

The magic touch

The carving of root vegetables into grotesque faces is only one of many attempts to ward off the advances of evil through the centuries, discovers Ian Morton



THEY were everywhere. A horde of lurking ephemeral beings, some merely mischievous, but most of them malevolent, beset the quaking populace throughout this haunted nation. Enumerated by Elizabethan folklorist and Kent MP Reginald Scot in his 1584 book *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, demons were a constant presence, especially in the countryside. Although his Christian intention was to expose superstition and trickery and protect the poor, aged and simple folk who were only too readily accused of witchcraft, Scot's work became an influential 'black bible'. It was consulted by Shakespeare to formulate Macbeth's witches and inspired several other playwrights. His exposé of stage tricks went on to inform two centuries of professional magicians. It had a long life.

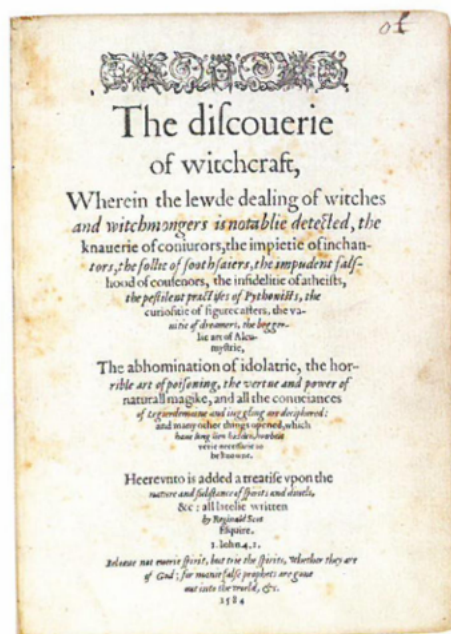
Further editions were published in 1651 and 1654, before an extended version was issued in 1665, which then reappeared two centuries



Top: What lurks amid our darkened trees? Above: Macbeth's malevolent witches three



Begone, foul fiend! One of the protective gargoyles that guards Westminster Abbey



tormented souls and evil spirits were discouraged by means of good magic—grotesque masks fashioned from root vegetables. The ugly faces carved into Hallowe'en pumpkin lanterns, illuminated from within by candles, are their direct descendants. 'Witch bulbs' of shiny blown glass were hung in windows to dissuade hags from entering the premises and survive today as the baubles on Christmas trees. Grimacing gargoyles, known in Somerset as hunky punks, date from the time when they were thought to turn satanic beings away from sacred and important buildings.

Some early churches, castles and cathedrals carried over their doors and windows the most bizarre deterrent of all, the ultimate and intimate symbol of a crude female figure displaying an exaggerated pudendum. This peculiarity originated in 11th-century France and Spain; the idea was apparently brought to these islands by returning pilgrims. Ireland has some 100 examples and a notable English survival is found on the 12th-century church at Kilpeck in Herefordshire. This carving, known as a *sheela na gig* (an Irish term), reflected a belief that such a brazen display frightened away Satan and his followers. Some scholars prefer to regard it as a warning against lust, others see a fertility significance and a feminist interpretation argues it was really a symbol of empowerment. Knickers weren't devised until the 19th century and it has been suggested that, in earlier times, a hoisted skirt would have been a gesture of contempt, with the same

later, when the Victorians were chilling to their own Gothic brand of horror and making the occult personal through spiritualism, seances, mediums and hypnotism. These antics were debunked by sceptics as 'all smoke and mirrors'. Scot would have approved of that.

The battle between good and evil had ever been constant. Against the army of malignant forces, real or imagined, the Dark Ages and succeeding centuries had resulted in an equally impressive array of defences known

to etymologists as apotropaic magic (from the Greek for turning away). Talismans, amulets, crucifixes, crossed fingers, incantations, fragments of the true Cross, fragments of saints' bones (both plentifully on sale on pilgrimage routes and at sacred destinations) and sundry other charms were carried in bag, pouch and satchel to counter unpropitious omens, turn away the evil eye and deny the witch's curse.

It was thought, too, that potent images could frighten away the ungodly. Vestiges of magical as well as religious symbolism remain apparent today. During Samhain, the Celtic new year that followed harvest,

Above: Scot's treatise of 1584. Below: Good magic: pumpkins to dismay evil spirits





Left: St Mary and St David, Kilpeck, Herefordshire. Middle: Remembering Pendle's witches in 2012. Right: The sheela na gig at Kilpeck

disconcerting and dismissive effect as bared male buttocks—the 'Braveheart moonie'.

