



# THE OCCULT AND WITCHCRAFT

People have always been fascinated by the occult: beliefs about a mysterious “other world”, hidden forces around them, secret sources of knowledge, and latent powers within themselves. Some individuals feel they have supernatural powers or occult powers that they can use to contact the “other world”, to make good or bad things happen, to cast spells, or to predict future events.

Occult lore <sup>1</sup> is less concerned with explaining events than with trying to predict, stop or induce them. Linked to this lore is the belief in life after death, and in spirits and ghosts.

The ancient Babylonians and Egyptians were great believers in the occult. Astrology originated in Babylonia about three thousand years ago. The Babylonians believed that they could predict the future by interpreting the positions of the sun, moon and planets.

The ancient Egyptians and Greeks also studied the heavenly bodies. They drew maps of the sky showing named constellations. The Greek zodiac is the one we still use today.

Pagan cults based on occult rituals survived the growth of such major religions as Christianity. But after the 14th century, occult practices began to be condemned by the church as evil or satanic. There was growing persecution of sects that believed that the material world was created by the devil. People accused of devil worship or Satanic rites were persecuted, tortured and burned at the stake. This was the beginning of the witch hunts which took place throughout Europe and America until the 18th century. It was believed that witches were in contact with the devil and other evil spirits. This gave them magic powers to cast spells and curses on people, and to make bad things happen.

Prayers, rituals and talismans were used to ward off <sup>2</sup> evil spirits and bad

1. **lore** : traditional knowledge on a particular subject.
2. **ward** [wɔ:d] **off** : keep away.



luck. Some folk superstitions remain today, such as touching wood, or carrying a good luck charm.

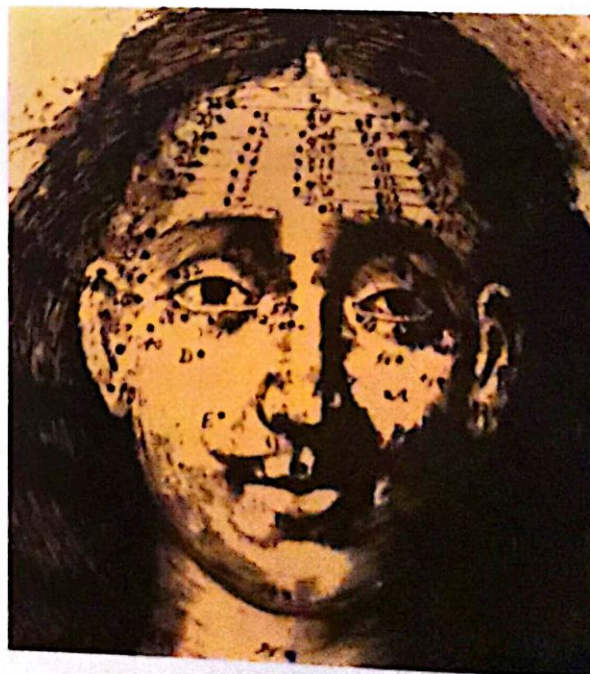
Exorcism is still used today to “drive the devil out” of a person who is said to be possessed by Satan.

Prophecy, fortune-telling, palmistry, astrology and tarot cards are just some of the things that are still present in our modern society.

All over the world today, there are people who believe in magic and the occult and who perform Satanic rites.

Witchcraft is often called “black magic”.

Witchcraft will probably never die because it satisfies the need of some people to predict, influence or control the mysteries of life.



**1 Choose the correct answer.**

- a. A definition of the occult is
- ☐ having to do with secret, mysterious, or supernatural beliefs, events and predictions
  - ☐ having to do with life after death
  - ☐ another name for early Christian rituals
- b. Spirits and ghosts are
- ☐ created by the devil
  - ☐ worshipped by certain cults
  - ☐ part of the occult lore
- c. Pagan cults were based on
- ☐ the worship of nature
  - ☐ occult rituals
  - ☐ early Christian beliefs
- d. After the 14th century, the Christian Church
- ☐ persecuted and executed witches
  - ☐ tried to convert devil worshippers
  - ☐ banished witches to the forest
- e. It was believed that witches were in contact with Satan, and
- ☐ lived forever
  - ☐ could "drive the devil out" of a person
  - ☐ had magic powers to cast spells, curses, and make bad things happen
- f. Witchcraft
- ☐ ended in the 18th century
  - ☐ is still practised today
  - ☐ is only practised in primitive societies



# THE WORD "WITCH"

To understand the Salem witch trials, it is necessary to know the 17th century definition of the word "witch". In England and New England, it was believed that a witch was a person who had made a pact with Satan. The pact involved an exchange of a soul for special evil powers, with which other mortals could be tormented.

Victims of witchcraft claimed to see horrible visions, exhibit strange behaviour and experience physical pain. These victims were said to be bewitched. The person who was accused of causing this was arrested and tried in a court of law. Under the English legal system of the 17th century, the person who was found guilty of practising witchcraft was hanged. The word "witch" has another important definition. People who practise the pagan religion of Wicca (similar to the word "witch"), trace their beliefs to Pre-Christian times.

Wicca is a religion based on Nature, and it worships a Father God and Mother Goddess. Wicca followers are not involved in any type of evil or witchcraft.

Finally, the word "witch" creates another image in our minds: the stereotype of an old, ugly lady, dressed in black, who wears a pointed hat and flies through the night sky on her broom. She is usually accompanied by a black cat. This is the cartoon interpretation of the "witch" that we see at Halloween because Halloween originated as a Celtic festivity. Witches were a part of Celtic culture.

