

A level History – Summer bridging work

Firstly, congratulations on choosing to undertake such a successful and challenging A Level. As a department we are very much looking forward to meeting you all in September. In the meantime, we have set you a task for you to complete over the holiday period.

TASK: Read the following article. Using this article and evidence from elsewhere (including the internet), write an extended paragraph explaining the major factors that contributed to a rise in Witchcraft trials in the 17th century.

Please make sure that you clearly identify the main factors and then give reasons for the increase in trials. Try to include relevant statistics in your answer.

This work should be handed in our first lesson back.

Make a good first impression.

A discovery of Witches

From 1692 to 1693, a pandemic swept through Salem Massachusetts. The Salem Witch Trials may have only lasted 15 months, but over 200 people were accused of practising witchcraft in that short time. However, despite the popularity of the Salem trials, you'd be forgiven for missing the gruesome history of Britain's history of witch-hunting.

Having been legally outlawed in the first Witchcraft Act of 1542, executions for witchcraft and cases of heresy had been ongoing throughout British history. In 1563 the Witchcraft Act introduced the death penalty for acts of witchcraft that resulted in death. In 1600 the act was updated to include making a pact with the devil as punishable by death.

During the start of the 17th century, witch hunts began to gain momentum across the UK. Reaching their peak in the middle of the century, the rise of puritanism across the UK fuelled some of the most gruesome, grizzly, and deplorable practices of witch-hunting. Here are just a few examples of witch trials in the UK that were darker, deadlier, and more sinister than the trials in Salem.

The North Berwick Witch trial (1590)

Towards the end of the 16th-century, witch trials were starting to build momentum across the UK. Though the trials took place in East Lothian, Scotland, the origins of the Berwick witch trials find their roots across the channel in Denmark.

Travelling to Copenhagen to marry his wife, James VI found the continent gripped in the fears of fierce witch hunts. The Trier witch trials were widely reported, and its ferocity was a topic of healthy debate in Denmark.

On their return trip to Scotland, the newlywed's fleet was caught in an intense storm and forced to shelter in Norway for a few weeks. Suspecting the storm to have been caused by witchcraft, the Copenhagen witch trials that followed resulted in two women being burned as witches. As he was so personally impacted by these events, James VI decided to launch a tribunal to root out witchcraft in his kingdoms.

More than 100 witches were arrested, and the trial ran over two years. Under torture, many accused admitted to having made a pact with the devil, using witchcraft to affect the weather, and attempting to sink the king's ship.

Northamptonshire (1612)

The Northamptonshire witch trials took place on July 22, 1612, and saw the execution of five men and women for the charges of witchcraft ranging from the

bewitching of pigs to murder. Four women and one man were hanged at the Abington gallows for their crimes.

The Northamptonshire trials marked a significant turning point in the attitudes towards witches in Britain and is believed to be the driving force behind the notorious trials at Pendle, Lancashire, later that year. The Northamptonshire trial was of significant importance as they were one of the earliest documented cases of 'trial by water' being used to determine the guilt of one of the accused.

One victim, Arthur Bill had already gained a reputation as someone associated with evil intent. Born to poor, ill-tempered parents that were rumoured to be witches, it didn't take long for fingers to point at Arthur. When the body of a woman was found brutally murdered, all eyes turned to Arthur and his family for using bewitchment to murder her. Arthur and his family were subjected to trial by water, better known as dunking, despite their vehement protestations of innocence. Tied toe-to-thumb, the Bills were thrown into the river. Should they be drowned then they would have been found innocent of all wrongdoing. However, each member of the Bill family rose to the surface signifying their guilt.

Pendle Witches (1612)

In the shadow of Pendle Hill, Lancashire, one of the most infamous British witch hunts, would set a dangerous precedent in the legal proceedings of witch trials. Of the 12 witches accused, six were from two local families: the Demdikes and the Cattox family. Elizabeth Southern, the matriarch of the Demdike family, had been a well-known local healer that had utilised natural remedies and practices for over fifty years before the trial took place. It wasn't until an unfortunate interaction between a travelling pedlar and Southern's granddaughter, Alizon Device, that the family fell under scrutiny.

While on her way to the local forest one day, Alizon encountered John Law, a pedlar from Halifax. Alizon asked John for some pins, an expensive item at the time due to them being made by hand. Knowing that witches often used pins in their spells, John was reluctant to do business with Alizon. Refusing to open his pack, John continued on his journey. A short way down the road, Alizon witnessed John stumble and fall (likely resulting from a medical event like a stroke or heart attack). Convinced of her own powers, a few days later, Alizon visited John on his sickbed and seemingly confessed to being the cause of his malady and begged for his forgiveness.

Shortly after this confession, Alizon and her family were summoned, and so began a series of confessions that pointed fingers at friends and family alike.

Perhaps the most shocking testimony in the trials was that of Jennet Device, whose testimony would seal the fate of all 12 involved in the trials and result in the execution of not only the ten Pendle residents but countless others from the precedent set by Jennet's evidence.

Prior to Jennet's testimonial, anyone under the age of 14 was considered an unreliable witness. When Jennet, an illegitimate beggar, took the stand, she gave such damning evidence that she set new legal precedence that is still in practice to this day.

As she was only nine years old, Jennet paved the way for children to give testimony in court which would later be used in the infamous Salem witch trials in 1693. The precedence set by Jennet's testimony would soon come back to haunt her when just 20 years after the Pendle witch trial she was accused of witchcraft, along with 16 others, by 10-year-old Edmund Robinson