

THE WITCHES OF ST OSYTH

An emotive, haunting story of a community torn apart, the Essex witch accusations and trial of 1581–1582 are, taken together, one of the pivotal instances of that malign and destructive wave of misogynistic persecution that periodically broke over early modern England. Yet, for all their importance in the overall study of witchcraft, the so-called witches of St Osyth have largely been overlooked by scholars. Marion Gibson now sets right that neglect. Using fresh archival sources – and investigating not just the village itself, but also its neighbouring Elizabethan hamlets and habitations – the author offers revelatory new insights into the sixteen women and one man accused of sorcery, while also asking wider, provocative questions about the way history is recollected and interpreted. Combining landscape detective work, a reconstruction of lost spaces and authoritative readings of crucial documents, Gibson skilfully unlocks the poignant personal histories of those denied the chance to speak for themselves.

MARION GIBSON is Professor of Renaissance and Magical Literatures at the University of Exeter and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Fascinated by witches' stories for nearly thirty years, she is the author of *Reading Witchcraft* (1999), *Early Modern Witches* (2000), *Witchcraft and Society* (2003), *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (2007), *Imagining the Pagan Past* (2013), *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft* (2017) and *Witchcraft: The Basics* (2018). In addition she serves as general editor of the Cambridge University Press series *Elements in Magic*.

‘This terrific book is that of a historian at the top of her game, bringing all her knowledge, research skills and writing ability to the task. In so doing, Marion Gibson has made an important addition to our knowledge of Elizabethan witchcraft. But the text is also written for a more general audience and is engagingly written with that audience in mind too. Thus, the book has all the virtues of a “crossover” study that will appeal both to the academic specialist and the more general reader. It demonstrates that good history writing can be erudite as well as entertaining.’

– *Philip Almond, Professor Emeritus of the Study of Religion, University of Queensland, author of The Lancashire Witches: A Chronicle of Sorcery and Death on Pendle Hill*

‘Marion Gibson is a very well-established and respected scholar with a particular reputation for expertise in the kind of sources she uses so effectively in this book. She is able to combine here first-rate academic research with a popular and accessible literary style. The book takes a very famous English witchcraft case and supplies genuinely new material by which that case may be understood, both by a close rereading of the celebrated text and by a contextualisation of it in a range of hitherto completely untapped local records.’

– *Ronald Hutton, Professor of History, University of Bristol, author of The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present*

‘An excellent monograph and contribution to the field of witchcraft studies.’

– *Diane Purkiss, Professor of English Literature, University of Oxford, author of The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*

THE WITCHES OF ST OSYTH

PERSECUTION, BETRAYAL AND
MURDER IN ELIZABETHAN
ENGLAND

MARION GIBSON

University of Exeter

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WHO'S WHO

ALDUST, JOHN – a wealthy farmer of Little Oakley and Ramsey, churchwarden of Ramsey. Cousin of John and Elizabeth Herd, John is asked by Annis Herd to intercede for her at the church court, to which she has been presented by John Wade and Thomas Cartwrite

ANWICK, ROBERT AND JOANE WELD ANWICK – moderately well-off farmers of Little Oakley. Joane, daughter of Richard and Anne Weld, and cousin of Godlife Weld Osborne and Anne Weld West, is walking with Annis Herd when she is accused by Richard Harrison

BARNES, 'MOTHER' – a St Osyth woman held to be a witch and cunning woman, died 12 February 1582

BARRENGER, PHILIP (also known as Cowper) – a labourer aged twenty-three, son of Joan Pechey of St Osyth and accused of incest with her

BAXTER, ALES – maidservant to Richard and Alice Rosse at Little Clacton, and by implication accuser of the Selles family

BENNETT, ELIZABETH – a farmer of Wellwick, St Osyth, the wife of John Bennett. Elizabeth is accused of killing her neighbours William and Joan Byet and several others

BRASYSER, JOHN – the Brasyers are wealthy farmers of Walton le Soken, and tenants of Walton Hall. John accuses Joan Robinson of witchcraft

Who's Who

BRETT, JOHANE AND WILLIAM – small-holding tenants of Little Oakley. Johane cared for Anne Harrison during her final illness and William is a churchwarden of Beaumont

BUTLER, JOHN – wealthy tenant of Lee Wick, St Osyth, farmer and landlord with interests in milling and fishing. John is said to have been bewitched by Ales Newman or Elizabeth Bennett

BYET, WILLIAM AND JOAN – next-door neighbours of Elizabeth Bennett, said to have been killed by her

