

HELEN ROGIE AND MARGARET BANE WITCHES OF LUMPHANAN

“Thou art indicted as a common witch, by open voice and common fame...” These words were spoken in April 1597, at the trial of one Helen Rogie, aka Mrs Helen Strachan, wife of John, who lived at Findrack, near Lumphanan. She would later be burned at the stake, accused of causing the death of her own daughter-in-law Bessie by maleficarum, that is, witchcraft with intent to harm. Her mother, Margaret Bane, a resident of Kincardine O’Neill, had been executed the previous month on similar charges.

Helen was a crofter’s wife, and her mother a midwife, or howdie. Helen would have learned the skills of aiding women in childbirth as a matter of course. For centuries, women relied on the country midwife to help them. It would be the 18th century before any official medical training was available; Aberdonian surgeon, Dr David Skene was one of the first in this area to offer such training in the 1760s.

What Helen and Margaret also had in common was a knowledge of curses, according to the testimony of their neighbours. Gaining the reputation of witches, people were only too willing to blame them for their misfortunes.

It would seem that the Strachan family attracted trouble, as poor Bessie, who had married one of Helen’s sons, was cursed and suffered a terrible illness, alternating between being “roasit and brint up” with fever, and “as cauld as ice”. Her sickness began after Halloween, one John Ross testified. He further compounded the crime by saying Margaret had given Bessie poisoned milk which caused her to have a fit. Their other neighbour, John Chapman, claimed he had been enchanted in the same way after seeing Helen carrying out a ritual known as “yird and stane” while in “a devilish shape”. Chapman had challenged her, but she had only stared at him and did not reply. He was convinced that he had been smitten by the evil eye. By modern standards, the pair were probably both suffering from influenza.

Helen’s nearest neighbour at Findrack, George Forbes, claimed she had bewitched his cattle, causing them to run wild and fatally injure themselves. He also said that Helen had cast a spell on his horse which threw him and ultimately died long before its time. Forbes testified in person at Helen’s trial.

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WITCHES OF LUMPHANAN

Andrew Nicol, a Lumphanan tailor, had accosted Helen and searched her bag, finding a leaden figure in the shape of a man, a type of “voodoo” doll perhaps? Nicol was lucky to survive this experience!

Saddest of all, poor Helen was condemned by her own mother, Margaret Bane, who told the court that they all took part in a “devilish dance” on Craiglich Hill with Satan himself in attendance. Craiglich and Craighlash were both associated with witches’ covens.



Lumphanan

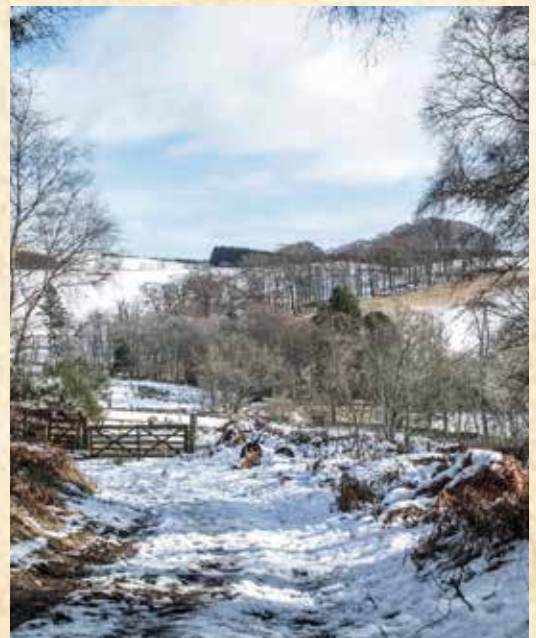
In Margaret’s case, it would seem that some of her midwifery clients blamed her for the deaths of their children, despite the fact that infant mortality was very high. She was not thanked for “predicting the birth of a child”, even though as an experienced midwife, Margaret would have been readily able to recognise the symptoms of pregnancy. Even attempts to ease a woman’s labour pains by apparently transferring them to someone else was believed to be evidence of her evil ways. There was no knowledge of psychosomatic pain back in the 16th century!

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WITCHES OF LUMPHANAN

She too was seen carrying out the yird and stane ritual, which related to ownership of property, her accusers claiming she was stealing their land. Margaret was blamed for the death of a neighbour's daughter, as she had been seen to remove a peat from their house and put it in her own hearth.

Thus the “witches” of Lumphanan were condemned to death by their own actions. Both were executed in Aberdeen, Margaret on 25 March 1597, Helen, ten days later. The period 1596-97 was nicknamed “The Year of the Burnings” since 26 women were burned at the stake for witchcraft. The frenzy against anyone, male or female, thought to be in league with the Devil and capable of causing harm to others, had all started with King James VI's obsession. He was convinced that the North Berwick Coven, led by Agnes Sampson, had conspired to kill his new bride, Anne of Denmark, by raising a storm to wreck the ship on which she sailed to Scotland. The Church and State worked together to fight what they saw was the Devil in action on earth, serving only to divide communities, fuel superstition, and give people an excuse to settle scores with difficult neighbours by accusing them of witchcraft. In Scotland and Europe witches were burned, as they were equated with religious heretics, whereas in England, witchcraft carried the sentence of hanging.

By the middle of the 17th century, those accused of witchcraft were merely fined and banished or had their magical books and articles burned by the civic executioner. However, the Witchcraft Act was law across Britain right up to 1951 when it was replaced by the Fraudulent Mediums Act. The last “witch” convicted until the old act was Helen Duncan, originally from Perthshire. She was imprisoned for nine days after a seance in Portsmouth during which she had revealed the fate of a British battleship during the Second World War before the Ministry of Defence had released the details. The information had apparently come from the spirit of a young sailor who had drowned aboard.



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Craiglich is a picturesque hillwalk today, and Findrack House, dating from the 17th century, marks the site of the estate between Lumphanan and Tornaveen where she lived.