During the early modern period, ‘Britain’ incorporated a number of discrete political entities, and witchcraft and witch hunting in those various entities demonstrated marked differences. The most developed of these political units was England, a large, sophisticated, and by 1700 relatively economically advanced realm with maybe 5 million inhabitants. By 1541, Wales, linguistically and culturally distinct from England, had been incorporated into the English and political system, generally speaking with the assent of the Welsh local elites. To the north lay Scotland, a separate kingdom with a population of maybe 1 million in 1700. Scotland had a troubled relationship with England during the Middle Ages, but the accession to the English crown by James VI of Scotland in 1603 lessened the potential for overt conflict, while in 1707 the Act of Union joined the two realms into a political entity known as Britain. Despite this formal political integration into the new British state, Scotland maintained its own legal, religious, and educational systems. And if we move beyond Britain proper to other parts of that archipelago which is termed the British Isles, we find Ireland, a separate kingdom in which, even after the shattering events of the mid-seventeenth century, was largely inhabited by a Gaelic-speaking population that maintained an uneasy relationship with the English who ruled them and the Scottish Presbyterians who settled in Ulster. It is, however, mainly with England and Scotland that this chapter will be concerned.

England and Scotland experienced different levels of witch hunting. In England, on a fairly generous estimate, perhaps 500 witches were executed. For Scotland, the total of executions was approximately 2,000, meaning that, proportionate to population, a Scot was roughly twelve times more likely to be executed for witchcraft than an inhabitant of England. A major key to understanding this divergence between the two kingdoms lay in their respective judicial systems. In England, witchcraft Acts of 1533 (repealed in 1547), 1563, and 1604 had defined witchcraft as a felony. Although occasional felonies might be tried at county quarter sessions, or at borough courts with rights of gaol delivery, most felonies, criminal offences potentially incurring the death penalty following conviction, were tried at the assizes. These were courts held twice yearly in each English county, and were presided over by trained and experienced judges sent out from Westminster, judges who were, moreover, prohibited from conducting assizes in counties where they owned their main estates.
Additionally, although used in cases of treason, torture was not a part of normal criminal trial process under English common law. Hence two of the main factors contributing to the amplification of witch-panics in many parts of Europe, unqualified judges immersed in local witch hunting cultures and the over-enthusiastic use of torture, were largely absent from England. This was not the case in Scotland. Some witch trials were conducted by the central judicial authorities in Edinburgh, and some by circuit judges, equivalent to the English assize judges. But the majority were tried locally, on commissions issued by the Scottish privy council. These commissions, usually granted in response to local fears of witchcraft, delegated the investigation and trial of supposed witches to local lairds (gentry), ministers, lawyers, and other notables. Such men, driven by the fear of witches in their communities and by the aggressive Calvinism of the Scottish Reformation, were usually anxious to obtain convictions. In so doing, they frequently bypassed normal legal procedure. In particular, they might resort to unauthorised torture (as in England, torture was not a normal part of criminal investigation under Scottish law), the more general maltreatment of suspects, and such practices as pricking suspects in hopes of detecting a witch’s mark.

A second major difference lay in the experiences of the Reformation in England and Scotland. The current interpretation is that the English Reformation was very much imposed ‘from above’, adopting what was essentially a Calvinist theology in the 1559 settlement but retaining the pre-Reformation hierarchy of archbishops, bishops, and archdeacons, and the pre-Reformation structure of ecclesiastical courts. This resulted in a relatively high level of control by the church authorities, and a desire to steer between the spiritual dangers of Catholicism and the excesses of over-enthusiastic Puritanism. The essential caution towards such matters in the upper reaches of the Church of England’s hierarchy was shown when the church had to deal with a number of high-profile demonic possession cases, normally involving related witchcraft accusations, around 1600. The key figure here was Richard Bancroft, bishop of London and from 1604 archbishop of Canterbury, who was clearly sceptical about such matters. It is also noteworthy that after Bancroft’s erstwhile chaplain and propagandist, Samuel Harsnett, became archbishop of York in 1633, presentment of sorcerers at the Yorkshire church courts virtually ceased. Such clergymen as would have welcomed a more active persecution of witches were kept firmly under control. The situation in Scotland was different. There the Reformation proceeded at a faster pace and with a greater urgency. Old hierarchies and institutional structures were done away with, and those parish clergy who supported the Reformation laboured avidly for the spiritual regeneration of the kingdom. More surely than in England, witches rapidly became established as enemies of godliness who needed to be weeded out. As early as 1568–9, during a period of civil warfare, the reforming churchman John Erskine of Dun led a witch hunt in Angus and Mearns which was clearly connected with the push to achieve the godly society and which drew in forty accused.