CARTER, JOHN – a small farmer of Thorpe le Soken who accuses Margaret Grevell of bewitching his brewing

CARTER, MARGERY – the wife of farmer William and part of the Carter family of Thorpe le Soken and Walton le Soken. Margery accuses Joan Robinson

CARTWRITE, THOMAS AND CECILY THURLETHORPE BLOSSE
CARTWRITE – wealthy farmers of Great and Little Oakley, related to the Marven and Blosse families and having dealings with the Wades. Thomas is a churchwarden of Little Oakley, who will present Annis Herd to the church court with John Wade and accuses her of bewitching his cattle

CHESTON, JOAN – a wealthy farmer and widow of Robert Cheston of Thorpe le Soken and Walton le Soken. Joan accuses Ales Manfield and Margaret Grevell, whom she charges with harming her cattle and killing Robert

COCK'S WIFE – a cunning woman of Weeley, consulted by Ursley Kempe

CROSSE, THOMAS – a farmer of Thorpe le Soken, who accused Margaret Ewstace of witchcraft and died in

Who's Who

about 1579. Thomas was the husband of Felice Okey and brother-in-law of Robert Sannever

DARCY, BRIAN – magistrate, at St Clere's Hall, St Osyth. The son of Thomas Darcy of Tolleshunt Darcy (died 1557) and his wife Elizabeth, Brian attended Lincoln's Inn in the 1560s. He is married to Bridget Corbett. Brian holds property at Tiptree, Witham and elsewhere, and appeared at Quarter Sessions in 1576–1577 represented by William Whetcrofte to defend claims on his large estate

DARCY, JOHN AND FRANCES RICH DARCY – second Lord Darcy and Lady Darcy; John died in 1581. They were the parents of Thomas, third Lord Darcy

DARCY, THOMAS – third Lord Darcy, succeeds to his title in 1581 and marries Mary Kitson

DARCY THOMAS AND CAMILLA GUICCIARDINI DARCY – the eldest brother and sister-in-law of Brian Darcy, of Tolleshunt Darcy

DARCY, THOMAS AND ELIZABETH DE VERE DARCY – first Lord Darcy and Lady Darcy, whose children were Robert (died 1569), Thomasine and John (their heir)

DEATH, THOMAS AND AGNES – a mariner and his wife of Great Clacton, the parents of Marie Death (born 1564) who accuses Cisley Selles of bewitching her, and of John (born 1576), whom they accuse Cisley of killing

DOWSING, ANNIS – a child witness and the daughter of accused witch Annis Herd and William Dowsing, born 1575

Who's Who

DOWSING, WILLIAM – the father of Annis Dowsing, husband of Susan Orris (died 1578) and Anne Smyth (died before 1582)

DUCKE, ALLEN – a farmer of Walton le Soken, who accuses Joan Robinson

DURRANT, HENRY – a butcher of St Osyth and father of Rebecca Durrant, whom he accuses Ales Hunt of killing. Henry also consults Ursley Kempe about witchcraft events when she is imprisoned in Colchester Castle

EWSTACE, ELIZABETH – a farmer of Thorpe le Soken with lands at Eustac and Hopkin Eustac on Hamford Water, the mother of Margaret Ewstace. Elizabeth was born in about 1529; she provided ointment to Ales Manfield, who accuses her, and she is also accused by Robert Sannever

EWSTACE, MARGARET – the daughter of Elizabeth Ewstace, servant to Robert Sannever in the mid-1560s. After sacking Margaret, Robert accused her and her mother of killing his child and his brother-in-law Thomas Crosse and she is also accused by Ales Manfield

GLASCOCK, ANNIS – the wife of the sawyer John Glascock of St Osyth, and a lodging-house keeper. Annis is accused by Ursley Kempe of bewitching children in the families of Michael Stevens and William Page

GREVELL, MARGARET – a widow of Thorpe le Soken, born about 1527. Margaret is accused by Ales Manfield, Joan Cheston and Nicholas Strickland of the murder of Robert Cheston, attacks on brewing and baking and killing her own husband

Who's Who

HARRISON, ANNE SPENCER – the wife of Richard Harrison, Rector of Beaumont, and widow of Hugh Spencer. The Harrisons were married in 1568, had five children and lived at Little Oakley as well as at Beaumont. In summer 1580, Anne quarrelled with Annis Herd and with the final words before her death before Christmas 1581, she accused Annis of killing her

