

# They Wur Cheust Folk

*13 poems for some of those accused of witchcraft*



*Ragnhild Ljosland & Helen K Woodsford-Dean*

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## 13 poems for some of those accused of witchcraft

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## Thank you

This project would simply not have happened without a great deal of patience, encouragement, time, generosity and support. Thank you. Apologies to anyone inadvertently missing off this list – it is not exhaustive and not in any order other than alphabetically by surname for individuals (please contact us by email via [info@spiritualorkney.co.uk](mailto:info@spiritualorkney.co.uk) if we have inadvertently missed you off and you would like your name to be added).

Orkney Heritage Society  
Orkney Islands Council  
The Orkney Library and Archive in  
Kirkwall (and all staff)  
The Orkney Museum  
St Magnus Cathedral  
Orkney Builders Ltd  
The Orkney News  
Highland Park Distillery  
Tesco (Kirkwall)

BBC Radio Orkney  
The Orcadian (newspaper)  
Kirkwall and St Ola Community  
Council  
St Magnus Players  
Centre for Nordic Studies  
The Church of Scotland  
Voluntary Action Orkney  
Orkney Interfaith  
The Scottish Pagan Federation  
The communities of Kirkwall and  
Orkney

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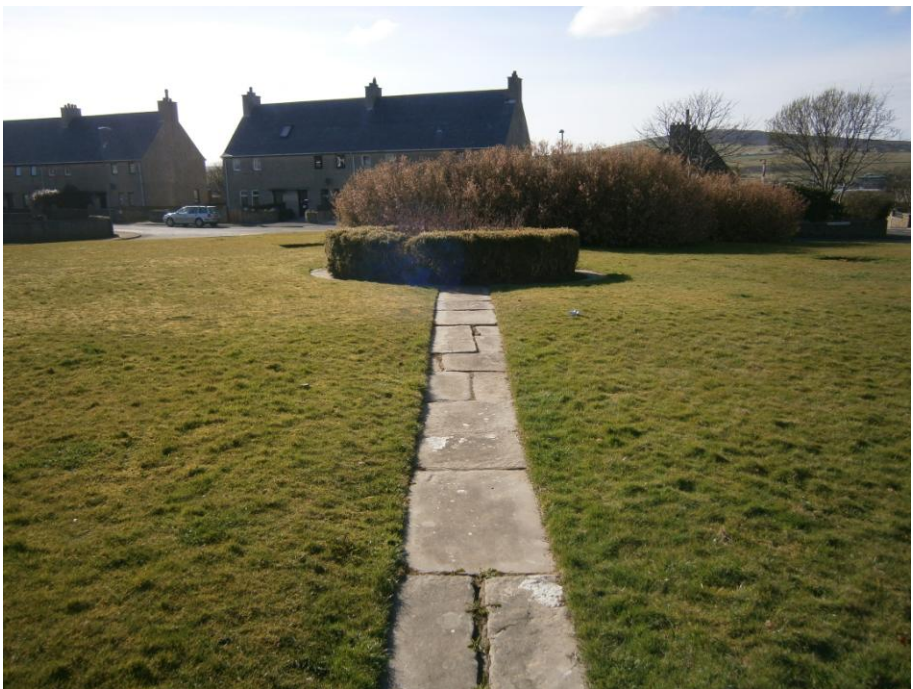
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# **Orkney's Memorial to the Historic Victims of the Witchcraft Trials – a brief summary of the project**

Helen K Woodsford-Dean (with Ragnhild Ljosland)

At the top of Clay Loan, amidst a housing estate and with a magnificent view over the city of Kirkwall, there is a bare patch of green land, mysteriously undeveloped (HY 453 104). This is Gallow Ha, the site of public executions in Orkney, but unmarked as such.



Most of the stories of Orkney witches and their associated witch trials date from the early seventeenth century; mainly occurring between the 1590s and the 1650s. This was a period in which there was a genuine and widespread belief in the existence of witches and when no one seemed to expect God to do good in compensation. These beliefs were fuelled by superstition, high mortality, and poor access to health care, and propelled by a particularly twisted theology and a judicial system that was constructed around it.

Witches were believed to derive their supernatural powers from the devil or from evil spirits such as the fairies, and it is this association which was the issue upon which witches were tried, whether that was in a theological or legal proceedings. Any mysterious happenings, or coincidences, could be used to infer this relationship, or witches could have been seen in the devil's or fairies' company, or might confess to it.

Orkney was one of the places in Scotland where the witch crazes were particularly rife, given the relative size of the population.

Since 2013, Dr Ragnhild Ljosland and I worked on a project to install a small memorial to the victims of the witch-trials. The original inspiration came from a lecture given by Professor Liv Willumsen in 2012, invited by the Centre for Nordic Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, in which she made comparisons between the witch trials in Northern Norway with those in Scotland, and spoke about the modern memorial at Steilneset in Finnmark, Norway.

Although an installation of the scale at Steilneset was unlikely to be viable in Orkney, we were aware that memorials to those accused of witchcraft have been introduced elsewhere in the UK, where they have tended to attract quiet approval with the public. For example, the memorial at Forfar Loch Country Park, where a headstone has been erected in a clearing simply inscribed with the words 'The Forfar Witches, Just People', and the brass horseshoe plaque laid at Paisley to commemorate the execution of seven people accused of witchcraft in 1697.

When Ragnhild and I first proposed the construction of a memorial to the historic victims of the witchcraft trials in Orkney, we both felt that the undeveloped area at the top of Clay Loan was the natural location; our

preference was for the installation to be sited directly within the circular area of box hedging which allegedly marks the site of the town gallows in the past.

