



The Magic Hatters

Understanding the Story of the Bakewell Witches

Eli Lewis-Lycett

The story of the Bakewell witches is unique within the annals of English witchcraft and a tale thought by some to be so fantastical that it may not even be true. Yet research cannot only place the event firmly in the context of the times, but it can also help create a picture of the events that originally brought the story into being.

The Old House

There are many reasons to visit the town of Bakewell. Beyond it being home to a true British classic in the Bakewell Pudding, its location in the heart of the Derbyshire Dales makes it the perfect hub from which to explore nearby attractions such as Chatsworth House and Haddon Hall. Yet for all that Bakewell has to offer, there is one location in the town that will instantly attract the more curious visitor; the wonderful Tudor building that now houses the Old House Museum.

Its a place chocked full of both local artefacts and more exotic items alike, with the very fabric of the building acting as a guide to the wider history of the local area. Having begun its life way back in 1534 as the home of local tax collector Ralph Gell, it was much expanded during the reign of Elizabeth I before going on to provide further use during the period in which the Industrial Revolution came to the town, at which time it was divided into a number of smaller cottages for the families of local millworkers courtesy of that 'father of the factories', Sir Richard Arkwright. But amongst all of the markers that are bound to the material history of the building, there is one in particular that may well act as a signpost to what is undoubtedly the most contentious tale of Bakewell's past.

Carved into an upright of the door frame that leads away from the guide shop, a pair of inverted, inch long V's lay atop one another, creating the illusion of a letter W. This unassuming symbol is in reality, a call for the protection of the 'Virgin of Virgins', the mother of Christ. More specifically, it is a call for protection from the devilry of witchcraft, the town's connection to which centres on a truly remarkable story from the year 1608.

Apotropaic Protection

The symbol on the doorway of the museum is known as a witch-mark, placed there in the belief that such carvings were able to prevent the intrusion of evil intention, by witch or spirit, from crossing any threshold on which they were found. The witch-mark represents just one aspect of a worldwide tradition known as apotropaic magic.

Coming from the Greek meaning *to turn away*, the central idea of apotropaic magic - that protection can be afforded by the creation of an image - appears to be deeply rooted in the human psyche. A great example of an enduring symbol of such protection is that of the Turkish eye, the *Nazar Boncuk*. Found throughout the country on key-rings,

fridge magnets, and all kinds of tourist goods, its inherent meaning as an amulet for protection is just as prevalent today as it ever was. Istanbul airline Fly Air used it on planes throughout their history; although their liquidation in 2006 may well show the magic doesn't work quite as well on matters of financial management as it does on evil spirits.

In the British Isles, apotropaic symbolism has been ever-present for thousands of years, be it in the form of prehistoric cave art, Christian crosses, or in the architectural imagery of gargoyles and grotesques, but on occasion, social circumstance has caused particular spikes in its popularity. At those moments, its implementation has been much the same irrespective of contemporary religious belief; and the witch-craze of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has left us with a legacy of such markings across houses, churches, and even in the landscape itself.

As with the museum in Bakewell, these marks are primarily found located on doorways, windows and fireplaces, and any other suitable place that a witch could conceivably use to enter a property. They will often take the shape of the double V symbol, but even more common is the elaborate, and really quite beautiful, daisy-wheel or *Hexafoil* pattern, which typically sees six semicircular petals stemming out from a central core. Chances are, whenever you're in a building with timber frames that date from the 1600s, if you look close enough, you'll find one.

Yet protection wasn't limited to just to homes and churches. In 2018, literally hundreds of apotropaic symbols were discovered in the cave complex of Creswell Crags, finally identified following two hundred years of mistaken belief that they were the remnants of local antique graffiti. Their creation likely an attempt to guard against spirits rising from the depths of the gorge.

It's clear that magical protection has always mattered to us, but could its use at the Old House in Bakewell have connections to one of the strangest stories of the witch-craze era to be found anywhere in the British Isles?