Scotland was clearly one of those regions where, as Stuart Clark has put it, it is possible to locate witchcraft ‘at the very heart of the reforming process’. This did not, of course, mean that English clergymen were uniformly unconcerned about witchcraft. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a number of English clergymen of a more or less Puritan cast of mind wrote demonological tracts. Perhaps the most important of these authors was William Perkins, a major Protestant...
theologian whose *Discovery of Witchcraft*, possibly originating as a series of sermons, was published posthumously in 1608. Other contributors to this corpus of demonological works were Henry Holland, George Gifford, and Richard Bernard. Although Scotland boasted the only European monarch to write a demonological tract, the northern kingdom did not produce a corpus of demonological writing on the English scale. Moreover, despite some late examples, Scotland did not produce anything like the stream of pamphlet accounts of witch trials which constitute a major source for historians of English witchcraft between the first of such publications, in 1566, and the last conviction of an English witch, in 1712. Both major demonological works and trial pamphlets ceased to be printed in the 1630s, indicating how witchcraft was dropping out of public discourse in that decade, but the renewal of witch hunting in England in the 1640s heralded the publication of both trial pamphlets and more substantial works. Such publications were to continue after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, with, in particular, weighty volumes being produced arguing for or against the reality of witchcraft. Although speculation about witchcraft was to continue, the last major debate between English authors came in 1718, when Francis Hutchinson, a Church of England cleric who was subsequently to hold a bishopric in Ireland, published his *Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft*.

The history of witchcraft in England, and, by implication, of Europe more generally, was revolutionised by a book published in 1970, Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study*. The region was the county of Essex, for which archival sources record a uniquely high number of witchcraft references, and the comparative framework was provided by anthropology. Macfarlane’s analysis emphasised that most accusations came ‘from below’, from villagers accusing their neighbours of witchcraft, and that their central concern was *maleficium*, the doing of harm to people, farm animals, or goods by witches. The sources consulted threw up a recurrent model of tensions lying behind accusations, with richer villagers habitually accusing poorer ones of witchcraft after an altercation revolving around the richer villagers’ refusal to provide their poorer neighbours with money, food, or work when they came begging to their doorstep. This ‘charity refused’ model blended well with the established model of socio-economic change in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Under the pressure of a rising population, village society, perhaps more rapidly in lowland England than in the north or west, was becoming more stratified, with a body of prosperous yeomen farmers doing well out of rising grain prices and the lower real value of the wages they paid those who worked for them, and, conversely, a growing body of the poor. Among the poor or relatively poor themselves, moreover, hard times and increased competition for resources encouraged the sort of neighbourly tensions which so often underpinned a witchcraft accusation. Macfarlane’s findings were reinforced the year after the publication of his book when the erstwhile supervisor of his doctoral research, Keith Thomas, published his magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, which adumbrated an interpretation of early modern English witchcraft fundamentally similar to Macfarlane’s.

These two works between them marked a major paradigm shift in how witchcraft was understood as an historical phenomenon, and which was to prove dominant for a quarter of a century. It was gradually realised, however, that despite the originality and strength of the insights that Macfarlane and Thomas, in their slightly different
ways, offered, there were some matters which needed further investigation. Firstly, although the need to analyse the background to accusations was accepted as vital, research into other parts of England found that the ‘charity refused’ model was not universally dominant. Staying with issues of socio-economic change, it remains unclear why Essex should have experienced so many more witchcraft accusations than Kent, Surrey, or Middlesex, all of them south-eastern counties for which the population and survival of relevant records was equivalent to Essex, and which were experiencing the same sort of social and economic pressures. The growth of women’s history and the establishment of gender as an important tool of historical analysis encouraged a feeling that they had paid insufficient attention to gender issues. And their use of anthropological insights, while deepening the understanding of the tensions and troubled social relationships underlying witchcraft accusations, did not help explain change over time: neither of the two books are at their strongest when attempting to explain why witchcraft accusations began in England, and why they ended. Moreover, there was growing disquiet with their insistence, echoing pioneering studies of witchcraft in England, that English witchcraft was essentially non-demonic, with little evidence of the demonic pact or the witches’ sabbat, being essentially a matter of interpersonal disputes turning on *maleficium*, making it different from ‘continental’ witchcraft. Especially after historians working on witchcraft in continental territories began to follow the lead given by Macfarlane and Thomas and examine witchcraft on a village level, it became clear that English witchcraft was founded on a set of variables which was present throughout Europe, but which varied in its emphases in different areas.