We discussed a number of ideas and materials; we both favoured a sun-dial because of the combined symbolism of sunlight as a natural, positive image, together with time as a healer. We initially pictured the sun-dial as being made of a single piece of blue-grey Orkney sandstone, shaped like one of the Standing Stones of Stenness, inscribed with 'Just People', or similar wording, perhaps rendered in Orcadian dialect.

The original concept is shown in the photo-montage (below):



Ragnhild and I started by entering a phase of raising awareness and interest in the project by consulting with interested parties including local officials, heritage charities and organisations, community representatives, faith representatives, and residents.



On investigation, we discovered that the land at Gallow Ha belongs to Orkney Islands Council (OIC). It was suggested that we put our proposal to their Asset Management Sub-Committee, in the form of a detailed report to be discussed by elected members. At the same time we were advised that OIC's preference was to communicate via a 'lead organisation' who would represent our project. Given their previous interest and approval, we approached Orkney Heritage Society (OHS) to be our 'lead organisation'; OHS seemed the natural choice given their excellent reputation in Orkney and their prior (and current) experience of successfully delivering heritage projects. In addition, their founder member, Ernest Marwick, was probably the person who has done the most research on the Orkney witch trials and made the court records available in transcription.

We presented our project in a detailed form to OHS' Committee and, although they were supportive, their prior experience of similar installs led them to raise practical concerns about the costs, future maintenance, viability, insurance and, most importantly, the health and safety issues associated with a metal gnomon sticking out at eye-level.

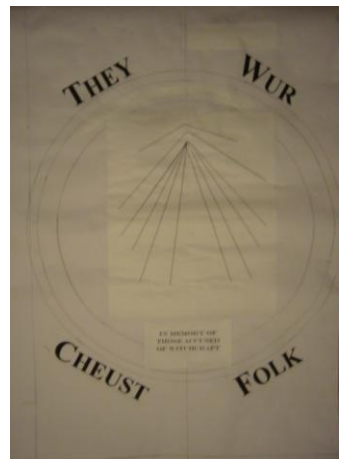
So, Ragnhild and I reviewed our project and suggested instead a much-reduced and simpler memorial. Our revised suggestion was to exchange one of the existing flag-stones, leading up to the circular box-hedging area (right), with a carved flag-stone. This flag-stone to be a single piece of blue-grey Orkney sandstone. This met with approval by the OHS and our proposal was put to OIC's Asset Management Sub-Committee on 2 June 2016, when it was approved by the elected members.



The sun-dial design is still central but is now rendered in a symbolic and abstract form. The particular design was taken from the grave-slab of Patrick Prince (died 1673), which can still be seen in the south side of the west end of the nave of St Magnus Cathedral (below).



The main wording is: 'they were just folk', written in Orcadian dialect (right):



At this stage, Ragnhild and I were joined by Tanya McGill, who offered to share her experience of making funding applications. A few members of Orkney Heritage Society then formed a sub-committee for the purposes of advancing this project. Spencer Rosie kindly chaired the sub-committee, and we were joined by Lucy Gibbon (archive experience) and Hayley Green (project management experience) – making us six in total.

Early in 2018, Tanya led our funding application to OIC's Cultural Fund, applied for via OHS. We were gratefully awarded £1000; this amount to cover the install, a creative day, and inauguration events.

OIC further advised that no additional permissions were required from them. The proposed installation was now of a form that Planning Permission was not required, and the permissions already granted by elected members in 2016 still stood. OIC's remaining stipulation was that the physical installation of the paving slab should be to the standard expected by OIC and that this would be most easily achieved by using an OIC approved builder.

From the beginning of the project, we have been keen to make reference to the cathedral as much as possible, mainly because many of those historically accused of witch-craft may have been tried and imprisoned there (one of the many unique features of St Magnus Cathedral is that it is the only cathedral in the British Isles to have a dungeon incorporated into its fabric: namely Marwick's Hole, a bottle-neck dungeon, still visible in the south transept). Thus our immediately choice for stone-mason was Colin Watson, who had been the cathedral's stone-mason (now retired).

At our request, Colin procured a suitable stone, shaped it, and carved our design upon it. Colin is a speaker of Orcadian dialect and he translated our phrase 'they were just folk' for us. Colin advised changing the sun-dial design slightly, with our full approval, and he completed the carving early August 2018 (next page):



We chose Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2018 for our creative workshop day as it was the nearest date to Samhain that also fell within the school holidays – our intention was to make the day accessible to families. Ragnhild and I facilitated a day of creative and reflective activities around the whole concept of witch-trials. The focus of the day was on making this creativity relevant to our contemporary society; we aimed to do this by reflecting on how easily people still ‘blame’ others. We were assisted by many of Orkney’s talented writers, artists, musicians, and story-tellers who performed or ran participatory workshops. These included: Sarah Jane Gibbon, Sheena Graham George, Jeanne Bouza Rose, Amber Connolly, Marita Lück, and Corwen Broch.

In the morning, historical background information was provided as a stimulus to creativity. This was sourced from material from the Orkney Archive (Lucy

Gibbon) plus recent archaeological finds (Dan Lee) and presented together with songs (Sarah Jane Gibbon) and story-telling (Marita Lück). We also filled and charged our own 'witch-bottle', which was kindly donated by Andrew Appleby (also known as the 'Harry Potter' orkneypottery.co.uk).

After lunch we held creative workshops where participants were encouraged to make music, tell stories, write, paint, and print. The primary intention of the day was for our community to produce material to go into a time-capsule which would be buried under the memorial at Gallow Ha; having provided background stimuli in the morning, we all got creative in the afternoon. The focus was on making this creativity relevant to our contemporary society by reflecting on how easily people still 'blame' others.

