

## 13 The Wider Context

This case was a one-off—there is nothing quite like it in the annals of English witchcraft. In less than a year, it had blown up from some rumours about fairies and buried treasure, to the making of a formal accusation of witchcraft. Most cases took decades to crystallize from suspicion to formal accusation. And if this prosecution had been initiated a couple of decades later, the accused women would have been in their 50s—a more typical age for people to be formally accused of witchcraft. Younger women in Germany—according to David Sabean—were often suspected of witchcraft, but were less likely to be accused for fear of repercussions. It was only when such women had become, perhaps, widowed and frail that their neighbours dared to make formal accusations against them. In Rye, some of the accusers were magistrates, so were less likely to be intimidated than their neighbours.

The political aspects of this case may also be unusual, although better documentation for other cases might very well modify this view—local politics (at least at the village level) does not generally reach the official record. Political factionalism in New England has certainly been linked by historians to witchcraft cases, and documentation there is better than in old England.

If it is unlike other English cases, neither does this case seem much like those continental trials where women (usually) were accused of flying to a witches' sabbath and engaging in devil worship. But not all European trials involved this type of accusation. There was considerable geographic variation in both the type and incidence of prosecutions in the epidemic of witch-hunting of the 16th and 17th centuries—which ranged from Scandinavia to Sicily, and from Russia to the European colonies in North America. Exploring the geography of witchcraft in fact reveals a striking pattern—as demonstrated by Brian Levack. When seen in this context, the Rye case seems less like an oddity, and similar to many other cases. The geographic pattern also suggests something about the dynamics of witch-hunting.

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Levack's findings concern not so much why the extraordinary European witch-hunt happened at all, as why it was so extreme in some places, and relatively mild in others. There were dramatic contrasts in the intensity of prosecutions across Europe and white America. The total is very difficult to estimate, but may have been in the region of 90 thousand (maximum), with about half of these people living in the many, mostly small, states that made up the Holy Roman Empire, which was slightly larger than modern Germany. At the other extreme, to take a few examples, were the British Isles, with probably no more than 5 thousand prosecutions, and Finland, with about 700; in the English and Spanish colonies in America—other than New England—prosecution rates were very low.

The numbers of the accused who were executed also varied considerably—for example, 90% were executed in the Pays de Vaud, 38% in Norway and between a quarter and a half in England (of those whose fates were known). Overall, about half the people tried for witchcraft in Europe may have been executed—although this estimate does not include cases in German and Polish regions, where rates were probably higher.

The region where the prosecution rate was highest—the Holy Roman Empire—was notable for the lack of central political control over its myriad political units. It is this issue, together with the degree to which the legal system was centrally organised, that seems to be crucial in providing a general explanation for the geography of witchcraft. There was no hierarchy of courts in the Holy Roman Empire. Local authorities were certainly required to ask the universities for advice in trying witchcraft cases, but this procedure only exacerbated the problems, because universities were developing theories about witchcraft as devil worship and heresy which only inflamed local hysteria. The original accusers were mostly concerned about the harm which they believed had been inflicted by the supposed witch on the victims (*maleficia*)—as elsewhere in Europe—but when these ideas were leavened with ideas about devil-worship and heresy, they could prove a lethal mixture (elsewhere, it was often other types of officials who added the ingredient of devil-worship).

In addition, torture was often used to extract confessions and get the accused to name accomplices. Then the usual grimly repetitive narratives would be uttered, and the local elite would be confirmed in their worst fears. The accused—usually a woman—would tell how she had met a dark man when she was in a low state—perhaps ill and poor—and he had offered her money in return for sex. His nature was cold, and the money never materialised, but by this act of carnal copulation she renounced her

baptism and sealed a pact with the devil. She flew to witches' sabbaths where they danced and feasted and worshipped the devil, sometimes doing orgiastic and blasphemous acts, which might include the killing and eating of babies. In addition, the devil required that they commit *maleficia*. There were some variations in the stories, but all had the same central theme of worship of the devil and renunciation of christianity.

