



**RAWS**

**St Monas and Abercrombie  
Community Council**

**Remembering The Accused Witches of Scotland**

**Crail  
Anstruther**

**17<sup>th</sup> April 2021**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing on behalf of Remembering the Accused Witches of Scotland, a constituted group of volunteers from all corners of Scotland, striving to raise the profile of the plight of people accused of witchcraft in years gone past. (We are in the process of becoming a registered Scottish Charity).

We hope to carry out and publish research; educate communities nationwide; build a National Memorial structure; provide an archive, display and education facility; obtain a legal pardon and an apology for all those accused of witchcraft in Scotland.

Remembering the Accused Witches of Scotland (RAWS) wholeheartedly support the request, made by Barbara Cockburn to have one of the new streets in the Lochay Home Development named after St Monans girl, Maggie Morgan accused as a witch in 1651.

Along with Maggie, there is Christian Dote, accused in 1644 and we have also found some folklore that mentions a Witch Grizzie in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The witch trials that took hold in Scotland from 1563 to 1736 are not a well-remembered part of our history. This is not because it was an uneventful time in Scotland, rather a time of great social, cultural and religious upheaval.

We at RAWS believe it is a part of our Nation's history, and all should know about! It is believed that over 4,000 people, were accused. They were persecuted, tortured and killed by the crown, the state and the church working together, to rid the country of "evil".

During the Witch Hunt years there were approximately 350 known accused witches in Fife, from this figure, the East Neuk has approximately 60, most notably in Crail with 25, Pittenweem with 21 and St Monans has 2 that can be found in records and one for the 15<sup>th</sup> century in folklore.

There are few places in Scotland that escaped the effects of the witch finding craze. Until recently it was not in any part of the public's attention other than at Halloween.

However, the last few years have seen an increase in the interest of these historic events, leading to the founding of RAWS in 2019. Much is now written and campaigned for about the accused. Notably the lack of memorials to the victims of these trials.

The story of Maggie Morgan is not well documented, unlike some of the later trials in the East Neuk.

We know that her story is a sad tale, and one as old as time.

By all accounts Maggie was a beautiful young woman and this made her stand out. She caught the attention of a young gentleman from the Elie house. He began making advances towards her. It is unclear how long he tried to woo her before he got what he wanted.

Maggie, as a young woman in 1650, would have been a god-fearing person, she would have dressed modestly and adhered to all the social and religious rules for the time, and her place in it. Maggie and her family would not have wanted her to have a bad reputation or shame herself and her family in this close-knit community.

A relationship between someone of his standing and a local Girl of no status would never have been permitted in that time.

Maggie became pregnant and he abandoned her. When the child was born, the Church began to question her about the father. As was the custom at the time, she had to answer to the church for her sins. She was brought up in front of the church elders. The gentleman did not attend, leaving Maggie to face all of this by herself.

The claims she made about who was the father of her child were judged by the Elders to be false. She also claimed the Minister had been at the home of the gentleman the night before. This was also considered to be untrue by the elders.

She was found guilty and was to make amends for her sins by standing at the entrance of the church for three consecutive Sundays, dressed only in an old sack, as the parishioners entered to the sound of the church bell ringing. She had to repeat the words "fause (false) tongue that lied". To complete her humiliation, she was then placed on a cuttie stool, a wooden chair that would be hoisted high above the congregation for all to see as she was berated by the minister. Having carried out her sentence, her guilt was forgiven by the church, but her life was destroyed.

She did however still present a problem, with her being around there would always be local gossip.

She was said to be left bitter over her experience, devoid of all emotion other than that of revenge, and whether that was true or not, it offered the basis on which the problem she created could be removed.

Maggie was accused of witchcraft.

The list of crimes she was said to have committed was long, as was her eventual confession. It was said that as she sat pondering her misfortune, a great storm swept across the village. With her hovel home illuminated by the lightning above, Maggie saw a woman appear before her, who was her spitting image. The woman told Maggie that she should go to Pittenweem Loan, at 10 o'clock at night on the 5th day of the following week, and she would be granted the powers to take full revenge on those who had wronged her.

The night Maggie was to visit Pittenweem Loan was a memorable one for all in the area. King Charles II was travelling through the area and was to stop at Pittenweem. Although in these days most people stayed within their own town boundaries, the news of the King's visit resulted in almost the entire population of St Monans travelling to Pittenweem, thus giving Maggie cover to make the journey unnoticed. The Minister and one of his clergymen were amongst those swept up in the hysteria connected to the King's visit, which was by all accounts quite an affair. The authorities were all present in their finest robes, carpets laid on the street and the King treated to a feast outside a building known as King's Halt, the name now changed to Kellie Lodging. The King's departure was marked with a 36-canon salute from the walls of Pittenweem and once he was gone, the Minister from St Monans, his clergyman and their wives retreated to a local tavern where they drank late into the night.