Ragnhild ran one of these workshops; it involved writing letters to some of the accused. In preparation, Ragnhild had taken some silhouettes to symbolically represent some of the victims and listed the 'crimes' of which they had been accused (below). To encourage attendance and publicise this creative day, these silhouettes were posted on our project's FaceBook page ('Orkney's memorial to the victims of the witchcraft trials'). I started to write a poetic response to each victim, some of which were also posted on-line. The notes on the accused and poetic responses are provided here, in this ebook, together with reading notes where they might be useful.



My original intention had been to respond to each silhouette on a daily basis, as each silhouette was published, but the poem for Jonet Forsyth, also known as 'The Storm Witch', broke my intentions because I was too emotionally involved. This story is now part of Orkney folklore and there is a great deal bound up in Jonet's story, not least whether or not she was rescued by her sweetheart 'Ben'. Anyway, this poem just wouldn't 'birth' and my 'muse' left me ... I decided, with Ragnhild's encouragement, to publish all responses as an ebook and hence this poetry project was 'completed' by the beginning of 2019. The poems are presented in more or less the order in which they were written.

Much of the material produced on the creative day was too large for the time capsule, so it has been given to the Orkney Archive to hold. A selection of items were chosen to go in the time capsule, including the witch bottle (made by Andrew Appleby) and a book of prints (designed by Jeanne Bouza Rose but made by many workshop participants). The time capsule also includes a USB drive on which all material produced has been stored digitally. A copy of the material on the USB drive is also stored on a DVD held by the Orkney Archive. Some of the artwork produced on our creative day has been exhibited on our FaceBook page, more will follow, and we also plan to exhibit some of it via an on-line 'virtual memorial' (news of this will be released to our FaceBook page).

At the end of our creative day, we visited the Orkney Museum to view some relevant artefacts, followed by some contemplative time at St Magnus Cathedral towards the end of the afternoon. At the cathedral we talked about Marwick's Hole (the dungeon in which many of the accused may have been held) and Fran Flett Hollinrake played a haunting tune on fiddle, entitled 'Marwick's Hole', which she had composed originally as part of Sheena Graham George's earlier sound installation. We also looked at the 'witch' marks that had been scratched on the walls, possibly as protection (page 48).

In the early evening, Ragnhild and I provided a guided 'witchy walk' through Victoria Street, Kirkwall, to the bottom of Clay Loan. This was the route which is generally agreed to be the one which the condemned took, although they would have continued up the steep hill of Clay Loan to Gallow Ha and their deaths. This tour was originally devised by Fran Flett Hollinrake as part of the Kirkwall Town Heritage Initiative. Although, from St Magnus Cathedral, it is a more direct route to Gallow Ha via Palace Road, it is possible that the



condemned were taken via the road now known as Victoria Street in order to maximise their exposure to the population of Kirkwall – this public condemnation being an important element of the torture and destruction of an alleged witch. From the bottom of Clay Loan, the condemned would have continued up the steep hill of Clay Loan to Gallow Ha and their deaths.

Orkney Builders Ltd generously offered to complete the install, including burial of the time capsule, free of charge and this took place early in 2019 prior to our inauguration day.

Our inauguration day was held on Saturday March 9<sup>th</sup> 2019. This date was chosen because it was the Saturday immediately following International Women's Day, and we wanted to acknowledge that the majority of those accused of witch-craft were women. Our honoured guest for the day was Professor Liv Helene Willumsen (Arctic University of Norway) – the original catalyst for our project – who opened the day with a short speech and took part in key aspects of the main activities.

The day started at the King Street Halls – our 'base' for the day – with the St Magnus Players providing a scene from George Mackay Brown's play 'Witch' (below), award-winning writer Ashleigh Angus reading her short story 'Unknown, Unknown, death c.1629', and Kate Fletcher and Corwen Broch teaching those present their song which had been composed at the creative workshop day back in October.



From the King Street Halls, participants walked to St Magnus Cathedral for a memorial service of reflection in St Rognvald's Chapel. Musicians Kate and Corwen were there to greet us with background music from the period. Then, arranged in a circle, with the 'audience' all around, eight speakers had been pre-selected to say the Lord's Prayer, one line at a time, in a variety of dialects and languages. All of the dialects and languages were those which were likely to have been spoken in St Magnus Cathedral during the past 400 years. They included: 'standard' English, Orcadian, Scots, Norwegian, ancient Greek, Latin, Orkney Norn, and Flemish. The speakers were arranged as male-female alternating voices to represent the Orkney community. In the middle of the circle, facing outwards, the lines of the prayer were repeated silently back by Sarah Wilkins and Fran Flett Hoillinrake in British Sign Language (below). This was designed to be symbolic of the way that so many of the alleged historical victims were unable to reply to the charges. Accompanied by Kate and Corwen, Flett Hollinrake then played her composition: 'Marwick's Hole'.





Those participants who then wished to, gathered outside the west end of St Magnus Cathedral before walking together, as an act of contemplation, along Victoria Street and up Clay Loan (below). As stated above, this may have been the route which the condemned took to their deaths.



Once at Gallow Ha, a group of about 50 people gathered for the unveiling of the memorial, including invited guests such as Professor Liv Willumsen, MP Alistair Carmichael, and the Rev. Fraser Macnaughton of St Magnus Cathedral.

