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THE WITCH OF HADLEIGH

William Wallworth

One of the witches that the nineteenth-century cunning man or 'witch doctor' James Murrell of Hadleigh in Essex had dealings with was a 'Mrs Eve'. She was born Elizabeth Finch (1769-1869) at Sible Hedingham in Essex and was first married to an Adam Finch and then to William Eaves or Eves. In his book *The Dark World of Witches* (Robert Hale 1962), the amateur folklorist Eric Maple said that Cunning Murrell pitted all his powers of white magic against a witch from Hadleigh called Mrs Eve. After her death a curious and macabre story circulated that nobody could be found to lay out the witch's body. One woman finally agreed providing she was never left alone with the corpse. She and a neighbour were just about to leave after completing the job when the witch's son, who had been absent from home for some time, entered the house. He told the women he knew his mother had died because her spirit had appeared to him where he was working in the fields.

Then he asked the women to stay behind as there was one more task to be done and asked them to light a large fire. The man then went to a chest and took out a small box from which there came a rustling sound. He told the two women that his mother "held a power" that now she was dead would be passed to him, but he refused to have it. The witch's son then threw the box into the flames and a terrible screaming came from it like a human voice in agony. The man then announced that "the power" had been destroyed and he was now free. This grim folk tale reveals the old belief that the power of a witch was passed down to her descendants by means of animal familiars, which were handed on at their death, but it also entails how that might be broken...by fire.

My research into 'Mrs Eve' reveals there was a Mrs Eves/Eaves living in Hadleigh at the time of Cunning Murrell. Elizabeth Finch was baptised on September 4th 1796 at the church in Sible Hedingham. Her parents were Joseph Finch and Martha Coney who came from the same place and were married in 1793. Joseph Finch was listed as a labourer. On June 19th 1822 Elizabeth Finch married Adam Finch at the same church. As they shared the same surname, it is not known if Adam was a cousin or distant relative. Also it is not known what happened to him, if he died or moved on. Since I have not found the baptism of Elizabeth's son Joseph Finch, born circa 1823 in either Essex or just across the border in Suffolk, it is not known if Adam was the father of the boy or a daughter called Eliza who was born to Elizabeth Finch ten years later in Belchamps Walter, Essex.

The next entry on Elizabeth Finch is in 1837 in Hadleigh when her daughter, Eliza Eaves, was baptised on 25th June three years after her birth. The parents were listed as William and Elizabeth Eaves and according to the census in 1841 were still living in Hadleigh, where William, who had been born in Rochford in 1811 or 1812, was an agricultural labourer. The household was listed as William, Elizabeth, Joseph and Eliza with the surname of Eves. From the 1837 and 1841 records it would appear that William and Elizabeth were married, but in fact they were only living together as man and wife and actually did not get married officially until July 1843. From the marriage certificate Wm. Eaves was a bachelor and the son of Henry Eaves, another labourer. Elizabeth was recorded as a widow, the daughter of Joseph Finch. She signed her name, but William Eaves just made his mark.

In 1851 William and Elizabeth Eaves were still living in Hadleigh. Their daughter Eliza married Joseph Wiltshire (born 1832) of Thundersley, Essex on September 16th 1860. On the marriage certificate where Eliza's father's name should have been it says: 'Mother's name Elizabeth Finch'. The fact Eliza was married under the name of Finch and her father's name was not given makes it possible that neither Adam Finch nor William Eaves was her parent. In 1861 the census lists William Eaves, his wife Elizabeth and two lodgers, Joseph Wiltshire (sic), aged 30 and Eliza Wiltshire, aged 26 i.e. their daughter and son-in-law. Elizabeth Eaves died at the age of 71 in the first quarter of 1869 in the Rochford registration of Essex that covered Hadleigh.