

Three English witches et al ©

There is an instruction or law from the King James Bible that states, "*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*". If you're reading the New English Bible, it reads that "You must not allow a witch to live". All clear so far? Well, you might think that it's very clear and straight to the point, until you include one very important factor – this part of Exodus is far from clear and not to be trusted in plain English.

The whole phrase is a wonderful example of a mistranslation that has gained evermore credence over the centuries. Early versions of the passage translated the word, *witch*, as a herbalist – someone who used herbal medicines to cure or, sometimes, to poison people, but the original Hebrew script has only one real term for witch ("kasaph", to enchant or practise magic through the use of herbs).

Don't worry too much about the Hebrew phrasing, but the law in Exodus 22: 18 was that, "You must not sustain a witch", that is do not pay a local wise woman or man so that he or she can make a living from magick. This is a ban against local village witches who might charge exorbitant fees for their services and the law was confirmed when the Decree of the Council of Ancyra in 314 CE banned witchcraft, when associated with people using herbal medicines (such as the Gnostics).

Nevertheless, it is also a far cry from condemning accused witches on the basis of conjuring spirits or divination, to hanging or a visit to the ducking stool. This later conclusion arose from the King James edition, which translated the Hebrew word, "khaw-yaw" (to sustain life or live prosperously), as "chayah" (to live or to exist).

Such mistranslations are very common when we examine the Old Testament, because what tended to happen is that the original versions were recorded orally for hundreds of years before being transcribed in Hebrew, commonly during the time of the Babylonian captivity.

After that, the books were translated into Latin in about 350-400 CE and, much later, were published in Britain. The only caveat is that few were published as such – some were written again in Latin, while others were copied by hand into Middle English/French, often by monks working by candle-light. And mistakes tended to creep in.

Enough of that – what I'd like to show is that, despite the public antipathy against witches in general, some witches in Britain did very nicely for themselves, in terms of material gain or celebrity right through to Victorian times and we'll start in West Yorkshire with [Hannah Green](#).

The Ling Bob Witch



Here is a picture of the Ling Bob pub in Wilsden/ Yeadon (part of the Bradford area) in 1960. Hannah Green – the Ling Bob Witch – lived in a small cottage on the site of the current pub car park from 1770 onwards. The term, *ling bob*, is a dialectical term for *Heather End*.

The present inn was built in 1836, but there had been an older pub of the same name on the same site. There were also a few very old cottages and farms in the area, because Wilsden was a very small village then – later, the Industrial Revolution was responsible for more mills and more cottages.

Local histories of Bradford and Wilsden refer to Hannah Green as a witch and fortune-teller who was able to divine the future of clients by reading tea leaves. Sometimes, she made general prophecies for her customers too, again for a fee. Her husband was the local miller. Was she successful? Here is a quotation from an eye witness.

"The cottage had a tall chimney stack, white-painted so her clients would know where to find her. She was very popular with the gentry who would travel considerable distances for a consultation and whose carriages were often to be seen outside her home... it was no novel sight to see carriages with pairs of horses standing outside the Ling Bob oracle's abode awaiting their fair mistresses, who had come to consult old Hannah concerning their conjugal or other difficulties."

In a career over some 40 years, Hannah Green saved more than £1,000 (at a time when £1 a week was a good wage for a skilled man and many people earned less than half that). In later years, Hannah moved to Novia Farm on the Otley Old Road, near Yeadon, where she died on 12 May 1810.

Here is a quotation from an eye witness, known only as Mabel.

"The people in olden times were very superstitious and there was one person in Yeadon who, from 1770 made a fortune out of the ladies who believed in fortune telling. She was known as the Ling Bob Witch, but her real name was Hannah Green. Many rich and aristocratic people consulted Hannah. She must have had a gift of second sight for they consulted her on many matters and she carried her profitable business on for 40 years."

Cunning Murrell

So, we move from West Yorkshire to Essex to consider the life of James 'Cunning' Murrell, who lived from October 1785 to December 1860 in Hadleigh, though his registered place of birth was Rochford.

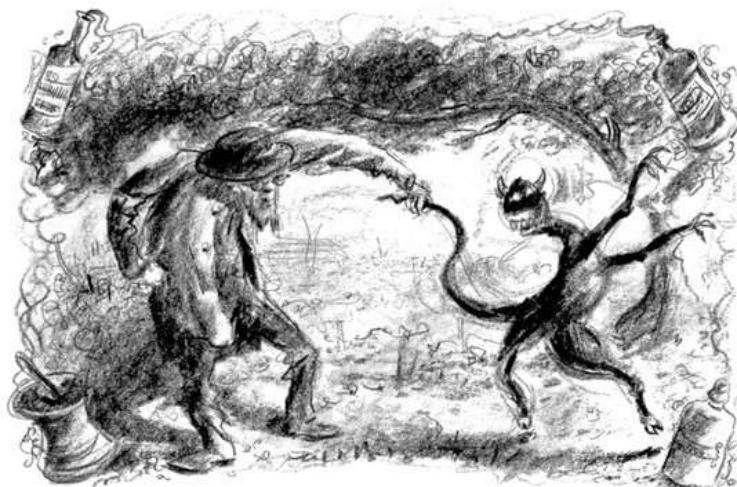
If you visit Hadleigh now, the lane called End Way contained James Murrell's cottage, close to the church – there are office buildings now, but his cottage was one of six. He was a maker of shoes, but his real claim to fame was that he was the seventh son of a seventh son, a witch and he had the angels on his side. Apart from anything else, he foretold the date and hour of his death to anyone he met and he was completely accurate.