Thirteen sheets of material had been prepared and laid to cover the flagstone, along with thirteen short readings. Thirteen was chosen because of its association with evil and witchcraft and also because it had been approximately thirteen generations (about 325 years) since the last person was accused and executed for witchcraft in Orkney. Thirteen readers each read two lines of the following poem – written by myself and Rev. David McNeish – with each reading, one ‘veil’ from the flagstone memorial was removed:

*The flames die down, the embers grey  
The wind whips up their dust  
Another victim's bones decay  
And cry of breach of trust  
How many stood in judgement here  
Accepting what was done?  
In silence, hope will disappear  
Injustice then has won  
Remember then those that they chose  
And grieve at cruelty  
They could not win, could only lose  
Accusers walking free  
Pain, anger, blame, and hurt, and hate  
Rejection, terror, fear  
This act demands they dissipate  
No scapegoats needed here  
Our witches now have different names  
Yet still we dread their sight  
The powerful making more false claims  
That just inflame the fright  
Truth will illuminate these lies  
And heal this ancient crime  
Sunlight bestowed upon the skies  
Redeems the passing time  
We pledge to stand against the crowd  
When might's not right but merely loud*



Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland,  
helps unveil the memorial,  
with Prof. Liv H Willumsen standing behind  
(in red)

The topmost veil was black to represent a shroud, then ten sheets of red flame-like material, followed by a grey sheet to represent ash, and finally a white sheet to represent fresh starts. One 'veil' of material was removed by each reader. The last reader, Rev. David McNeish, led those assembled to repeat the final rhyming couplet as a community oath. The symbolism was about recognising how easily witch-hunts can take place and about being brave enough to stand up, as a lone voice, against mob rule when required – and as necessary today as in the past.

To conclude the inauguration, Kate and Corwen led those assembled in singing the song composed at the creative workshop day.

After a brief pause for lunch, participants returned to King Street Halls for an afternoon of academic lectures. Chaired by Dr Ragnhild Ljosland the speakers were Professor Liv Helene Willumsen, Tim Morrison, Jocelyn Rendall, Dan Lee and Marita Lück. The day's events finished in fine Orkney tradition with a raffle, the main prize being a bottle of Highland Park whisky generously donated by the distillery themselves.

Although this project took seven years from inception to inauguration, not rushing it through was necessary because the historical events which it commemorates are painful ones for any community to revisit. As this project had the potential to become controversial, all those involved wanted to ensure that the project progressed in full consultation with the community and stakeholders throughout, to make certain that everyone's concerns had been fully considered. The process was as important as the end result.

Ragnhild and I have always believed that it is appropriate, viable and desirable for Orkney to have its own memorial to the victims of the historic witch-trials. Our intention throughout has been to install a positive memorial with the message of 'never again' and to commemorate an important episode in Orkney's history. The aim is to look ahead together as a community, a community that aims to be free of prejudice and remains optimistic about continuing to be so in the future. The memorial is discrete and modest – one which is perhaps not easily found and which has to be deliberately sought – implicit in its design is a symbolism that is powerful in its own quiet, strong and persistent way; this holds a different type of potency than a highly visible

monument. The finished install has now been handed back to OIC and it is hoped that the costs of future maintenance will be minimal.

The memorial itself has become an additional, albeit minor, tourist 'attraction' for Kirkwall and highlights a fascinating part of Orkney's history. It features on the Kirkwall Heritage App., developed through the Kirkwall Town Heritage initiative. It is understood that the memorial site has become a place of quiet reflection for many.

If you have any questions about these events, please contact us via our FaceBook page: 'Orkney's memorial to the victims of the witchcraft trials'. Any updates and news will be posted on FaceBook.

## Barbara Boundie

Accused of:

- Speaking with the Devil
- Threatening to let the Devil blow corn in the air
- Travelling with an unbaptised child
- Fainting by the roadside
- Being abducted by fairies
- Saying she can discover witches
- Seeing the Devil with another woman
- Witnessing another using a potion
- Dancing with the Devil and 99 witches at Moaness in Hoy

The accusations against Barbara Boundie started this poetry project; the line ‘Travelling with an unbaptised child’ just wouldn’t leave my head so ...

### **‘Travelling with an unbaptised child’**

And a wonky cat whose almost human mew  
Brings me weaving and tripping to your door  
I carry a burden of demons on my back  
Whilst this black strangeling suckles my third teat  
The father was a dark man, Christening was not his way  
I cannot name him but you’ll ken the bonny snood in my fair hair  
Maybe the last farmer forgot to bury it with his wife  
And spent it on a quick upright between the peat stacks  
What might *your* husband offer?  
The wind’s got up and your door swings on its pivot  
One word can kill, so I keep downcast and stifle a yawn

## Reading notes:

The whole point of this piece of writing is to be confusing, I want the reader to question who some of the 'you' and 'your' refers to, hence the last line (which I changed several times), please do ask *whose* word can kill. The farmer's wife (presumably) and the speaker (Barbara presumably) are *both* victims and accusers in this situation, they are both equally vulnerable. Question the time too, is this then or now?

*Whose* cat is it? And is it a familiar, with that human call? Has it been with the speaker long, or has it just run up to greet her as she approaches the door? If so, *whose* familiar is it?

*Weaving* is a reference to the norns and witches weaving as spell-casting activities.

*Tripping* – stumbling, drug-addled, or hallucinating through hunger and cold? Or is it that cat doing the weaving and tripping?

*Burden of demons* is a reference to 'Pilgrim's Progress'.

*Demons* is a reference to mental health.

*Strangeling* is an invented word (well spell-checker doesn't like it) playing on 'changeling'.

