



Walking with witches

A walk inspired by the 17th century East
Anglian witch trials

Time: 2 hours

Distance: 3 miles

Landscape: rural

This short walk on the Stour Estuary between Essex and Suffolk is inspired by the 17th century East Anglian witch trials. During this dark period of English history, around 300 people were tried for witchcraft and close to 100 executed as 'witches'.

The walk was produced in collaboration with the artist **susan pui san lok** and is part of a project called A COVEN A GROVE A STAND, a body of work commissioned by Firstsite as part of New Geographies.

As we investigate the sites, we'll encounter excerpts from susan's audio work *Seven Sisters*, which conjures back to life the names of the individuals accused and executed as witches and hear from **Alison Rowlands**, Professor of European History at the University of Essex, who has written widely on the European and Essex witch trials of the 17th century.

Location:

Manningtree, Essex

Start and finish:

Manningtree Library, High Street, CO11 1AD

Grid reference:

TM 10557 31851

Keep an eye out for:

The village sign for Manningtree which depicts Matthew Hopkins



Route and stopping points



- 01 White Hart pub
- 02 Village Green, South Street
- 03 42 High Street
- 04 Hopping Bridge
- 05 Gamekeepers Pond
- 06 Old Knobbly
- 07 Footpath connecting Manningtree and Mistley

01 White Hart pub

The run-down building opposite was once the White Hart Pub. It dates back to at least the 17th century and according to local legend is one of the inns where 'witchfinders' Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne met with local accusers to plan their persecutions. Though referred to as 'witchfinders', this wasn't by any means an official role. The title 'witchfinder general', with its military associations, was created by Hopkins himself as an act of self-aggrandisement.

It's important to remember that witchcraft had been criminalised in England since 1563, and in order for a 'crime' to be investigated, a woman (or man), first had to be accused, usually by somebody in the local community. The accuser then contacted a local magistrate (or Justice of the Peace) to search for 'proof' and build up a picture of the 'bewitching'. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Alison Rowlands, Professor of History at the University of Essex, who has written extensively on the European witch trials:

"So what you do, if you want to bring an accusation against somebody, you would go to a Justice of the Peace (JP) and bring the charge and they would then start investigating it, and it's at that point that first of all John Stearne is brought into the procedure, because the local people here, they ask John Stearne, who also lives in Manningtree, to take their complaints to the JPs. And then the JPs ask him to help some of the investigations and then Matthew Hopkins gets involved as well. Now, it's almost certainly the case that Hopkins and Stearne and the accusers and the JPs met in pubs, because that's where men of standing got together - in a meeting room in an inn. So I think any kind of local-ish pub that would have been around in the 17th century, you could probably make that case for."

There are very few places that historians can say with certainty which events happened where. In place of historical evidence, myths and legends will naturally emerge to fill the void. In the case of the East Anglian witch trials, local stories have long connected the White Hart Inn to the witchfinders' plotting. This might, of course, have benefited the landlord, hoping to gain some ghoulish trade...

Directions

Walk along the High Street for a short while, then take a right at South Street. Stop on the small green at the top of the hill.

02 Village Green, South Street

Surrounded by large, well-kept Georgian houses and high up on a hill, today South Street is one of Manningtree's most desirable streets. Yet it was here on July 18th 1645 that four local women were hanged for the crime of witchcraft. Their names were: Anne West of Lawford, Helen Clark of Manningtree, Marian Hocket from Ramsey and Anne Cooper from Great Clacton. According to historical records, 92 witnesses testified against these women and 15 others during their trial.

This is worth thinking about for a moment. This means that nearly 100 people were prepared to travel to give evidence - a huge investment of their time, money and reputations - to make sure these women hung. Here's Professor Alison Rowlands:

"...that's something which usually gets missed out of the local story, because that's very hard, isn't it, to think that your community actually invested a lot of effort in trials. I think somehow it's easier to say, oh it was Hopkins, he's an easy villain and you see that in other parts of Europe where it's nice to blame one villainous person, but actually you can't have a trial unless there's somebody willing to make an accusation. So every single person who was tried, somebody from their community has accused them of causing some sort of harm through witchcraft."