The Witches of Bakewell

The story of the Bakewell witches has proven to be a font of fascination for the past 200 years. From its first formal reference by sculptor and chronicler White Watson in his *Observations On Bakewell* at the turn of the ninetieth century, through to providing inspiration for a recent Escape Room attraction in Derby city-centre, the events of 1608 are very much as mystifying today as they ever were. To relay the story of our piece, we

are perhaps best served by turning to the 1892 publication *Bygone Derbyshire*. Edited by a noted author of various local works, William Andrews, the tale of the witches that he included in the collection is attributed to a man by the name of Thomas Tindel Wildridge, a respected antiquarian and author originally from Hull, who provides not one, but two comprehensive versions of the tale for our consideration. The first of these would appear to be the story as told from the legend at its outset, whilst the second is likely the version of the story that cemented itself within local folklore in the years that followed. From reading between the two, as is the aim of this piece, we might just find something like the truth.

The First Telling;

Mrs. Stafford, a milliner of Bakewell, kept there a lodging-house.

Early one morning as one the lodgers, a Scotchman, was lying awake while it was yet dark, he perceived through the clefts of his chamber-floor, rays of bright light.

Peering down through one of the crevices, he recognised his landlady and a female companion in the room below, dressed as though for a journey. As he crouched over the hole, he heard Mrs. Stafford repeat these strange words;

"Over thick, over thin, now Devil, to the cellar in Lunnun."

On the instant, all was silence and darkness. They had gone.

The Scotchman, startled at the occurrence, wondered what there might be in the lines and mechanically endeavoured to repeat them.

"Through thick, through thin, now Devil, to the cellar in Lunnun."

And "through" instead of "over" it was, for a hurricane swept him up and whirled him away, half-naked as he was, and in a moment, confused, and tattered to ribbons, he found himself sat by the side of the two witches - for they could be nothing else - in a cellar, lighted by a dim lamp. The witches were busily engaged in tying up parcels of silk and similar goods, which he somehow understood they had "lifted" from shops as they passed along their aerial flight though the city - for he instinctively he was in London. The witch, Mrs. Stafford, handed him some wine and upon drinking it he immediately became unconscious. When he came to his senses, he found himself alone

in the cellar. Shortly after, he was taken into custody by a watchman and being haled before a justice, was charged with being found in an unoccupied house with felonious intent. Asked by the justice where his clothes were, he replied that they were at the house of one Mrs Stafford, at Bakewell in Derbyshire.

*"Bakewell, Derbyshire! Cried the astounded justice,
"have you walked thence, clothed but with that shirt torn in such a manner?"*

"I came - I know not how. But Mrs. Stafford came hither in like fashion. I was at bed at three of the clock this present morning in Mrs. Stafford's house in Bakewell. I repeated certain words used by Mrs. Stafford and her sister - as I think - and I came to London as I have said, but they have gone back, as I suppose in like manner as they came.

"This," said his worship solemnly, "is very clearly a case of witchcraft. Take down the depositions of this worthy man. See that he be provided with apparel. Lay information before the justices of Derbyshire to the end that these witches may be committed to gaol, tried according to the evidence and duly executed."

The Second Telling;

In the year 1608, a Scotchman, whose execrable name has not come down to us, lodged at the house of a Mrs. Stafford, an industrious milliner of Bakewell. With her there lived as her assistant, a person who was her sister, or a female friend. The Scotchman got into arrears with his rent, and, he leaving his lodgings, Mrs. Stafford detained some of his clothes as a lien. We know tongues in the early days of King James I. were likely to have been more unpolished in their usage than they are now on similar occasions; and it is far from unlikely that some biting words took place, perhaps on both sides. At all events, the Scotchman, gravitating by the inexorable laws of northern nature to London, there conceived the diabolic plan of vengeance he so successfully carried out. He retired to a cellar, stripped himself, hid his clothes, and attracted the attention of the watch. On being subjected to the "interrogatories" of the worshipful member of the bench, he invented a story of how, imitating a magic spell of Mrs. Stafford, he had, in the twinkling of an eye, been

transported over no less than five counties, to find himself the companion of the two witches. Days had been when all men - save Macbeth - feared witches. They had now come when they were more hated than feared. Nearly every man in magisterial authority was called upon at one time or another to decide upon cases of witchcraft, and it was but an imitation of the silly and superstitious king, for each man to take pride in being a witch-finder, or a witch exterminator. The London justice was an extreme specimen of such foolish credulity, and set the cumbrous but dreadfully effective machinery of the law in motion. The ex-lodger had his revenge. The "witches" of Bakewell were hanged,-a notable example, but only one among many which might be adduced to fill to the full the account of one of the most deplorable and disgraceful periods of English history.