*Third teat* is a reference to one of the ways by which witches were identified: they allegedly had an additional nipple at which the devil suckled. The speaker is breast-feeding, is she flaunting a malformation? Has she given up caring about her own life? Or is she daring the farmer's wife to look too closely at something natural? – and this is also a reference to all the modern pish about breast-feeding in public.

*Whose* child is it? Is it the speaker's or just one she has collected herself, and carries out of charity, perhaps even with purpose. Or is it a faery child? Is there an implicit threat that the speaker might exchange her child with the farmer's wife's child? Will this make them both hyper-vigilant during this exchange?

*The dark man* is a reference to the devil, often referred to in this way, or could equally be a non-white man in a predominantly white population. I was also thinking it might be an Islamic immigrant, in a modern setting, hence him not being into Christening his children, quite legitimately.

*I cannot name him* – why? Because he hasn't a name (like the devil), she never found out his name, or will it get someone into trouble? Perhaps this is simply something which is best not known. Or is it because of claiming benefits today? – there used to be welfare rules which endeavoured to force absent fathers into paying for their children.

A *snood* is a ribbon used to tie up a woman's hair. We learn that the speaker has fair hair, but is this pretty or very blond? If the latter then, if the speaker is the mother of the child, that father must have been *very* dark to have a black child. Some Orkney witches used snoods taken from dead women in their magic.

*Peat stacks* are a store of fossil fuel, they're also dark and kept outside, dirty and cold.

*Spent* is both a sexual reference and an economic one.

*The wind's got up* – Orkney's witches were notorious for controlling the wind.

*Swinging* is a reference to hanging – a constant threat. The speaker knows she is playing against the weight of the theological and judicial system. Or perhaps the farmer's wife is now employing her own magic?

And *yawning* – Orkney witches had the reputation for casting spells whilst yawning, perhaps because it is contagious or it might be a memory of the pagan Norse Völva who are recorded as doing this whilst prophesising. Or perhaps the speaker is really just bored by it all now.

I also want to question whether the speaker has any powers, or is she just playing on her reputation, or is the farmer's wife (presumably) projecting onto the speaker, or are *both* of them 'witches'?

The speaker is a sexual threat too; women beyond the norm always are. The farmer's wife might want to be rid of her quickly for this reason – and will be keeping a close watch on her own husband, upon whom her own socio-economic situation almost certainly depends.

## Marable Couper

Accused of:

- Often bothering her neighbours, David and Margaret
- Causing David and Margaret's cows to lose their good milk, one cow to die in calving, another not to get pregnant with calf, causing a cow and two calves to die
- Making David ill by offering him ale to drink, thereafter curing him again by witchcraft
- Causing David's kiln to go on fire, burning the grain
- Quarrelling with Margaret, who called Marable a witch and blamed her for her illness; giving Margaret hot ale and thereby restoring her health
- And several more accusations of the same kind

Marable was sentenced to be handcuffed, carried to the top of the Clay Loan, there tied to a stake, strangled to death and burnt in ashes.

Well, Marable, when it comes to bothering others, it's a case of you and me both, lass, and I know I'd be burning with you if it wasn't for a couple of centuries' difference.



## **‘Often bothering her neighbours ...’**

Do I bother you?

With your fascination with aspiration

    Your inherited wealth and taxing by stealth

Your mobile ‘phone and holiday home

    Your winters spent south and fortunate health

Do I bother you?

With my prepost’rous dreams and limited means

    I just cannot bear your failure to care

I pray daily for *hope* but mainly to cope

    When I suggest that we share, you chant: ‘life’s not fair’

Do I bother you? I hope I do.

Do I bother you?

With your racist ‘larks’ and sexist remarks

    Your superior sneers towards gays, trans and queers

Your hankering rage for a past golden age

    Your crocodile tears and threatening jeers

Do I bother you?

Those living in muck who are plain out of luck

    I don’t fault the poor nor the sick or the sore

They’re not all to blame, it’s a political game

    But you fear that us poor will always take more

Do I bother you? I hope I do.

Do I bother you?  
Your disdain for the planet and all that inhabit  
    This earth – the perfect fit that we treat as shit  
Your casual discard of glass, tin and shard  
    Not caring one bit for the whale, hare or tit  
Do I bother you?  
When I haven't a need for your corporate greed  
    On this I'll be quoth, for here is my oath:  
You can keep your shares and your cheap plastic wares  
    Perpetual growth, or the world, but not both  
Do I bother you?  
I f\*\*\*ing hope I DO!

## William Scottie

Accused of:

- Transferring illness from a cow to a cat by stroking the sick cow and then stroking the cat, which fell down dead
- Curing someone of pain in the side by laying his hand on the person, then on the hearthstone; it cured her in an hour
- Going the wrong way around a man's house, after which the man's wife fell sick and lost her milk
- Healing her again by laying his hand on her and transferring her illness to a mare foal, which died

William Scottie, I'm not sure whether you were a Paul Daniels, a Derren Brown, or a Merlin, but I suspect you just knew too much. Title is, as always, one line taken from the accusation made.

**'Curing someone of pain in the side by laying his hand  
on the person, then on the hearthstone.'**

Let's store a song within a stone whilst pain's dragged out of broken  
bone

Perhaps some yellow can be poured or cat calls tied within a cord  
If essence can be moved this way, then what is real and what hearsay?  
Or is this just a clever trick, a sleight of hand to make you sick?

