

A Hertfordshire Trial for Witchcraft.

BY CHARLES E. JONES.

THE last woman to be condemned for witchcraft in England was Jane Wenham, of Walkern, near Stevenage, whose trial took place in the year 1712. A pamphlet published anonymously, but attributed to the Rev. Francis Bragge, vicar of Hitchin from 1689 to 1728, gives an account of Jane's offences and some particulars of the trial from the point of view of one who, apparently, was fully convinced of the prisoner's guilt. The pamphlet bears the formidable title:—

A
True and Faithful
ACCOUNT
OF THE
DISCOVERY
OF
SORCERY AND WITCHCRAFT,
Practis'd by
JANE WENHAM
of Walkerne in Hertfordshire, upon the Body
of ANNE THORN.
With the Proceedings against her,
from her first Apprehension,
TILL HER
Conviction and Condemnation,
AT THE
Assizes at Hertford before Mr. Justice
POWELL, March 4. 1711-12.
Nottingham: Printed by William Ayscough in
the Middle-Pavement.

Mr. Bragge was not the only man who rushed into print as soon as the trial was over, for a long war of pamphlets ensued, with the result that a case of no great importance, except to the unfortunate woman concerned, has been recorded in many books. I venture, however, to relate the details in the hope that they may be new to some of my readers, and because they give an insight into the superstitious belief in witchcraft, and also that there was concerned in the matter one of our local celebrities, Sir Henry Chauncy, author of *The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire*.

Chauncy, who was born in London in 1632, was the son of Henry Chauncy, of Yardley Bury, near Walkern

(now called Ardeley Bury), an Elizabethan manor house which was rebuilt in 1815. The younger Henry was educated at Bishop's Stortford, proceeded to Caius College, Cambridge, at the age of fifteen, entered the Middle Temple at seventeen, and was called to the Bar in 1656. Later, he was appointed successively a justice of the peace for the county of Hertford, a justice of the peace for the borough, and in 1680, when Hertford obtained its charter, the first Recorder. He was knighted by the Merry Monarch in 1681, and in the same year succeeded to the family estates upon the death of his father. He died at Yardley Bury in 1719 and was buried in the church there.

Chauncy's neighbour, Jane Wenham, had for a long time before the events that led to her trial "lain undern suspicion of being a Witch," so we see that the scales were weighted against her. A sheep had been "taken strangely, skipping and standing upon its head," and this odd behaviour was attributed to the machinations of the village witch. The sheep recovered in half an hour, but Jane's evil reputation suffered permanently. On another occasion she stroked a nurse-child which sickened and died soon afterwards, but so many nurse-children died in infancy¹ that possibly the blame for this mischance should attach to Elizabeth Field, who had charge of the infant, rather than to Jane Wenham. However that may be, matters came to a crisis nine years after this latter proof of Jane's "converse with the devil."

On New Year's Day, 1711-12, a farm labourer named Matthew Gilston was accosted by the witch, who asked him for the gift of some of the straw he was carrying on a fork. Matthew having given a blunt refusal, Jane helped herself to part of his load. Exactly four weeks later he was thrashing in the barn, when an old woman in a riding-hood or cloak looked in at the door and asked him to sell her a pennyworth of straw. Again he refused, and the woman went away muttering. Thereupon Gilston—why he did not know, but "only he was forc'd to it"—ran two miles at top speed, dashed through a river instead of crossing by the bridge, and

¹ See *Transactions* 1925, p. 159.

so reached Munden Hill, where he tried to buy a pennyworth of straw, but without success. Not to be thwarted, Matthew helped himself to straw from a dung-heap and wrapped it in his clothes, of which he stripped himself for the purpose, and so returned to Walkern *en déshabillé*.

Some days later John Chapman, the farmer for whom Gilston worked, met Jane Wenham and took the opportunity to rate her soundly for bewitching his man and causing him to run through rivers and discard his clothes on a January day. This was too much for Jane, who straightway obtained a warrant from Sir Henry Chauncy, charging Chapman with slander. The case was referred to the Rev. John Gardiner, rector of Walkern, who advised the parties to live more peaceably in future and ordered the defendant to pay Jane a shilling as compensation. The plaintiff felt that the award of this paltry sum added insult to injury, and appears to have lost her temper, for she flounced out saying that if she could not get justice there she would get it elsewhere. And now the rector and his household take the middle of the stage in our story.