Without any legal representation, the women were arrested, interrogated and kept prisoner in the cells of Colchester Castle before being tried at the Assize courts in Chelmsford. Fifteen of them were executed in Chelmsford, but the four named above were brought to Manningtree to be hung here on the village green before a gathered crowd. Alison Rowlands:

"...early modern hangings were fairly basic. The 17th century hanging was slow strangulation. So you just needed a fairly rough frame and a ladder and rope, and then you put the rope around the person's neck and they dangle there until they asphyxiate. Which is why family members would sometimes be allowed to go and pull on their legs."

This desperate action is the origin of the phrase 'hangers on'.

Directions

Walk back down to the High Street, turn right and stop outside the hairdressers at no 42.

03 No. 42 High Street

This old brick wall next to the hairdressers would be easy to miss. But look up and you'll see a plaque fixed to the brickwork which reads: 'Site of the church of St Michaels and All Angels 1616-1966'.

The buttress wall is all that remains of Manningtree's church; the same church where the local community: accusers and accused, watchers and searchers, witchfinders and prosecutors would have met for regular worship. It's also where the self-styled 'witchfinder general' Matthew Hopkins' stepfather, the rector of Mistley and Manningtree, preached his sermons to a largely pious crowd.

During the 16th century, the country had experienced the turmoil of the English Civil War and the English Reformation, which had turned the tide of religion from Catholicism to Protestantism. This was a time of insecurity, mistrust and religious disputes. According to some historians, this upheaval contributed to a climate of fear and blame. Malcolm Gaskill, author of *Witchfinders – A Seventeenth Century English Tragedy*, sums up the era's uncertainty:

"These were "days of shaking" – of rebellion and fighting, of uncertainty, fear and grief; the orderly world created and governed by heaven was being turned upside-down. Fair was foul and foul was fair. That year, brother had slain brother; Parliament had ruled without a king; harvests had spoiled in the fields while folk went hungry; and plagues and agues had touched high and low with a fickle hand. The devil reigned."

Directions

Continue along the High Street bearing left to reach The Walls, with the River Stour on your left, stopping when you reach a bridge on the left over a lake.

04 Hopping Bridge

This brick wall is what remains of the Hopping Bridge. The bridge itself wouldn't have been here during the period of the witch trials as it wasn't built until the 18th century, but bodies of water like this one were used to test the guilt or innocence of suspected witches by a process known as 'swimming'.

The theory was that the innocent would sink, but the guilty would float. This could be used as 'proof' of crimes. 'Swimming' may also have had religious connotations. Those who had renounced God and were in league with the devil would be rejected by the purity of the water and so would float. Here's Professor Alison Rowlands:

"...the victim would be tied crossways; i.e. their opposite thumbs and big toes. And then they would put a rope under the suspect's armpits and bob them in, but obviously, you've got quite a lot of control – it's clearly not an objective test anyway – but if you've got a rope under their armpits to drag them in and out with, you've got some sort of leverage. I think it's really another form of quasi-torture...kind of almost like waterboarding in a way... So although it's supposed to be a test of guilt or innocence, it's in a very grey legal area. And that's I think why parliament in 1645 says, you know, just stop doing it, because it is very problematic."

Directions

Continue on the road past the Hopping Bridge and passing the Mistley Towers to reach Mistley Quay. Turn right at the large industrial building (a maltings) and follow the Essex Way signs over a railway bridge. Follow the footpath across a field and at the second T-junction of footpaths turn left towards the woods. Take the path bearing left to walk down to the pond.

05 Gamekeepers Pond

The ghost of Matthew Hopkins, in full 17th century costume, is said to haunt Mistley Pond. This could very well be more colourful, local legend, but ghosts are sometimes said to haunt lakes, pools and rivers, suggesting that water acts as a portal between the living and the dead.

Like the Hopping Bridge, this pond is another likely site for witch 'swimming'. 'Swimming' was one of several euphemisms used for the witchfinders' practices of extracting confessions or finding 'proof' through semi-legal means. Suspected witches were also 'watched' and 'searched' in the belief they would call on their familiars (often

cats, dogs, toads, even ferrets) for help. 'Watching' actually involved walking the suspect back and forth for days and nights on end until they broke down. Alison Rowlands explains:

"The idea being that that would give you proof, proof very much in inverted commas, that they were witches. But it amounted obviously to torture, because watching was effectively sleep deprivation. I don't know if you've seen the image on the front of the pamphlet, the Hopkins publication in 1647, it shows him and two women on chairs and they would have been watched. They'd often be tied to the chairs with the familiars. But you could only do that in somebody's home, because that could often go on for two or three days and nights and you'd have local people helping, acting as, they were called watchers, they would actually watch to see what would happen. So again, there's a massive communal investment of effort in the witch finding."