These things can only happen in a faery universe

Where postures have potential both as healing and as curse

Nothing is as it seems to be, try looking sideways on

And when I'm done, you're well once more: pay up, and I'll  
be gone

## Jonet Reid

Accused of:

- Offering mint to W Kirkness to keep mice away from his corn
- Serving the Devil, saying: 'I dry this corn to the Devil'
- Counselling Robert Sinclair on stopping his disturbing dreams about his dead wife by going to her grave and telling her to leave him alone
- Curing three people of a bone or joint complaint by means of physiotherapy and saying a charm
- Attempting to cure one of A Linklater's children of heart disease by means of a charm

Jonet Reid seems to have understood the occult law of reciprocity. This is a little attempt at iambic pentameter: a measure for your pleasure.

**‘Stopping his disturbing dreams about his dead wife by  
going to her grave and telling her to leave him alone’**

(but equally: ‘offering mint to keep mice away from his corn’)

Things respond well when kindly asked or told  
Politeness goes far in the spirit world  
The dead don’t differ, no need to be tense  
I’ll make them an offer in recompense  
You dead serve to remind us of our guilt  
The hurt we caused you, the pain that we built  
That’s why I come now, to speak by your grave  
The living scorn, but when asked I must save  
It’s time for calm, my dear, to be at peace  
You don’t belong here, restlessness should cease  
Oh let him sleep, and rest, and dream again  
No joy falls to you, to drive him insane  
This earth is yours now, away from your farm  
In thanks I’ll leave you this token, a charm  
We trust you abide in a better place  
Those of us left behind must pray for grace

## Elspeth Cursetter, 1629

Accused of:

- When refused access to a house in Birsay, she sat down on the doorstep and expressed an ill wish; two weeks later, the house owner's best horse had a fall where it broke all its bones, its thigh bone piercing its bowels
- Recommending to someone he should carry the bones of a lapwing in his clothes to preserve his health
- Knowing exactly what was served and what was spoken about at a party, even though she wasn't there; she had shape-shifted into a bee

A nonsense rhyme for Elspeth Cursetter because if it was me on trial I'd be tempted to resort to sarcasm at the ludicrous nature of the accusations (because I'm stupid that way), and that would probably get me into even more trouble.

**'Knowing exactly what was spoken about and what was served at a party, even though she wasn't there. She had shape-shifted into a bee'**

If I could shape-shift into anything, it wouldn't be a bee  
If I could borrow another's mind, and if my choice were free  
If I was allowed one day of flight, a fulmar would bring glee  
I'd glide and hover on the wind, I'd stare straight back at thee

If I could shape-shift into anything, it wouldn't be a bee  
I do not want to hear your prattle, nor watch you eat your tea  
For who would waste a chance to change on attending your party?  
Without choice, I would buzz in, but you'd get a sting from me!

Another one for Elspeth Cursetter because 1) you deserve a serious poem as well as a silly one and 2) I love that advice to ‘carry a lapwing’s bones in your pocket’, so I’ve broken the rules (they’re my rules, so I’m allowed to break them) and given this poem a title and used that advice as the first line. All of these practices could have been aspects of sympathetic magic, some of them were, some of them I made up.

### **A Lesson in Witching**

Keep a lapwing’s bones in your pocket  
Walk widdershins around stacks of hay  
Hold your lover’s hair in a locket  
Gathered on the first full moon in May

Hang, above your door, a mermaid’s purse  
Taken from between the flow and ebb  
Cover mirrors to deflect a curse  
And touch the droplets caught in a web

Painted quartz pebbles and puffin beaks  
Stones worn with holes and shells from the surf  
Are what an expectant mother seeks  
All provide aid during childbirth

Never let your peat fire burn low  
Nor look into embers feeling tense  
None of this should either of us know  
And if they ask, we’ll say it’s nonsense

## Katherine Craigie

(First trial) Accused of:

- On three occasions attempting to heal Jonet Craigie's husband by heating stones, leaving them over-night under the threshold, then putting the stones in water and washing the patient
- Cursing J Craigie so that she developed an ulcer on her cheek
- Offering J Traill water to help his bere barley grow better
- Offering Issobel Craigie a herb for a love potion

(Second trial) Accused of:

- Calming the wind for a payment of cloth; also causing a storm
- Using the stone and water cure again; also causing illness in cattle
- Getting information from the Devil and more

Katherine was acquitted at her first trial (1640) but at her second trial (1643) she was sentenced to be tied to a stake, strangled and burnt to ashes.

That accusation of 'calming the wind for a payment of cloth' really got me thinking about why Katherine Craigie might need cloth? And this is someone accused twice, so I gave some thought to her status between accusations. And then, so many of those accusing her, those she worked magic for, have her surname. So, I put two and two together and came up with this:



### **‘Calming the wind for a payment of cloth’**

The wind first got up about a week ago  
I can get inside it and stir up the haystacks  
It came in as suddenly as my son went out  
An ill exchange that contented no one  
It whips around the eaves and rattles at the roof  
He just lies still and greying in the parlour  
Straining to smile against the bindings at his jaw

We cannot go out in this wind, not when it's this strong  
Not with the wind up and wild, we can't possibly go out  
To the kirk, to the kirkyard, to open your husband's lair

So we sit, closed up together, annoying each other  
Whilst my son whispers incessantly that he needs  
More than a scrap of sacking when he meets his father  
I'm just another mouth to feed, of no benefit  
To this family whose name I proudly took  
I cannot stand this bickering, my offer a resolution:  
Good cloth mind, best linen, decent winding cloth

**Reading note:** A *lair* is a grave.

## Jonet Forsyth, 1629

Accused of:

- Slaying four pigs, which subsequently caused illness in a woman who ate from the pork
- Bewitching Robert Reid so that he fell ill while out at sea; healing him by washing him in salt water on the same evening
- Bewitching Thomas Port, making him ill, and later well again by transferring the illness to Michael Reid's horse; when later examined, the horse's heart was nothing but a 'blob' of water
- Taking the 'profit' (=goodness, fat) of other people's cows / milk and taking the 'profit' of corn
- Putting curses on people who refused to give her food or drink when asked for alms

Jonet was found guilty and sentenced to be taken to the place of execution with her hands tied, tied to a stake, strangled to death and burnt to ashes.

