

Introduction

'The works of darknesse'

What is a witch? To this deceptively simple question, history provides a myriad of different answers. The late-sixteenth-century commentator George Gifford produced the following succinct definition: 'A Witch is one that woorketh by the Devill, or by some develish or curious art, either hurting or healing.'¹ His contemporary, William Perkins, agreed: 'A witch is a Magician, who either by open or secret league, wittingly and willingly, consenteth to use the aide and assistance of the Devill, in the working of wonders.'² The author of the pamphlet about the Belvoir witches attempted a more detailed definition, which included categorising the different types of witches. These included 'Pythonissae' (who dealt with artificial charms), 'Necromancers' (who exhumed corpses and used them to foretell the future), 'Geomantici' (who conversed with spirits and used incantations), 'Ventriloqui' (who spoke with 'hollow voyces' as if they were possessed by devils), and 'Venefici' (who used poison to either cure or kill).³

In a tract published during Elizabeth I's reign, William West provided no fewer than six classes of witch: magicians, soothsayers, diviners, jugglers, enchanters and witches. The latter were defined most closely.

A witch or hag is she who – deluded by a pact made with the devil through his persuasion, inspiration and juggling – thinks she can bring about all manner of evil things, either by thought or imprecation, such as to shake the air with lightnings and thunder, to cause hail and tempests, to remove green corn or trees to another place, to be carried on her familiar spirit (which has taken upon him the deceitful shape of a goat, swine, or calf, etc.) into some mountain far distant, in a wonderfully short space of time, and sometimes to fly upon a staff or

fork, or some other instrument, and to spend all the night after with her sweetheart, in playing, sporting, banqueting, dancing, dalliance, and divers other develish lusts and lewd disports, and to show a thousand such monstrous mockeries.⁴

All of the authorities on the subject agreed that there were both good ('white') and bad ('black') witches. The former, often known as 'cunning folk', used their powers to provide a range of useful services to their community, such as healing the sick, finding lost or stolen goods, or predicting the future. In his *Treatise Against Witchcraft* – which was the first pamphlet on witchcraft to be published in England – Henry Holland attempted to explain the difference: 'Hereby it is manifest, that hurtfull magitians and witches which kill and hurt mens bodies and goods, are onely to be avoyded, and so they doe amongst us, but such of these practitioners, as can and will cure the sicke, finde things loste, have a good neere gesse in praedictions, and are not in any wise to be blamed . . . are often sought after in necessities unto this day, and they seeme to doe no man harme, but much good, and they speake the very trueth often.'⁵ Not everyone took such a positive view of them. The influential pamphleteer, Richard Bernard declared: 'All Witches, in truth, are bad Witches, and none good.'⁶

The main crimes attributed to 'black' witches included the causing of death or injury to another person. They might also harm or kill farm animals, which in a primarily agricultural economy could spell disaster. A single cow could be vital to the well-being of a poor family, so it is not surprising that there was almost as much concern for the health of animals as for that of friends or family members. One Norfolk farmer lamented that thanks to the maleficium of a local woman, his boar 'could not cry or grunt as beforetime' and five of his calves 'were in such case as we could not endure to come nigh them by reason of a filthy noisome savour, their hair standing upright on their backs and they shaking in such sort as I never saw'.⁷ Meanwhile, in neighbouring Suffolk a woman stood accused of committing various acts of sorcery against one Thomas Aldus, including having 'caused one of his cows to skip over a stile and burst her neck'.⁸

Witches were also accused of interfering with nature by ruining a harvest, preventing a cow from producing milk, or frustrating some

other domestic operation. On the Continent, their powers were believed to extend to commanding the weather. In Wiesensteig, in south-western Germany, 63 women were executed as witches between 1562 and 1563 for causing a violent hailstorm. The trial records are also littered with accusations that suspected witches had disrupted sexual relations. Such cases were relatively rare in England, which had the highest proportion of female witches; elsewhere in Europe a significant number of men were convicted of the crime.

The word 'witch' has several possible derivations. These include the old English *wicca* (meaning sorceress) and the German *wichelen* (to bewitch or foretell). Although the words 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery' tended to be used interchangeably, they were different disciplines. Witchcraft was an innate power which might be inherited or conferred by the Devil. Sorcery, on the other hand, was the employment of destructive spells, charms and the like. Anyone could learn to be a sorcerer, but to be a witch, one had to be born to it. The methods of maleficent sorcerers were thought to vary from the straightforward uttering of curses or evil prophecies, to the use of technical aids. Among the most common of these were making a wax image of the victim and sticking pins in it; stealing their hair, fingernails or even excrement and manipulating this in some way; burying their clothing; or writing their name on a piece of paper and then burning it.

By such means, suspected witches were believed to have caused many thousands of deaths, injuries and illnesses in England alone during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Little wonder that they were feared and reviled in equal measure.