Witchcraft accusations in Scotland were likewise rooted in neighbourly tensions but, as we have suggested, the Scottish judicial system and the Scottish kirk facilitated the amplification of these accusations into large-scale hunts. There is a general consensus that Scotland experienced five major panics. The first occurred in 1590–1, and included the North Berwick trials in which James VI took a personal interest. Documentation for this period is imperfect, but maybe a hundred people were tried in these two years. Scattered accusations continued throughout the 1590s, and a major wave of witch hunting came in 1597, with 111 accusations that year. There was renewed witch hunting in 1628–30, with 249 accused, 175 of them in 1629 alone. This outbreak has so far been little studied, but is currently interpreted as an aspect of a broader attempt to impose tighter law and order and godly discipline on the Scots. The next big hunt came in 1649–50, with 367 accused in the former year and 188 in the latter. The key element here was surely the need to establish order, and godly discipline, after the disruption of civil warfare and the political shock occasioned by the execution of Charles I in January 1649. English occupation of Scotland during the 1650s helped keep witchcraft accusations low, but renewed political tensions after the Restoration of 1660 led to Scotland’s last great witch hunt, with perhaps 210 persons accused of witchcraft in 1661 and 402, the largest in any single year in Scotland, in 1662. Concentration on these big outbreaks should not obscure the fact that witchcraft trials were endemic in Scotland, and that several years witnessed fifty or more prosecutions. The hunts were at their most severe in the Lothians, Fife, and the East Borders, the first two areas in particular being zones where the kirk had achieved a considerable impact. The highlands, largely outside the control of the courts and the kirk, suffered fewer trials, although witchcraft was
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certainly part of that region’s folklore. In 1662, however, the highlands contributed significantly to the overall total of trials, evidence perhaps of the belated penetration of the influence of the Scottish state and the kirk. Throughout these large-scale panics, the social profile of the accused remained the same: people, and especially women, from the middling or lower ranks of rural society.

The great Scottish hunt of 1661–2 was one of the most violent in European history. The context for this mass hunt was surely provided by the politics of the immediate post-Restoration period, when the reimposition of the old order heightened religious tensions, witchcraft accusations being a possible by-product of these. There is also a suspicion that the massive diminution in witch trials caused by the English occupation of Scotland in the 1650s may have created a backlog of suspicions which exploded once trials began in 1661. The immediate origins of the 1661–2 hunt, however, lay in a petition to the Scottish parliament from a landowner, the earl of Haddington, who requested a commission to allow him to try the witches who, he claimed, were rife on his estates, and were causing trouble for his more godly tenants. His petition remarked that:

‘That upon several malefices committed of late within and about my lands of Samuleson there being several persons suspect of the abominable sin of witchcraft apprehended and searched, the marks of witches were found on them in the ordinary way. Several of them have made confession and have delated sundry others within the said bounds and have acknowledged pactition with the devil’.  

The language of this passage is interesting. The suspected witches had committed ‘malefices’, acts of concrete harm, but as was usual with Scottish accusations, witchcraft was clearly identified as an ‘abominable sin’ and the pact with the devil assumed a central importance. The earl also identified the way in which confessing witches accused (‘delated’) other people of witchcraft, creating that spreading of accusations which was a feature of all large witch hunts. And there was the searching of suspects for the witch’s mark, which, we are told, was frequently found ‘in the ordinary way’. This presumably refers to the practice of pricking witches, which was a well-documented feature of the 1661–2 hunt. John Kincaid of Tranent, East Lothian, was an expert in this field, and was responsible for finding the witch’s mark – hence helping establish the guilt of suspects in a large if indeterminate number of instances. Gradually, however, central authority, alarmed by the extent and virulence of the craze, and concerned with the numerous distortions of judicial process, assumed control. In April 1662, the Scots privy council issued a proclamation asserting the need for due legal process in witch trials, and demonstrated its resolution by imprisoning John Kinkaid and another witch-pricker, John Dick. This was to be the last major witch hunt in Scotland.

As we have noted, one of the peculiarities of the history of witchcraft in Scotland was the involvement of a monarch, James VI (from 1603 James I of England), both as a proponent of witch hunting and as an author of a work of demonology. The exact nature of James’s involvement has, however, been the subject of considerable debate.  

