

WITCH-HUNT AT TRING

THE seriousness with which witchcraft was regarded as late as the eighteenth century is illustrated by a remarkable case which occurred at Tring in August 1751, and resulted in the callous murder of an unfortunate woman named Osborne and the subsequent hanging of one of her killers.

The story opens in 1745, when Ruth Osborne, having vainly besought milk from a certain farmer named Butterfield, went away muttering to herself that she wished the Pretender would soon come and carry off his cattle. Shortly afterwards the man fell ill and was afflicted with various misfortunes, which he was certain were the direct result of Mrs. Osborne's evil powers and ill-will.

To counteract these "satanic" influences, a renowned white witch or wise woman from Northamptonshire was summoned. On arriving at Tring, she confirmed the general opinion that the old woman was a witch and took prompt measures to remove the evil spell. Six strong men, armed with pitchforks, were detailed to keep guard over Butterfield's house both by day and night, and, in order to prevent them also being bewitched, charms were placed around their necks.

To be ducked

But these measures failed to benefit the "bewitched" man, and, proving somewhat costly, it was decided to try more direct methods in the added hope that they would bring relief to the troubled man and profit to the neighbouring innkeepers. A mob of thirty ale drinkers was organized to carry out the new measures.

To advertise this new plan of action the town criers of the towns of Hemel Hempstead, Leighton Buzzard and Winslow were engaged to announce the following notice on their respective market days:

"This is to give notice that on Monday next a man and woman are to be publicly ducked at Tring for their wicked crimes."

Matthew Burton, the parish overseer of Tring, on hearing that the persons alluded to in this public indictment were John and Ruth Osborne, was determined to protect them from harm and lodged them in the workhouse for safety. The master of this institution, Jonathan Tompkins, decided to remove his charges on the Sunday night to the vestry of the parish church, hoping that the sacred nature of the sanctuary would have a deterrent effect upon the would-be persecutors.

ON the following day, however, a mob, reported to have consisted of 5,000 people, made up mostly of the lower classes but including many persons who were well dressed and mounted on horseback, proceeded to the workhouse and

*Less than
200 years ago a woman
was drowned by a
mob of local people because
she and her husband
were suspected of
witchcraft*

by Charles H. Cooke

demanding the immediate surrender of the Osbornes.

Although the master assured the crowd that the persons sought were no longer in the building, the rabble broke open the doors and searched all parts of the premises. Every conceivable place was examined, and, in their abject ignorance and superstition, even the salt-box was searched in the erroneous belief that a witch and a wizard were able to conceal themselves in the same space as two cats could occupy.

Smashed church doors

Disappointed by their failure, the angry mob became wild and infuriated, and proceeded to demolish the workhouse. They lighted firebrands and threatened to murder the master and burn down the town of Tring if their demands were not complied with. Tompkins weakened before such ominous threats and revealed the whereabouts of the Osbornes. Accompanied by yells of fiendish delight the savage mob smashed open the church doors, seized the helpless victims, and carried them to Marlstone Green. Here followed an orgy of uncontrollable fury and heartless devilry which ultimately resulted in the death of Ruth Osborne.

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AT the inquest on the body of Mrs. Osborne, a verdict of murder was returned against Thomas Colley and twenty-one other known and unknown persons, who were committed for trial at the County Assizes at Hertford.

The case opened in July 1751, when Colley, William Humbles and Charles Young, alias Lee or Red Beard, were arraigned on the capital charge.

Many witnesses were examined, and their evidence was full of gruesome details of the murder.

John Holmes, for example, testified as follows:

"The man and woman were separately tied up in a cloth or sheet; then a rope was tied under the armpits of the deceased, and two men dragged her into a pond; and they dragged her sheer through the pond several times; and that Colley, having a stick in his hand, went into the pond, and turned the deceased up and down several times."

Another witness, John Humphries, deposed as follows:

"Colley turned her over and over several times with the stick; that after the mob had ducked her several times, they brought her to the shore, and set her by the pond side, and then dragged the old man in and ducked him; that after they had brought him to the shore, and set him by the pond side, they dragged the deceased in a second time; and that Colley went again into the pond, and turned and pushed the deceased about with his stick as before; and then she being brought to shore again, the man was also a second time dragged in, and underwent the same discipline as he had before; and being brought to shore, the deceased was a third time dragged into the pond; that Colley went into the pond again and took hold of the cloth or sheet in which she was wrapt, and pulled her up and down the pond till the same came from her, and then she appeared naked; that then Colley pushed her on the breast with his stick, which she endeavoured with her left hand to catch hold of, but he pulled it away, and that was the last time life was in her. When Colley came out of the pond, he went round among the people who were the spectators of the tragedy, and collected money of them as a reward for the great pains he had taken in showing them sport in ducking the old witch, as he then called the deceased."