One of the most famous witch hunters in history was James I, who was King of England from 1603 to 1625. His personal crusade resulted in the deaths of thousands of women in Scotland, his native land, and hundreds more south of the border. Among the latter were Joan, Margaret and Phillipa Flower, who became known as the Witches of Belvoir. Their story could have been taken from the pages of a fairy tale, albeit one with a dark and terrible twist. There is the contented, prosperous and noble couple whose carefree existence in their castle is brought to an abrupt end when malevolent witches curse their children. As in all classic fairy tales, the story concludes with good triumphing over evil when the witches are put to death. But the

children of Francis and Cecilia Manners were not to enjoy the happy ending of Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and the rest. The spell was never broken; they never awoke from their entranced slumber. Instead, as their tomb bears testimony, they met the same fate as their wicked bewitchers.

Notorious in its time, the case of the Belvoir witches has since faded from memory. In the historiography of the period it is overshadowed by trials such as Pendle in 1612, or the infamous Hopkins witch hunts of the mid seventeenth century. That I knew of it was due to the fact that the women involved were tried and executed in my native city of Lincoln, but even there the story is neglected. One can search in vain for any mention of it in the guidebooks to the city, or even to the castle, where the Flower women met their grim fate.

Wicked Practise & Sorcery, an excellent and painstakingly researched study by Michael Honeybone, an eminent local historian, has gone some way towards redressing the balance. The Belvoir witches also inspired a novel by Hilda Lewis: *The Witch and the Priest* (1967). By contrast, there is a wealth of general histories of witchcraft, most notably Keith Thomas's seminal work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, which first appeared in 1973 and has since been reprinted numerous times.

The popularity of books such as this proves the huge groundswell of interest in witchcraft. This is reflected by the internet. Even the most cursory of searches for the word 'witch' results in more than 6.5 million sites, and there are as many again for 'sorcery', 'dark arts', 'spells' and the like. Almost half a million websites are dedicated to the history of witchcraft, and a number of these refer to the Belvoir witches as being one of the most curious of all the cases that were brought before the courts of seventeenth-century England.

As well as being one of the most enduringly popular topics of historical research, witchcraft is also one of the most fiercely debated. Given that the contemporary sources are both startlingly vivid and frustratingly patchy, this is perhaps inevitable. Historians have long attempted to explain the reason why, between 1450 and 1750, around 100,000 people – most of them women – were tried for this crime in Europe, and a little under half put to death. What were the beliefs and fears which led to these executions? How and why did the legal systems of countries across Europe support them? And why were

scores of the most intelligent scholars so convinced of the existence of witches that they wrote long books supporting their persecution? For every question, there are at least a dozen answers, none of them convincing enough on their own to lay the debate to rest.

Despite all the extraordinarily rich and vivid contemporary accounts of witches, their victims and their fate, there are substantial gaps in the sources – notably the complete absence of trial records in most counties of England. Moreover, because the vast majority of the accused were among the poorer members of society, their lives were generally obscure until they gained notoriety as a result of their supposed crimes. Although there are numerous contemporary pamphlets describing particular witchcraft trials or condemning the practice in general, the accused women's own voices are almost entirely absent. This is perhaps not surprising, given that most were illiterate. It is also indicative of their powerlessness in the face of their accusers, and of the subservient position that women in general endured at this time.

Likewise, although the scores of witchcraft pamphlets attracted a diverse readership, the fact is that they were invariably written by the educated elite. There is no comparable source for the uneducated, illiterate masses who made up the vast majority of the population. Their views can only be reconstructed from scattered shards of evidence, rather than lengthy treatises. The latter tend to represent ordinary people's perceptions of witchcraft as being rooted in ignorance and superstition. Glimpses of their true opinions can be gained from the patchy records of witchcraft trials, which suggest a genuine, deep-seated fear of the dark arts, as well as the strength of mystical traditions. They also reveal the tensions that existed in local communities, which led to many more cynically motivated accusations being levelled. In short, popular perceptions of witchcraft were every bit as rich and complex as those held by the so-called elite members of society.

The deeply held beliefs, superstitions, faith and world-view of the people who lived through these times are, inevitably, alien to modern readers. We can imagine, we can (to an extent) empathise, but we cannot enter the minds of those who practised the magical arts, those who believed they had fallen victim to such people, or those who hunted them down. Partly as a result, the theories as to why the witch

hunts dominated European society for so long – and, equally, why they disappeared so suddenly – are many and varied. But the key to gaining a deeper understanding of the subject perhaps lies not in assessing the phenomenon as a whole, but in conducting a detailed case study of a particular trial. Such is the aim of this book.