In 1890 or so, the writer Arthur Morrison visited the Murrell's cottage and met the new tenants, who were in their nineties. He noted that they still believed in and praised the remarkable wizard, who had lived there before them. They talked of the cures he had performed, the amazing recovery of stolen goods, the exorcisms and his numerous prophecies, aided by the stars. Morrison's notes continue thus.

"The front door of the cottage opened into the little room where he had received his clients amid walls hung about thick with the herbs that he was always gathering."

Morrison was able to visit James Murrell's son (Edward) and look at his father's stock of calculations, horoscopes, exorcisms and obscure ancient books. The books were a bible, prayer collection, texts on astrology and astronomy, old medical books and home-made books or manuscripts of conjurations and magic. There were also many letters from satisfied customers letters that proved the immense faith people put into Murrell's powers, like the one that read, *"I have took the powder it made me verrey quear in the stummuk pleas send sum more."*

Despite his fame, James Murrell remained fairly poor. When Arthur Morrison was shown Murrell's grave and those of his family around him, the graves were unmarked and, even then, most were just a discolouration in the turf. Arthur Morrison published both a novel and a *Strand* magazine article on Cunning Murrell in 1900. Here is an illustration (unknown artist) of Murrell at work, *Cunning Murrell: the Devil's Master*.



The Tebay Witch

From Essex, back up north, this time to Cumbria to look at the case of [Mary Baines](#), who was certainly famous, if not that rich. Tebay is a small village on the M6, not far from Kendal and the Lake District.

Mary Baines (or Baynes) was a farmer's daughter, born on an isolated farm in 1721. She was a spinster and stayed at home to look after her parents. When they died, she was forced to take a cottage in Tebay. She had become more eccentric as she had grown older and the villagers treated her with fear and hatred. If children teased Mary, she would threaten them.

Anything strange that happened was thought to be her fault and some believed she had magic powers to help her in her malicious deeds. She was not a good-looking woman and it wasn't long before she was known as *The Tebay Witch*.

Mary did not like cruelty to animals and, when the fox hunt was in Tebay one day, she was said to have turned herself into a hare to lead the hunt down into Tebay Gorge. When she reached the bottom of the gorge, she re-charged her magickal powers on a heap of stones. She then ran up the fell above and the hounds followed her, but couldn't keep up with her and returned to Tebay completely exhausted. Of course, by this time, the hare had turned back into Mary Baines. Here is a story about Mary, told by one of her Tebay peers.

"Ned Nisson, of the Cross Keys Inn, had a mastiff which worried Mary's favourite cat to death. She decided to have the cat properly buried in her garden and a man named Willan dug a grave for it. Old Mary handed him an open book and pointed to something he was to read, but Willan, not thinking it worthwhile to read anything over the cat, took pussy by the leg and said: 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, Here's a hole and in tha must'.

Mary grew angry and warned her companion he would fare no better than his levity. Soon afterwards, Willan was ploughing his field when the implement suddenly bound up and the handle struck one of his eyes causing blindness. Mary Baines was given credit for having bewitched his plough."

Mary also predicted widely that, one day, carriages would go over Loops Fell without the help of horses. She would die before her prophecy was realised, but the prediction came true when the London & Glasgow Railway came to Tebay, some 50 years later. Mary died aged 90 in 1811, the most celebrated witch in that area: at that time, many people in Cumbria were superstitious and took pains to keep witches away from their homes. Was Mary a real witch or was it just superstition? What is curious is that there are no records as to the location of her grave.

Conclusion

What we do know is that the instruction of the King James and other bibles was carried out to the letter in the sad case of [Krystyna Ceynowa](#) (also spelled as *Cejnowa*). Krystyna was a Polish widow, living in Prussia in 1836 and accused of witchcraft by neighbours. The evidence was that Krystyna never attended church or mass and that black crows were attracted to her chimney. There was no trial – the villagers took her to the nearby Baltic Sea for the ordeal of water, but she stayed afloat (conclusive evidence of sorcery) and so she was forcibly drowned there and then by the mob. The local authorities did not prosecute anyone for her murder.

So, if we contrast her fate with the likes of Hannah Green, James Murrell and Mary Baynes, the English attitude towards witches had changed totally by the late 1800s. Part of the reason for this trend was the trial of [Jane Wenham](#) for witchcraft in March 1712 at the Lenten Assizes in Hertford.

Wenham was charged for offences under the **Witchcraft and Conjunction Act 1604** for conversing familiarly with the Devil in the shape of a cat and the jury found her guilty. She was sentenced to hang, but Queen Anne pardoned her. Wenham continued to live under the protection of local gentry until she died in 1730 and that was the last of the witch trials in England.

The [Krystyna Ceynowa](#) attitude had not totally died out among the English peasantry. In 1808, a mob took the law into its own hands in Great Paxton (Cambridgeshire) against [Ann Izzard](#). Ann was suspected of causing a farmer's cart to overturn by magick and of causing fits and depression in several village girls. The mob beat Ann with clubs and prepared to use the ordeal by water, but she was able to escape to another village. She brought her own lawsuit against the mob members, resulting in the prosecution of nine villagers at the next assizes.