Different regions of the Holy Roman Empire had varying prosecution rates which can also be related to Levack's theory. The worst area was south-western Germany, where several city states and other small territories were almost completely independent of all outside political and ecclesiastical control—this situation gave magistrates great freedom in their handling of witchcraft cases. Rates of prosecution were much lower in north-eastern Germany, where political units were much larger and less fragmented.

Another region in which central control was exceptionally weak was Poland, where some of the most intense witch-hunting occurred. Cases were generally tried in municipal courts, even though they were supposed to be tried in ecclesiastical courts, and the *municipal courts ... repeatedly violated all of the procedural rules that were designed to protect the accused*.

At the other extreme, in England, most cases of witchcraft and other felonies were tried by the King's justices, and not in local jurisdictions—other than, of course, in the Cinque Ports and a few other boroughs. And the relatively centralised legal system (by comparison with some other places) was reinforced by a rapidly centralising state, with a strong monarchy. An exception was during the Civil War, when Assize judges preferred to stay at Westminster, far from the fighting, and local justices and noblemen presided over trials.

In France the legal system was still more hierarchical than in England, with a regular system of appeals from local courts to provincial parlements, and thence to the parlement of Paris, and the latter, at least, provided a general dampener on the enthusiasm of prosecutors. But along the frontiers of the kingdom, in areas which were resistant to the efforts of the French monarchy to establish a centralised state, and where local courts operated with greater independence than elsewhere, some serious witch-hunting took place—along the north and east borders, Languedoc, the south-west, and Normandy. Overall, however, the prosecution rates were only slightly higher than those in England.

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The right to use torture was an important factor in exacerbating witch panics, yet not as important as one might think. It was allowed in Scandinavia, but used sparingly, and prosecution rates were about twice those in England. The governments there tried hard to put a curb on witch-hunting, and to a great extent succeeded (all cases in Denmark had to be referred to the central courts after 1576).

By contrast, in Scotland torture was no more allowed than in England (without the permission of the Privy Council), but it was used extensively—usually in the form of sleep deprivation, which did not involve the use of identifiable instruments of torture. King James authorised torture in the case in which he thought he was a victim, but this did not apply to other cases. Local magistrates in Scotland were usually granted specific commissions to try witchcraft cases without any supervision, although some cases were heard before central judges in Edinburgh or on circuit. Execution rates varied markedly between these different types of courts—fully 91% of those tried by local magistrates were executed (of those where the outcome was known), with 57% for the Justiciary Court and only 16% for the Circuit courts (but these were only late 17<sup>th</sup> century). Overall, the proportion of witches executed in Scotland relative to the size of the population may have been about 12 times that in England. It saw one of the major witch-hunts in Europe.

Torture was permitted but rarely employed in Italy and Spain, which came under the jurisdiction of their respective Inquisitions. One might expect that the courts of the Inquisition would treat witchcraft severely—as a heresy—but it was in fact considered a very minor matter in both countries, and there were probably no more than 300 executions in the whole of this region. Moreover, these courts had strict procedural rules at this period. All over Europe, indeed, ecclesiastical courts generally put a brake on witch-hunting, because they had procedural controls, a hierarchy of courts, and the judges probably had less involvement in local conflicts. Increasingly, however, secular courts were taking over the jurisdiction of witchcraft cases from ecclesiastical courts.

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The geographic pattern of witch trials is thus remarkably consistent—the most serious witch panics occurred in areas where the trials were conducted in local courts. Other factors may have been important in specific places, but none have such general application as this one—more examples could be cited from Levack's study. The town of Rye is thus

only one example—even if an extremely small one—of a relatively autonomous jurisdiction on a country's borders where fears of witchcraft blew up suddenly and then multiplied. The town clerk was still listing new potential witnesses right up to the last trial, and Thomas Higgons was added to the possible victims of witchcraft. The kinds of irregularities that had been taking place in Rye were also by no means uncommon in the European context. As in Rye, members of political factions in some German towns used charges of witchcraft against their rivals' wives to advance their own political careers.

