

THE WITCHES OF LONG COMPTON

Michael Howard

Writing in his book *Murder by Witchcraft* (Arrow Books 1969), Donald McCormick said that ‘ a sweep of country covering parts of Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, ranging from Moreton-in-the-Marsh and Long Compton to Chipping Norton, Stow-in-the-Wold and Bourton-on-the-Water...rippling out as far as Broadway and Charlbury’ has a historical and modern reputation for the practice of witchcraft. This is the area that is today popularly known as the Cotswolds and includes part of the modern region of West Midlands. At its mythological and folkloric centre is the ancient megalithic site of the Rollright Stones on the Warwickshire and Oxfordshire border and the so-called ‘witch village’ of Long Compton described by Julia Phillips in her article ‘The Rollright Stones and the Hallows’ in *The Cauldron* 146 (November 2012).

The Rollrights are not isolated because weathered and eroded they sit in a sacred landscape that includes Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds and Iron Age and Roman settlements. The site is very interesting from an archaeological viewpoint as it is a unique ritual complex comprising a stone circle, the King’s Men, a solitary standing stone, the King Stone, and a collapsed cromlech or chambered burial mound, the Whispering Knights. How these different components of the site got their names is recorded in a local legend of times gone past involving a Danish king, his invading army and a witch related in full by Julia Phillips in her article.

The king and his men arrived at the Rollrights on their journey to conquer England. One version of the tale names him as Rollo and allegedly this is the origin of the name ‘Rollright’. There was a famous Frankish knight called Roland so there may have been some historical confusion. When the king arrived at the stone circle he was confronted by a witch who barred his way. Evidently she was the human guardian of the place or possibly *ageni loci*. Considering the king’s purpose for being there, she may have even been a representation of Sovereignty, the goddess of the land.

It has been claimed that, like so many megalithic sites in the British Isles, the Rollrights had an astronomical significance. Coincidentally, considering the elder tree legend, when viewed from the circle the King Stone is aligned to the sunrise on the summer solstice. A ley-line (landscape alignment) or spirit path is also supposed to run from Long Compton church, possibly built on a former pagan site, to the King Stone and then on to the church at Chipping Norton. When Earth Mysteries researcher and author Paul Deveraux was conducting the Dragon Project investigating ley lines, unusual energies and psychic experiences at megalithic sites he visited the Rollrights. He reported that one of the team members, a ‘well-known archaeologist’, was sitting in a van in the lane near the stones when he saw “A very large, hairy animal” with coarse grey hair walked by. He wondered what it was and when he got out to see there was nothing there.

In local folk belief the King Stone was regarded as a phallic symbol potent with the power of fertility. This fits in with the idea of the would-be ruler as a sacrificial divine king. In 1909 a local historian visited the area and at a local inn was told what a young married woman did if she could not conceive. Apparently she went up to the Rollrights at full moon and pressed her naked breasts against the King Stone. She then went home and made love to her husband. The historian was told that this procedure never failed to produce a healthy baby nine months later.

In the nineteenth-century the Whispering Knights were used as an oracle. They were solemnly visited by local women who put their ears to the stones in the hope of hearing a ghostly voice give predictions of their future. Interestingly, writing in *Pentagram*, the newsletter of the old Witchcraft Research Association, in August 1965 the Cabbalistic magician William Gordon Grey recounted one of the many psychic experiences he had at the

site. He claimed that the cromlech was originally a central chamber made of turf and stones. It was regarded by the Old People as the 'Dwelling of the Gods' and an old woman was placed in it to act as a tribal oracle. She carried a rattle made from a human skull containing bones or small stones and used it to summon the spirits of the ancestral dead, who whispered messages to her for the benefit of the tribe. Gray also claimed that an oath was taken at the King Stone before anyone was allowed to enter the circle. They had to solemnly promise to observe the peace, desist from personal feuds and warfare and abstain from violence. To break the oath meant a nasty death.

Another local folk tradition stated that there was a hollow space or cave directly beneath the stone circle at the Rollrights. This was allegedly the home of the faery folk who came out on moonlit nights and danced around the circle. This story was possibly connected with the common belief that it is impossible to count the seventy-eight stones of the King's Men. It was also very unlucky to move them and anybody who attempted to do so would suffer bad luck and misfortune. One day a local farmer removed a stone to use to repair a bridge. It was dragged it down the hill using a team of horses because it was so heavy. The farmer had not gone far before the horses became distressed and began to sweat and shiver. He released the team from its harnesses and hitched a single horse that was not affected to the stone. He then took it back to the circle and the horse managed to do it quite easily on its own.