The story of the Belvoir witches is one of the most extraordinary of all the witchcraft trials that took place in the seventeenth century. It has all the classic elements of the dark arts: spells, familiars, sexual deviancy and pacts with the Devil. And yet it is also set apart from the many other cases of witchcraft in Jacobean England because it was not merely the product of a dispute between neighbours, but involved one of the foremost aristocratic families in the country. The tendrils of this darkly fascinating tale stretch to the court itself, with James I and his closest favourite playing a significant, possibly sinister, part.

It is for this reason that the sources are richer than for many other witchcraft trials. Such was the Flower women's notoriety that court letters, diaries and state papers have all offered illuminating insights into the case, enabling me to reconstruct the witches' history and that of their 'victims' at Belvoir Castle. Principal among the contemporary records consulted, though, has been *The Wonderful Discoverie of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillippa Flower, Daughters of Joan Flower, neere Bever Castle*, a salacious pamphlet published shortly after their trial in March 1619. Glorious for its sensationalist descriptions of the spells, familiars and other 'devilish arts' with which Joan Flower and her daughters were able to destroy the young scions of the noblest family in England, it is also suspiciously biased, confused and inaccurate on numerous points of detail. A true reflection of the events it described, or a cynical attempt to disguise the real culprits? The answer to this, and to the question of the Flower women's guilt, became gradually – shockingly – clear as I sifted through the shards of evidence to build the narrative. It led me to believe that theirs was not just one of the many ordinary tragic miscarriages of justice that marked the long history of the witch hunts; it had at its heart a murderous conspiracy that has remained hidden for almost 400 years.

I

'Naturally inclin'd to Superstition'

The picturesque village of Bottesford lies some 16 miles north of Melton Mowbray in the Vale of Belvoir, part of modern-day Leicestershire.¹ To the west is Nottinghamshire and to the east is Lincolnshire. The nearest urban centre is Grantham, which in the seventeenth century was a prosperous market town. Belvoir Castle dominates the skyline, built by the Normans on top of the only hill for miles around. Its residents, the Manners family, earls of Rutland, were one of the most ancient and distinguished noble dynasties in the country. As the name Belvoir suggests, the area is one of outstanding natural beauty, characterised by a gently undulating landscape intersected by rivers and woodland.

At the centre of Bottesford is a marketplace with its cross and stocks still preserved. Nearby is the magnificent church of St Mary's, founded in the fourteenth century. One of the largest village churches in England, it boasts the highest spire in Leicestershire. An early-seventeenth-century commentator described it as 'very faire and large, with a high spire Steeple'.² St Mary's was the focus of community life for the residents of Bottesford. As in parishes across England, it provided the most common and well-attended meeting place, and anyone who chose not to go would have earned the censure of their neighbours. The church was often also the political centre of the village: a place where parish officers would be elected, and important deeds and other documents kept.

Villages such as Bottesford were naturally very tightly knit entities in which daily interaction between neighbours was not merely a choice but a necessity. The village economy depended upon small exchanges of goods and services; there were common fields and pasture, shared labour and many matters which required communal decisions. Great importance was placed upon harmony and conformity. The year was

marked by various traditional rituals and festivities, such as Easter 'drinkings' and 'love feasts', as well as by weddings, baptisms and funerals, in which every member of the community was expected to take part. Such events reaffirmed neighbourly ties and the collective identity of a community, and were, as one contemporary put it, occasions to 'increase love among neighbours'.

A sixteenth-century account of the fetching and decoration of a maypole provides a vivid illustration of one of the most popular events in the annual calendar.

Against May Day, Whitsunday, or other time, all the young men and maids, old men and wives, run gadding overnight to the woods, groves, hills and mountains, where they spend all the night in pleasant pastimes; and in the morning, they return, bringing with them birch and branches of trees, to deck their assemblies withal . . . But the chiefest jewel they bring from thence is their May-pole, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus. They have twenty or forty yoke of oxen, every ox having a sweet nose-gay of flowers placed on the tip of his horns, and these oxen draw home this May-pole (this stinking idol, rather), which is covered all over with flowers and herbs, bound round about with strings, from the top to the bottom, and sometime painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children following it with great devotion. And thus being reared up, with handkerchieves and flags hovering on the top, they strew the ground round about, bind green boughs around it, set up summer halls, bowers and arbours hard by it. And then they fall to dance about it.³

Although some of the village events degenerated into drunken brawls, sparking new animosities between neighbours, on the whole they symbolised the desire for unity and accord. Anyone who refused to join in was immediately the subject of suspicion and hostility. No matter how joyous and light-hearted such festivities might appear on the surface, there was an elaborate code governing the interaction, whether it was the seating plan in the church or the order of procession at a dance or feast. Everything was symbolic of status and position. During the services at St Mary's, for example, the lord of Belvoir Castle and his family occupied pride of place at the front of the church.

The rest of the congregation may have stood up and bowed out of respect when they entered – a practice that was common in churches across England. Meanwhile, the Earl of Rutland's servants, tenants, yeomen and other members of the community were seated in strict order of precedence. Women were segregated from men, and young women from matrons.