Mr. Gardiner had a servant, some sixteen or seventeen years of age, named Anne Thorn, who on the previous day had dislocated her knee and so was temporarily a cripple. Soon after Jane Wenham had left the house the rector heard loud screams proceeding from the kitchen and, going to learn the reason, found Anne "stript into her Shirt-sleeves," wringing her hands while she shrieked. Mrs. Gardiner came upon the scene, but neither she nor her husband could get any explanation from the servant, who continued to scream and point to a bundle of twigs wrapped in her discarded clothes. When her mistress undid the bundle Anne grew a little calmer and, with a cry of "I'm ruined and undone," related the following strange story. Feeling, after Jane Wenham's departure, that she must run somewhere, she raced across the close, climbed a five-barred gate, dodged some of John Chapman's men who tried to stop her, and was making for Cromer when she met a "little old woman" muffled in a riding-hood. The woman said that there were no sticks to be found at Cromer, pointed out a neighbouring tree where there were plenty, and

told Anne to take off her gown and apron to wrap them in. The stranger produced a crooked pin with which the bundle was to be fastened "and then vanished away."

Mrs. Gardiner noticed the similarity to Gilston's experience and, acting upon the common belief that to burn the thing bewitched would cause the culprit to appear, threw the sticks and pin in the fire—and, sure enough, in walked Jane Wenham, making the excuse that she wished to see Anne's mother about doing a day's washing.

Someone with a turn for arithmetic measured the distance Anne had travelled, ascertained how long she had been out of the house, and found that her speed worked out at more than eight miles an hour, which was good going for a runner with a dislocated knee.

The following day Anne had another attack of nerves "with strange Tremblings and Convulsions," and insisted that she would not be better until she had fetched more sticks. Thereupon she was allowed to go out, the rector's wife heading a long procession that followed to watch events, for by this time the whole of Walkern appears to have been in a ferment, the villagers neglecting their avocations rather than miss anything worth seeing. Anne vaulted over two five-barred gates, although one of them stood open, collapsed several times on the way and then, being forced by her retinue to go home, leapt over another gate on the return journey. After reaching the rectory and having another fit, nothing would satisfy the girl but a visit to Jane Wenham in order to "have some of her Blood." So the procession moved off once more and carried the sufferer home after her knee had been dislocated afresh.

Jane was then fetched to the rectory, and an argument ensued between the witch and the victim as to whether the latter had been bewitched. When the recriminations were over Anne was taken to a bone-setter and, on her return, wanted to fetch more sticks. Apparently the retinue was getting tired, as it was left to Arthur Chauncy² and Thomas Ireland to follow her. They saw her go to the same tree as before, gather some sticks, and leap a gate on her way back. She threw the bundle in

² Sir Henry Chauncy was thrice married, Arthur being the elder of his two children by the third wife.

the fire, but we are not told that Jane appeared. Later in the day Anne tried to drown herself in the river, but was prevented by the two watchers and several others who had joined in the pursuit.

In the meantime Sir Henry Chauncy had been informed, and had issued a warrant for the apprehension of Jane Wenham on a charge of felony and witchcraft. Accordingly the constable broke into Jane's cottage and, for some reason unknown, took her to see Anne, who scratched the poor woman's face several times, and so whole-heartedly that "the noise of her Nails seem'd as it were scratching against a Wainscot." Jane's face was badly torn by the girl's nails, *but no blood came.*

On February 15th, 1711-12, the prisoner, Anne Thorn, Mr. Gardiner and the rest appeared before Chauncy at Yardley Bury. After Jane had been searched by four women for witchmarks, none of which were found, she offered to submit herself to the swimming test. The offer was not accepted but, instead, the Rev. Mr. Strutt, vicar of Ardley, tried her with the Lord's Prayer, then one of the tests for suspected witches. Jane managed quite well until she came to the words, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," which she was unable to get right. She tried six or seven times, her versions being, "Lead us not into no temptation and evil," "Lead us not into no temptation, but deliver us from all evil," and, worst of all, "Lead us into temptation and evil." She excused herself by saying that she was "disturb'd in her Head" and needed rest, so further tests were postponed until the following day. On the morrow Mr. Strutt tried Jane once more at the house of the village constable who had her in charge, only to find that she was still unable to get past her stumbling-block. The vicar having urged the witch to confess for the salvation of her soul, Jane "began to relent a little" and asked for the conversation to be continued in a private room. To this Mr. Strutt agreed, stipulating that Mr. Gardiner and a man named Archer, one of Jane's relatives, should be present also. The two parsons, so our author states, by cross-examination, obtained admissions from their victim that she had been a witch for sixteen years, that she had bewitched Anne Thorn because the girl had once vexed her, and, in answer to a

question as to why she was so familiar with the devil, that her hot temper and use of bad language when annoyed by her neighbours were such that "the Devil took Advantage over her." These frank avowals were so convincing that "Mr. Archer, her kinsman, was so fully satisfy'd with this free and full Confession that he had not one word more to say in her behalf."