As well as the witch who bettered the foreign would-be king of England, the Rollrights have a long reputation for being associated with witchcraft. A witch-hunting commission was convened at Oxford in the sixteenth-century and heard reports of the Witches' Sabbath held at the stone circle. A century later in the reign of King Charles I a 'witche' from Little Rollright was hanged for attempting to kill her niece with magic. She was said to have attended witch meetings held at the Rollright Stones and Boar Hill outside Oxford.

On May 12th 1949, Old May Day by the Old Gregorian Calendar, two concealed witnesses claimed to have witnessed what was described as a modern Witches' Sabbath at the Rollrights. Before fleeing because she was frightened by what she saw, one of the witnesses describing seeing "shadowy figures dancing in a queer fashion and bouncing up and down as though they were on pogo sticks" around the King Stone. This sounds like they may have been dancing on besoms. The second witness, Mr J.F. Rogers of Banbury in Oxfordshire, said he counted about half a dozen people and they were wearing cloaks. As he watched they danced widdershins back-to-back around the standing stone as described in the old witch-trials. Rogers heard "mumblin'" (possibly chanting) and saw the leader of the group, who he described as wearing a "goat-face mask", making "signs and gestures" as he stood by the King Stone.

Following this report being published in local and national newspapers several other people came forward to report strange goings-on at the Rollrights. It was said burnt patches had been found on the ground at the site indicating that fires had been lit at night. During the 1950s there was so much activity at the stones that once a police dog handler was assigned to patrol the site. According to local folklore, the Alsatian dog became so scared during the night that it ran away – and its owner quickly followed! In the 1970s the dowser and writer Tom Graves reported finding the remains of a fire and the mutilated body of a puppy when visiting the stones. He described the atmosphere as "horrific" and afterwards, rather bizarrely, a clergyman was called in to exorcise the pre-Christian site.

Witchcraft was, and still is, rife in the Cotswolds. In the late 1950s Cecil Williamson exhibited his famous collection of witchcraft artefacts in a building at Bourton-on-Water until he was driven out by hostile villagers led by the local vicar. One of the exhibits in the museum was a jar labelled 'witches' flying ointment'. This contained belladonna or deadly nightshade and other narcotic plants. It was allegedly used by local witches who dabbed it under their armpits. When the witch's body heated up when dancing or from the warmth of the fire the ointment gave off strong fumes that produced visions.

Another exhibit was a magical contraption used locally to inflict harm on an enemy. Twelve different woods were burnt on twelve different dates, probably corresponding to the lunar

phases, planetary hours and astrological aspects. More twigs were then erected over the resulting bed of ashes and an wax image representing the head of the enemy was impaled on a hazel stick in the middle. A special poisonous potion made by the witch was dripped from an eggshell decorated with occult sigils on to the head. Shreds of cloth from the victim's garments were also hung on the contraption to provide a psychic link with them.

Williamson also talked of country houses and cottages in the Cotswold where witches had their own personal shrines. One that is known about was in a secret room in Snowhill Manor near Broadway, once the home of a sugar magnate who was an alchemist. When he died and the National Trust took over the house they called in Williamson when a 'magician's den' was discovered. On the floor was a magical circle and pentagram and among the objects found in the room was a 'Hand of Glory' made from human fat.

As mentioned earlier, the picturesque Long Compton with its houses made from honey-coloured Cotswold stone has long been renowned as a 'witch village'. Christianity is supposed to have come to the area as late as the early seventh-century when the Roman Catholic missionary St Augustine, the first archbishop of Canterbury, converted the local lord of the manor. At the entrance to the parish church is the time and weather worn effigy of a woman at whose feet sits a small animal that is either a cat or fox. It is said to date from the fourteenth-century and is supposed to depict one of the local witches of the time with her familiar.

In a field nearby known as The Close is an ancient earthwork that suggests the church may have been built on or near a pre-Christian site. A young man from Long Compton was said to have sold his soul to the Devil in the centre of the field 'where the paths [leys?] cross'. He drew a circle on the ground and recited the Lord's Prayer backwards. The pact was sealed and signed in his own blood and in return Old Nick gave him twelve imps or familiars as his servants. Shortly afterwards the man caused a scandal at Banbury Fair when he summoned a spirit that appeared in the shape of a black cockerel.

Local historian and folklorist Mark Turner tells the story of how a ghost-hunter, author and photographer visited the earthwork with his girlfriend. She became uneasy at the strange atmosphere at the site and decided to return to their car. The man remained behind to take some photographs for a forthcoming book. Suddenly the sky became very stormy and as he raised his camera to take a shot it was wrenched from his hands by some invisible and powerful force. He also received a violent blow on the back and later a large bruise developed on his shoulder. The man also hurried back to the car without taking the photograph he wanted.

