

Why was the last witch trial important to the heritage of Hertford?

The Case of Jane Wenham: “A Witch or a Bitch”

The last witch to be tried and traileed in England lived in Walkern, Hertfordshire and was brought to court in the Hertford Assizes in Shire Hall.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” (King James Bible, Exodus 22:18)

The misinterpretation of this biblical teaching was responsible for the mass executions of women believed to be witches, roughly between 1484 and 1750.

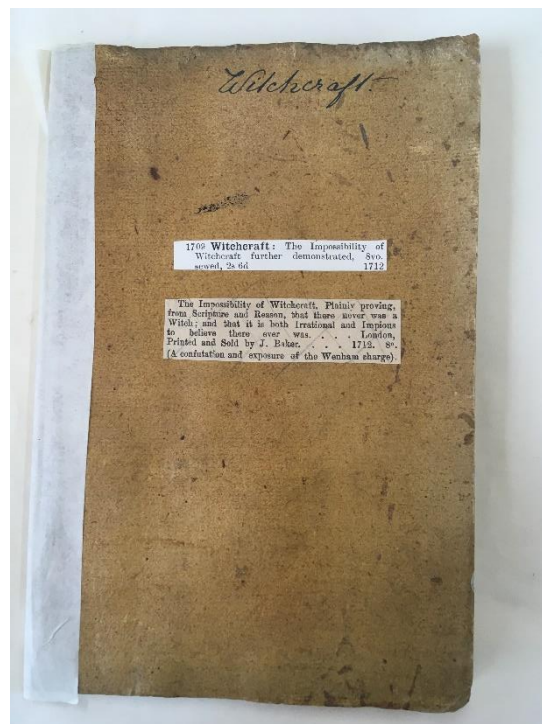
Witchcraft, and practicing witchcraft was not made illegal in England until the 16th Century. Where upon the passing and ratifying of the Witchcraft Act 1563 made the “use, practise, or exercise any Witchcraft, Enchantment, Charm, or Sorcery, whereby any person shall happen to be killed or destroyed”, should be punishable by death. (Gibson 2006)

The focus of this blog is Jane Wenham. Wenham was the last woman to be tried, and found guilty of witchcraft in England in 1712. She was pardoned by the judge of the Hertford Assizes, and was granted the royal pardon by Queen Anne in the same year.

The story of Jane Wenham begins as most of the cases of witchcraft did: suspicion, allegations and the lower/working class belief in the ‘supernatural.’

Local farm owner John Chapman was one of the first people to have suspicions Wenham was a witch when, upon her asking Chapman’s farmhand for some straw she walked away muttering under her breath. Supposedly, this drove the farmhand to run to a neighbouring farm and retrieve some straw, clearly angering Chapman who was convinced the Wenham had bewitched his employee.

Chapman is famously known to have gone on to call her a ‘Witch and a Bitch’, not sure that is fair punishment for his employee running off on a jolly!



Front cover of ‘The Impossibility of Witchcraft’ booklet, printed by J. Barker in London (1712)

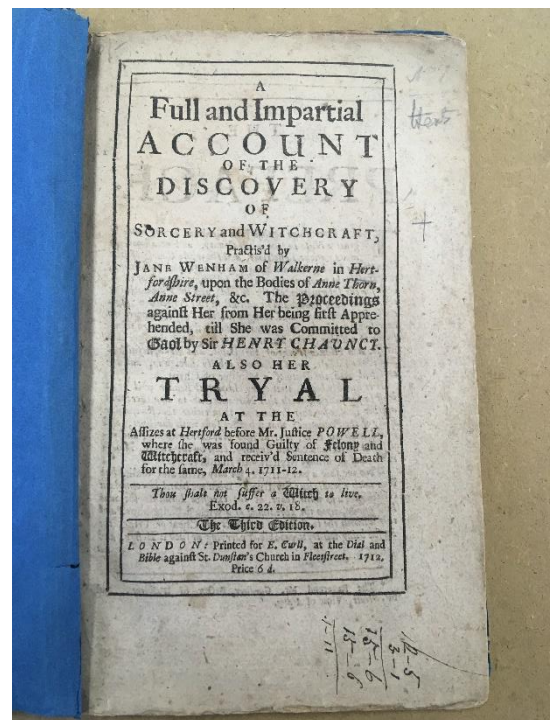
After many other allegations, she was arrested on 13th February (let's hope it wasn't a Friday too). She was searched by 4 women for the marks of a witch, upon her body of which there were none. Along with other various measures to try and prove Wenham guilty, she was transferred to Hertford jail where she would await the guilty verdict, before being pardoned.

William Cowper, first Earl Cowper, came to Wenham's rescue and begged the Queen for a pardon. Cowper died in Panshanger, Hertford in 1723.

Jane Wenham's legacy is still being remembered in Hertfordshire. Her last years, including before and after the trial have been turned into a play by playwright Rebecca Lenkiewicz, 'The Last Witch of Walkern' and opened at Watford in 2015.

Jane Wenham and the last witch trial were hugely important to Hertford at the time and are still pertinent to the area today. The outcome of Wenham's trial sparked the legal process to revoke the Witchcraft Act 1563, setting a legal precedent for the future. In addition, she was held in Hertford jail and spent her whole life in Hertfordshire.

FINALLY, WE CAN BUT WONDER WHAT QUEEN ANNE'S THOUGHTS WERE AS SHE WAS GRANTING WENHAM THE ROYAL PARDON, HOWEVER THE WORDS OF FRANCIS BRAGGE'S DEFENCE AGAINST WENHAM MAY PROVIDE US WITH A GOOD GUESS...."(THE TRIAL OF JANE WENHAM IS) CONFLICTING OF NOTHING, BUT A FEW MISREPRESENTATIONS AND RIDICULOUS CONJECTURE, I DON'T THINK WORTH TAKING ANY FARTHER NOTICE OF!"



First page of clergy Francis Bragge's 'Full Confutation and Defence of the Proceedings against Jane Wenham', printed by Dial and Bible (1712)