Hanged with military display

The jury found Colley guilty and condemned him to be executed and hung in chains at the spot where the crime was committed. To prevent a rescue, and to impress upon the ignorant populace the power of the law and the seriousness of the crime committed in their midst, the arrangements were carried out with military display and unusual solemnity.

A contemporary report in the *Universal Magazine* for 1751 read:

"Thursday, August 22d.—About ten in the morning, Mr. Thomas Colley, condemned for the murder of Ruth Osborne, as a supposed witch, received the sacrament at Hertford, administered to him by the Rev. Mr. Edward Bouchier, when

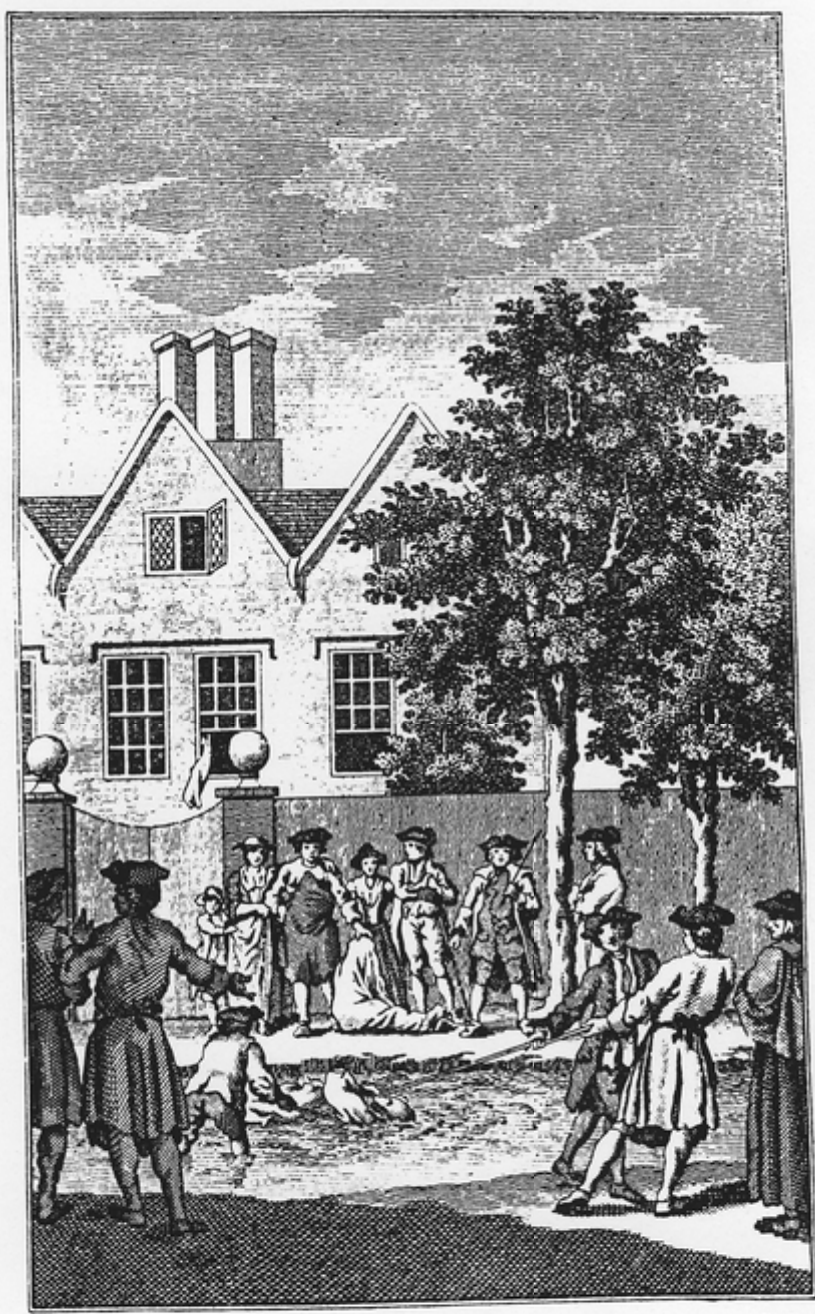
he signed a solemn declaration of his faith relating to witchcraft; which he desired might be carried to the place of execution, and was there publicly read at his earnest request, just before he was turned off, by the Rev. Mr. Randall, minister of Tring, who attended him in his last moments. He was escorted by one hundred and eight men belonging to the regiment of Horse Guards Blue, with their officers and two trumpets, and the procession was slow, solemn, and moving. Friday night he was lodged in St. Albans jail, and at five the next morning, he was put in a one-horse chaise with the executioner, and came to the place of execution about eleven; and after half an hour spent in prayer, he was executed, and immediately after hung up in chains on the same gibbet he was hanged on. The infatuation of the greater part of the people in that country was so great, that they would not be seen near the place of execution, insisting that it was a hard case to hang a man for destroying an old wicked woman, that had done so much damage by her witchcraft. A very odd accident happened in Tring town, which was that just as the prisoner's wife and daughter were permitted to speak to him, one of the trooper's pistols in his holster went off, occasioned by his handkerchief accidentally getting into the holster, which he pulling out, drew the trigger, and the ball went into the ground; but no other damage ensued than putting the corps in some disorder, it being at first imagined to have been fired out of a window."