Tastes for a parallel world never flagged; a mid-19th-century reappraisal of the medieval rural spirit world appeared in a 13-year series of popular papers written by Yorkshire historian Michael Aislabie Denham. Drawing on Scot's treatise, his so-called *Denham Tracts* recalled the traditional and mainly regional names by which almost 200 'apparitions of every shape, make, form, fashion, kind and description' had been known: shelly-coats, tantarrabobs, nicknevins, wirrikows, thrummy-caps, miffies and gringes, to mention but a handful. In the untutored countryside, many were still current.

'There was not a village in England that had not its own peculiar ghost,' noted Denham. 'Nay, every lone tenement, castle or mansion which could boast of any antiquity had its own bogle, its spectre or its knocker. The church, churchyard and crossroads were all haunted. Every green lane had its boulder-stone on which an apparition kept watch at night. Every common had its circle of fairies belonging to it. And there was scarcely a shepherd to be met with who had not seen a spirit.'

Trees were enlisted in the battle. There were unfriendly trees—English folklore had it that a malicious willow could uproot itself and stalk the traveller—but there were more good than bad. Through Norse and Druidic mythology, the birch had the power to drive out evil, hence the Roman fasces and the birch rod formerly used for flogging in Europe. Witches were said to fly on besoms with birch shafts, yet a birch twig carried by the virtuous warded off baleful influences.

Despite its modest dimensions and straggly growth, the elder was sacred to the Earth Mother and was neither burned nor turned into furniture. When planted close to dwellings, elder discouraged witches and the Devil himself; boughs placed in doorways excluded misfortune; twigs gathered just after midsummer and dried leaves hung round the necks of people and their animals held the same friendly power. Elder leaves scattered

There was not a village in England that had not its own peculiar ghost

over an individual and then tossed to the four winds dismissed ill fortune. Happily, the potent elder was readily available to the poorest and the humblest.

Celtic lore revered three primary magical trees, as Kipling recorded in 1906 in *Puck of Pook's Hill*: 'Of all the trees that grow so fair/Old England to adorn/Greater are none beneath the sun/Than oak and ash and thorn.' The noble oak reigned supreme, its topmost branches reaching for Heaven as its roots probed the underworld. Druid rites were performed in oak groves and the very name of their culture is said to emanate from *duir*, their word for the oak. The ash likewise reached high and low and was the Viking world tree Yggdrasil, its wood hugely valued for

weaponry, tools and coach and cart axles. If a sick child was passed through a cleft ash sapling that was then bound up, the patient was expected to thrive as the tree healed.

The blackthorn had a double role. Its Celtic name was *straf*, from which we have strife, and, as an omen of conflict, it represented the waning moon and the darker side. Witches were said to carry blackthorn sticks with thorns still on the business end and convicted hags ideally met their end on blackthorn pyres.

Conversely, the wood was used for physical protection and employed in exorcism rites. Amulets with dried sloes or thorns banished evil. Meditation beneath a blackthorn tree purified the mind, eased melancholy and helped in confronting the inevitability of death. To rid oneself of a tormentor, the victim could carve a candle into human shape while reciting the oppressor's name, sticking blackthorn barbs into the head, heart and stomach. Once the lit candle had burned down and toasted the barbs, the persecution was over.

Other trees had a variety of apotropaic functions. The yew symbolised death, the Romans favouring it for funeral pyres, and early Christians believed that Jesus died on a yew cross. Its branches were burned to communicate with the spirits of the deceased and a yew or apple wand conjured fruitfulness and longevity, discouraging evil influences. A holly threshold deterred witches in the doorway and a rowan beam over the fireplace stopped them from coming down the chimney. There was, indeed, plenty of good magic with which to combat the bad. 🐉



WORLD OF CLEFT



Winterborne Zelston

Blandford Forum, Dorset DT11 9EU

Tel: 01929 459245 • Fax: 01929 459011 • Mobile: 07831 101671

Email: richard@winterbornezelstonfencing.co.uk • www.winterbornezelstonfencing.co.uk

Also Iron Fencing and Gates. *Please send for brochure.*