He is mainly associated with the North Berwick trials of 1590–1, where confessing witches claimed to have attempted to sink the ship carrying home the king and
his bride, Anne of Denmark, from marriage celebrations in Copenhagen. James was an active proponent of divine right monarchy, and that Satan’s agents were willing to machinate against the Lord’s anointed fitted very neatly into his view of politics. Detailed research on the situation at the time of the North Berwick trials, however, suggests that they were only one example of a number of witch trials occurring in Scotland at that time, these being mainly driven by the kirk. Thus James did not initiate the large-scale witch hunting of the 1590s, but became involved in one incident in which royal authority was threatened, although his presence at the North Berwick trials must surely have helped legitimise witch hunting. Similarly, there is disagreement about the date of the composition of his treatise, his * Daemonologie*, published in 1597. It seems likely that it was composed in 1591, in the immediate aftermath of the North Berwick trials, and that his decision to publish the work (a short and entirely conventional Protestant interpretation of witchcraft) in 1597 was prompted by renewed fears of witches threatening the crown as an aspect of the major hunts of that year. But after his accession to the English throne, whatever the level of his involvement in the witchcraft statute of 1604, James adopted a more sceptical stance over witchcraft, evidently adopting the position that he could demonstrate his expertise in the subject as clearly in exposing cases of fraud or misconception as in revealing nests of malefic witches.

Getting large-scale hunts off the ground was difficult in England. The famous Lancashire trials of 1612 marked the largest trials experienced in England up to that point, with ten people executed at Lancaster and another, in a related trial, at York, but even this celebrated affair was very minor compared to the large-scale Scottish outbreaks. Tellingly, when a large-scale hunt seemed to be looming in the same county in 1633, central authority, alerted to the problem by an assize judge, intervened rapidly to close things down. England did, however, experience one large-scale hunt. This began in the spring of 1645 and petered out by the summer of 1647. Fragmented and imperfect sources make it difficult to determine the exact number involved, but some 250–300 persons were accused or at least suspected of witchcraft, most of them being drawn into the web of accusations before the end of 1645, of whom at least 100 were executed. This outbreak is associated with Matthew Hopkins, a Suffolk minister’s son living as a petty gentleman in Essex, the so-called Witch Finder General, who, together with his associate John Stearne, rapidly established a reputation as an investigator of witchcraft. The craze was limited to eastern England, beginning in Essex, spreading rapidly into Suffolk and then Norfolk, with further trials in the areas bordering those counties. The circumstances of this great witch hunt were unique. It came towards the end of the Civil War and had its storm centre in counties which had not experienced fighting but which were of central importance, in ideological and material terms, to the parliamentarian war effort. Ideologically, the war was being seen increasingly as a battle for true religion, with parliamentarian propaganda demonising royalists. The normal controls which had inhibited extreme Protestantism in the Church of England had gone, and the eastern counties had experienced a purge of unreliable (and in many cases moderate) ministers, with Suffolk in addition undergoing officially sanctioned iconoclasm in churches which were felt to contain ‘popish’ adornments.

Likewise, judicial and administrative structures, geared to supporting the war effort, were stretched sufficiently to dilute that caution which the assize courts normally demonstrated in matters of witchcraft. These factors, added to the catalyst...
which Hopkins offered, help explain England’s only large-scale witch hunt. Ironically, the long term consequences of the craze of 1645–7 was to discredit witch hunting in post-Restoration England: educated opinion was not yet ready to dispense entirely with the reality of witchcraft, but its active persecution was now associated with the low-born religious fanatics who were thought to have come to prominence in the 1640s and 1650s.