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The main difference between Rye and the German towns was the absence of the pact-with-the-devil narrative—and indeed this has been presented as a major contrast between English and continental witchcraft in general. It has been argued that ideas about diabolism did not, as it were, cross the channel. Were these two 'types' of witchcraft, therefore, different phenomena?

The issue is complicated by the fact that judges in some countries—where witchcraft was defined as heresy—were expected to get a confession of a pact with the devil from the accused before they could obtain a conviction, whether or not *maleficia* had been alleged. But did they or the accusers believe in it? Disentangling the beliefs and motivations of the various participants in trials is notoriously difficult. One thing is generally agreed—that accusers everywhere were mainly concerned about the harm that they believed had been done to the victims by supernatural means (*maleficia*), whether or not they *also* believed that the accused had made a pact with the devil.

Another point which can, I think, be lifted clear of the tangle of issues is that there was no clear distinction between regions where trials involved diabolism, and other regions where they did not. There was usually a mixture of the two in any particular region. For example, in south-west Germany, where the larger trials focused on diabolism, there were also smaller trials that simply concerned *maleficia*.

At the other extreme, English trials were almost entirely devoid of diabolism, yet diabolism cropped up in New England—whose white population of course originated from England—but was not found in witch trials in English colonies further south. Diabolism was also present in witch trials during the lawlessness of the English Civil War (though partly instigated by the self-styled 'witch-finder general', Matthew

Hopkins). Full-blown diabolism was rife in Scotland, where there was admittedly influence from Denmark through the King's wife—but attributing the character of essentially local scares to her influence surely gives it undue weight. In Spain, most cases were very minor—only involving *maleficia*—but there was a large Basque witch hunt in 1610 (near the French border) which involved the full witches' sabbath.

So there appears to have been a scattering of trials involving diabolism in areas where these beliefs were not otherwise prevalent—when, perhaps, a local community became convulsed by a witchcraft panic, and the fantasies became elaborated. Norman Cohn has shown that such nightmare fantasies have existed in Europe for over a thousand years, being applied to different out-groups on different occasions. The early Christians were accused by Romans of incestuous orgies and eating of children, and medieval heretics were accused of incestuous orgies and devil-worship—all of which were elements in the witchcraft fantasies of our period. I therefore think that it is inappropriate to say that in *this* area people knew about and believed in diabolism, and in *that* area they did not—these countries were all part of Christendom. When the paranoia took over, people did not have far to look to find fantasies that suited it (using the word *paranoia* in a very loose sense).

Perhaps we should be looking not only at how such ideas are transmitted, but also at the soil in which they flourish or die—the socio-economic context. To take a modern example, one area of southern Africa has seen the proliferation—since the 1960s—of beliefs in obscene and money-devouring familiars. These ideas were adopted from a neighbouring people, while the traditional animal familiars have played a much smaller role in modern witchcraft fears. These more recent fantasies have been shown by anthropologists to relate to the strains of wage labour and labour migration that, under apartheid, replaced the traditional subsistence agriculture. So it can be surmised that these people adopted these new beliefs because they reflected current concerns better than traditional beliefs. And when the new Christian Churches under black leadership identified witches with Satan, this was also woven into traditional non-Christian beliefs—witches became identified with evil, where they had previously been more ambivalent. The endemic witch-killings still continue in the region.

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I keep referring to paranoia—is this relevant to the Rye case, or indeed to others which involved political rivalry? Perhaps the accusers were utterly cynical—using a witchcraft accusation as a strategy to remove opponents. Even in this scenario, however, the strategy would only work politically if others considered the accusation to be believable. But the issue does not have to be cynicism or belief—surely the worst scenario is when those who are trying to undo their rivals are also fired by paranoid inclinations. And it bears repeating that the Rye case blew up very suddenly—if the process had carried on, rather than being stifled by outsiders, perhaps accusations might have spread further. If Anne and Susan had been hanged, would this have satisfied the accusers and silenced their opponents—or would it have further enflamed social conflicts in the town? In France peaks of official persecution of witches, far from pacifying village feeling, generated higher numbers of illegal killings.