**1** Choose the correct answer.

- a. In the 17th century, it was believed that a witch
- ☐ had magic powers
  - ☐ had made a pact with Satan
  - ☐ could predict the future
- b. Making a pact with the devil involved
- ☐ an exchange of a soul for special evil powers
  - ☐ worshipping Satan
  - ☐ offering a human sacrifice
- c. Being bewitched meant
- ☐ practising witchcraft with other witches
  - ☐ making a pact with the devil
  - ☐ exhibiting strange behaviour, experiencing physical pain, seeing horrible visions
- d. Under the English legal system of the 17th century, the punishment for witchcraft was
- ☐ hanging
  - ☐ burning at the stake
  - ☐ life imprisonment
- e. Wicca is a pagan religion based on
- ☐ witchcraft
  - ☐ human and animal sacrifice
  - ☐ Nature
- f. Witches are symbolic of Halloween because
- ☐ Halloween originated as a Celtic festivity and witches were a part of the Celtic culture
  - ☐ Wicca is the ancient name for Halloween
  - ☐ most witchcraft is practised on Halloween



# SALEM AND WITCHCRAFT

Belief in witches and witchcraft was common in Europe and New England during the 17th century. Before the dramatic Salem witchcraft trials, almost 300 New Englanders (mostly lower-class, middle-aged women, spinsters<sup>1</sup> or widows) had been accused of witchcraft, and more than 30 had been hanged. However, the Salem trials exceeded all precedents in their intensity.

In 1692, a few adolescent girls became entranced listeners of voodoo stories told by Tituba, a slave from the West Indies. Suddenly, these girls began acting strangely—they shouted, barked, grovelled,<sup>2</sup> twitched<sup>3</sup>—without any apparent reason. The town doctor concluded that they had been bewitched!<sup>4</sup> The girls pointed to Tituba and two white women as the culprits.<sup>5</sup>



*The Salem Witch Museum.*

*Tituba tells the children of Salem tales of the Devil.*

1. **spinsters** : older women who aren't married.
2. **grovelled** : lay or moved face downwards in sign of abject humility or fear.
3. **twitched** : moved convulsively.
4. **bewitched** : possessed by an evil spirit.
5. **culprits** : the people responsible, usually for a crime.



The townspeople were seized by panic as the word spread that the devil was among them. At a hearing before the magistrates, the “bewitched” girls shrieked and rolled on the floor in convulsive fits as they were questioned by the magistrates. In the midst of this hysteria, Tituba shocked her listeners by confessing to the charge and accusing many others in the community of performing the devil’s work.

At this point, the crazed girls began accusing dozens of townspeople, including several of the most respected members of the Puritan community.

After a few months, the Salem prison was filled with townspeople—men, women and children—all accused of practising witchcraft. There was general hysteria everywhere in the area.

Within ten months, 19 people had been hanged and more than 100 had been put in prison. One man, Giles Corey, was pressed to death with heavy stones. Sarah Good, who was hanged on July 19, 1692, put a curse on Reverend Noyes. She told him that if she was hanged, he would have blood to drink. Tradition says



*The Hanging of a witch.*





That twenty-five years later, Reverend Noyes died of a throat haemorrhage. As the accusations spread beyond Salem, colonial leaders began to worry that the witch-hunts were out of control. When the bewitched girls accused Samuel Willard, the devoted pastor of Boston's First Church and president of Harvard College, the magistrates decided that something was wrong. The governor himself intervened when his own wife was accused of worshipping the devil. He disbanded<sup>1</sup> the special court that was responsible for the witch-hunt and released the remaining suspects. A year after it had started, the terrible witch-hunt was finally over. There was never another witch-hunt like it in the New England colonies. In Europe, however, witches were still being executed in the 18th century. Arthur Miller, the famous American playwright, wrote a play about the Salem witch trials, called *The Crucible*. A film, based on the play, has recently been produced.



Examination of a Witch, by T. H. Matteson 1885.

1. **disbanded** : broke up an organisation.





**1** Complete the following sentences using the words in the box.

governor's    witchcraft    bewitched (x2)  
 Tituba    witch-hunt    magistrates  
 children    listeners    seventeenth  
 confessed    months    court  
 accused (x2)    prison    voodoo    strangely  
 devil's    nineteen    adolescent    doctor  
 common    hysteria

- a. Belief in witches and ..... was ..... in Europe and New England during the ..... century.
- b. In 1692, a few ..... girls became entranced ..... of ..... stories told by ....., a slave from the West Indies.
- c. Suddenly, these girls began acting ..... . The town ..... said they had been .....
- d. The girls ..... Tituba and two white women.
- e. Before the ....., Tituba ..... to the charge of witchcraft. She accused many others of performing the ..... work.
- f. The ..... girls ..... dozens of townspeople. Soon the Salem ..... was filled with men, women and ..... . There was mass .....
- g. .... people were hanged in ten .....
- h. When the ..... wife was accused of witchcraft, the governor disbanded the special ..... . The ..... was over.



## 2

## ACROSS

## DOWN

1. the practices of a witch
2. slave from the West Indies
3. Satan
4. unmarried older woman
5. famous American playwright

6. city of witch trials
7. woman whose husband is dead
8. suspend by the neck until dead
9. act of hearing and judging a person in a court of law
10. man who was pressed to death