As well as the contributions already noted, Macfarlane and Thomas’s works of the early 1970s were also important in highlighting the existence of ‘good’ witches. These were known by a variety of names. In England, the most common term was cunning (i.e. skilful or knowledgeable) man or woman, but they were also known as wise men or women or, if male, conjurers or wizards. The term ‘charmer’ was also frequently employed, although it has been suggested that for Scotland at least this term specifically indicated a type of folk healer. Whatever the terminology, there clearly existed a body of occult practitioners who might be called on, according to their perceived abilities, to help find stolen goods, to provide folk remedies for illness, to tell fortunes or predict marital partners, or to give advice to those who thought themselves to be bewitched. Such people were clearly perceived as being useful by the bulk of the population, were unlikely to find themselves in court facing charges of witchcraft, and, indeed, were to survive in English and Scottish rural society into the twentieth century. Elite observers were very unhappy about them. English demonological writers in particular bewailed the popularity of these plebeian occult practitioners, usually arguing that they were as bad as malefic witches in that they too derived their occult powers from a demonic pact, or indeed worse than the ‘hurting’ witches because they led their clients to perdition by claiming to be benevolent. Thus the great English theologian William Perkins ended his 257 page tract on witchcraft by declaring that ‘death therefore is the just and deserved punishment of the good witch’, while the Scottish Witchcraft Act of 1563 made consulting such people a capital offence. Neither Scotland nor England, however, experienced what might be termed a ‘cunning folk craze’. The population were unwilling to report ‘good’ witches, and local judicial authorities rarely imposed capital punishments on those that did come to trial. In England, indeed, a large proportion of such village sorcerers falling foul of authority were tried in the ecclesiastical courts, which usually dismissed them following an admonition.

The issue awaits more detailed research, but it seems that those who entered the historical record as cunning folk or charmers consisted of roughly equal proportions of men and women. This was not the case of those appearing before the courts on potentially capital charges of witchcraft. In Scotland, about 85 percent of those accused were women, on the Home Circuit of the assizes in England, the largest sample of trial records available for that country, around 90 percent. The reasons for this massive gender imbalance have been much debated, but remain elusive. For those writing from within the women’s movement around 1970, the answer was a simple one: witchcraft was one of the ways in which misogynistic and patriarchal men attacked women as a means of keeping them subjugated. Although few historians working in the field would deny the existence of misogyny, patriarchy, and the problem of gender relations in early modern society, few would now accept such a simplistic explanation. One immediate objection is that witchcraft accusations were not levelled at all women: they tended to be elderly, poorer than their accusers, and were (although this
point has recently been challenged) disproportionately likely to be widows. Another crucial point is, as Julian Goodare put it, that ‘patriarchy was sufficiently stable not to need witch hunting’, while those suggesting that it did need witch hunting are faced with the problem of determining why the witch hunts began and ended.\textsuperscript{23} Christina Larner, whose feminist credentials were irreproachable, argued that witch hunting could not be equated with women hunting. She wrote that:

‘The pursuit of witches was an end in itself and was directly related to the necessity of enforcing moral and theological conformity. The fact that a high proportion of those selected in this context as deviants were women was indirectly related to this central purpose’.\textsuperscript{25}

The problem is, of course, that of establishing the exact characteristics of this ‘indirect relationship’. Women, like men, were in England and Scotland, as throughout Europe, being subjected to the disciplinary pretensions of the confessional state. Why this process resulted in most areas in a disproportionate number of those accused of witchcraft being women remains contentious.

The interpretative problems are demonstrated by differing interpretations of why so many accusations against alleged female witches were levelled by other women. One interpretation of this is that the women doing the accusing were conforming to patriarchal norms: patriarchy, like any political system, to function successfully needs the co-operation, or at least the acquiescence, of those it attempts to control, while most people in any social system conform to that system’s norms most of the time. Larner was among the first to follow this line, and subsequent writers have adopted a broadly similar approach. Others have gone into more detail on the interpersonal antagonisms from which the accusations arose. In particular, those involving the alleged bewitching of a child, with its mother launching the accusation, seem to locate witchcraft accusations firmly in the female sphere, with only a tenuous connection to patriarchal domination. Diane Purkiss, who has correctly stressed the need for a close reading of women’s accounts of witchcraft, has suggested that witchcraft beliefs enabled women to ‘negotiate the fears and anxieties of housekeeping and motherhood’.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, those seeking to understand the connection between witchcraft and women, in Britain as elsewhere, have to steer their way through a number of competing interpretations. But one surprising point is that, unlike modern commentators, early modern writers did not find the gender issues around witchcraft in any way problematic. Epistomon, the fount of knowledge in James VI’s \textit{Daemonologie}, when asked why ‘there are twentie women given to that craft, where ther is one man?’, did not regard the problem as being complex:

\begin{quote}
The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so it is easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved to be true, by the serpents deceiving of Eva at the beginning, which makes him homelier with that sexe.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

