

Matthew Hopkins, the self-appointed Witchfinder General, was based in Manningtree & Mistley during a dark period of English history – the time of brutal witch-hunts.

Witchfinder

The activities of the Essex Witchfinders took place between 1645 and 1647. Nationally in this period, 112 people were hanged for witchcraft – 82 coming from Essex. It is likely that Hopkins and his colleague, John Stearne, were responsible for most of these.

In 1620, Matthew Hopkins, the son of a local minister, was born at Great Wenham, Suffolk. This was the time of the puritans and Hopkins was brought up in a household ruled by strict obedience to God's Law and a life-long devotion to Christ.

After a period as a shipping and a lawyer's clerk, Hopkins used an inheritance to buy the Thorn Inn at Mistley in 1642. This was at the time of the start of the Civil War when a lack of order in the land meant that the 'godly' felt that their orderly world

was being turned upside down. There was much folklore and storytelling about evil witches that were causing catastrophe and death. Local gossip would be directed against those who were a bit 'odd' or perhaps were suspected of having 'cunning' powers.



Matthew Hopkins met up with another staunch puritan, John Stearne, who, in March 1645, was commissioned by the local magistrates to 'question' a

suspected witch, Elizabeth Clarke.

Questioning was carried out with the assistance of female searchers. The task of these women was to physically examine the suspect for signs – the devil's marks. These could be warts, moles or bits of extra skin that were declared to be 'teats' to give suckle to imps and familiars. The searchers would sometimes also prick the marks to see if the witch felt pain. The 'witch' would be interrogated and 'watched' for three days and nights, going without sleep, food or water.

Elizabeth Clarke broke down and named several other women including – Anne Leech, Helen Clarke, Anne West and her daughter Rebecca. The women were detained and taken to the cells in Colchester Castle for questioning. The young girl, Rebecca West, confessed and implicated her mother and others, thus saving herself from hanging.

Hopkins and Stearne zealously continued their work and after a while 33 women were locked in the cells at Colchester Castle. There was some disquiet locally, not only about the cost to the town, but also about the awful conditions in which the accused were being held.

In July 1645, the women from the Colchester cells (four of whom had already died) were tried at the County Assizes in Chelmsford under the jurisdiction of Robert Rich, the 2nd Earl of Warwick and



MATTHEW HOPKINS the famous WITCH-FINDER of Manningtree in Essex, who in only one year during the reign of James 1, hanged 60 reputed Witches & was himself at last executed for a Wizard.

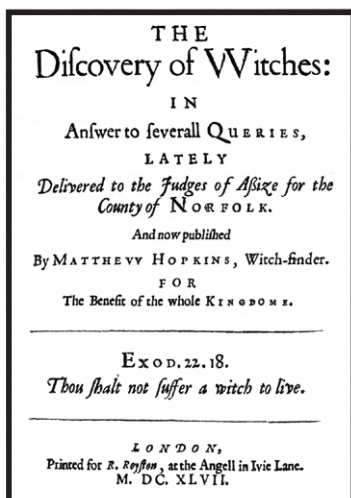


Lord Lieutenant of Essex. With no legal representation and among scenes of chaos, all but one of the women were found guilty. Elizabeth Clarke and fourteen of the others were hanged in Chelmsford but

four were taken back to Manningtree and hanged on the village green. Nine were later reprieved.

Apart from being driven by their puritanical zeal, the Witchfinders and their searchers were paid fees and expenses for their work. At a today's equivalent of more than £1000, the costs of a single prosecution became quite a burden on local towns. So Hopkins and Stearne headed out into Suffolk and Eastern England, working separately to search out witches. They were however not always as welcome or successful as they were in 1645. It was perhaps the prohibitive costs to local parishes, as well as growing unease with their methods and Hopkins becoming ill that curtailed their activities by the spring of 1647.

Mathew Hopkins himself, contrary to the popular belief that he was hanged for being a witch, died of consumption in Manningtree in August 1647. He was buried in a simple, unmarked grave at St Mary's, Mistley Heath. It was a very ordinary way to end a short but extraordinary life.



For more information:
 Visit: www.headgatetheatre.co.uk
 or read: Witchfinders – A Seventeenth Century English Tragedy
 by Malcolm Gaskill published by John Murray.
 ISBN 0-7195-6121-3

Witchfinder Fact 1 *Witchfinder General*

This was the title used by Matthew Hopkins himself in 1647 when he published a defence of the actions of the witchfinders. The publication contained a woodcut illustration of Hopkins set between Elizabeth Clarke and Rebecca West.

Witchfinder Fact 2 *Cunning Folk*

'Cunning folk' were people who were gifted with powers of healing or divination. They were often used by villagers to diagnose and reverse the effects of witchcraft, but were often feared for their powers. A typical test for a witch was to boil the victim's urine and hair in a bottle.

Witchfinder Fact 3 *Swimming of Witches*

Suspected witches were often subjected to a 'swimming' test by throwing them bound into a local pond or river. If they floated it was thought that the water, with parallels to a baptism, had rejected them and they were therefore guilty. This practice, initially favoured by John Stearne, was in fact illegal and if the suspect died, the perpetrators could be tried for murder.



Witchfinder Fact 4 *Hangers On*

In the 17th century, death by hanging was achieved by strangulation. The long drop, resulting in a more humane death, came much later.

It was quite normal for hangings to result in a slow end by asphyxiation. When this happened, relatives would have the choice to speed the process by adding their weight to the victim's legs and it is this action that gives us the phrase 'hangers on'.

Witchfinder Fact 5 *Witchfinding since 1647*

The statutory offence of witchcraft, punishable by death, was repealed in 1756, but even up to the 20th century English villages continued to scratch, swim and even murder suspected witches. There was a lynching as late as 1945.

In the poverty-stricken areas of the world, misfortune is still seen as the result of ill will and evil-doing; witchfinding follows. In 2000, five suspects were brutally murdered in Bihar, India, after being found guilty by a witchfinder. More than 800 perished in a witch-hunt in a Congolese province in 2001. This is not just the work of savage persecutors, but the actions of ordinary neighbours acting out their violent fantasies as a result of fear and ignorance.