There was an old saying in the area that "There are always enough witches in Long Compton to draw a wagon-load of hay up Long Compton Hill." In 1969 a friend of mine who was one of his students took me to see the Oxfordshire cunning man Norman Gills. He was staying at the time with his aged mother in a tumbledown sixteenth-century cottage in the high street at Abingdon that has now been demolished. As part of her training Gills had taken my friend around Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire introducing her to various old ladies who were solitary witches. However Norman also claimed contact with what he described as "the oldest coven in England" and it was located in Long Compton. Some years ago another friend of mine obtained a set of fine stag antlers that had been owned by Gills. Allegedly they had been used ritually by the Long Compton group.

They may have been the same group who were mentioned by locals in the 1940s when the police were investigating the ritualistic murder of an elderly farm labourer called Charles Walton from the nearby village of Lower Quinton. It was said that three men and four women (the magical seven again) still lived in Long Compton and were survivors of a "witchcraft cult" that originated before 1900. Allegedly they still met on Meon Hill, a spooky place associated with legends of the Wild Hunt, complete with a demonic horned huntsman and hell-hounds, and a supernatural black dog. Lower Quinton was also notorious for the practice of witchcraft. There was a strong belief among the villagers even in the twentieth-century in witches and the malefic power of the Evil Eye.

When he was investigating stories of witchcraft in the area around the Rollrights in the

1960s author Donald McCormick was told by locals that in both Long Compton and Lower Quinton “the influence of witches comes and goes like the full moon”. A local clergyman, the Reverend Harvey Bloom, collected many tales about nineteenth-century witches in both villages. One old lady from Long Compton he was told about was reputed to have shapeshifting powers. Allegedly she could change from human form into a mouse, cat or rabbit, always white in colour. Unfortunately one moonlit night while the woman was ‘out and about’ in animal form she was run over by a horse and cart. Next day she was seen walking in the village with her arm bandaged and in a sling.

In another incident three young men from Long Compton were trying to catch a rabbit for their supper. They were repeatedly followed and harassed by a large white hare. It ran in circles around the men preventing them from catching their prey. For superstitious reasons they were too frightened to shoot it as it was regarded as bad luck. The hare even followed the men home and sat on the garden wall glaring at them. They were convinced it was a local witch in animal form or her familiar sent out to spoil their hunting trip.

Another popular story was about a Long Compton woman who believed she had been bewitched. Her relatives had gathered around her sickbed but in her confused state the old woman told them she refused to die until they left the room. They obeyed her request even though they knew she was not in her right mind. Once outside the relatives heard loud noises coming from the bedroom. When they rushed back in they found the furniture had been overturned, boxes and drawers were wide open and the woman’s clothes and possessions were scattered all over the floor. As they opened the door a large black bird flew out of the room and the relatives saw that the woman was dead.

In 1875 a forty-four-year-old feeble minded man, John Haywood, from Long Compton appeared at Warwick assizes charged with murder. It was said that he had stabbed a seventy-nine-year-old woman called Ann Turner with a hay fork. It was an unprovoked attack and caused her death. In his defence Haywood said “she kept toads in her garden” and was a known witch. He claimed she had bewitched him and because of her spells had suffered pain and cramps for many years. Haywood told the court that Turner possessed the power of the Evil Eye and had also ‘witched’ the cattle belonging to local farmers. She was supposed to be one of sixteen alleged witches living in the village.

Haywood told the court he had attacked the witch to draw blood so that he could be released from her influence. One day returning drunk from hay-making he saw Ann Turner in the village street and stabbed her in the head and legs with his pitchfork. This was the old practice to make an alleged witch bleed and was believed to destroy her power. Haywood claimed it was never his intention to kill his victim. Unfortunately he hit a major artery and, despite the administrations of a doctor who was quickly called to the scene, Turner died from her wounds due to shock and loss of blood. Haywood had been accompanied by other farm workers who witnessed the attack. They summoned the local police constable and Haywood was arrested.

So convinced was John Haywood that his victim was a witch that he asked the judge to have her corpse dug up and weighed against the church Bible. This was an ancient test carried out in earlier centuries to ascertain if the accused practised witchcraft or not. Not surprisingly the judge refused to carry out this archaic and rather distasteful act. Haywood was found guilty as charged and only escaped hanging because he was declared to be delusional. He was sent to an asylum for the criminally insane where he died fifteen years later.