This poem, for Jonet Forsyth, took ages to ferment – and I'm still not happy with it. The imagery draws on the 'Westray Storm Witch' story and also that weird accusation and evidence:

**‘When later examined, the horse’s heart was nothing  
but a “blob” of water’**

Bestowed with an affinity for water  
A reputation that can never be rinsed  
An unwanted gift, wise women told my ma  
When I broke her waters (not that waters can  
Be broken). Bathing me and baptising me,  
They did both fast in those days, to cleanse and wash  
Away my sins before any were acquired  
Set to watch the pot boil whilst skeins of steam sweat  
Stirring the bucket, intent, ma swipes the stick  
Harshly hard from my hand and the storm subsides  
Banished outside I watch the freeze and thaw and crack  
Following the dropped ring as it sinks down and  
The mirrored surface settles to clarity  
Taming the tempest with sighs, riding the tides  
The shock of the cold can knock a sadness out  
Skimming the waves, drowning within the ebb’s foam  
Where does it end and begin, this thin membrane?  
We become liquid, melting from hostile stares  
Suspected of brewing with laying out lave  
The rain’s persistence, drumming on roofs and heads  
At this time of year nothing fully dries out  
Ducking wears away to suck out confessions  
And at the end I will dissolve into tears

## Magnus Grieve

Accused of:

- Going backwards in a harrow to see what wife he should have, and how many children

I cannot help but wonder whether Magnus Grieve may have been found 'not guilty' given it was such a trivial accusation of petty divination. I imagined Magnus as perhaps the younger brother, always last in line for the ladies, and desperate to grow up and join in. And where today such a youth might entertain fantasies about 'pin-ups', what might be the equivalent 400 years ago?

**‘Going backwards in a harrow to see what  
wife he should have and how many children.’**

Clumsy Kate with the crippled foot!  
My brothers teased without remorse  
The youngest, left ‘til last of course  
Bethie will do, she has a lisp!  
You’ll never wed, they laughed, not when  
You have no land, no but nor ben  
Maggie might suit, she can’t see straight!  
I cannot dance, or so I’m told  
I’m lacking craft, and trade ... and gold  
There’s always Anne, we’ve all had Anne!  
But I can dream, and soar upwards,  
And paint my wishes with my words

So lure to me a fairy lass!  
She’ll lead me to the trowie mound  
All time we’ll lose and ne’er be found  
Summon up a Finfolk lover!  
We’ll turn rough ground to greening curves  
And lay a-spell between ploughed turves  
Entice me next a mermaid bride!  
Together we’ll scythe from the seas  
A harvest that is bound to please  
And call to me a selkie wife!  
Shed your seal-skin into my arms  
Turn shells to herds with magic charms

Hence I walk backwards, full of dread  
Thrown apple peel shows who I’ll wed  
Spin shears in a sieve one hundred  
Times, to divine God’s plan instead

## Reading notes:

A *but and ben* is a simple two-roomed domestic house, traditional to Orkney, especially in rural areas.

A *trowie* is a supernatural mound-dweller.

The *Finfo* are from Orkney folklore, magic users who travel in little boats searching for human captives. There is also a reference here to one of the (several possible) ways that Finstown (Firth, West Mainland) may have got its name.

The turning of *shells to herds* is a reference to a children's farm animal game that used to be played in Orkney, where each of the different seashells represented a different type of domesticated animal.

One form of divination, to discern a future spouse, was to spin a pair of shears in a sieve a hundred times.

## Christian Gow, 1624

Accused of:

- When William Milne was terminally ill, and his winding sheet lay ready by his head to be put over him, Christian made him instantly whole and well by ‘ganging and whispering’ over him
- Cured the Westray minister’s horse with this charm:  
Three things hath the forspokin  
Heart, tung, and eye, almost;  
Thrie things sail the mend agane  
Father, Sone, and Holie Ghost

Christian Gow’s ‘magic’ comprises verse heavily laden with Christian references; when what you are accused of is also what is expected of you, your community has gone very bad indeed and you don’t stand a chance.

**‘Thrie things sail the mend agane,  
Father, Sone, and Holie Ghost.’**

Nine blessings tae tak away dee pain:

Sinew tae sinew, vein tae vein

Joint tae joint, bane tae bane

Muscle tae muscle, strain tae strain

Blood tae blood, stain tae stain

Hurt will wane, health will reign

Thrie things by thrie sail be mend agane

These things sail mend in Geud’s holie neem

## Reading notes:

In the mid twentieth century, Ernest Marwick collected many Orcadian folk verses that were traditionally said as a form of charm to cure illness and afflictions – my poetic response amalgamates and cannibalises several of these verses.

Apologies for the terrible rendering of Orcadian, I am not a speaker, and I took phonetic spellings directly from Marwick where available.