'Searching' included probing the bodies of the accused for physical evidence, specifically teats, which were used to suckle their familiars. This would amount to 'proof' that could be used against them.

"...the women who were accused, their bodies were searched in really humiliating and painful, probing ways and they'd have blemishes and marks pricked with needles to see if they bled. So 'searching' is very euphemistic. In classic witch finding euphemisms, searching actually is very horrible."

Directions

Retrace your steps back to the main path then follow it uphill to reach an ancient oak tree with a half trunk in the woods.

06 Old Knobbley

Known as Old Knobbley, this ancient, gnarled oak tree is thought to be around 800 years old. Over the centuries it has born witness to wars, famines, even a mini Ice Age as well, of course, as the 17th century witch hunts.

Though today, with the 18th century development of Mistley Quay nearby, we're not far from urban development, three hundred years ago, this would have been a much wilder area, a feral forest outside the confines of the town. It's not hard to imagine this as a place to hide and seek sanctuary from the fear and loathing, accusation and uncertainty happening in the streets.

Trees like these hold a double meaning in our story of the witch trials, they represent both sanctuary for those fleeing their accusers and persecution; as the branch of a sturdy tree was sometimes used for hanging those found guilty.

Old Knobbley was one of 270 sites nominated by the public for New Geographies, a three year project remapping the East of England through a series of artist commissions reflecting on local stories of unexplored or overlooked places.

Artist susan pui san lok was one of the artists selected and she chose to recreate Old Knobbley in her work A COVEN A GROVE A STAND, which explores ideas of history, myth, collective witnessing and resistance. The following is excerpted from Fear and Loathing, the sound walk created as part of this project, which you can download from Discovering Britain:

(susan pui san lok) *"I was interested in 7 of the sites that were nominated by the public, 7 out of 270, and all of the sites were somehow associated with the folklore around witchcraft or referenced the witch persecutions across the East of England over a 200 year period including a very concentrated period between 1645 and 1647.*

I was interested in the fact that Old Knobbley was nominated as an imagined sanctuary for those accused of witchcraft...I was struck by the recurring image of the tree as both power and sanctuary and quite early on I wanted to bring it in to the gallery in some way and make that presence disturbing and awe inspiring and to explore through that the relationship to place and history and myth."

Directions

Follow the path ahead past Old Knobbley to reach the edge of the field. You can continue into the field to find the site of the church where Matthew Hopkins is buried, though there is nothing to see now.

07 Footpath connecting Manningtree and Mistley

The path back to Manningtree is part of the Essex Way and this section is an ancient trackway connecting the village to nearby Mistley. It passes the site of St Mary's Church at Mistley Heath, where Matthew Hopkins is buried. It's hard to imagine now as nothing remains of the church or its graveyard today, its flint and rubble ruins totally overgrown

We can however imagine that this path was regularly walked by some of the accused women like Anne Leech who lived at Mistley and her daughter Helen Clark from Manningtree. They would have been familiar with this way; in good times treading it between the villages to visit each other, and later during the dark days of the witch trials, perhaps fleeing along it for their lives.

As we follow this ancient path back towards Manningtree this is a chance to reimagine the landscape. Today we think of this area as a tranquil place, it's where people walk dogs and children play, but a few generations ago it bore witness to one of the most tragic episodes in English history. As we walk back to the town, we'll bear witness to the women (and some men) who were persecuted here by remembering some of their names...

Joan Haddon, Witham, 1560

John Samond, Danbury, 1560

Elizabeth Lowys, Great Waltham, 1564

Elizabeth Francis, Chelmsford, 1566

Joan Osborne, Chelmsford, 1566

Agnes Waterhouse, Chelmsford, 1566,

Joan Waterhouse, Chelmsford, 1566

Lora Winchester, Chelmsford, 1566

Directions

Take the path back passing Old Knobbly to leave the forest and reach the field track. Instead of taking the path right (back across the railway bridge and Mistley), continue ahead following a gravel track passing large houses. At a crossroads, turn left then take a footpath right towards Manningtree. Cross a road and take the footpath opposite between houses. Turn right to cross the railway line and continue along Brook Street to reach the High Street where we started.

 Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!