As well as these major events in the life of a village community, there were numerous other occasions when its members got together. The daily round of informal recreation could include conversations at work, chance meetings when out walking in country lanes or shopping in the marketplace, convening in alehouses to drink, talk, sing or play games, or – more soberly – after church services. All of this was governed by the same strict observance of social etiquette between equals or superiors and inferiors which dictated the course of more formal gatherings. Relationships were thus established and maintained within a very local context, and there were ample opportunities to identify and gossip about anyone who did not fit in. It was a short step from not fitting in to being actively persecuted.

Those who stood out as troublemakers were swiftly punished, either by the community or the church courts. It was enough for a person to be of 'ill fame' for the latter to prosecute. Clergy were also instructed to refuse Communion to quarrelling parishioners. Meanwhile, community-led punishments included the cucking stool, putting the offender in a cage, or leading them around the streets by a metal bridle. The most frequent offenders were 'scolds', legally defined as 'a troublesome and angry woman who, by her brawling and wrangling amongst her neighbours, doth break the public peace and beget, cherish and increase public discord'.⁴ That both the law and community justice were so harsh on them suggests that there was a close association between scolding and witchcraft. Reginald Scot, one of the leading authorities on the subject, claimed that the 'chief fault' of witches 'is that they are scolds'.⁵

With a desire for conformity in village communities came a distinct lack of privacy. A man's personal affairs were viewed as the legitimate concern of the entire community. It was the age of the nosy neighbour par excellence: everyone knew everyone else's business. Partly this was sparked by natural curiosity and a desire

to enliven the sometimes dreary, monotonous existence of rural dwellers. But there was also an element of self-preservation, of wishing to protect oneself – and one's village – against evil. The arrival of outsiders often prompted intense speculation and suspicion, and they could expect to be the subject of scrutiny for some considerable time.

The community of Bottesford was more insular than most. The people of the 'Vale' were even more suspicious of outsiders and troublemakers than were those in many of the other 10,000 or so parishes in England. Marriages tended to be forged between local families, which made communities very static. The local records attest that families such as the Fairbairns, Stanages, Gills, Houghs and Vavasours had been part of the Bottesford community for many years, and there was very little migration between parishes, let alone counties.

Most of Bottesford's inhabitants would have been tenants or servants of the Earl of Rutland. Although they would have considered themselves as being of the 'better sort', their living conditions were extremely poor by modern standards. There were small local markets instead of shops, no public services, and the church was the only public building. There were no metalled roads, only dirt tracks, which could become virtually impassable in poor weather. Water (often stagnant) was drawn from the local well, and the privies, which were little better than holes in the ground, bred noisome smells as well as disease. Houses were damp, uncomfortable and malodorous, with most people sharing their living space with animals. The poorest dwellings were infested with vermin of all kinds.

The hard, unsanitary living conditions were fertile breeding grounds for diseases. For many sudden and virulent diseases, such as smallpox, typhus and – most terrifying of all – the bubonic plague, there was no known cure. From the beginning of the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, the latter was only absent for a dozen years. Even though it was most prevalent in larger cities and towns, ignorance about how to contain it meant that it could be rapidly spread to rural communities by tradesmen and other travellers. In the absence of any known cure, people of all classes resorted to whatever

means they could to avoid infection. Sir Christopher Hatton famously sent Elizabeth I a ring to protect her from it. Meanwhile, severe outbreaks of plague during the same period created a deeply insecure and volatile society. A succession of bad harvests and near famines, such as occurred at Trier in Germany in the late sixteenth century, coincided exactly with a period of frenzied witch hunting. Likewise, an outbreak of plague in the town of Ellwangen in 1611 prompted a spate of witchcraft cases.

For centuries a staging post due to its central position in the country, Bottesford proved more resilient to the depredations of famine and floods than other, more isolated, rural communities fell prey to. Nevertheless, it suffered badly from plague in the early seventeenth century. One hundred and twenty-five people died in a single year – five times the average annual toll in the village. 'The dying poisoned many, Th'infection was so great whereat it came it scarce left any,' lamented the parish curate.⁶ This might have signalled the decline of a more isolated village, but its geographical location enabled Bottesford to recover more quickly than many others, and by the end of the seventeenth century its population was higher than ever.

Nevertheless, the average life expectancy here as elsewhere was much lower in the seventeenth century than it is today. 'We shall find more who have died within thirty or thirty-five years of age than passed it,' observed one writer in 1635.⁷ Infant mortality was particularly high, and even among the richer classes a third of children died before the age of five.

