

People in Tudor and Stuart England were a very superstitious bunch. The day Queen Elizabeth was crowned, for example, was specially selected only after the stars had been studied for several weeks! Despite the fact that scientists were uncovering more and more about the world, people still didn't understand how animals could suddenly drop down dead or why a field of crops might fail one year. More often than not, when bad things happened in a town or village, it was concluded that a witch was at work. Witches, people thought, were the Devil's helpers, always on the lookout to do evil things and to help sinners find their way to hell!

### Mission Objectives

- Explore why witchcraft was so widely believed in.
- Identify the type of people accused of witchcraft.
- Analyse sources from Stuart times.

### The King's favourite subject

King James I was very interested in witchcraft and wrote a book suggesting different ways to catch witches. He wrote that all witches had strange marks on their bodies where they fed their 'familiar'. A **'familiar'** was a small creature – a toad or a cat, for example – that sucked on the witch's blood every night. The 'familiar', James wrote, was really the Devil himself in disguise! In fact, all sorts of 'witch-spotting' tips were published – they had no shadow, they talked to themselves, their hair couldn't be cut, they couldn't say the Lord's Prayer without making a mistake, and many more.

King James told Parliament to pass strict laws against anybody who was thought to be a witch and, in 1604, witchcraft became a crime punishable by hanging! Over the next 100 years, thousands of people were accused of witchcraft. The majority were poor old women – after all, they were the most likely to live alone with a pet and have strange marks on their body from a lifetime of hard work!

### A witch trail

In James I's book, he claimed that the best way to identify a witch was to 'swim' them. This was a kind of trial. The accused would have their arms tied in front of them and a rope wrapped around their waist. They would then be thrown into a pond that would have been 'blessed' by a priest. It was thought that if the accused floated, they must be a witch because the 'pure' water didn't want them. They would be hanged. If they sank, the 'pure' water wanted them so they must

be pure themselves and couldn't possibly be a witch – they were declared innocent (but dead!).

### Witch-hunting

Witch-hunting was at its height in East Anglia during 14 terrible months between 1645 and 1646. An unsuccessful lawyer named Matthew Hopkins set up his own witch hunt, claiming that he had the Devil's list of witches. Hundreds of people were rounded up as a result of his enquiries – and most were women over the age of 50! He had 68 people put to death in Bury St Edmunds alone and 19 hanged in Chelmsford, Essex, in a single day. In fact, during these years, there were more cases of witchcraft in Essex courts than of any other crime, apart from theft. And after Essex, Hopkins set off for Norfolk and Suffolk where more people were accused!



**SOURCE A:** This picture shows accusers 'swimming' a suspected witch.

During the seventeenth century, about 2000 people were hanged as witches in England, Wales and Scotland before the 'witch craze' finally began to die down. Witchcraft ceased to be a crime in 1736. Britain's last victim, Janet Horne, was executed for witchcraft in 1727. Apparently, she had turned her missing daughter into a flying horse!


**SOURCE B:** This print from a book of the time features Matthew Hopkins. He called himself the 'Witch Finder General' and he is pictured here surrounded by several 'familiar'.



## Wise Up Words

familiar

### Work

- Look at **Source A**.
  - In your own words, explain how the 'swimming test' was meant to identify a witch. Include details about the thinking behind the test.
  - Do you think this was a fair test? Write down the reasons for your answer.
- Look at **Source B**.
  - Why has the artist drawn so many animals?
  - Write down five facts about the Witch Finder General.
-  Imagine the Witch Finder General himself is coming to your town and you want to impress him. Design a booklet that gives details about your town's efforts to catch witches. Include:
  - information about spotting a witch
  - successful convictions
  - drawings to show your witch trials.
- Why do you think people in Tudor and Stuart times were so ready to believe in witchcraft and witches?

**SOURCE C:** This German illustration, dated 1555, shows witches burning on a bonfire. Around 200,000 people were tortured, burned or hanged for witchcraft in Europe between 1500 and 1750!