HARRISON, RICHARD – Rector of Beaumont, widower of Anne Spencer Harrison. They were the parents of Richard, Mary, Thomas, James and Anne. Richard senior was in London when his wife quarrelled with Annis Herd and subsequently accuses Annis himself of theft and witchcraft. He and his son Richard would later face their own accusations

HAYWARD, WILLIAM AND MARGARET – moderately wealthy farmers of Frowick, St Osyth, and neighbours to Elizabeth Bennett. Ales Hunt, one of whose children Margaret had christened, is accused by Ursley Kempe of killing William's cattle

HERD, ANNIS – a poor but well-connected woman from Little Oakley, with multiple lovers. The daughter of Robert and Charity Herd, Annis is the unmarried mother of Annis Dowsing (whose father William was her lover at least from 1573 to 1575) and a boy. She has been presented to the church court for immorality and witchcraft, and is accused by John Wade, Thomas Cartwrite, Bennet Lane, Andrew and Anne Weld West, Richard and Anne Harrison and Godlife Weld Osborne; subsequently she is also accused of killing William Dowsing's wives

Who's Who

HERD, JOHN – a wealthy farmer from Little Oakley, active in the 1570s and 1580s when his children were baptised. John has business dealings with Robert Anwick, John Aldust (his cousin), John Wade and the Marven family, and the Herd family hold extensive lands across Little Oakley and Ramsey

HEWET, JOAN – maidservant to Joan Robinson at Walton le Soken. The Hewet family hold lands in the Soken manors, especially at Thorpe le Soken and Skighawe

HOOKE, WILLIAM – a painter of St Osyth, next-door neighbour of Ales Newman, whom he accuses of witchcraft

HUNT, ALES BARNES – the wife of William Hunt, under-employed mason of St Osyth. Ales is the daughter of 'Mother' Barnes, sister of Margerie Barnes Sammon and mother of Febey Hunt. Ales is accused by Ursley Kempe of killing William Hayward's cattle and Henry Durrant's daughter, and herself accuses Joan Pechey – her mother-in-law Widow Hunt's next-door neighbour in Nether Hoo – of witchcraft

HUNT, FEBEY – a child witness, the daughter of Ales and William Hunt, born about 1574

JOHNSON, JOHN – Collector for the Poor in St Osyth, in which capacity he gave food donations to Joan Pechey and denied money to Ales Newman. John and his wife died suddenly in 1581 and his death was attributed to both women's witchcraft

KEMPE, LAWRENCE – of Thorpe le Soken, brother of Ursley Kempe. Lawrence alleges that his wife died after a fight with Ursley

Who's Who

KEMPE, URSLEY GREY – of St Osyth, cunning woman, midwife-nurse and unmarried mother of Thomas Rabbet. Ursley is Lawrence Kempe's sister. She lives near her friend Ales Newman, whom she accuses of sharing in her witchcraft. Ursley also accuses Elizabeth Bennett, Ales Hunt and Annis Glascock. She is herself accused by Grace Thurlowe of killing her daughter Joan, by Annis Letherdall of killing her daughter Elizabeth, by her brother of killing his wife, of causing various illnesses and of killing Edena Stratton. Ursley will be imprisoned at Colchester Castle, and questioned there by villagers and magistrates about the death of John, second Lord Darcy

LANE, BENNET RUSHE AND WILLIAM LANE – of Little Oakley, married in 1581. Bennet was the widow of William Rushe and William the widower of Anne or Agnes Lane. The Lanes were poor people with two children – Bennet's step-children – and little property. Bennet accuses Annis Herd of witchcraft

LETHERDALL, ANNIS AND RICHARD – the parents of two children and a baby (Elizabeth), whom Annis accuses Ursley Kempe of bewitching. Annis will help to search the bodies of Ursley and possibly other accused women for witches' teats

MANFIELD, ALES – of Thorpe le Soken, born about 1519. Ales accuses Margaret Grevell, Elizabeth and Margaret Ewstace, Cisley Selles, Ursley Kempe, 'Mother' Turner, Ales Barnes Hunt and Margerie Barnes Sammon and is herself accused by Joan Cheston of bewitching her animals and by Richard Rosse of arson

Who's Who

MILES, ALES – a farmer of Walton le Soken; she accuses Joan Robinson

NEWMAN, ALES – of St Osyth, wife of William Newman (although he dies during 1582), friend of Ursley Kempe and godmother to her son Thomas Rabbet, and neighbour of William Hooke. Ursley accuses Ales of sharing in her witchcraft against Elizabeth Letherdall, Joan Thurlowe and Edena Stratton, and killing John Johnson and his wife