Many of those who did survive could look forward to a life beset by chronic pain from ailments which were either resistant to, or exacerbated by, the ministrations of doctors and cunning folk. Poor diet accounted for a high proportion of the common health complaints. The upper classes ate too much meat and scorned fresh vegetables and milk. Contemporary medical records show that they frequently sought relief from gout, bladder stones, urinary tract infections, constipation and rotten teeth. By contrast, the diet of the poorer members of society included more vegetables, but insufficient meat and dairy produce, and what little they ate had often gone bad. The widespread undernourishment among this

class made them vulnerable to influenza, tuberculosis and gastric upsets, and many were also anaemic because of the lack of iron in their diet.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a considerable growth in population, with England's population alone doubling from around two and a half million in 1530 to around five million in 1630.⁸ This put increasing pressure on economic resources, and a flooded labour market resulted in a prolonged period of high unemployment and low wages. At the same time, a succession of poor harvests led to food shortages and even famine. What little food was available was so expensive that only the richer members of society could afford it. By 1650, the price of bread was six times what it had been in 1500. Pre-existing social divides were therefore accentuated, which led to tensions within communities.

In an increasingly unstable and volatile society, people clung ever more tightly to their deeply held superstitions – even those who claimed to have embraced the new religion. The Kingdom of Darkness was as real to them as the Kingdom of Heaven, and ordinary people everywhere believed in devils, imps, fairies, goblins and ghosts, as well as legendary creatures such as vampires, werewolves and unicorns. Everyone feared evil portents, such as a hare crossing one's path or a picture falling from the wall. A pregnant woman must avoid gazing at the moon because it would render her baby insane. In one of his tracts on witchcraft, George Gifford described a number of signs which were believed to augur evil – from salt spilt at a banquet to the sudden onset of a nosebleed: 'Heavy newes is brought unto some, that her father, or her mother, or her brother is dead: I did even looke for such a matter (saith she) for my nose this day did sodainly break forth a bleeding.'⁹

Children were frightened into obedience by their mothers or nursemaids with tales of evil witches, spirits, elves and fantastical creatures. Women were grouped together with the sick and infirm as being particularly susceptible to 'vaine dreames and continuall feare' as a result of their 'weaknesse of mind and bodie'. Even grown men were afraid of the dark, for this was when it was believed spirits most often appeared. 'Some never feare the divell, but in a darke night; and then a polled sheepe is a perillous beast, and manie times is taken for our fathers soule, speciallie in a

churchyard, where a right hardie man heretofore scant durst pass by night but his haire would stand upright.'¹⁰ One of the earliest works on witchcraft, published in 1486, claimed: 'The imagination of some men is so vivid that they think they see actual figures and appearances which are but the reflection of their thoughts, and then these are believed to be the apparitions of evil spirits or even the spectres of witches.'¹¹

The greatest fear was reserved for Satan, God's chief adversary on earth. Belief in the existence of the Devil was synonymous with belief in the existence of God. 'If there be a God, as we most steadfastly must believe,' asserted the East Anglian minister Robert Hutchinson, 'verily there is a Devil also.'¹² Satan was evil, God was good; the former dark, the latter light. Medieval preachers terrified their parishioners with tales of the Devil's wickedness, and the ease with which humans could fall prey to his temptations. He could whip up thunderstorms, cause untold pain and suffering, prompt lustful thoughts, and carry sinners off to the torments of hell. The depictions of Satan in medieval iconography, with his horns, tail and forked beard, have changed little over time. They inspired a host of grotesque gargoyles and wood sculptures in churches, which would peer down at a terrified congregation as they fervently muttered prayers to protect themselves from his power. But the Devil did not act alone. As well as the demons, goblins and imps of hell, he enlisted human beings as witches to carry out his evil intent. He was 'the Witches and Sorcerers great and graund Master', according to the leading pamphleteer John Cotta.¹³

Notions of magic and witchcraft infiltrated cultural as well as social and political life. The celebrated Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser created an influential portrait of a witch, secreted away in her lonely cottage and inflicting evil upon the rest of society:

There, in a gloomy hollow glen, she found
 A little cottage built of sticks and weeds,
 In homely wise, and walled with sods around,
 In which a witch did dwell in loathly weeds
 And wilful want, all careless of her needs;
 So choosing solitary to abide,
 Far from her neighbours, that her devilish deeds

And hellish art from people she might hide,
 And hurt far off, unknown, whomever she envied.¹⁴

Belief in witchcraft helped to give reason to the often cruel randomness of life, as one Elizabethan sceptic, Reginald Scot, observed: 'If any adversitie, greefe, sicknesse, losse of children, corne, cattell, or libertie happen unto them; by & by they exclaime uppon witches.'¹⁵ George Gifford agreed: 'Men look no further then unto ye witch: they fret and rage against her . . . they think if shee were not, they should doo well enough: shee is made the cause of all plagues and mischiefes.' He added that the opinion of the 'multitude' was that 'Witches can worke at their pleasure, & so are the comon plague of the earth, breedeth so innumerable sins, that it is as a monster with many heads.'¹⁶ Even Richard Bernard, who wrote a detailed guide for those involved in the prosecution of witches, admitted: 'It is the generall madnesse of people to ascribe unto Witchcraft, whatsoever falleth out unknowne, or strange to vulgar sence.' He scoffed that: 'Feare and imagination make many Witches among countrey people, being superstitiously addicted, and led with foolish observations, and imaginarie signes of good and bad lucke', and urged his readers: 'Let such as suspect themselves to bee bewitched, consider whether the cause of their vexation be not naturall and enquire not of a devellish Wizard, but of learned and judicious Physicians to know their disease.'¹⁷

