

Witchcraft In Britain

by ALLEN ANDREWS



An express letter brings a copy of a curse, and a plea for advice... The black art is not dead. It has merely become hidden

CECIL WILLIAMSON, who directs the "Witches' Kitchen" at Castletown in the Isle of Man, is a witchcraft consultant. It is his full-time occupation. And when, for example, he receives an express letter imploring him to remove a spell set on the writer, he is sufficiently learned in the lore of witchcraft to compound a remedy.

A woman who wrote to him recently enclosed a malevolent screed, written in magical characters, which she had received from a former woman friend. It implied that, because Williamson's correspondent was about to marry, an old friendship was broken. Minor accidents convinced her a spell was working and she demanded a counter-spell against the ill-wisher.

Williamson decided to make a doll, or poppet, representing the ill-wishing witch. The basis was clay from a river bed worked with water from a fall. He collected salt-water worms to represent the witch's vitals, pine gum for the essence of life, Hibben ivy berries growing in a churchyard for the eyes, and white quartz from a high cliff for the teeth and bones.

He burned the bodies of three black toads, a pregnant brown rat and a black cock on an altar to the sun. On another to the moon he burned another mixture, the most pleasant ingredient of which was herbs. The ashes were compounded into the poppet, which had life symbolically breathed into it and was passed through the elements of earth, air, fire and water.

He thrust glass splinters into the poppet, shrouded it, and dispatched it to his client. Her instructions were to bury it in a shallow un concealed grave near the witch's home, light a fire over it and intone a powerful, prescribed counter-spell. Then the strength of the witch would be sapped and the original curse fail.

Why does Williamson go to so much trouble? His interest is partly professional, partly

To defeat the curse in the letter, witchcraft expert Cecil Williamson passes a "poppet" image through fire

Strange Things Are Needed For Witchcraft Ritual



Berries from a graveyard will be the eyes of the poppet with which a counterspell is to be cast



White quartz is chipped from a lonely cliff on the Isle of Man, to make the bones and teeth



Worms dug up on the sands at sunset are need as entrails. The witch will have internal ago



Herbs from a ruined garden stand for sinews and muscles. They will be burned, with a chant



Running water, fluid of the body, must be collected in earthenware—never glass or china



Lastly, a ritual fire has been lit at an old altar the forest. Ashes are mixed in the clay in

academic. He had found this spell in an old book and was curious to use it. He explained to his client, in order that she might be adequately impressed, the full complications of the formula he had used on her behalf, and he sees little difference between this routine and other more modern methods of persuading a person through a form of hypnosis or suggestion that fancied ill-luck has left him.

But this is only one aspect. How significant is the whole practice of witchcraft in Britain today? For one thing, it is known that in addition to a number of places around the south coast, groups of witches are operating at Liverpool, at Barnet and in Cumberland.

And not many years ago, on February 14, 1915 (Candlemas by the Old Calendar), Charles Walton, aged seventy-four, an agricultural worker, was found dead in a ditch near Meon Hill, Warwickshire. His throat had been laid open by his own hedging-hook and he was pinned face downwards by a hay-fork driven through his body into the roots below. . . . The manner

in which the hay-fork was used was exactly similar to the murder in 1875, in nearby Long Compton, of Ann Turner, killed by a man "because she was a witch," and also to an earlier hay-fork stabbing when John Haywood attacked an old woman. He had said he would kill "all sixteen witches" in Long Compton.

It is quietly believed locally that three men and four women, survivors of a cult practising near Meon Hill, continue to meet. The murder of Charles Walton, still unsolved, may have arisen from an internal feud with a band of witches.