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Rye could thus be seen as one of many local communities convulsed by witch hunts in early-modern Europe, even if we only see the early stages of the process—when suspicions were still crystallizing—before it was interrupted by outsiders (this in itself is interesting, because the case reached the record book while suspicions were still fluid). Not very much is known about criminal justice in other self-governing communities in England, though a woman was executed for witchcraft in Norwich in 1588, five in Harwich in 1601, and three hanged at Faversham during the Civil War (the last two towns were very small).

The fundamental question remains—why were these communities convulsed in this way, and why was witchcraft central to these conflicts? In spite of the massive historical literature devoted to early-modern witchcraft in recent years, there is little agreement amongst historians on this question. How can we get anywhere near understanding a particular case, if the broader causes of this extraordinary social seizure are little understood?

This is no place to try and encompass this huge topic, but I would like to put forward a couple of general points, concerning the socio-economic context rather than the witch-hunt itself. Greater understanding can be achieved, I believe, if we spread our net even wider—outside the confines of early-modern Christendom.

Belief in witchcraft—in the narrow sense of the *power to harm others by supernatural means*—is found the world over, more or less, in developing

societies: *from Africa to the South Seas, and from Asia to America*. The exception being nomadic peoples, who can get away from one another when conflicts arise, and so it is less essential to live in amity and co-operation. Perhaps witchcraft should not therefore be thought of as 'belonging' to any particular religion (nor as a pre-Christian survival), but simply as a gut reaction to misfortune in certain circumstances. To focus only on issues peculiar to Christianity may limit our understanding of the phenomenon. In Europe, neither Catholic nor Protestant areas had a predominance of witchcraft cases—it was those unstable areas with marked religious divisions and conflicts which had the most.

To talk of a 'gut reaction' is not to deny that witch beliefs will be incorporated into people's religious and scientific ideas, but they are perhaps not *primarily* an intellectual matter. Consequently, education does not necessarily cause beliefs in witchcraft to evaporate. In the region of South Africa mentioned above, it was reported that *educated people ... cited Shakespeare to justify their beliefs*, and that someone who was educated at an English public school did not as a result abandon his belief in witchcraft.

Many historians do not favour this type of cross-cultural approach, associating it with *colonial-era functionalist social anthropolog[y]*, which should be relegate[d] ... to the dustbin of history—to take a comment from a recent book review by William Monter as an example. But early-modern Europe *was* a developing society which had concerns similar in some respects to third world societies today, so it may be counterproductive to rule out a broader perspective that includes such societies. Such an approach would move us away from thinking of witchcraft as a sort of cultural item which can be studied in isolation, and towards seeing it as an aspect of a certain kind of society.

There is a rather surprising contemporary who somewhat endorses this cross-cultural approach to witchcraft. The Kentish sceptic Reginald Scot was famous for writing a large tome denying the reality of witchcraft (it was this work which prompted James I to write his rejoinder). Scot claimed that the old women who were commonly accused of being witches were just suffering from melancholy—an emotional and physical condition that particularly afflicted old people—and their curses had no real effect on their neighbours. But he was less averse to belief in what he called *natural witchcraft*—the evil eye—which he identified as a common belief in Africa (though he did not believe in it himself).

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What is it about developing societies that makes them spawning grounds for belief in witchcraft? Too large a question to be addressed comprehensively here, but there is a simple point that can be made, which is also relevant to the subject of the essay at the end of this book. I am first tempted to enter a *caveat*, because galloping globalisation and the development of international communications in developing societies in recent decades complicates the argument. But the creation of a few multi-millionaire globe-trotters in, for example, India, does not transform the rest of that society.

The distinctive characteristic of such a social world is that it is very *personal*. Today in the West we rely on so many impersonal services—police, banks, insurance, and many different types of communications, and we can safely assume that the price of an ordinary loaf of bread will not vary much in different parts of the country. In societies where bureaucracies are inefficient and markets are uncertain because the economy is not well-integrated, these things cannot be taken for granted. Everything has to be negotiated through other people. And if your enterprises fail, which is ever possible in such an unpredictable environment, it is essential that you can call on others to assist.