Another branch of magic which remained enduringly popular, despite the advent of religious and social change, was astrology. This was most popular with the richer members of society, many of whom retained a personal astrologer in their households. They were also to be found in most of the royal courts of Europe. Elizabeth I famously consulted Dr John Dee for much of her reign, but she was only following the example of her father, Henry VIII, and many others like him. As well as offering cures for maladies and foretelling the future, astrologers could advise on the most propitious time for a birth, a coronation or even a war. With the introduction of the printing press, astrology gained much more widespread popularity. Charts and almanacs that set out in great detail the various astronomical events of the coming year, and thereby the most propitious time to make decisions or take action, could be reproduced on a much greater scale than ever before.

Astrology had clearly taken hold in Bottesford and the surrounding area by the early seventeenth century. Ellen Green, an associate of the Flower family, confessed that her familiars came to suck her blood at certain phases of the moon.¹⁸ Meanwhile, during her interrogation, one of her co-conspirators, Anne Baker, described her dealings with the planets at some length, declaring that they came in four colours: 'black, yellow, green and blue, and that black is always death'. She also noted that she had seen the blue planet strike one Thomas Fairebarne, a local resident.¹⁹ The idea that planets of various colours could influence a person's health and well-being was rooted in the medical lore of the Middle Ages, and also had links to the ancient theory of the four humours.

It may seem ridiculous to modern observers that people in the past should base their lives around the movements of the stars and planets. But living conditions made everyone far more aware of the heavenly bodies than they are today. In an age before artificial lighting, ordinary people had a much greater knowledge of the stars and planets. They would tell the time by the sun, and plan their journeys to coincide with a full moon. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the working day was longer in the summer than in the winter because there was more daylight.

As a means of being able to disentangle some of the mysteries of life and provide explanations for the apparent randomness of events, astrology remained extremely popular throughout the early modern period. Little matter that many of its predictions proved inaccurate: the comfort and sense of control that its adherents drew from their consultations and charts was enough to safeguard its reputation. An allied practice was alchemy. Its central premise was a belief that base metals could be turned into gold or silver, as well as an elixir of life which conferred eternal youth and immortality. Alchemy divided up the metals between the planets, and drew upon teachings which dated back to classical times. Although viewed as a mystical art, it was the precursor of modern chemistry and medicine, and even celebrated scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton were said to be secret practitioners.

A problematic fact for the likes of Elizabeth I and James I, under whose rule healers were subjected to intense scrutiny and many prosecuted as witches, was that the belief in the magical power of the

royal touch remained strong until the early eighteenth century. Monarchs had traditionally participated in ceremonies designed to relieve the suffering of epilepsy or the 'falling sickness'. Special rings known as 'cramp rings' were blessed by the king or queen and distributed to sufferers at an annual ceremony. This practice died out with the accession of Elizabeth I, but the tradition of touching for the 'King's Evil' proved much more durable.

This tradition had originated in the reign of Edward the Confessor, and the full ceremonial that accompanied it was laid down by Henry VII. The King's Evil was the name given to scrofula, or struma, an inflammation of the lymph glands or neck, but it came to encompass a variety of complaints affecting the head, neck and eyes, including sores, blisters, tumours and swellings. The unsightly and very visible nature of the condition meant that many sufferers were prepared to go to great lengths to find a cure. Parish authorities from the furthest-flung corners of the kingdom would routinely raise funds in order to send the affected persons to the royal court in London, and the efficacy of the monarch's touch was so renowned that some even came from overseas. The popularity of the practice grew rapidly. By the end of the thirteenth century, Edward I was touching 1,000 sufferers per year, whereas Charles II ministered to more than 90,000 over a 20-year period.

Special religious ceremonies were held for the purpose, to which hundreds of sufferers would flock. One by one the patients would approach the royal throne and kneel before it. Their sovereign would then touch them lightly on the face, while a chaplain read aloud the verse from St Mark: 'They shall lay hands on the sick and they recover.' The king or queen would then hang round their neck a gold coin strung from a white silk ribbon. This served as a talisman against future evil, and Mary Tudor urged her patients never to part with it – although many sufferers judged its monetary value to be even greater and sold it as soon as the ceremony was over.

