

The Tale of Matthew Hopkins

The Tale of Matthew Hopkins Witch - Finder General Of Essex

Matthew Hopkins is perhaps the most famous of the Witch Finders of 17th century Britain. The sense of imminent violence, mistrust and religious fervour surrounding the ongoing Civil War provided all that was needed for supernatural paranoia to take hold. It was within such an atmosphere a man such as Matthew Hopkins could thrive.

During his career as a Witch Finder Hopkins had between 200 and 400 executed for witchcraft, with 68 of those being in Suffolk alone. This reign of terror began in Manningtree, Essex, in 1644. Old One Legged Elizabeth Clarke was the first victim of Hopkins search for Enemies of God, by the time Clarke's interrogation was over thirty one accomplices had been named.

The reputation and horror grows. Hopkins` career began modestly, but as his reputation grew, so did his ego. He began to proclaim himself Witch Finder General and commanded large expenses for his work. at a time when average daily wages were around two pence, Hopkins would take up over £20 for "Ridding a village of Witchcraft". While not strictly guilty of torture, which was forbidden under law, Hopkins and his minions used sleep deprivation to secure confessions.

Torture and Trickery.

While appearing outwardly honest and earnest in his beliefs Matthew Hopkins began to use trickery in his search for convictions. It was believed Witches spots did not bleed, and so Hopkins made use of a knife with a retractable blade that wouldn't pierce the skin of the accused. His specialisation was extracting confessions from elderly women with pets. For example, Faith Mills of Fressingham admitted following interrogation, that her three pet birds, Tom, Robert and John, were Familiars who had magically made a cow jump over a sty and break a cart. Faith Mills Was Hanged.

Another method of uncovering Witchcraft was to throw the accused in the lake. It was believed Witches would not sink because their bodies rejected baptism and thus water. If the accused floated they were guilty, if they sank they were innocent. Contrary to popular belief, those that sank did not usually drown, they were pulled out by a rope that had been tied around them. John Lowe 70 Year old Vicar of Brandeston, received this treatment. He was kept awake for three days and nights, and then forced to walk without rest until his feet were blistered, before being ducked in a lake. He was denied visitation by the clergy and had to recite his own funeral verses on the way to the Gallows.

By Gerald Grant
Local Seaside Historian

Seaside Community Association has published this information on this website with permission by the author, for the interest of the local community. Seaside Community Association cannot vouch for the accuracy of this article or validity of the research undertaken. Readers should contact the author direct and examine the source documents in the case of any conflict of information.