Two accounts of the same wondrous tale, both somewhat devilish in their way. With many such legends, clarification is often enabled by a thorough search through the corresponding Assize records, in which trials for witchcraft are surprisingly well attested, complete with the accusations, testimony and resulting sentence, all born out with relative clarity.

However, in this respect, Derbyshire on the whole is something of an outlier. Although Assize court records of the Midland circuit (of which Derbyshire was a part of) begin officially in 1559, little to nothing survives today relating to matters pre-1662, reportedly thanks to a fire in the nineteenth century. Whilst this is the reason often given for a lack of further inquisition and subsequent discovery in the case of the Bakewell witches, I feel that by placing the story and its details within the context of the time, and making a comparison to other cases elsewhere, we still have ample opportunity to learn more about the reality of events in 1600s Bakewell.

The Witch Craze

Throughout the Middle Ages, witchcraft had always been an agenda item for both religious rulers and royalty alike, but it was with the publication of one particularly popular book in 1486 that fervour around the subject kicked into overdrive. *Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of Witches)* by Heinrich Kramer was a work that directly placed the matter of witchcraft into the light of heretical persecution, in a manner that spoke to ecclesiastical and intellectual audiences alike. Inspired by the sentiment shared in the *Book of Exodus* ('you shall not permit a sorceress to live'), upon publication, the perception of those accused of practicing witchcraft dramatically shifted. They were no

longer living in the shadows of the law, but rather they had become fully-fledged, officially sanctioned, targets for persecution.

Of course, as with any such ideological licence, for some people the encouragement to persecute any such supposed witches was variously used as a convenient tool to curry political favour, make financial gains, or most commonly, to simply attack those which local society deemed undesirable.

It was just so easy to do; too easy. After all, this was fast becoming a state-sponsored profession. As referred to elsewhere in this collection, prior to taking the English throne in 1603, King James IV of Scotland had not only directly overseen the trials in North Berwick, but had in 1599 published *Daemonologie*, his personal treatise on the subject.

It is from this swirling ideological whirlpool that the Bakewell story was born. But assuming we do not take the account of the Scotchman's 3 am teleportation as literal, I suspect the truth of the tale is to be found within its more subtle details. Clearly, something must have happened in London in 1607 that would enable such a wild prosecution to be forthcoming. That is, of course, assuming the case of the Bakewell Witches is based in reality at all.

The Nature of Reality

Whether the official records have not survived into the twenty-first century or it is actually more a case that they have simply yet to be transcribed by the National Archives (a possibility that struck me during my research), for our purposes they are presently non-existent, and so we must pursue other avenues for proof of the incident in history. As touched on previously, there is little that appears to have been seen as outlandish when it comes to the details of the accusations levelled at the supposed witches in the early 1600s.

Cavorting with the Devil was standard fare in such accusations, but common too, were instances of night flight. To this end, we can look to the case of the Pendle Witches of 1612, which is perhaps the most famous witch trial of the era, where accusations ranged from allowing the Devil to suck the blood of the women involved, to the reanimation of corpses and caring for a retinue of talking animals. Other similar cases of the time include reference to cannibalism, flying around church spires, and creating creatures that appeared as half-man, half-horse, courtesy of the humble art of knitting. Frankly, as odd as the Bakewell story may sound to us now, in the context of the time, it is simply not weird enough for people to have bothered 'making up'. We can therefore assume with

some degree of comfort that we are not dealing with fiction, at least where the strangeness of the story is given to be an indicator of such. The level of oddity in the accusation of the Scotchman was actually pretty mundane stuff.