The monarch's power to heal sprang in theory from their consecration with holy oil at their coronation, which emphasised their sacred status. This, together with the Biblical passages that were repeated at the ceremony, made it clear that they were God's representative on earth, and it was from Him that their power was derived. However, some monarchs did not wait to be crowned before

performing the ceremony, and as far as most people were concerned, the power to heal was an innate, mystical ability bound up with royal status. As such, it carried enormous psychological weight for those who took part: if the power of a local cunning woman could be believed in, then how much more so that of their sovereign? Perhaps this was why some people swore by the healing value of the royal touch. The seventeenth-century surgeon Richard Wiseman claimed that Charles II cured more sufferers in one year 'than all the surgeons of London had done in an age'.²⁰ But Wiseman, like others who extolled the benefits of the practice, was a devout royalist, keen to promote the omnipotence of his sovereign. Those patients who were 'cured' by the royal touch would probably have recovered naturally anyway, for glandular disorders often recede with time. 'Physicians do attribute the cause more to the parties' imagination than to the virtue of the touch,' observed one sceptic.²¹ The Venetian ambassador was similarly doubtful, and when reporting the practice to his masters, he added that 'it remains to be seen with what result'.²²

Touching for the King's Evil was an essentially superstitious practice, and as such it was at odds with the Reformation. Subsequent monarchs (Mary Tudor excepted) thus found it somewhat difficult to reconcile with their religious beliefs. But they came to appreciate the usefulness of the ceremony as a means of reinforcing their royal power, for it was believed that only a legitimate sovereign could heal scrofula. Elizabeth I found it particularly valuable in establishing her somewhat shaky position on the English throne in the wake of Pope Pius V's Bull of Excommunication in 1570. Likewise, the future Charles II began touching for the King's Evil while still in exile, and it was no coincidence that he became one of the greatest advocates of it after the Restoration in 1660. Only after the Glorious Revolution in 1688 did the practice begin to fall out of use; the last English monarch to employ it was Queen Anne.

But there was one monarch who proved more reluctant than all of the rest to perform the ceremony, and it was only after considerable pressure from his advisers that he agreed to set aside his scruples and uphold the tradition. His reluctance was understandable, for he was deeply averse to the practice of magic and would become one of the most feared witch hunters in Europe. He was James VI of

Scotland, whose fate was about to become inextricably bound up with the inhabitants of Belvoir Castle.

The early part of the seventeenth century was a turbulent time for Bottesford, as it was for many communities across England. The first two decades saw a marked increase in enclosures in Leicestershire, by which process common land was systematically eroded and the local aristocracy and other landowners restricted it for their own use. In short, public land was increasingly appropriated for private gain. This deprived thousands of people of their livelihood and resulted in the destruction of entire villages. Little wonder that the enclosure system was one of the most unpopular innovations ever to be introduced into English rural society, and it soon sparked widespread unrest.

In late April 1607, the so-called Midland Revolt broke out in Northamptonshire and quickly spread to Warwickshire and Leicestershire. Led by John Reynolds, otherwise known as 'Captain Pouch', a tinker from Desborough, it attracted considerable support. Reynolds told his followers that he had authority from God and King James to destroy enclosures, and urged them to join him in the task. He also promised to protect protesters with the contents of his pouch, carried by his side, which he said would keep them from all harm.²³ Three thousand protesters gathered at Hillmorton in Warwickshire, and a further five thousand at Cotesbach in Leicestershire. Meanwhile, in Leicester itself a curfew was imposed because it was feared people would stream out of the city to join the riots. A gibbet was also erected as a warning, but was pulled down by the citizens. Matters came to a head in June, when 1,000 rioters converged upon Newton in Northamptonshire to protest against the voracious enclosures of Thomas Tresham, who hailed from a notorious family of Roman Catholic landowners, one of whom – Francis Tresham – had been involved in the Gunpowder Plot two years earlier. James I issued a proclamation, ordering his deputy lieutenants in Northamptonshire to quell the riots. A pitched battle ensued, and between 40 and 50 men were killed. The leaders of the riot – including Reynolds – were captured and executed, but the deep-seated resentment among the common people simmered on, and their relations with the local

landowners – the Manners family of Belvoir Castle included – remained volatile.

The turbulence that the community of Bottesford had experienced during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was mirrored elsewhere in England and Europe. Foremost among the changes with which the population had had to come to terms was the revolution in religious practices and beliefs. And it is no coincidence that witch hunting most commonly occurred in areas that had experienced significant religious change, particularly those at the forefront of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that witchcraft filled the void created by the demise of the 'old religion', Catholicism, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The dividing line between Catholicism and magic had always been blurred. At the heart of Catholicism was the belief in the power of rituals and relics which were virtually indistinguishable from the spells and potions peddled by the local cunning folk or white witches. Chief among them was the ceremony of the Mass, during which it was (and is) believed that the bread and wine actually became Christ's body and blood, and thus had supernatural powers for all who consumed them.

