

Strange Accusations in LONG STANTON

ENID PORTER writes of the extraordinary 17th century
accusation of witchcraft by Margaret Pryor of Long Stanton
and subsequent trial.

THE Cambridgeshire village of Long Stanton is, as its name implies, long and scattered, with its main street extending a good three miles. It has two parishes, each with its own church: St. Michael's, noted for its thatched roof, and All Saints with its fine altar tomb of 1685 which bears the marble figures of Sir John and Lady Hatton with six of their children. The Bishops of Ely once had a palace in the village which they used as a place of retirement, and in 1564 Bishop Cox entertained in it the first Queen Elizabeth as she returned from Cambridge.

The royal visit doubtless caused excitement among the villagers but this was, perhaps, nothing compared with the stir and gossip which was to be aroused, 104 years later, by a Long Stanton woman named Margaret Pryor.

In 1659 fear of and belief in witchcraft was widespread, even among the educated. The Witchcraft Act of 1604, which had replaced the milder Elizabethan Act of 1563, was still in force, not to be repealed until 1736. It imposed the death penalty on any convicted witch even if he or she had been brought to trial for a first offence and the alleged witchcraft had not caused the death of any person. Only for such first offences as the destruction of property or livestock, or the making of love potions was the penalty that of a year's imprisonment with four appearances in the pillory; a second conviction meant death.

The hunting out and persecution of supposed witches had, since the accession of Elizabeth I, developed into a patriotic sport. The clergy, University professors and other educated people wrote books denouncing witchcraft and containing the most extraordinary accounts of instances of it which the authors declared they had themselves witnessed. Large and noisy crowds packed the court rooms on the occasions of witch trials, and the proceedings were, in many instances, published in the form of cheap pamphlets which were eagerly read, inaccurate and biased as they usually were. Accusers, witnesses, juries and, often, magistrates and judges had but one desire and that was to see the witch found guilty. It was against such a background of cruelty, ignorance and superstition that Margaret Pryor brought her accusation of witchcraft against two Quakers and so caused them finally to appear before Judge Windham at the Assizes held in Cambridge on 30 July, 1659.

This was not the only instance of Quakers being so accused, though it seems strange to us, today, to think of such peace-loving Christians becoming involved in the shameful proceedings of a witchcraft trial. Usually, as in the Long Stanton case, the accusations stemmed from personal malice on the part of the accuser; but the Quakers — and they were strong in Cambridge at that time — were not universally popular and they did incur opposition in

Cambridge on account of their preaching in the streets against the University, the clergy and learning.

The two people accused were William Allen and Mrs. Morlin, a widow. Earlier, at the Quarter Sessions, Margaret Pryor had declared that both were guilty of witchcraft, but at the Assizes she acquitted William Allen and described to the Judge only the misdeeds of Widow Morlin. Her story was this:

Nearly two years before, on November 20th, 1657, Mrs. Morlin had come at night to Margaret's house, taken her out of bed where she lay sleeping with her husband, put a bridle into her mouth then changed her into a bay mare and ridden her to Madingley Hall. Arrived there, Mrs. Morlin had attached the mare to the latch of the door and had then gone inside to feast with other Quakers on mutton, rabbits and lamb.

Judge Windham seems to have been more enlightened than many of his fellow judges who were often only too eager to accept such stories as true, for he at once proceeded to undermine Margaret's evidence. The events she described, he said, had taken place twenty months before — why had she been so long in bringing her complaints? Because, replied Margaret, she had been forced by the Justices "to bind Widow Morlin over and to prosecute her at the Assizes."

The Judge asked his next question. Were not her hands and feet rubbed sore when, as she had declared, she had been turned into a mare and ridden upon? And had she not become covered with dirt and mud?

Her feet, Margaret replied, *had* become a little sore but her hands had not, nor had she become at all dirty.

How, then asked the Judge, was it that she had been ridden upon only on this one occasion?

Margaret had an easy answer to that. She had, she declared, burned some elder bark with some of her own hair and although Widow Morlin had, on another occasion, come again to her house this action had ensured that she had no more power to do harm.

The reply was Margaret's undoing. It showed, said the Judge, that she was no better than a witch herself, for she "had used sorcery on her own confession." In his opinion she was "a whimsical" woman bent solely on discrediting Widow Morlin; the whole affair was "a mere dream and a fantasy." It took only a quarter of an hour for the jury to find Widow Morlin and the earlier-accused William Allen not guilty.