Although it was different in its methodology, the Haywood case was recalled by some of the local people seventy years later when an elderly farm labourer Charles Walton was found horribly murdered near his home in Lower Quinton. When the old man did not return home after work on St Valentine’s Day 1945 his niece raised the alarm. A search party was sent out and found Walton’s mutilated body in a field on the slopes of Meon Hill where he had been cutting hedges for a local farmer. He had been pinned to the ground with his own pitchfork and the blade of his billhook had been used to slash his face, throat and chest in the shape of a cross. The curved blade of the hook was still embedded in the wound. It has been suggested that Anne Tennant, the alleged witch killed in 1875 at Long Compton, may have

been Walton's great-grandmother.

The method used to kill Charles Walton was similar to an Anglo-Saxon practice. It was called *stacung*, stanging or 'sticking' and involved impaling the bodies of *wiccians* or witches with spikes. In the 1940s the schoolmaster at Lower Quinton, A.W. Dobson, reported that the local blacksmith had shown him antique iron spikes once used to "pin down victims during black magic rites". In reality they were more likely to have been used to stake the corpses of suspected witches to stop them "walking at night" and haunting the living.

At first xenophobic suspicion fell on Italian prisoners-of-war held in a nearby Army camp and there was also talk of a dispute over money owed by a local man to Walton for farm work. Robbery was suspected when it was discovered that the labourer's old tin watch case was missing, even though it was of little value. However the mystery deepened when it was revealed that instead of a watch the old man carried a round, flat and highly polished black glass in the case. It was suggested that perhaps this mysterious object was what his murderer was after and it was the cause of Walton's savage death.

Detectives from Scotland Yard's Murder Squad were called in to assist the local police who were out of their depth. When the detectives from London began to question the villagers they discovered Walton was very much an anti-social loner and was not liked by everybody. In fact he was considered a bit odd and eccentric because of his interest in witchcraft. It was said he claimed to be able to talk to the animals and birds, was a 'horse whisperer' and told people that as a young man he had secretly spied on local witch meetings. As a ploughboy in 1885 he had even witnessed the apparition of the Black Dog of Meon Hill. He saw it on the way home on nine successive evenings on the way home from work (nine being another significant magical number). Sightings of the creature were supposed to be an omen of death and on the ninth day Walton heard that his sister had died.

When he was investigating the murder twenty years later for his book, Donald McCormick was told by an elderly informant that Charles Walton was introduced to witchcraft by a servant girl who allegedly had put spells on cattle by roasting a cow's heart on a fire. However the farm labourer never actually joined the witch-cult, but he had secretly witnessed the meets of a local coven. For that reason, it was said, he had to be disposed of before he revealed too much. While this is not beyond the bounds of possibility, if it was true then they waited a very long time!

An alternative and much more sensational theory was that Walton's murder was some kind of ritual killing and for a while this was taken seriously by the police. The controversial Egyptologist and writer on witchcraft Dr Margaret Murray did a 'Miss Marple' and disguised as an artist went on holiday to Lower Quinton to investigate the murder. Afterwards she made a fool of herself by telling the press that, despite the fact he was an old man and therefore an unlikely victim for a fertility ritual, Walton had been a *Wicker Man* type human sacrifice. This story was later elaborated in a series of articles published in a Sunday newspaper in the 1950s. A mentally disturbed woman came forward and claimed that Walton had been ritually killed by well-known occultists from Birmingham and London.

Charles Walton was possibly murdered by someone who feared his alleged powers as a cunning man or because he was in possession of a magical object – the black scrying glass in his watch case – the killer or killers wanted. The most prosaic explanation is that he was murdered during a violent argument over money he was owed. The murderer, possibly influenced by the Haywood case, then added the ritualistic elements to throw the police off the scent. Although the murder was never solved that was the opinion of the detectives on the case. They did not have enough evidence to charge anyone and the prime suspect died some years later.

The rumours of the involvement of witchcraft in the Charles Walton case indicate the strong and persisting beliefs about the subject in the Little Rollright, Lower Quinton, Meon Hill and Long Compton area at the time. It was Donald McCormick's belief that there was a revival of traditional witchcraft in the area just before the Second World War with the foundation of new covens. He claims that this development had a connection with the British Intelligence Service and Nazi spies. Today the Rollright Stones have passed from private ownership to a

charitable trust, and are used with permission by many neo-pagan, magical and Wiccan groups for their rituals. However there are still rumours of an old coven in Long Compton that may have a connection with the village's witchy past.

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