

Preface

man cannot inherit the past; he has to re-create it
Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 266

Many small ports around the long coastline of Britain have suffered over the centuries from changes in the shape of that coastline—their harbours have silted up and become useless, or alternatively their houses have been swept away by the encroaching sea. The town of Rye in Sussex was one such port, but its experience in the 16th century was particularly remarkable because for a couple of decades before the harbour started silting up, it experienced a sudden prosperity (partly because its neighbour, Winchelsea, had already suffered the same fate). The population of Rye at least doubled in size and it became one of the most important ports on the south coast, before subsiding back into its earlier role of small port and market town, with little more than 1500 people.

Such dramatic economic changes were not likely to be seen as the result of an impersonal fate, in the heated religious climate of the 16th century—with Reformation being over-taken by Counter-Reformation, predictions multiplying about the coming of Antichrist heralding the end of the world, and paranoia about witches building up across Europe. In a godly town like Rye, in particular, disasters were seen as punishments from God (too large just to be sent to try us), or alternatively as the work of the devil, who had been drawn into the fray by the machinations of some local witch.

It was witchcraft that some amongst Rye's social and business elite pinpointed as at least one of the evils afflicting their fortunes. These people were the merchants and capitalist tradesmen who had been able to survive better than most the declining fortunes of the town, until around the turn of the 17th century they too were swept under by a tide of disasters. Their scapegoat was a local healer named Anne Taylor who had close ties with their political opponents in the town—a faction in which small independent artisans and retailers were dominant, known at this period as the urban *middling sort*. These tried to distance themselves from the pervasive influence of the big merchants in local affairs—refusing to *lean to the bent of their bow* and *hang on their sleeves*, in the words of one inhabitant—by emphasising their own honesty and godliness, and

evincing an outspoken, defiant rejection of traditional forms of deference, conformity and controlling rituals (both religious and social).

The middling sort were much more vulnerable to economic decline than the merchants, and sunk into political oblivion as soon as Rye's fortunes started to plummet. But some of the elite feared the resurgence of this faction following their own catastrophes. They had experience of this—back in the time of prosperity, the members of the middling faction had become so confident and numerous that they had dominated local politics for a short time, and remained a present threat to the elite's grip on power in the town. So who more likely to be causing trouble to the elite than a sharp-tongued cunningwoman from the middling sort—the daughter of an indebted butcher—who had made an extraordinarily good marriage to a local gentleman, by which that faction's political fortunes might have been restored?

We might not have known anything about the prosecution of Anne Taylor for witchcraft, were it not for another extraordinary feature of Rye's past. As a member of the semi-autonomous enclave of the Cinque Ports (along the coast of East Sussex and Kent), which had special privileges as a recompense for its ancient role of defending the kingdom from invasion and providing ships in time of war, the mayor and aldermen (known as *jurats*) had the authority to try all crimes except treason. They thus had the power, in this very small town, to inflict the death penalty on their neighbours. Some of the Rye elite were therefore both principal accusers and judges in this witchcraft trial, and they collected a *massive* amount of evidence—compared with most such cases—with which to bolster their case. Part of the reason for this was the need to fight off attempts by the central government and others to challenge their right to try it.

This large cache of documents tells us little, however, about the political and economic context which I have outlined—that only emerges when the participants and their statements are linked with other records. It tells us, instead, about the arrival of spirits in the town, as well as a myriad of little details about life and social relations. Much of this detail is in the words of a poor sawyer's wife—Susan Swaffer—the second scapegoat in this case, who seems to have got caught up in it almost by mistake. She was too recent an arrival in Rye to have much awareness of the ancient conflicts that periodically divided the townspeople. It is rare indeed to have such a record of the words and beliefs of a poor woman before the advent of newspapers or of much antiquarian interest in folk beliefs and customs (the middle and end of the 17th century respectively).

Most of this book just tells the story—although I pay considerable attention to teasing out its different strands, as well as revealing the confusions between spirits and real people, and the uncertainties and surprises that this extraordinary material presents us with. Chapter 13 relates the case—which is unlike any other in the annals of English witchcraft—to the history of European witchcraft, and suggests that it is not so peculiar when set in a European context. There is a Time Line of the events in the story (or relevant to it) in appendix 1, and some biographical details of the people involved are included in the Names Index.

With a background in social anthropology, in which people are directly observed and questioned about their lives, I do at times find the local records very frustrating, because it is so difficult to find out the assumptions that people made about their world. In particular to understand the *godliness* that was such a major feature of life in Rye, and which has a large role to play in this case (although not in a way that you might expect!). It was utterly different from the nonconformity of the 19th century, that so automatically comes to a modern mind—as often noted by historians—when we think of puritanism (hence the epigraph at the start of this preface). So in the essay at the end of the book I venture out of the local context, using a wide variety of printed sources to explore a particular aspect of godliness—its rejection of laughter—and use the findings to interpret the behaviour of people in Rye. The essay is something of a scamper through a wide range of ideas—a narrative that is intended to make suggestions rather than to prove a theory. But an important aspect of proving anything is to get the hypothesis right in the first place, and that is what I have tried to do here. A more complete treatment of these ideas may be the subject of another book.

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