'a respectable dressed woman and healthy', complained that she had been assaulted by a lace maker called Virgin Hebden at Colpton Raleigh on June 8th. Sullock said she was turning out her cow into a brake (a dense group of trees or bushes) and was touched by the defendant. When she told Hebden she had frightened her she replied: "You want to be frightened for what you ha' done me." When Sullock replied she had done nothing to the woman she scratched her face and hands with a sharp object drawing blood. A witness for the defendant claimed he saw Sullock chasing Hebden with a stick and calling her "bad names." This was confirmed by Hebden's father. However the defendant was found guilty of assault and fined fourteen shillings to cover costs. The court noted 'drawing the blood' of a witch was popularly believed to be a cure for bewitchment and that witchcraft was very prevalent in the villages of Colyton, Salterton and Woodbury.

In October 1860 a farmer in Drewsteignton in Devon had two horses die from old age. However the farmer and one of his workers believed the animals had died as the result of witchcraft. Their neighbours agreed and said some "fiendish witch" must have caused the deaths. Although two local 'white witches' had passed over, word reached the farmer of another living at Crediton known as 'Professor S.' The farmer rode to the wizard's house where 'the old incantations were put in practice'. The man showed the farmer the features of his enemy (it is not stated how) and twenty five shillings was paid for advice to break the spell. As instructed, on returning home the farmer dug up the bodies of the dead horses and cut out their hearts. These were pierced with blackthorns and pins, wrapped up in brown paper and when darkness fell burnt on a fire of green ash wood and coal. As soon as the hearts from the horses were consumed by the flames the spell was broken.

In the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* dated 22nd August 1867 there was a story about a case involving alleged witchcraft brought before magistrates at Axbridge in Somerset. An old lady called Ann Davies was accused of assaulting Elizabeth Williams by making a cut on her arm with a knife. Williams said she had passed the defendant's cottage on June 22nd and stopped to try and sell her a flower. They engaged in conversation and then Davies produced a previously concealed knife and cut the other woman's arm three times drawing blood.

In her defence Davies claimed Williams was always 'hagging her to death' and claimed she was a witch. Further she had made Davies fall from a cart and had killed her cat and donkey using witchcraft. She admitted scratching Williams with a pin (not a knife) believing that if she drew the witch's blood she would no longer have any power over her. The magistrates said that a person holding such beliefs should really be in a lunatic asylum. Instead they bound her over to keep the peace on the payment of a surety. Her husband, who shared her beliefs about witchcraft, reluctantly consented to be responsible for his wife.

On February 27th 1869 the *Luton Times and Advertiser* printed a story about two or three young women at Dittisham in South Devon who fell ill and witchcraft was suspected. Their mothers believed they had been ill-wished by somebody with the Evil Eye. A wizard from Teignmouth was consulted and declared that the women had been "deeply wounded" by the power of witchcraft. However he said they could be cured if a certain amount of money was handed over by their families. Although payment was made to the man the girls remained ill and the wizard declared their case was hopeless and nothing could be done for them. A witch was then consulted in Dartmouth and again she demanded money for her services. This was allegedly passed on to her "secret friend" to ensure success. When the women recovered the witch claimed the credit and asked for a further payment of £4.00. When the mothers of the young women could not raise that amount they consulted a male witch also living in Dartmouth to intercede with the female one on their behalf. He threatened to bring her before the local magistrate and she was so frightened she gave up her claim and even returned some of the money previously paid to her.

The *Gloucester Citizen* on August 19th 1879 reported a case of surviving 'West Country superstition' in a North Devon parish. A farmer reported he had been bewitched by one of his relatives and consulted a 'white witch' in Exeter. She visited his house and, telling the farmer to keep silent, burnt some incense while repeating an incantation. The witch then told the farmer to keep to a beef only diet for a week. It was reported that during the woman's visit the farmer's wife made some 'contemptuous observations' about her activities.

Witchcraft in the seaside town of Ilfracombe in North Devon was reported in the *Western Times* on April 23rd 1907. Quoting the *Ilfracombe Gazette* it was said a farmer had made a trip to a 'white witch' in Exeter after three of his horses fell ill and died. The local vet was unable to tell what had happened to them and the farmer suspected bewitchment. The Exeter witch visited the man's farm and confirmed that he had been 'witched'. In answer to questions about the affair and whether he believed in 'the superstition' (of witchcraft) the man replied that he definitely believed in it. He said that " 'twas a good job I went [to the witch], or else I should [have] lost everything. I lost all my horses, and 'twas awful. Awful!"