This trial may, in comparison with others of the 16th and 17th centuries, seem a trivial one, but it is interesting in that it provoked the immediate publication of no less

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than three pamphlets, one of which was written by John Bunyan. The second, entitled *The Strange and Terrible Newes from Cambridge*, was an anonymous work, probably by professors and clergy of the University, while the third was written by a group of Cambridge Quakers who, naturally, were anxious to vindicate the slur cast on their faith. No copy exists today of Bunyan's pamphlet but we know of its contents through allusions to it in the Quakers' publication which attacked both it and *The Strange and Terrible Newes*."

The Quaker pamphlet, *A Lying Wonder Discovered And the Strange and Terrible Newes from Cambridge proved False*, bears at the end the statement, dated 6th August, 1659:

That this is a true relation aforesaid we whose names are hereto subscribed are witnesses, who were at the hearing and examination of the particular herein mentioned, and followed by the names of the witnesses: James Blackley,

she had been turned into a bay horse, yet at the Assizes she had sworn to the Judge that she had become a bay mare.

Her answers to the Judge's question as to whether she had not become sore and dirty when being ridden to Madingley were a tissue of lies. She had told him that her hands only had been sore and that she had not become dirty. Yet, according to the authors of *The Strange and Terrible Newes* she had shown them her hands and feet which were described in the pamphlet as "lamentably bruised and changed as black as Coal, her sides beside being also exceedingly rent and torn . . . and her smock all bloody." Would a horse have worn a smock? asked the Quakers, and lashed out at the authors of the *Newes*:

. . . we say its a great disgrace and shame to Priests, Professors and Schollars, that such grosse dirty stuffe should be reported or given credit to by them in Cambridge or elsewhere . . . Oh! grosse delusion and folly that ever



Long Stanton as it was in 1904. It had probably changed little since the witchcraft trial of the 17th century.

Alderman; John Smith, sen; Robert Letchworth; George Whitehead and John Harwood.

The pamphlet records Margaret Pryor's statement to the Assize Judge and her account of the mutton, rabbits and lamb on which, she said, the Quakers had feasted. This, said the authors, showed her to be an "impudent Liar," for how could they have eaten lamb in November? Moreover, if Margaret really had been turned into a mare how could she have recognised what the Quakers were eating? John Bunyan, they wrote, had stated in *his* pamphlet that Margaret saw a bright light shining about the Quakers as they ate, and heard them discussing doctrine. Could a mare, however, understand doctrine?

Ye may see John Bunion's faith, what he hath believed and published to make people wonder at such lies.

Margaret herself, said the Quakers, had lied too. She had in the first instance told them that it was an evil spirit which had turned her into a horse but had, later, accused Widow Morlin of so doing and had, moreover, accused other "honest people of good report" of being at the feast. She had, according to Bunyan's pamphlet, told him that

Cambridge should be so dishonoured as to have such newes as these proceeding from any of the learned in it; Oh! what a sad thing it is, that those that should be teachers are given up to such strong delusions, as to believe such lies, but where the well head is corrupt and dirty, it cannot send forth pure water.

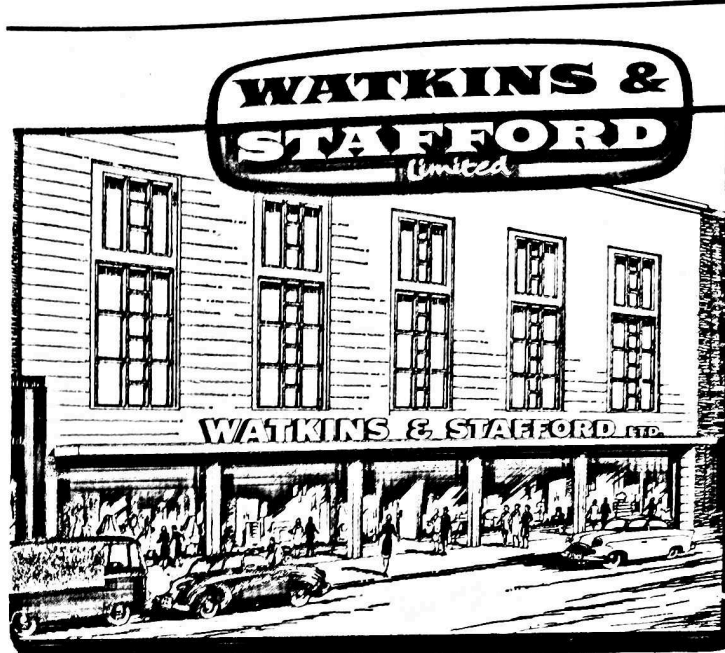
They attacked, too, inaccuracies in the *Newes* whose authors called Margaret Pryor Mary Phillips and said she had been ridden from Dinton — a place which, as the Quakers rightly pointed out, does not exist in Cambridgeshire. Certainly the *Newes* is a confused piece of writing which denounces magicians and witches as a whole — quoting examples of their misdeeds — and the Quakers in particular, accusing them not only of the bewitching of Margaret but of claiming to have seen a "Vision . . . in the air, betwixt Kingston and London, figuratively presenting the dividing of the City and Southwark; and of the Cities devolving and extinguishing in Smoak."