As for the instances of accusations and trials of witchcraft, particularly by region, a great deal of information can be found in the work of American medievalist and historian Professor Richard Keickhefer.

The compendium in his work *European witch trials, their foundations in popular and learned culture 1300-1500*, begins with examples of trials from the eleventh century and continues through to the 1860s, and whilst the explosion of accounts around the period of the Bakewell case is worth noting, of particular interest is the specific entry for 1607 in Derbyshire, which simply reads as 'several hanged'.

Not only is there no other recorded hanging of a witch for at least ten years either side of that date in the whole of Derbyshire, the fact that its entry is placed under the name of the county and not the city of Derby itself (as seen with entries for Elizabeth Wright and Alice Goodridge in 1597), may suggest that the confusion of the folk record, where the witches are variously said to have been hanged in both Derby and Bakewell, is not purely due to the convenience of the storyteller. It may well be that from a hundred or so years after the event, people were simply unsure of where the execution took place; and with good reason.

Derby did not have its own gaol until 1652, when the Cornmarket Gaol was erected in the centre of the older medieval town. Before then, Derbyshire's criminals were taken to Nottingham's gaol, adjacent to the Shire Hall. This is a noteworthy point because while Mrs Stafford and her co-accused are said in legend to have been buried at St Peters Church in Derby following their execution, we cannot rule out the possibility that the whole end-game could have actually taken place in nearby Nottingham.

From American researchers again, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* by Wallace Notestein contains a reference to the ambiguity around the number and location of Derbyshire hangings during the reign of King James I, and also references the Bakewell case itself;

We now turn to the question of the distribution of witchcraft in the realm during James's reign...Derby had several, the exact number we can not learn...the tale of the Bakewell witches is a very curious one and, though not to be confidently depended upon, may suggest how it was possible to avail oneself of superstition in order to repay a grudge...all that we really know about the Bakewell affair is that several witches

probably suffered death there in 1607...while it is unlike any other narrative of witchcraft, it is not necessarily without foundation.

From the research then, we have clarified the picture as best we can. We know that several witches were hanged with connections to Derbyshire during the early 1600s and that the accusations levelled at Mrs Stafford and her assistant were far from the stuff of fantasy in the context of the times. Furthermore, as for stories attached to the unknown figures that make up Derbyshire's executed from the time, we have just one story that has appeared to warrant a place in local folklore; the Bakewell witches.

There is a discrepancy on the date of 1607 compared to 1608 as told in the folktale, and if anything this may further suggest a truth to the story. From the incident itself in the cellar in London, to the arrest back in Derbyshire, considerable time is likely to have passed, and it may well have been an Assize court of 1608 to which evidence of an act in 1607 was presented. All things considered, I think it entirely likely that something happened concerning witchcraft in Bakewell to start the legend, and the story is in fact, likely to be the memory of a real occurrence. So, if we accept the bones of the story to be real, what exactly do we think went on?

The Mystery of the Milliner

As a milliner, Mrs Stafford, whilst primarily being a maker of hats, would have been involved in various pursuits of tailoring and as such, the idea that a dispute may have broken out over materials is entirely plausible; because ultimately, it is the issue of material that is central to the story.

Beneath the noise of magical flight and incantation, it is the milliners of Bakewell that were said to be stealing material in the London cellar. Likewise, it is the Scotchman, the accuser, that was missing his materials when he was found in the cellar himself. London was known to supply materials to the Derbyshire region in the seventeenth century. It was a bundle of material received from London that is believed to have led to the infamous outbreak of plague at Eyam in 1665.

Such trade routes were well worn, and a similar relationship was likely held between London and Bakewell in 1607. With a distance of fewer than 7 miles between Bakewell and Eyam, any supplier servicing one, from such a distance, would surely have supplied the other too.