‘Thrie thinges sail the mend agane’ was a particularly haunting line incorporated into the song written by Kate and Corwen for this project refer: [www.ancientmusic.co.uk](http://www.ancientmusic.co.uk)



## Katherine Grant, 1623

Accused of:

- Looking at a man over her shoulder, turning up the white of her eye, making the man feel as if there was a great weight upon him, making him ill
- Advising this cure: fill a vessel with sea water, put three stones in it without speaking; this transferred an illness from a wife to her husband
- Saying a spell over a sick child; causing the illness to transfer from one child to another by letting them eat the same food, then transferring the illness to a calf – both children recovered but the calf died
- Attempting to cure a sick horse with a fire ritual, and a cow by bathing it in the sea
- Curing a man by giving him algae to eat and laying her hand on him where the pain was, then on the earth, three times
- Causing a woman to go mad after not having been let into her house

Following my habit of trying to discern the underlying story, I put the accusation of transferring an illness from a wife to a husband, presumably on purpose, with that rather poignant and strange accusation of:

**‘Causing a woman to go mad after not having been  
let into her house’**

You won’t let me in, so I’ll stand here and stare  
Silently watching, I’ll continue to glare  
Your movements so busy, as if you don’t care  
Come out and confront me! I know you won’t dare ...

You won’t let me in, so I’ll stand here and stare  
I’ve plenty of time to remind you of where  
We placed stones in a vessel, three did it bear  
He became ill and was prepared for his lair

You won’t let me in, so I’ll stand here and stare  
My presence reminds you of what we will ne’er  
Tell others we did, in silence so rare  
Let me into your house! Don’t be unfair ...

**Reading note:**    *A lair* is a grave.

So much material from these trial notes, so here's a second poem for Katherine. This one is a little wishful thinking on my part, but also pragmatically realistic about the 'evil eye'.

**'Looking at a man over her shoulder,  
turning up the white of her eye,  
making the man feel as if there was a  
great weight upon him, making him ill'**

If my gift was a glance which could paralyse  
And if we all held power within our eyes  
If only looks alone could kill  
Justice would be dispensed at will  
I'd glare at folks who cheat and steal  
At those who take and those who deal  
All men who rape without remorse  
(And Judges who acquit, of course)  
I'd focus on the politicians next  
And those who bully via text  
I'd stop the rot by staring hard  
I never would let down my guard  
I'd roll my eyes and gawk again  
Until the world was purged from pain  
The hunted fox, the homeless guy  
The hungry child, the war-torn sky  
Finding all who'd evil perpetrate  
Just like an optical magistrate!  
At last two wrongs would a mighty right make  
The weak would be safe, the corrupt would quake  
But how would *I* fare when *you* looked back in turning?  
Would I too be crushed by the weight of *your* yearning?

## Still Here

I find the sonnet the hardest form to write, but this demanded it. Ending with a sense of hope and the potential for transformation. Written for a friend.

### Still Here

Holding office behind a porous cell  
Days pass whilst hopes seep into rosied stones  
Sink into dust with each toll of the bell  
The guardi'an absorbs it into her bones.  
Early on she taught me how to stop time  
Select the axe-key and tread spiral stairs  
Follow dense tocks, relentless ticks, just climb  
Whilst it watches, waits, weighs how much she cares.  
On descending, lights a candle and prays  
To concealed saints and a green wild god  
Bows to the Sheelagh who boasts of her ways  
Grinning, she gives the beard-puller a nod;  
Without spae sensings we would be bereft  
The witch in the cathedral never left.

**Reading notes:** *Spae* means being a bit intuitive, sensitive, psychic even, able to see into the future.

## About the Authors

Ragnhild Ljosland was born in Norway, where she studied Scandinavian Language and Literature, obtaining a PhD in sociolinguistics in 2008.

'Raggie', as she is best known, has had a keen interest in Orkney's language, history and culture since she first visited the islands in 2000 as a young undergraduate student of Orkney & Shetland Studies. In 2009, at the age of thirty, she moved permanently to Orkney to take up an academic post and join her husband in returning to his native island. Her special interests lie in the Norn and Scots languages and Orkney dialect, Orkney literature, history, folklore, traditional customs and folk beliefs, and the culture of Orkney in its Scottish and Scandinavian contexts.

Ragnhild also has a particular interest in runic inscriptions. She is the author of several books and many articles, both academic and non-academic.

In addition to her academic work, Ragnhild enjoys working as a Scottish Tourist Guides Association qualified guide for Orkney where she, amongst other things, offers Viking-themed adventure tours.

From her own kitchen she works as a chocolatier, where she recreates archaeological artefacts from the Stone Age, Pictish period, and Viking Age in delicious Belgian chocolate.

She can be contacted via her web-site at [brodgar.co.uk](http://brodgar.co.uk)

Helen K Woodsford-Dean comes from southern England where she lectured in archaeology, specialising in the prehistory of the British Isles. In her early 40s she decided to move to Orkney because she thought it would be lovely to get away from the 'rat race' and live on a 'remote' Scottish island.

Helen is Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Pagan Federation. As well as providing open ceremonies to celebrate the turning of the year, Helen also offers life rituals such as baby-namings, legal weddings, and funerals on request

She is Co-convenor of the Orkney Greens and believes that politics and spirituality need to be interlinked to be fully effective and ethical.

Also a Scottish Tourist Guides Association qualified guide for Orkney, she specialises in providing tours for those visitors to Orkney who come on spiritual pilgrimage with an interest in prehistoric archaeology and folklore.

She can be contacted via her web-site at [www.spiritualorkney.co.uk](http://www.spiritualorkney.co.uk)

Helen and Ragnhild are close friends; they initially met via this project and have worked together on it throughout and then gone on to work together on other successful projects. They share a mutual love of social justice, fairness, laughter, story-telling, archaeology, and cake.

Helen Woodsford-Dean (left) & Ragnhild Ljosland (right)  
photographed at the memorial on the inauguration day  
Saturday March 9th 2019







Carving in St Magnus Cathedral,  
possibly made to protect from malevolent witchcraft