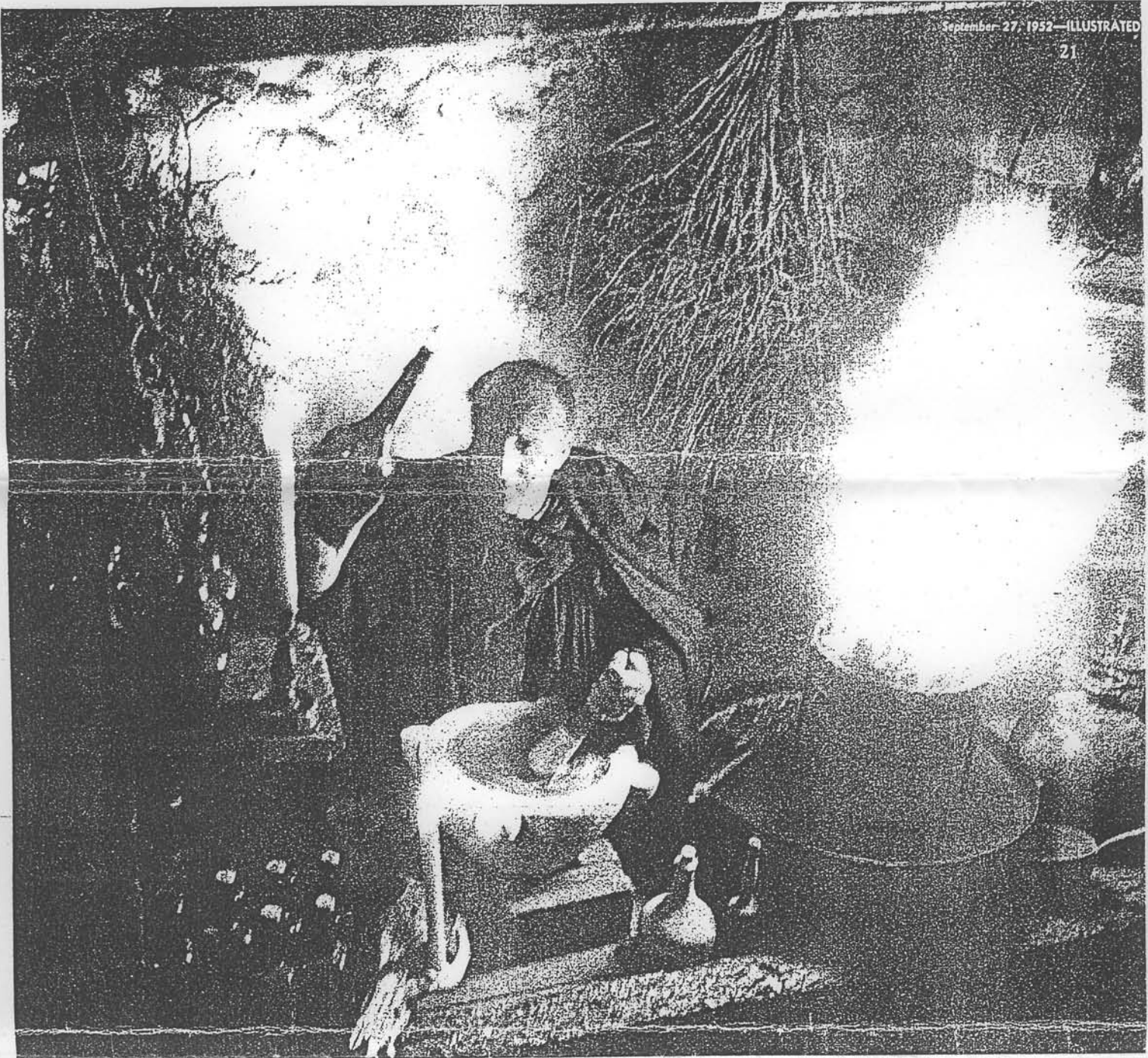
At midnight on May 12, 1940, the night of the full moon nearest Waipurgis Night (and May eve by the Old Calendar), a concealed observer by the Rollright Stones on the Oxfordshire boundary a mile above Long Compton saw five cloaked figures paying obeisance to the solitary King Stone, which archaeologists take to be a symbol of fertility. They chanted as they danced widdershins around it, then fell prostrate before it. Finally they pressed themselves upright

against it, their interlocked hands extended above their heads. To do this they had had to clamber over the eight-foot railings, put there to save the stone from being disfigured by idle carvings, or chipped to make ingredients used in compounding ancient medicines.

Much more recently—at noon, in fact, on September 7, 1932—a man in a Gloucestershire village between Meon Hill and Long Compton admitted that he had been known to consume a nest of young, hairless field-mice; he washed down the strange meal with a quart of cider. Witnesses said he had used this repast as a rather jaunty introduction to a ritual which culminated in prophecies delivered in shambling rhyme. But this evidence he countered. He simply, and shrewdly, said: "It's illegal to tell fortunes isn't it?"