For the events which followed, we must rely upon the information provided leading to the conviction of poor Maggie. When the Minister and his companions left it was noted to be a moonless and starless night, making it abnormally dark, yet the journey back to St Monans was uneventful until they were approaching the town, when they found themselves suddenly surrounded by a thick mist, reducing visibility even more and they stopped. As they stood, apparently frozen to the spot, there was a streak of white light towards them, and they spotted a white rabbit.

The white rabbit ran around them a total of 7 times. Watching the rabbit rapidly circle them in the darkness confused the group's senses, having a hypnotic and disorientating effect. With the light from the rabbit dazzling them, each thought they saw the other spin, so their feet were pointing towards the sky and their heads to the ground, and they found themselves starting to laugh uncontrollably until they were exhausted and fell silent to the ground.

The sound of sweet music swept through the area, suddenly replenishing the group's energy, and they leapt to their feet, before following the music, singing, and dancing as they went. They found themselves once again approaching Pittenweem, where they stumbled upon a gathering of what were described as witches and demons.

What happened was not documented, it is suggested they refused to discuss it. Possibly out of fear, having sworn the events to secrecy in return for their freedom.

Finally, they found themselves surrounded by a thick, dark smoke with flashes of blue light, and after feeling themselves being lifted from the ground, they found themselves back where they had encountered the rabbit, just outside St Monans.

After composing themselves, they hurried back to the manse. Once inside, they attempted to rationalise what had happened. However, they then spotted a large, black mass in the corner of the room. The Minister attempted to expel the mass through prayer, but failed, leaving them with no option but to flee after a horned face appeared within the darkness, growling as it advanced towards them. They were pursued by the darkness, before being once again surrounded by it and falling to the ground exhausted.

When they awoke it was daylight and looking around, they found that they were again close to the site where they had witnessed the demons and witches carrying out their ceremony, so they decided to make their way to the nearest safest location, that being the tavern in which they had drunk the night before.

After much discussion and rationalisation, along with concern regarding accusations being made against them for the previous night's activities, the decision was made to try to meet with the King, who had stayed with the Anstruther Family after the celebrations.

The Minister managed to gain permission, and after telling King Charles II of the night's events, he ruled that all 4 of the group would be given immunity against prosecution for any events that took place for a period of 24 hours after they had left Pittenweem the day before.

As they returned to Pittenweem the events of the night before truly sank in. It seems the two men had shown more than what would be deemed an acceptable level of affection to each other's wives, in fact when they had awoken earlier that day, they were in the arms of the wrong wife! And while they blamed it on being enchanted by witchcraft, they began arguing as jealousy sneaked in.

Reaching the spot where they had encountered the white rabbit the night before, the two women started to fight, needing to be physically separated by their husbands. Realising that the King's 24-hour grace period was almost over, they went on their separate ways, their friendship finished.

The following months were quiet. Maggie could not be directly implicated in the incidents of that night. It was likely the Minister did not want the night's events to be talked about or explored publicly in any detail, and so no further action was taken.

In June, Maggie is said to have spotted the father of her child with a new woman, as they walked through the village to the harbour where they were to get a boat out to the Isle of May, which sits around 6 miles offshore in the Firth of Forth.

She quickly made her way to Pittenweem where she met with Thomas Brown, better known as "Brown of the Braes" or "Old Cowzie", who was widely rumoured to be a powerful warlock, and leader of the local witches. He instructed her to take a bucket full of water to a high vantage point where she would be undisturbed but had a good view of the harbour. When she saw the father of her child's boat set sail, she was to place a wooden cup on the water in the centre of the bucket, and stir the water 7 times, while all the time watching the boat sail and keeping her desire firmly in her mind. Once the boat was sufficiently far out to sea, she was to quickly turn the cup upside down, and the deed would be done.

Seemingly teleported back to St Monans, she did as Old Cowzie had instructed. She watched the boat sail from the safety of the harbour, she began to stir the water in the bucket around the wooden cup. As the cup began to be thrown around in the bucket by the movement of the water, a storm began to arise from nowhere around the boat, waves tossing it from side to side. As she finished the 7<sup>th</sup> stir, she grabbed the cup and upturned it, all the time focusing her attention on the ship as a gust of wind caught its sail, and it capsized. Satisfied that she had at last got her revenge, Maggie learned the next day that although the sailors on the boat had managed to safely swim back to shore, the young couple had drowned.