The authors declared that Margaret had lapsed from the Church of England and had joined the Quakers until, "detesting their actions," she had, after a few weeks,

renounced them, which made them consider her not worthy of being "an Earthly Being." It was thus out of spite that they had turned her into a horse. The writers of the Quaker pamphlet admitted that Margaret had for a time attended Quaker meetings, "yet she was never owned by them as one of them." Indeed, she was, as many of her Long Stanton neighbours had testified, "a lewd vain woman of evil conversation that hath been seen uncivilly to behave herself, often times in prophaneness and drunkenesse."

We do not know what happened to Margaret Pryor after the Assizes. Doubtless she had many sympathisers in Long Stanton, and in Cambridge too, for this was an age when people *liked* to hear such fantastic tales as she had told, and when most men and women enjoyed the excitement of a witch hunt and trial. It may be that she had the full support of the parochial clergy; many rectors and vicars believed witchcraft to involve worship of the Devil and so to be an evil which must be suppressed. The Quakers, in their pamphlet, pointed out that the priest of Long Stanton should "if he had been honest," and if he had really examined her accusations before the trial, would have stopped her from proceeding with them. As to how Margaret, who was probably only a poor woman, found the money to prosecute, she told the Judge, the Quakers wrote, that she had been lent it "but did not declare of whom she had the money, nor who was the chief in setting her on to prosecute."

Margaret may have told her story about William Allen and Widow Morlin because she had a personal grudge against them and the Quakers, or because she wished to draw attention to herself. For whatever reason, she certainly succeeded in making Long Stanton, for a time, the talking point of the neighbourhood.



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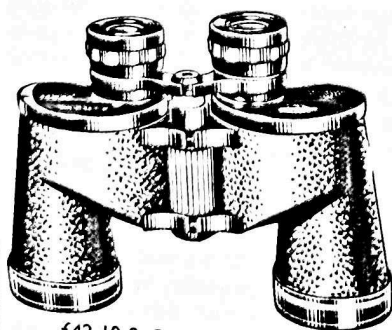
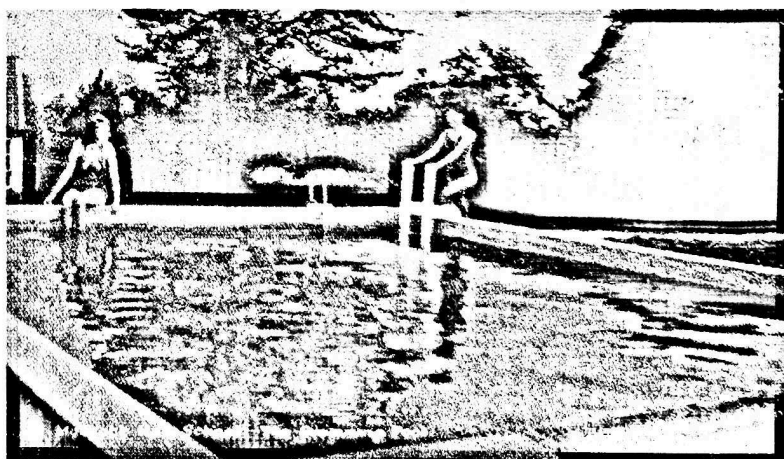
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