In this environment, people have to be experts in social relations. They also have to be willing to invest considerable time, effort and money or goods in tending relationships with significant others, or within the local community generally. Common methods of generating good feeling between people include gifts, hospitality, drinkings, festivities and similar social activities. The purpose is to establish a basis of goodwill so that when assistance (whether economic or political) is required in the future, allies will feel morally obliged not to betray trust at the crucial moment of need. These activities may seem very simple and inconsequential to westerners, who associate such activities with a very restricted domestic sphere—but they are essential techniques for the creation of what might be called the *good-will society* in less centralised societies.

The terms for these relations in early modern England were *good lordship* for hierarchical relationships, and *good neighbourhood* for the local community. These were not so much descriptions of existing social relations as ideals to aim for—the good will had to be continually reaffirmed and renegotiated in the myriad interactions of everyday life, as well as on occasions of special ritual significance. Popular festivities such as May games were thought to be one means of creating amity in a community, and I will look in more detail at another strategy for achieving it in the second part of this book.

Reducing quarrelsomeness was another objective. If good relations with others helped you run your life satisfactorily, then quarrels had the opposite effect—particularly in small communities. Hence the punishments in local courts for quarrelsome people (scolds, barrators). Christian ritual was important here—taking communion was (amongst other things) a celebration of the cohesion of the community, and was in this sense a spiritual version of more mundane types of social communion. It worked slightly differently from simple conviviality, however—you had to settle your quarrels with neighbours *before* taking communion with them (usually an annual event, at Easter), because harbouring unsettled quarrels in your heart would attract divine punishment. This was not always left to the individual conscience—church wardens in one Sussex parish complained to the church courts that their minister had admitted to communion an ‘open contender’ who would not reconcile his differences with neighbours. Taking communion with your neighbours was therefore about reducing conflict within the community, rather than an expression of how wonderfully cohesive it already was.

This point is still more evident in a custom which invoked the power of holy communion to suppress disorder in some towns before the Reformation. If a fight broke out, the *host* (consecrated bread) might be brought out of the church and held aloft—threatening divine vengeance on the brawlers if they did not stop fighting.

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Throughout this book I have documented not only how disruptive factionalism could be in the town of Rye, but also the various efforts made by the inhabitants to control it. I have suggested that this may have been a reason for the absorption of leaders of rival groups into the magistracy, and for their lack of family dynasties (see pages 185 and 193 respectively). A similar rationale may have been associated with the creation of a common council in 1575—which caused such uproar among the Bennetts and their allies, as described above (page 87), because most of the initial members of the council (chosen by the mayor and jurats out of the freemen) were from the other faction. Henceforward the main body of freemen had no say in the administration of the town, apart from electing the mayor, until the council was abolished in 1590. Such councils (common in early modern towns) have been seen as undemocratic instruments of domination by some historians. But in a small community,

where numerous personal ties link the common councillors with people outside it, democracy is perhaps of less significance than in a more anonymous context. Those outside may, indeed, have too *much* influence—pulling the councillors in different directions, and preventing them from working well together as a group. To facilitate the latter, some distance between them and the rest of the inhabitants can help—and their selection by the magistrates might be seen as creating this distance, as also the prohibition on them talking about council matters outside it. Which is not to deny that the structure could also be undemocratic.

Another means of reducing friction, it may be suggested, was to create interdependence between households by the widespread custom of sending out teenagers to serve in other people's households (see page 71).

More evidence of the overriding concern to maintain peace was the reluctance shown by victims of crimes to indict suspected criminals in Rye before the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (see page 66); this reluctance was also found elsewhere in England. A problem with prosecution on indictment and trial by jury in a local community is that these focus on a single issue, which is likely to exacerbate tensions where people interact in many different contexts, and so have many potential sources of conflict (*multiplex* relations). For example, I might have a quarrel with my neighbour over a shared fence, and think he is mistreating his apprentice who is also my wife's nephew, while he accuses me (a baker) of selling him underweight bread. In such circumstances, a new, major conflict will cause other grievances to resurface, and addressing only the most recent issue is likely to exacerbate the dispute.

