



The  
**CAULDRON**

Witchcraft, Paganism & Folklore

No 153 Summer 2014

[www.the-cauldron.org.uk](http://www.the-cauldron.org.uk) ISSN:0964-5594

---

*Castle of the Mole King*

*Druidic Living Today*

*Remembering the  
Exeter Witches*

*Finding Faery Folk  
in Norfolk*

*Paganism & Satanism*

*Pan in Fiction*

*The Witch of Shepton  
Mallett*



## THE WITCH OF SHEPTON MALLET

William Wallworth

In the article 'Witchcraft in the West Country' published in *The Cauldron* No 149 (August 2013) the 1856 case of Ruth Marshman (1805-1878) was mentioned. Described in court as a "reputed witch", Marshman was convicted of extorting money from one of her clients and sentenced to six weeks in prison. During her trial there was mention of an 'enchanted box' that when opened contained a coloured painting of the Devil executed by Marshman, some toad's legs and a biblical verse (unknown) written backwards. When the police searched her home they discovered a crock or earthenware pot concealed under a stone that contained several toads.

Ruth Marshman's maiden name was Litman and there are records going back to the 1600s of a family of that name living in the Somerset village of Shepton Mallet where she was born in 1805. Ruth Litman had an illegitimate daughter in November 1834, which would have caused a scandal in those days, and three months later married Charles Marshman from Croscombe in Somerset. It is not known if he was the father of the baby. In the 1851 census it is recorded that Ruth and Charles Marshman were living in Quarr Street in Shepton Mallet with their son Henry and daughter Jane. Another daughter Sabina had died at the age of eight or nine in 1850. All the family, despite the young age of the children, were employed. Charles, aged 39, was a labourer, his wife Ruth, 40, was a silk thrasher (thrasher or thresher?), their daughter Jane, aged 14, followed the same trade and Henry, only 8, was also listed as a labourer.

The 1856 courts case was not the first time that Ruth Marshman and her family had come to the attention of the law. In the *Wells Journal* newspaper of July 8<sup>th</sup> 1854 it was reported that Charles Marshman and another man William Jones had been charged with stealing a quantity of wool from a John Luff of Shepton Mallet. One of Luff's employees said that after his master's sheep had been shorn 143 fleeces were stored in a cupboard under the stairs of an empty property owned by the farmer. Subsequently Marshman and James were arrested and charged with stealing the fleeces and trying to sell them to a local manufacturer of woollen rugs called Frederick Taylor. In court Taylor testified that the defendants had brought two sacks of wool to his house and asked him if he was interested in buying them. Taylor was suspicious and secretly sent for a police constable who arrested the two men.

In his defence Marshman claimed that James had told him he had found the wool on the roadside near a turnpike gate and he was not aware it had been stolen. As a result Charles Marshman was acquitted of stealing the wool but James was found guilty and sentenced to eighteen months hard labour. However in January the next year Charles Marshman appeared in court again charged with stealing coal. As he had three previous convictions for theft when he was found guilty he received a prison sentence of twelve months hard labour.

In November 1856 charges were then laid against Ruth Marshman at the petty sessions (local court) in Shepton Mallet for extorting money from a Elizabeth Bathe. She had hired Marshman to break a spell allegedly put on her husband by another witch. The man had apparently been suffering misfortune as a result. In return for 'charming away' the spell Marshman asked for payment of a sovereign (which was equal to a modern pound sterling but made from gold), a quantity of onions and some of the woman's clothes. At one of her consultations with the witch Bathe was given a small box with strict instructions to show it to nobody and especially not her husband. Shortly afterwards the woman became sick and believed she was under Marshman's influence and that the box was the cause of her illness.

Ignoring the witch's instructions, Elizabeth Bathe consulted two respectable local farmers about the mysterious box. However Marshman heard about this and warned the two men that if they dared to open it Bathe's house would blow up. They declined to get involved and instead a man called Rood declared he was not frightened to open the box even if the Devil himself was inside it. He must have been psychic as when the box was opened inside was a

card with a painting of Old Nick on it together with a biblical passage written in reverse on a piece of paper and some amputated legs from toads.

Marshman was reported to the police and a local constable searched her house. He stepped on a loose stone and lifting it up found a crock containing several toads. Ruth Marshman was found guilty of obtaining money by unlawful means and sentenced to six weeks in the House of Correction. These establishments were originally set up after the passing of the Poor Law in 1601. They were places where the unemployed, vagrants and beggars were sent by the courts. Houses of Correction were also used to punish the poor who had been convicted of petty crimes, prostitution or anti-social behaviour.

In August 1858 the *Wells Journal* carried a report that Ruth and Charles Marshman had both been charged with receiving stolen goods. Apparently their daughter Jane had stolen some linen, lace collars and muslin from a woman called Elizabeth Keen who lived in Wells in Somerset. Her parents were accused of receiving the items knowing them to have been stolen. In court a policeman giving evidence described Charles Marshman as a "ticket of leave man", which probably meant he had been released from jail on parole. The constable also informed the magistrates that Marshman's wife Ruth had been convicted of a felony in the past. In the end the Marshman's were acquitted of the charge but it is not known what happened to their daughter.

In 1861 the Marshmans were living in Pike Lane, Shepton Mallet and again Charles Marshman was in court. He was accused of refusing to leave the rented property the family lived in after their landlord, a Mr Burgess, issued them with an eviction notice. Marshman agreed he owed Burgess £1.19s in rent arrears but bizarrely claimed that while they wanted to leave the house their landlord would not let them. The Marshmans were ordered to obey the eviction order and vacate the house within seven days.

In May of the next year Ruth Marshman was back in court again. This time charged with being a "rogue and vagabond" by pretending to tell fortunes. The *Wells Journal* said that Marshman had previously been jailed for practising the 'Black Art'. She was described by the newspaper as an 'old woman' although she was only 57 years old at the time. A 'well dressed young woman' called Pricilla Taylor living in the Market Place in Shepton Mallet testified against her. She told the presiding magistrates she had met the 'cunning woman' Ruth Marshman, who was a complete stranger, in the street and she had been invited to visit her house.

About a month afterwards Taylor was coming home from Wells and decided to drop in on Marshman to find out what she wanted. The witch produced some cards (probably ordinary playing cards) and gave her a reading. Taylor was told there was a young man who wanted her but she should have nothing to do with him. In fact there was another young man with a fortune who she did not know but would meet in the very near future. Incredibly this would be a whirlwind romance and she would be married by the following Saturday. At her insistence Taylor gave the witch a shawl, which was to be taken away to "work a charm over" to facilitate her meeting with her husband-to-be. Later the young woman found out that the shawl had been taken to a pawn shop by Marshman who was now demanding a payment of a shilling for her magical services. Taylor also gave her a dress, a piece of printed cloth and a mantle (sleeveless cloak) in payment. Unfortunately at the end of the week there was no sign of the wealthy young suitor and Taylor reported the witch to the police as a fraud.

After a lengthy discussion the two magistrates presiding over the case decided that Ruth Marshman was guilty as charged. They sentenced her to two months in prison and said that during that period she must do hard labour. Ruth Marshman, the Witch of Shepton Mallet, died aged 73 and her death was registered during the first three months of 1878. Three years later the census recorded that her husband Charles Marshman, described as a widower, was living at his grandson's house at Cat Ash in Pike Lane, Shepton Mallet. He died at the quite old age of 81 and his death was officially registered in the last three months of 1890.