OKEY, FELICE CROSSE – widow of Thorpe le Soken, who accuses Elizabeth Ewstace of killing her former husband Thomas Crosse. Felice is the sister of Robert Sannever

OSBORNE, GODLIFE WELD AND EDMUND OSBORNE – of Little Oakley, small farmers married in 1575, and the parents of Edmund (died 1577) and Susan. Godlife was born in 1558, the daughter of John Weld and sister of Anne Weld West, Dorothy Weld Cressie (died 1573) and Richard Weld (died 1572). Joane Weld Anwick is her cousin

PAGE, WILLIAM – a gardener of St Osyth Priory, father of Charity Page and foster-father of a nurse-child, both of whom he accuses Annis Glascock of killing. His wife may have consulted Ursley Kempe as a cunning woman

PECHEY, JOAN – of St Osyth, where she has lived for forty years. Friend of 'Mother' Barnes and mother of Philip Barrenger (or Cowper), Joan lives in Nether Hoo as the neighbour of Widow Hunt. She is accused by Ales Hunt, and suspected of killing John Johnson from whom she received food donations

Who's Who

POLLIN, JOHN – of Little Oakley, where he is churchwarden. Widower of Phillice, John confirms the dying words of Anne Spencer Harrison, which accused Annis Herd of being the cause of her death.

RABBET, THOMAS – a child witness of St Osyth, son of Ursley Kempe against whom he gives evidence. Thomas was born illegitimately in about 1574 and Ales Newman is his godmother

REDWOORT, MARGARET HARVIE – of Little Clacton, wife of Josias Redwoort and friend of Cisley Selles; died 1581

ROBINSON, JOAN – a substantial, married farmer and trader of Walton le Soken, accused of witchcraft by Edmund Upcher, Ales Miles, Thomas Rice, Ales Walter, Allen Ducke, John Brasyer, Margery Carter and her own maidservant Joan Hewet

ROSSE, RICHARD – wealthy farmer of Little Clacton, husband of Alice and accuser of the Selles family. Richard is the employer of Ales Baxter and Robert Smith, as well as of Henry Selles

SAMMON, MARGERIE BARNES – of St Osyth, daughter of 'Mother' Barnes and sister of Ales Barnes Hunt. Employed by a family in the Southfleet area of St Osyth, Margerie nursed her dying mother in 1582. She accuses Joan Pechey and is herself accused by her own sister

SANNEVER, ROBERT – of Thorpe le Soken, brother of Felice Okey and brother-in-law of Thomas Crosse, whom he accuses Margaret and Elizabeth Ewstace of killing. Robert employed Margaret in the 1560s, until he

Who's Who

sacked her on the advice of a cunning man. He also suspects she killed his wife and child in 1579

SAYER, JOHN – constable of Thorpe le Soken, who accuses Ales Manfield, his tenant. John is related by his marriage to Jane Moyse to the wealthy Moyse and Wheeler families who hold land across the Sokens and beyond

SELLES, CISLEY AND HENRY – of Little Clacton. Henry was born in 1543, the son of Christopher and Katherine Selles and married Cisley March in 1566. Their children were Hercules (deceased), Robert aged twelve, John (deceased), Henry aged ten, another John aged six, and Joyce aged three. Henry senior and Cisley are accused of witchcraft and arson by Richard Rosse – who employed Henry, and the other accusers Ales Baxter and Robert Smith – and of murder and other witchcrafts by Thomas Death and his daughter Marie. Later, Robert Selles will be accused of arson by Richard Rosse.

SIMPSON, MARGARET – probably a relation of William Simpson, curate of St Osyth and vicar of Little Clacton, she examines Ursley Kempe, Annis Glascock, Cisley Selles and perhaps others for witches' teats

SMITH, JOAN AND ROBERT – of Little Clacton, where Robert is employed by Richard Rosse. They accuse Cisley Selles of killing their daughter Avis, who died in 1581, and Joan also examines Cisley Selles for witches' teats

STEVENS, MICHAEL – a shoemaker of St Osyth, he accuses Annis Glascock of killing his daughter Martha in 1582

Who's Who

STRATTON, JOHN AND EDENA – John accuses Ursley Kempe of killing his wife Edena in 1582. Their relative Robert Stratton is a servant of John Butler

STRICKLAND, NICHOLAS – a butcher and farmer, of Thorpe le Soken and Kirby le Soken. He accuses Margaret Grevell of witchcraft

TENDERING, JOHN – a wealthy merchant of St Osyth and the Sokens who confirms the story of William Byet's evidence against Elizabeth Bennett