The worship of saints and their relics was another integral part of the Catholic religion, and most churches had their own patron saints – with an accompanying collection of associated relics. The intercession of saints was regularly sought by people in need or distress, or simply to avoid ill fortune. Midwives urged pregnant women to carry holy relics to protect their unborn child, and to call upon the Virgin Mary to reduce the pain of labour, or to appeal to St Felicitas if they wished the child to be a boy. Rich and poor alike resorted to such means, and royalty believed in them as devoutly as everyone else. In preparing for the birth of one of her children, Henry VII's queen, Elizabeth of York, paid 6s.8d to a monk for a girdle belonging to the Virgin Mary. One hundred years later, an enterprising Oxford recusant named John Allyn made a small fortune from selling vials of Christ's blood at £20 a drop.²⁴ This was well beyond the means of ordinary folk, so most of his clients must have been drawn from aristocratic circles.

There was a raft of other methods employed by the medieval church to invoke God's power or ward off evil spirits. They included rituals for blessing people, animals, houses or objects. Holy water was routinely scattered on fields to ensure plentiful harvests, or given to the sick as a remedy. Even in the late sixteenth century, many people were still using the sign of the cross to protect themselves from Satan and his minions. The use of talismans and amulets was also commonplace. 'About these Catholics' necks and hands are always hanging charms, That serve against all miseries and unhappy harms,' scoffed the sixteenth-century Protestant theologian Thomas Naogeorgus.²⁵ The most popular was the agnus dei, a small wax cake bearing the image of a lamb and flag, which was believed to guard its owner against the assaults of the Devil.

Medieval clergy thus had at their disposal a bewildering array of supernatural methods for protecting and improving the lives of their parishioners. There was practically no evil the church could not ward off, no desire it could not fulfil. As well as their own traditional rituals, the clergy were not averse to employing more blatantly magical practices when occasion demanded. Thus, for example, when the fourteenth-century Pope John XXII feared he was being poisoned, he procured a magic snakeskin to detect any suspicious potions in his food and drink. Some clergy – not always Catholic – practised magical healing, such as Dr Richard Napier, rector of Great Linford in Buckinghamshire. A contemporary of the Flower women, he was known as an 'astrological physician' and was extremely popular.²⁶ He claimed to have seen around 60,000 patients during the 40 years that he practised his art. Meanwhile, the churchwardens of Thatcham in Berkshire consulted a local cunning woman to find out who had stolen their communion cloth. This made the dividing line between religion and magic even more blurred.

The Reformation, which got under way in England in the early sixteenth century, sought to rid society of such superstitious practices, replacing them with the persuasive (but less appealing) idea of salvation through faith. An individual should have a direct relationship with God and not rely upon the intercession of intermediaries such as the clergy or saints. Only by appealing directly to God through prayer should a person seek to change or improve their lives. The Reformists thus attempted to take all of the magical elements out of religion.

Declaring the use of rituals and relics to be 'the very practice of necromancy', and the Roman Catholic priests 'the vilest witches and sorcerers of the earth', the Reformists swept away as many vestiges of the old religion as they could lay their hands on.²⁷ Churches were stripped of their shrines and other such adornments. The Mass was denounced as popish nonsense and replaced by a Communion in which the bread and wine were merely representative of Christ's body and blood.

As the sixteenth century progressed, the Reformist measures became ever stricter, with the notable exception of 'Bloody' Mary Tudor's reign, which saw a brief and ill-fated attempt to bring England back to the papal fold. Her half-sister Elizabeth was more tolerant in matters of religion, famously remarking that she had no wish to 'make windows into men's souls'. Her long reign nevertheless witnessed a series of systematic attempts by her increasingly desperate ministers to eradicate the last vestiges of the Catholic faith.

The eroding of the clergy's 'magical' powers which were believed to keep evil at bay accounts for the sudden increase in witchcraft persecutions during the sixteenth century. Deprived of their traditional recourse to protect themselves against maleficent magic, people had no choice but to take legal action. But centuries of tradition could not be swept away overnight. While the Reformation undoubtedly gave the justice system a powerful new role in the persecution of witches, it did not completely eradicate the old systems of belief. 'Three parts at least of the people [are] wedded to their old superstition still,' lamented a Puritan writer in 1584.²⁸

As well as sweeping religious change, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed an extraordinary series of other revolutions and rebellions. The Thirty Years War, which began in 1618, involved most of the countries of Europe and was one of the most destructive conflicts in its history. Initially fought as a religious war between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire, it gradually became a power struggle between old rivals the Habsburgs and the Bourbons. Such political turmoil tended to unsettle the ruling elite more than the lower echelons of society. Any perceived threat to social order could in turn prompt monarchs, nobles or members

of the judiciary to step up their persecution of witches as a means of re-establishing authority.

Although celebrated for their enlightened and benevolent approach towards the local community, the family at Belvoir would prove the truth of this statement.