The idea that the lodger had left his clothes in lieu of payment to Mrs Stafford in any

form is unlikely. Mrs Stafford would not be short of material for clothing, and it's a stretch to imagine a professional milliner would accept the rags of a man that could not afford to pay his rent with a view to repurposing them. If we take the subject of a material dispute in broad acceptance, suddenly the tale takes the look of a business feud. It begins, in some way, to add up. Perhaps the lodger was a salesman or a representative from a London supplier. The 'facts' of the case are that he that was found in compromising circumstances at the cellar in London, and that he had a direct connection to Mrs Stafford's property in Bakewell. The question then, is that why, upon being caught in the act of something illegal, was it Mrs Stafford and the issue of witchcraft that was seen as the best fit to mask his apparent guilt?

The lodger in the cellar may have only recently found his way to London, a six-day journey from Bakewell at best. Could it be that he was actually there on business on behalf of Mrs Stafford, pocketing the money for materials himself and planning to steal the goods instead? His disheveled state could have even have been the result of a night's drinking prior to the act, building up the courage he needed to put his plan into action. Then again, maybe he just lost the money, in a bet or a fight. Whatever the truth of the lodger's reasons, to accuse his Bakewell landlady of witchcraft lays bare the nature of his character for all to see. He would have known what could happen to her. Indeed, what was likely to happen to her, once he pursued that particular channel of accusation.

At a time when the practice of identifying supposed witches was gathering real sponsorship at a Royal level, the judges that came across such cases were keen to bolster their reputations on the back of such opportunities. Upon being caught red-handed, blaming the whole event on an accidental misadventure involving witchcraft would have actually been the most obvious and plausible excuse there was.

What is slightly unusual, is that the resulting trial saw the accused hanged. Most cases of execution for witchcraft happened following a murder. Furthermore, there may be a widespread impression that thousands of people were put to death following an accusation of witchcraft but the reality is there are little more than 500 trials recorded throughout the entire period in England, with 'only' around 20% of those accused actually put to death.

It would appear that the Bakewell witches were particularly unlucky in this respect, and perhaps fell victim to what must have been a remarkably zealous streak in the judge that presided over their case.

Finding Mrs Stafford

However the Bakewell case came into being, and no matter how difficult the attainment of record may be, the telling of the tale has at least left us one definitive name; Mrs Stafford. The name is common in Derbyshire during the period, although markedly more so at Baslow than in Bakewell. A village lying a little over five miles south-west of the town, it has approximately five times the amount of Stafford births connected to it in the period between 1570 and 1600 than Bakewell itself. Could it be that the milliners of Bakewell had set up shop having moved in from nearby Baslow? As we search the record further, focusing on the years of 1607 and 1608, in the hope of finding a burial record that could connect with our Bakewell Staffords, it is worth considering the implications of burial for those executed at the time.

In all likelihood, Mrs Stafford would have been tried at the Derby Assize of early 1608, and whilst the travelling court system that met four times a year would have been likely been held in central Derby itself, the detention of the accused prior to trial may well have taken place in Nottingham.

There is only one instance of a female Stafford burial in Derbyshire during 1607 and 1608, and it comes on June 3rd, 1608 at Etwall, with a Johanna Stafford. We don't know her age or cause of death of course, but we do know that there is no parish record of her baptism. It may be a stretch to think there could be a connection with the Mrs Stafford of the Bakewell case as there are almost 30 miles between the locations; but Etwall is barely 8 miles from the gallows of St Peters Street in Derby.

Until further transcriptions of any surviving Derbyshire records are made, we will glean no more insight into the story of the Bakewell witches, and in all likelihood, the records that we would require to do so may well have perished in the nineteenth century fire. Yet, irrespective of the record, I feel we can piece together enough content to say that the story itself is likely to have been based on real historical events.

A business deal gone rogue, accusations of devilry and teleportation. All quite incredible to us, but for the infamous lodger, cellar watchman and the judge, the story of the Bakewell witches was once deemed clinically, perfectly and terribly rational.

Eli Lewis-Lycett 2022

This essay is included in *Mythstoric Origins: Exploring the Extraordinary Local Histories Behind the Legends and Folklore of East Cheshire, Peak District Derbyshire and the Staffordshire Moorlands* which is available worldwide via Amazon.

Contact: thelocalmythstorian@yahoo.com

Twitter: @TLMythstorian

Visit: thelocalmythstorian.com