THURLOWE, GRACE AND JOHN – of St Osyth, where Grace is a servant of the Darcy family. Grace and John are the parents of Davy and Joan, whom Ursley Kempe is accused by Grace of attacking in 1581, killing baby Joan

UPCHER, EDWARD – a farmer of Walton le Soken, who accuses Joan Robinson of witchcraft after going to Colchester Castle to consult Ursley Kempe

WADE, JOHN – a wealthy farmer, of Little Oakley where he tenants the Hall farm; he also has lands in Tendring (where many of his children were baptised) and Moze. John is churchwarden in Moze parish. He accuses Annis Herd of bewitching his animals after he presents her to the church court with Thomas Cartwrite. John is connected to the wealthy Marvens and Herds, is bailiff of Little Oakley manor and employs several servants

WALTER, ALES – a moderately wealthy farmer, of Walton le Soken, who is connected to a wider Walter family with lands across the Sokens and Clactons. She accuses Joan Robinson of bewitching her animals

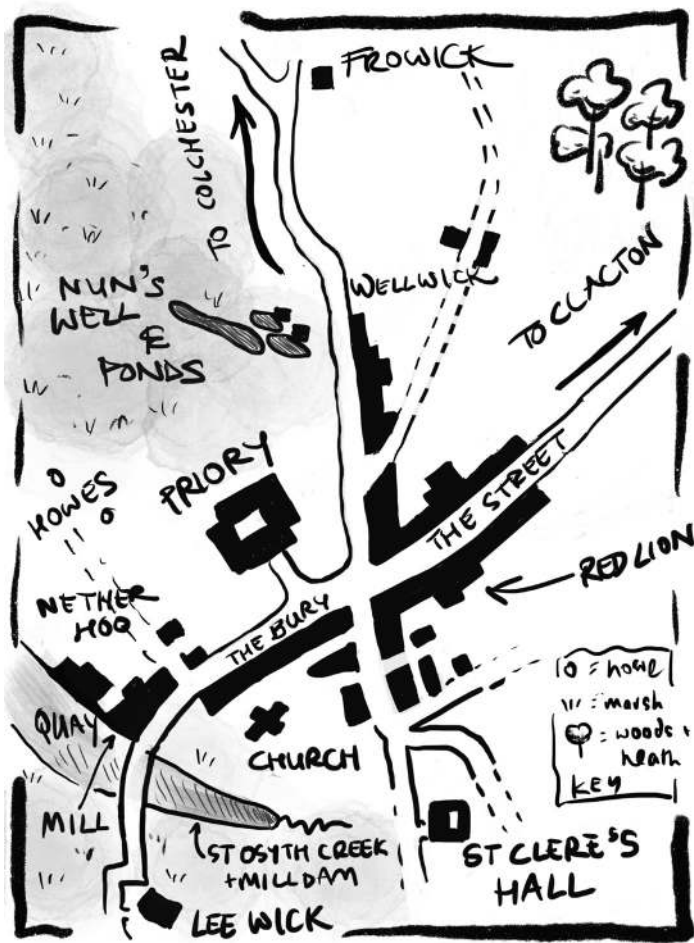
Who's Who

WELD, JOHN AND MARGARET – the parents of Anne Weld West, Godlife Weld Osborne, Richard Weld junior (died 1572) and Dorothe Weld Cressie (died 1573). John was a mariner and small farmer who died in 1571, holding land in Little Oakley and Ramsey

WELD, RICHARD SENIOR AND ANNE – the parents of Joane Weld Anwick and Dorothe Weld Wood. Richard shares the tenancy of Gardelers in Little Oakley with Hugh Spencer and his wife Anne, later Anne Spencer Harrison

WEST, ANDREW AND ANNE WELD WEST – the brother-in-law and sister of Godlife Osborne, cousins of Joane Weld Anwick, guardians of Richard Weld junior and parents of multiple children. Small farmers, the Wests accuse Annis Herd of harming their animals

WHETCROFTE, WILLIAM JUNIOR – son of the lawyer and town clerk William Whetcrofte of Ipswich, Wherstead and Witlesham and his wife Alice, William junior is a clerk and pamphleteer



MAP 1 Map of St Osyth. (Source: author.)



MAP 2 Map of eastern Essex. (Source: Joe LeMonnier.)

ABBREVIATIONS

ATAJR	<i>A True and just Recorde</i> (London, 1582)
CRO	Cheshire Record Office
CUL	Cambridge University Library
ERO	Essex Record Office, Chelmsford
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
SRO	Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, formerly Public Record Office (PRO)