The traditional method of settling disputes in the local civil courts (when mediation did not solve the problem) was *compurgation*—where the accused person was required to bring a specified number of neighbours to support him/her. This emphasised the restoration of peace at the expense of deciding the rights and wrongs of a particular issue. But the increasing influence of the common law courts made the use of trial by jury unavoidable, and it was used in trespass cases in the Rye civil court from about the 1560s.

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If people are so dependent on the good will of others, it follows that they are likely to be very alert—hypersensitive?—to the possibility that these others do not bear them goodwill. If their enterprises are failing—the butter will not churn, the cow dies, goods are lost in shipwreck—perhaps

it is ill will in others that is responsible. You may say that this is too much of a jump to make, from an essentially rational strategy—creating goodwill—to an irrational one, of attributing bad luck to the illwill of others. But people *did* sometimes think that misfortune had a personal cause—an intentional act directed at oneself—if not necessarily by a witch.

When storms hit Rye in 1572, throwing sand at the quay and heaping it on sandbanks in the harbour, the corporation decided that God was punishing the inhabitants for their immoral ways and their quarrelsomeness, and a programme of moral regeneration was instituted. The honest inhabitants were to take communion

thereby to declare, to all the world, a general reconciliation of all offences whatsoever passed between every of the inhabitants of this town, as also to protest a godly, christian and steadfast love and unity between the inhabitants. And farther by such brotherly and Christian communicating together, to manifest their faith and godly agreement in the religion of Jesus Christ.

‘Offences’—in other words to reconcile all parties who had quarrelled, where one had inflicted a wrong on the other. Thus communion had the same social significance in godly Rye as it had had before the Reformation, even if the remedy was to attend to one’s spiritual state, rather than to use ritual in an instrumental way.

The 1550s and 60s had seen nearly everyone profiting from the town’s prosperity, so the storms in the 1570s affected them all. Responses were not so harmonious later in the century when economic changes affected people in more diverse ways—benefiting some, while harming others. In this context, some people might attribute misfortune to the illwill of a neighbour—such as Anne Taylor—rather than to the hand of God correcting their own sins. A couple of years before the witchcraft case, when Thomas Hamon, then MP for the town, had been unable to get to Parliament because of lameness in one of his legs, the jurats phrased his predicament as follows:

It falleth so out that it hath pleased God to lay his cross of lameness upon Master Thomas Hamon our mayor of Rye.

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There is perhaps a more direct connection between witchcraft on the one hand, and patronage and neighbourly relations on the other, in the character of some of the witch fantasies of early modern Europe. The witches' sabbath was often more like a popular festivity, with feasting and dancing, than a diabolic ritual. For the Scots it was about eating and drinking and music and dancing. It is about *gorrovage* (uproar). Furthermore, *the Demonic Pact initiated...a standard feudal relationship*—in which the devil promised material rewards in return for the witch's loyalty.

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Opinions were changing about how much reliance on patrons and neighbours was required for success in one's enterprises. I will be discussing this further in part 2, but would just like to consider some economic changes that bore directly on attitudes to misfortune—and hence witchcraft.

Fifteenth century England had consisted of a *loosely linked collection of regional economies*, with prices and wage rates varying considerably in different regions. The marketing of produce was tightly regulated (including the setting of 'fair' prices) to prevent the *cornering of the market in a vital commodity, which was all too real a threat in locally circumscribed markets*. At least two-thirds of households were oriented towards subsistence farming, but the average farmer was nevertheless much better off than he would have been a century earlier. The halving of the population since the Black Death had benefited tenants at the expense of landlords, by lowering rents because of an abundance of land, raising wages because of a scarcity of labour, and ending serfdom.