Sometimes accusations of bewitching ended in tragic circumstances. The *Tamworth Herald* of August 5th 1916 published a report on an inquest held at Edithmead near Highbridge in Somerset three days earlier. It involved the death from a gunshot of an 82 year-old man called Daniel Lawrence at the hands of a local 48 year-old farmer Philip George Hill. The murdered man's son told the coroner's court that Hill believed in witchcraft and thought people in the district were bewitching him. Before he died Lawrence stated that his killer said: "I have been waiting for you for a long time, now I will do for you." He then fired his gun at the old man. When he was arrested by the police Hill told them: "All the lot about here have been bewitching my child and pony". A verdict of 'wilful murder' was returned by the coroner.

A belief in witches and their powers survived in Devon after the First World War. On December 9th 1924 the *Western Daily Press* published an account of a court case at Cullompton near Tiverton in Devon. It involved a smallholder called Alfred John Matthew village of Clyst St Lawrence who was accused of attacking his neighbour Ellen Garnsworthy. The court was told that for no apparent reason Matthews scratched the woman's arm with a

pin caused a profuse flow of blood from the wound. He also threatened to shoot her. The defendant pleaded guilty and in his defence said Garnsworthy had ill-wished him and bewitched his prize pig. He had told the police they should raid the witch's house and seize a crystal she used in her spells. The magistrates tried to convince Matthews that witchcraft did not exist but he refused to accept what they said. He was sentenced to a month in prison for the attack.

PSYCHOACTIVE PLANTS AND THE WITCH

In the first issue of the *Abraxas* journal published last year there was an article by academic Dr Sarah Penicka-Smith on the witches' 'flying ointment' or 'lifting balm' and the psychoactive plants in the various historical recipes for it. She is a tutor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney in Australia and the music director of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir. In her article she says that Gerald Gardner dismissed the use of natural drugs in modern witchcraft. Dr Penicka-Smith goes on to say in her article that Gardner not mentioning the magical use of plants with hallucinogenic or psychoactive properties proves an ignorance of the subject typical of modern witches. A similar claim about Gardner was made by the pseudonymous 'Talesin' writing in the *Pentagram* newsletter in 1965 about the use of the fly agaric toadstool by modern traditional witches. Dr Penicka-Smith quotes the High Priestess of the Eldergrove Coven in Sydney who says the use of drugs is not recommended as there are safer methods of obtaining altered states of consciousness such as meditation, trance work and "raising power". This isolated quite from a Wiccan is supposed to prove the assertion that modern witches know nothing about the subject or if they do disapprove of using natural drugs in magical rituals or practices.

How true is this claim and is it justified? We know from an independent description by the novelist Louis Wilkinson of the New Forest Coven that Gardner was initiated into in 1939 that they knew about fly agaric or *amanita muscaria* with its distinctive red cap with white spots and used it in their rituals (see Francis King's *Ritual Magic in England*, New English Library paperback edition 1972:141). If that was the case one presumes that Gardner would have been aware of it, its properties and magical use. Also Robert Graves mentions in his writings that he discussed the use of 'magic mushrooms' with modern British witches. When Gardner and his friend the Sufi master Idries Shah visited Graves at his home on the Mediterranean island of Majorca their use by the Brickett Wood coven was a subject they discussed.

In fact in *Witchcraft Today* (Rider & Co 1954) Gardner says that witches had knowledge of a herb called 'Kat', which if mixed with incense would 'release the inner eye' and facilitate astral projection or spirit travel. Also if a man inhaled the incense smoke containing the drug any woman he sees looks more beautiful. Gardner speculates it also contains wild hemp which he says is also used by 'sorcerers'. What he is referring to is khat, which is popular today among the Somali immigrant population in the United Kingdom. Despite contrary advice from their own drug advisory group, in July 2013 the coalition government banned its use. It is a stimulant derived from the leaves of an Arabian shrub that can be chewed or drunk as an infusion and is known in Arabic as *kat*. In his book Gardner also discusses the use of coca leaves, the peyote mushroom and even alcohol to affect the nervous system of the human body and open the Third Eye to aid Second Sight (pp 127-128 of the Pedigree Books paperback edition published in 1956).

So it seems Gerald Gardner was well aware of and informed about the use of natural psychoactive or hallucinogenic drugs in witchcraft for magical and psychic purposes. In that respect he was heir to an ancient practice in historical witchcraft that is still continued today by some modern traditional witches. Of course not all occultists, magicians and witches agree with the use of such methods. It is a matter of personal choice and inclination and should only be practised by those with a well-informed, practical knowledge of psychoactive plants and fungi or under experienced supervision. Also the ownership and partaking of many of these plants and fungi is currently classified by the authorities as illegal and a criminal offence.