The local concentration of these instances of forms of modern witchcraft is not intended to single out this area, visible from the Four Shire Stone at Paxford, as a particular hotbed of magic—though the district may be one of the

Continued on page 4



Below ground, crouched by his brazier, witchcraft consultant Williamson pounds the compound to make the "poppet" of the evildoer. To strengthen the spell, he has burned the bodies of three black toads, a brown rat and a black cock.



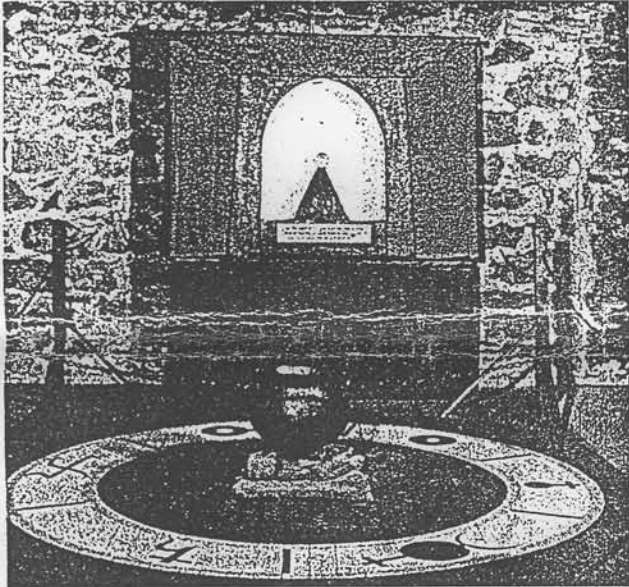
He has appealed to the spirits for power. Now he breathes through a straw into the clay mouth of the poppet. This symbolic rite gives it "life"



Inside the sinister triangle, glass splinters are pressed into the body. While the candle burns, this will bring torment sharper than the sting of needles

Witchcraft is more than the Black Mass . . .

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21



In the "Witches' Kitchen" of Cecil Williamson's Isle of Man museum there is a monument to "The nine million human beings known to have been burnt at the stake as a sacrifice to superstition"

few containing a vicar who claims he knows of three witches in his congregation. But it does show the wide scale and varying gravity of the observance of what some people call the Old Religion.

This observance is not restricted to any one part of Britain, nor ever exclusively to the rural areas. It is true that the most sophisticated—and also the most vicious—practices are found in the large towns. But it is possible to cite in London, for instance, not only narcotic orgies in Maida Vale, which generally end in the blackmail of those taking part, but also the ritual preparation of simple herbal brews in the Old Kent Road—though it may be that some of the clients in this circle are most interested in aphrodisiacs, or love potions.

Magic Against Hitler

For witchcraft is not merely the Black Mass, the blood and the lust rumoured to have been loosed in South Audley Street, London, as well as in the remote temples of Aleister Crowley, the notorious "Great Beast." It is also tying a knot in your handkerchief to enclose the magic of remembrance. And there was no evil intended on the night of the first of August (Lammas), 1940, when an invasion of Britain seemed imminent; then an extraordinary summons was sent out to members of the Southern Coven of British Witches. It brought seventeen men and women to a clearing in the New Forest.

Their ceremonial firebrands were expertly kept dim, yet alive, by such of the company as were air-raid wardens, and the coven proceeded to conduct rites intended to raise the most colossal "cone of power" they had ever produced—and direct it against Hitler. The climax of a long ritual came with the members, in a state of tense excitement, projecting their defiance in shouts of rhythmic unison: "You can't cross the sea, you can't cross the sea. Not able to come, not able to come." Older

members of the coven, those who came from a generation when magic enjoyed a matter-of-fact acceptance in some households, could remember family talk of a similar rite against "Boney" at the time of the threatened Napoleonic invasion.

