

### Further reading: Witchcraft in the seventeenth century

Answer these questions using the information below. Write in full sentences.

1. What punishment was given for witches who harmed property or made love potions?
2. What motivated Matthew Hopkins to begin his witch-finding business (try to find two motives)?
3. How were women tortured to try to get them to confess?
4. How did Hopkins and Stearne torture women to extract a confession?
5. Whose support did Hopkins call on to successfully prosecute his 'witches'?

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The exact number of witches executed by Matthew Hopkins, England's most famous witchfinder, cannot be precisely quantified. His assistant, John Stearne, estimated that "as many as 200 were hanged". The statistics suggest that the East Anglia trials of 1644-1646 represented a major panic.

Under James I, hanging was compulsory for the first offence of "maleficia" (evil magic), even where the bewitched person did not die, whereas under Elizabethan law, the penalty was a year's imprisonment. However, for making love "philtres" (a drink designed to make a person more amorous), or harming property, the penalty remained, for a first offence, one year's imprisonment and time in the "pillory" (also known as stocks). The pillory was a wooden box with holes for the accused's head and limbs to protrude from. They were kept in villages to be used for the public humiliation of any convicted person in full view of their fellow villagers or townsfolk.

Matthew Hopkins believed that there were seven or eight witches regularly practicing their dark arts close to his house. Records do not show how he dealt with them, but his puritan background gave him a strong motivation to destroy the "works of the devil" and, as a lawyer with little money, he could see the financial incentive of pursuing the hunt on a wider scale.

The torture of witches to extract confession in England, the vast majority of which were female, was less violent than in Europe – the methods favoured in England were bread-and-water diets, tethering of limbs and sleep deprivation, otherwise known as "watching". Other brutalities which were not practiced, included thumbscrews or, as preferred on the continent, "Spanish boots", which were large boots of leather or metal into which boiling water or molten lead was poured, with the accused's feet still in them, of course.

Hopkins and Stearne employed varying methods to extract confessions from the "witches". They would keep the suspect awake on surveillance for days on end,

resulting in sleep deprivation, meaning that at the end, the suspect could be coaxed into confessing to almost anything. Interestingly, this practice of confession-extraction is still used by a number of armies today.

Hopkins believed that witches fed their "familiar" (animals that would accompany them in their evil practices) with their own blood; by keeping the witch under guard this would also ensure that their familiars would not be able to feed from the witch, thereby depriving the witches of their alleged capabilities.

Partly through fear, groups of villagers would act as witnesses for the prosecutors, and Hopkins and Stearne would find ready support from local clergymen (priests). In the Manningtree area, a group of "women searchers" – a panel of professed experts whose names regularly appeared in various witch trials, were called on as witnesses to suspicious lumps or other marks on witches. It was with this wider support that Hopkins was able to prosecute his witch-finding exploits.

Hopkins and Stearne, along with local justices, clergymen and other notable inhabitants believed they were performing a public service with the witch-hunts. But local country-people said that it was Hopkins' personal financial greed that motivated his intentions. Hopkins denied these accusations, citing that, although Stearne and he put themselves at risk with their work, they were welcomed and given "thanks and recompense". But records from their actions in Stowmarket alone show Hopkins was paid £23, and in Aldeburgh he was paid £6 – a relatively high payment when compared with the average countryman's wage of just 6d (6 pence) a day. It was estimated that his fees may have totalled about £1000.