According to a notice in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XXI, it is stated that Colley, the day before he was executed at Gubblecut-cross, signed a public declaration affirming his dying conviction that there was no such thing as a witch, and prayed that the "good people" might refrain from thinking that they had any right to persecute a fellow creature, as he had done, through a vain imagination, and under the influence of liquor; he acknowledged his cruelty, and the justice of his sentence.

The pond in which the two unfortunate victims of blind superstition were incarcerated was not quite two and a half feet in depth, including mud and water, and yet the woman's failure to sink in such shallow water was regarded by the ignorant as "confirmation strong as holy writ" that she was a witch.



FURTHER lurid details of the atrocities committed were supplied after the trial by John Osborne, who was some years younger than his wife. Although a well-built and able-bodied man, none of the neighbouring farmers would employ him after his wife's murder, for the belief that he was capable of wizardry still persisted and he was compelled to become an inmate of the Tring workhouse for the remainder of his life.



"The Ducking of John Osborn"
Artist: Wale. Engraver: Ashley

HERTFORDSHIRE 1731-1800

MOB VIOLENCE AT TRING

23 April 1751. At Tring in Hertfordshire, one B——d——d, a publican giving out that he was bewitched by one Osborne and his wife, harmless people above 70, had it cried at several market towns that they were to be tried by ducking this day, which occasioned a vast concourse. The parish officers having removed the old couple from the workhouse into the church for security, the mob missing them broke the workhouse windows, pulled down the pales, and demolished part of the house; and seizing the governor, threatened to drown him and fire the town, having straw in their hands for that purpose. The poor wretches were at length for public safety delivered up, stripped stark naked by the mob, their thumbs tied to their toes, then dragged two miles, and thrown into a muddy stream; after much ducking and ill usage, the old woman was thrown quite naked on the bank, almost choked with mud, and expired in a few minutes, being kicked and beat with sticks, even after she was dead; and the man lies dangerously ill of his bruises. To add to the barbarity, they put the dead witch (as they called her) in bed with her husband, and tied them together. The coroner's inquest have since brought in their verdict of wilful murder against Thomas Mason, William Myatt, Richard Grice, Richard Wadley, James Proudham, John Sprouting, John May, Adam Curling, Francis Meadows, and 20 others, names unknown. The poor man is likewise dead of the cruel treatment he received.

2 May, 1751. Tring. Though your account of the riot and murder that lately happened in this place is in general true, yet several names were mistaken, and some circumstances omitted. These I have corrected, and supplied; and added some account of the incidents which for several years past have gradually been tending to produce this unhappy event.

A little before the defeat of the Scotch in the late rebellion, the old woman Osborne came to one Butterfield, who then kept a dairy at Gubblecote, and begged for some buttermilk, but Butterfield told her with great brutality that he had not enough for his hogs. This provoked the old woman, who went away, telling him, that the Pretender would have him and his hogs too. Soon afterwards several of Butterfield's calves became distempered; upon which some ignorant people, who had been told the story of the buttermilk, gave out that they were bewitched by old mother Osborne, and Butterfield himself, who had now left his dairy, and taken the public-house by the brook of Gubblecote, having been lately, as he had been many years before at times, troubled with fits, mother Osborne was said to be the cause. He was persuaded that the doctors could do him no good, and was advised to send for an old woman out of Northamptonshire, who was famous for curing diseases

that were produced by witchcraft. This sagacious person was accordingly sent for and came. She confirmed the ridiculous opinion that had been propagated of Butterfield's disorder, and ordered 6 men to watch his house day and night with staves, pitchforks, and other weapons, at the same time hanging something about their necks, which, she said, was a charm that would secure them from being bewitched themselves. However these extraordinary proceedings produced no considerable effects, nor drew the attention of the place upon them, till some persons, in order to bring a large company together, with a lucrative view, ordered by anonymous letters that public notice should be given at Winslow, Leighton and Hempstead, by the cryer, that witches were to be tried by ducking at Long Marston on the 22nd of April. The consequences were as you have related them, except that no person has yet been committed on the coroner's inquest except one Thomas Colley, chimney-sweeper, but several of the ringleaders in the riot are known, some of whom live very remote, and no expense or diligence will be spared to bring them to justice.