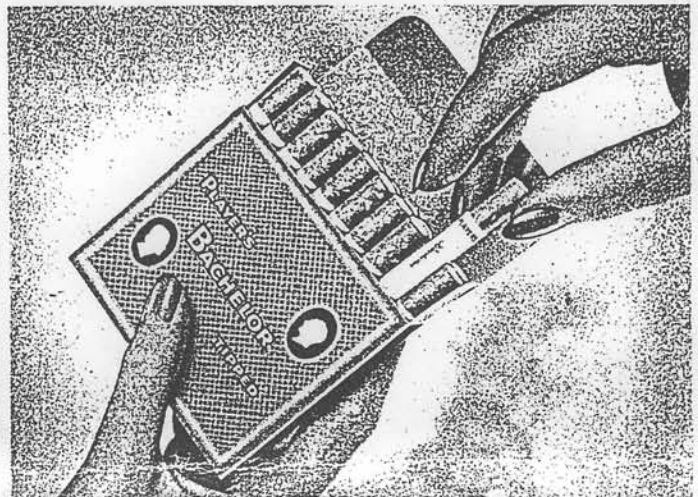
A coven of witches is traditionally composed of members of either sex, thirteen in number, with one of them acting as officer. Before the days of witch-hunts the coven organized public and popular beanfeasts on the great days of May Eve, Hallowe'en, Candlemas and Lammas—the Witches' Sabbats, sometimes called Frolics. Their private business meetings were called esbats. Persecution killed the "open" Sabbats and increased the witches' stealth surrounding subsequent meetings.

Covens cannot usually raise thirteen local members these days. Hereditary witches, who have the lore handed down to them, form a proportion of the covens, whose average ages are rather high. They make up their numbers by inviting certain known enthusiasts to join them. These have made a wider study than the locals, and constitute the intellectual wing of a coven.

Goddess Of Fertility

The gods of the witches are the oldest of all—fertility and death. A coven is nowadays led by a woman officer because of a shift in emphasis towards the life-goddess—a woman—and away from the lord of death. There are moments in a ceremony when the god is believed to enter the body of the officiant. During the May Eve fertility rites the priestess may easily be assumed to be the goddess. During winter celebrations she will for a moment place her hands on the opposite shoulders to make the crossed bones beneath the skull—the symbol for the presiding deity—but will immediately open her arms and stand astride to form the pentagon of life.

In general, modern witches believe



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Gods of Magic Are The Oldest of All



Isle of witches... Williamson paints on his front door a sign to ward off the "evil eye." And level-crossing keeper William McHarris "knows there are witches in the Isle of Man." But he does not meddle

that they will achieve controlled power by ritual, some of which is primitive. From observing old customs, they get the sentimental satisfaction that others get from keeping Christmas. They feel that their meetings bring them emotional stimulus and old-fashioned good luck.

These are, of course, the "pure" practitioners, who base their ritual on instructions handed down from the elders, eked out with the *Clavicles Of Solomon*, an obscure book which changes hands at some sixty guineas a time. There are in addition the over-sophisticated adherents who give black magic its permanent notoriety. A Vatican order made in 1938, for the better protection in altar tabernacles of the reserved consecrated Host, is said to have been an acknowledgement of the prevalence of thefts carried out for blasphemous purposes.

Magic In Brighton

Circles practising magic of an involved, cabalistic nature have been noted, among other places, in Brighton, where a large garage is used; in Finchley Road, London, where proceedings approach the erotic; in a churchyard in rural Yorkshire; and in Brompton Road, London, where love-charms and vengeance-spells have been cast, but where a ritual purist has been offended by the use of a gas-ring, instead of "natural" flame, to soften wax images.

The least sophisticated of the modern observers of the Old Religion are typified by the shepherd at Steyning, Sussex, who protects his flocks by making ritual observances to the moon from within "fairy rings," and declared bluntly to a questioner: "Anyone would be a

damn fool if he didn't." Indeed, the bulk of rural people who believe in the strength of magic are practical in their aims.

Witches in the past were wise in the application of herbs and the treatment of cattle. They have been supplanted by the rise in status of the doctor and the vet. And there are scores of modern instances of people who gather herbs or treat belongings in compliance with a traditional ceremonial of action: the downward sweep of a new knife, for instance; the chanting of old rhyming spells; the practice of dressing with hair loose and feet bare.

Investigation Needed

But for others the observances are sheer spiritual exercises, more satisfying than modern creeds. One group has evolved from book-study of ancient ways a pretty Candemas ceremony on the South Downs. Eleven people use the Druids' Circle near Keswick for ancient and apparently sincere ceremonies. "You get so close to God," one of them explains. But there is no doubt that many of today's practices are undesirable, in need of further investigation and regulation.

Cecil Williamson's work is admittedly largely the research technique of a student. He finds that his "practice" brings him constantly widening knowledge of the theories of witchcraft held today.

It is, certainly, a roundabout route for a research worker to take, but it may be, for him and those like him, the only method to counter the shyness of the present-day believer in magic. But there is one development that is worth pondering. That occurs when the student of witchcraft wakes one day to find himself a devotee.

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