Some light may be thrown upon Jane's admissions by the fact that they procured her two days' freedom from custody, but the net was closing round her. Arthur Chauncy had been conducting a little experiment of his own. Anne, who was still having fits, had several pins "convey'd to her Invisibly," and one of these pins Chauncy "ran several times in the sight of all the Company into Jane Wenham's Arm up to the Head, but could make no Blood come, neither did she show any the least Signs of Pain at it." Added to this "a dismal Noise of Cats was heard about the House [the rectory], sometimes their cry resembling that of Young Children, at other Times they made a Hellish Noise, to which nothing can be resembled; this was accompany'd by Scratchings, heard by all that were in the House, under the Windows, and at the Doors, which startled and affrighted them all to a great degree," and it was not until Arthur Chauncy had killed a prowling cat that these noises ceased. And so Jane's respite came to an end, it being "thought high Time to put the *Mittimus* in Execution . . . and to send her to Goal" (*sic*) for three weeks to await the Assizes.

The prosecutors wished to charge the prisoner with bewitching Anne Thorn, but the lawyers preferred to draw up an indictment charging the prisoner with conversing with the devil in the form of a cat. The grand jury found a True Bill and on March 4th, 1712, the case was tried before Mr. Justice Powell, a judge who had been described in Swift's letter to Stella of July 5th, 1711, as "an old fellow with grey hairs, the merriest old gentleman I ever saw, spoke pleasant things, and laughed and chuckled till he cried again."³

Sixteen witnesses, three of whom were clergymen, were

³ Sir John Powell, a native of Gloucester, died there in 1713 at the age of 68. The cathedral contains a monument to his memory.

called for the prosecution and duly set forth what has been already narrated, some of them making additions that they had remembered, or imagined, since. Early in the proceedings Anne Thorn fell into a fit in court, whereupon the Rev. Mr. Chishall, having asked for and received permission to pray, recited that part of the Order for the Visitation of the Sick from "The Almighty Lord, who is a most strong tower" onward. The sufferer soon recovered sufficiently to repeat the Lord's Prayer after Mr. Chishall.

Arthur Chauncy introduced a picturesque touch into his evidence by saying that Anne "went over a Five-Bar'd Gate as nimbly as a Grey-hound." Another witness deposed that Jane Wenham could fly, to which the judge retorted "There is no law against that." It was also stated in evidence that the feathers in Anne's pillow were found on examination to be matted in little "Cakes of a Circular Figure something larger than a Crown piece; the small Feathers were placed in a Nice and Curious Order, at equal Distances from each other, making so many Radii of the Circle in the Center of which the Quill Ends of the Feathers met." They were fastened together by some sticky substance, supposed to be "Ointment made of Dead Mens Flesh, which Mr. Glanvil⁴ and others mention as often used by Witches." According to Mr. Bragge these cakes also contained short black and white hairs, which he considered came from cats.

The prisoner denied her guilt, the judge summed up in her favour, and the jury retired. They found her guilty of "conversing with the Devil in the Shape of a Cat," and she was duly sentenced to death, but "Repriev'd till further Orders."

Through the good offices of Sir John Powell, Queen Anne granted Jane Wenham a free pardon, and Colonel John Plumer of New Place, Gilston, allowed the poor woman to occupy a cottage on his estate. After Plumer's death she was cared for by Earl and Countess Cowper until her death in 1730, when her funeral sermon was preached by the Rev. Mr. Squire, curate of Hertingford-

⁴ Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680), author of *Philosophical Considerations concerning the existence of Sorcerers and Sorcery* and *Sadducismus Triumphatus*.

bury. Let us hope that, away from Walkern, she found peace.

In conclusion it may be noted that the last victim in England to suffer death for supposed witchcraft, though not by process of law, also belonged to our county. The statute against witchcraft had been repealed in 1735, but the belief in it still remained. In 1751 there lived at Long Marston a poor old woman of 71, named Ruth Osborne, with her aged husband. Ruth was suspected of being a witch, apparently because a local dairyman had once refused to give her some buttermilk and had since fallen on evil days. The crier was sent round to give notice that witches were to be tried by ducking, and accordingly a mob gathered on the appointed day, seized the old couple, stripped them, tied their hands to their toes, and threw them into the pond. After further cruelties on the part of the ferocious rabble Ruth died, though the husband recovered. It is some satisfaction to learn that one of the ringleaders, a chimney sweep named Thomas Colley, was duly hanged at Tring for his share in the outrage.

We may count ourselves fortunate that we do not live in times when :

This sudden burst of wickedness and crime
Was but the common madness of the time,
When in all lands, that lie within the sound
Of Sabbath bells, a Witch was burned or drowned.