The village was soon rife with talk and gossip of what had happened, with theories and fingers being pointed. Unfortunately for Maggie, she was unable to conceal her pleasure at the events, and with her having been seen in Pittenweem speaking to Old Cowzie shortly before the tragic accident, thoughts again returned to her allegations of an affair with the deceased. When word reached the Minister, it was seen as an opportunity to deal with Maggie, who he still blamed for his own misdemeanours, without having to recall or explore the events of that fateful night again. Within a matter of days, he had managed to have Maggie detained on the charges of witchcraft, in that she was under the control of the Devil and was able to turn herself into a white rabbit.

Although the documents indicate a confession was forthcoming from Maggie upon her arrest, the reality is, this is likely to have been obtained through torture. Any hope that having confessed she would have a swift end were short lived.

Maggie was kept awake by her guards who sounded a horn directly into her ear, and beat her with a paddle covered in spikes, known as a witch's goad. The following day she was taken to a waiting pyre, where she was burned for her alleged crimes. Her ashes were then placed in an open loft on the spire of St Monans Church, known as the Burnt Loft, to allow the wind to carry them away and scatter them far and wide.

At the end of Maggie's story, it is written that the wooden chairs on which the authorities sat and watched her burn are still in the town hall. It would be amazing if they were still there.

St Monans' association with witchcraft started way before the tragic story of Maggie Morgan, with the legend of Witch Grizzie in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Witch Grizzie was convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to be burnt at the stake. While waiting for the sentence to be carried out, she was allowed to sleep, however, it is said that as soon as she did Grizzie transformed into a droning beetle. This insect was also known as "the devil's horse".

Witch Grizzie was never seen again in human form, those who were involved with her conviction for witchcraft were plagued for the rest of their life with a droning noise in their ears.

It is believed this is why Maggie was not allowed to sleep prior to her burning.

In 1644 Christian Dote was accused and found guilty of witchcraft. What her alleged crimes were at this time are still unknown, they may come to light with further research. Again, her remains were deposited in the burnt loft of the church.

The story of Maggie Morgan has been brought right up to date in a book written by Laura Bates called "The Burning". It is a story for teenage readers about a teenage girl, Anna, and her Mum who move to St Monans after the death of her Anna's father. Because of difficulties Anna is also having due to online images of her being posted and the bullying that followed, St Monans is a new start for the family.

The book presents the village and the community in an incredibly positive light. Anna stumbles across Maggie's story, and over the 400 years, a connection is made between them and their experiences, much like that shared by thousands of women of all ages today and throughout history. Thankfully, Anna's life has a happier ending than Maggie's.

Laura Bates is an author, a journalist, and the founder of the everyday sexism project. In communication with her about Barbara's idea, Laura stated she fully supports the naming of a street after Maggie.

Two other towns in Scotland have named streets after accused witches.

In 2019 Queensferry named five streets in a new housing development after the accused:

Helen Thomson, Marion Stein, Marion Little, Isobel Young and Marion Dauline

Then in February this year Kilwinning named a street after Bessie Grahame.

At this time, the lack of memorials to people that are neither white nor male has come under greater scrutiny, and the lack of a female presence in memorials and a lack of their presences in the collective memory of Scotland is a great shame.

As part of our campaign, RAWs aims to raise awareness of the Accused Witches by memorialising them.

They were, as it says on both the Forfar and Orkney memorials, "Just folk".

It is believed that 85% of the accused were women and 15% were men, it is important to remember these ordinary, everyday people that had extraordinary things happen to them and not just the people that created or did extraordinary things. All their stories are important in telling the history of Scotland.

Women in mainstream culture are underrepresented and have even at times been invisible. In the book by Sara Sheridan "Where Are The Women?" she explores the amazing achievements of women through the centuries in a reimagining of Scottish place names. In the book it shows just how underrepresented women are, in both memorials and indeed in place names. She also shows how the extraordinary things that women have achieved over the centuries, have helped shape our nation into the diverse, tolerant, and progressive country it is. A huge part of this is by understanding our collective past. The good and the bad. Once we understand our past, we can build a better future.

This is a wonderful opportunity for St Monans to show that it is a community proud of its colourful past. I would therefore respectfully request that Maggie Morgan and Christian Dote are memorialised in the street names for the new housing development.

“I stand at the very edge of the cliff, the church looming behind me, and look out at the waves. There’s nothing left to mark the spot were Maggie died. I think about her life dissolving into the wind. But I know Maggie lived, I know how she died and that’s enough she won’t be forgotten”.

Laura Bates “The Burning”

**Yours**

**Sheila Gaul**

**Chairperson**

**On behalf of Remembering the Accused Witches of Scotland**

**Rememberingsaw2019@gmail.com**