It would appear, therefore, to have been a rising demand for goods and services from a relatively comfortably-off peasantry in the later 15<sup>th</sup> century that quickened commercial activity. Prices started to rise, prompting greater specialisation in agricultural produce and manufactures by urban markets and their hinterlands. This in turn encouraged greater movement of goods between different areas, levelling out price variations and hence integrating local and regional economies. The country's plentiful water transport helped here—both coastal and riverine. Slowly but surely, all these factors interacted to create a broadly market-based economy by 1700. By this time, local famines were a thing of the past—as disparities between deficits and surpluses in different localities were ironed out.

In the south-east, the increasing demand from London provided a reliable market for different kinds of goods and services. The population was increasing, and with it demand grew for consumer goods from a broad swathe of the population in this region, not just the rich. So there were reasons why some people might feel that they could rely on the market to get their livings—and consequently did not have to rely so much on patrons and neighbours.

These changes did not affect everyone in equal ways, and it is likely that people were pulling in different directions—some thought they could rely on the market, others did not. Those that felt they did not need to depend so much on the goodwill of others might invest some of the (not inconsiderable) sums usually spent on hospitality and gifts in their own business. But then if they had distanced themselves from their neighbours, only to be crushed by disaster, perhaps the paranoia which on similar occasions in the past might have just taken the form of mild resentment, hit them with redoubled force ....

This is not to suggest that there was a simple connection between particular economic developments and witchcraft. I am just arguing that attitudes to *good lordship* and *good neighbourhood* were changing—a non-contentious point—and that this change related to concerns about witchcraft. I have mentioned some economic developments that were likely to have influenced these attitudes—another was the climate change that was decimating harvests across Europe in the later 16th century and increasing the sufferings of the poor (as it did in Rye). Rich landholders who could afford to store grain from one year to the next were not affected in the same way as their poorer neighbours—and were indeed reviled for hoarding, and selling it when prices were high, thus benefiting from others' sufferings. There was hence a widening gap between rich and poor in many areas, and scope for considerable disagreement about the necessity or otherwise of maintaining patronage and neighbourly relations.

This point is rather abstract—how does it relate to what was going on in Rye? The town's economic fortunes were of course idiosyncratic. As elsewhere in the country, there was a widening gap between rich and poor in the last couple of decades of the 16th century. But the port of Rye had its own problems—and the elite were only cushioned from these temporarily by their wealth. The turn of the century saw disaster hit the merchant faction—including some personal disasters for individual magistrates which may not have been directly related to the economic

situation. What a cruel twist—continuing prosperity while the rest were suffering, followed by catastrophe!

And then one of the women from the other faction made the most extraordinarily advantageous marriage to a local gentleman, in a town where marriage—though usually to a widow or daughter of a magistrate rather than a granddaughter—was a means of access to the aldermanic bench. She and her mother were already known as wise women—had her powers helped her make this catch? So the elite saw the other faction gaining in influence just as they were losing their dominance over the magistracy. And Anne's cursing of Thomas Hamon encouraged opposition amongst others, perhaps threatening to revive the factional conflicts that had paralysed Rye politics in the 1570s and early 80s.

Other inhabitants also cursed him—as we saw in chapter 10—but if anyone was to be accused of witchcraft, she was the most likely target, and also probably the most feared. An accusation of witchcraft in effect denounced the evils of dissension, rallying people to the cause of social cohesion—an appropriate means of suppressing opposition to a regime. In this little semi-autonomous enclave, inhabitants needed to sink their differences to combat intrusions from outsiders—or so the elite could claim.

A century later, merchants no longer felt that their prosperity was closely tied with the fortunes of the rest of the town. This was expressed most clearly in the refusal of most of them to take communion with those inhabitants who did not belong to their select group. While they depended on the assistance of others in their group, they also felt enough confidence in the operations of the market and the various financial devices that had recently been created to dispense with the methods of achieving peacefulness in the community which had previously been so important.

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I have not here made specific references to *good lordship* and *good neighbourhood* in Rye, but will return to explore these in more detail in the second part of the book, which is in a lighter, more discursive style than this chapter. In this essay, we will move out of the local arena for a time, to explore ideas presented in an eclectic selection of sources which are more informative on this subject than the local records.