The connection between women and witchcraft was clearly regarded as a given by early modern demonologists, something which, ironically, raises more puzzling problems than if it had been a matter for lengthy discussion.
Witch hunting in Scotland, most historians agree, was largely restricted to the Lowlands. Recent research has revealed that there were more prosecutions in the Highlands than had previously been thought, but these were largely clustered on the peripheries, leaving a core Highland zone where trials were few. This situation must have owed much to the relatively weak penetration of the Highlands by the Scottish kirk and the judicial apparatus of central government. But there is a complementary explanation, which carries considerable weight if the Highlands, the main Gaelic-speaking area of Scotland, are treated in parallel with Gaelic-speaking Ireland. In both the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and Ireland there was a belief in witchcraft and magic, but the witch did not assume the demonic character so central to Scottish and English official witch-theory. The role of the witch was taken by other spiritual beings, notably fairies. A recent commentator has identified the presence in Gaelic-speaking Scottish Highlands of

‘the creatures or spirits who had a fully functioning parallel society inside hills and mounds. There is no doubt that, across the Highlands and the Western Isles, until the twentieth century, they were believed to blight human beings, especially children, and crops and livestock, in much the same manner as witches elsewhere. In particular, they were considered to be a menace to young children, both by injuring them and stealing them and leaving fairy offspring in their places’.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish folklorist Sir William Wilde affirmed that over much of the west of Ireland fairies were ‘the great agents and prime movers of all accidents, disorders and death, in man and beast’, a tendency which was most marked in the extreme western Gaelic-speaking areas. The presence of these alternative agents of misfortune probably helps explain why, outside of areas dominated by English or Scots settlers, few experience witchcraft accusations. An interesting variation is provided by the Isle of Man, another Gaelic-speaking part of the British Isles where fairy beliefs were firmly rooted. Man was ruled by the English earls of Derby, and its church was incorporated into the Church of England. Two people, a mother and her son, were hanged there for witchcraft in 1617, but otherwise only two witchcraft prosecutions, both of which failed, reached the secular courts. In the Isle of Man, witchcraft records were initially screened by the Manx church courts, and investigation of their archives reveals that accusations arising from a heavily folklorised witchcraft were routinely defused at that level or ended with the supposed witch launching a defamation suit against her accuser.

Then there was Wales, another linguistically and culturally separate area. Administratively, Wales had been formally integrated into the English state in 1541, one of the consequences of this process being the setting up of assize courts in the principality. The records of these survive in bulk, and they reveal little by way of witch trials, in contrast, for example, with very high levels of prosecution, frequently leading to hanging, of property offenders. Over the period when the English witch statutes were in operation, there were thirty-four trials of witches which led to eight convictions and five executions, this in a population of maybe a quarter of a million. In Wales, too, there was a traditional belief in witches, but as in Gaelic-speaking areas, these were not particularly threatening figures, and co-existed with other agents of
misfortune, including fairies. During the seventeenth century, the English witch stereotype did penetrate into Wales, but it came late and was never fully internalised.\textsuperscript{32}

Discussion of supernatural beliefs in the Celtic parts of the British Isles raises the issue of broader beliefs about witchcraft in Lowland Scotland and England. Certainly, fairy beliefs were firmly established in Lowland Scotland, and witches and fairies were sometimes conflated in accusations, possibly because James VI identified fairies as demonic beings.\textsuperscript{33} Very rapidly, however, Scottish witchcraft accusations recognised the importance of the devil. As we have noted, the Scottish Reformation was more aggressive than the English. In 1560 the kirk’s \textit{First Book of Discipline} envisaged a new, reformed church, and a new, reformed society, that society to consist of new, reformed human beings. Witch hunting was an element in the long cultural process which obtaining these objectives entailed. Accordingly, the notion of witches as the instruments of the devil was internalised by the Scottish peasantry, with confessing witches routinely telling how they met the devil, entered into the satanic pact, and had sexual intercourse with him. Christina Larner, indeed, postulated the existence in early modern Scotland of a ‘new popular demonic . . . a well rooted and well understood popular demonology’.\textsuperscript{34} This degree of internalisation of the concept of demonic input into witchcraft was, she argued, characteristic of popular attitudes to witchcraft as the Reformed church’s teachings penetrated deeper into the peasant consciousness. But the peasant consciousness was capable of retaining, far into the seventeenth century, fairly complex beliefs about witchcraft and related matters which were embedded in an earlier popular culture. In 1662 a woman called Isabel Gowdie, from Auldern in northern Scotland, was tried as a witch. In a remarkable series of confessions, she gave a heavily folklorised account of a supernatural world in which witchcraft co-existed with the operations of elves and fairies. The kirk clearly had further work to do in the remoter parts of the kingdom of Scotland.\textsuperscript{35}

So far, the existence of a ‘popular demonic’ in England remains uninvestigated, although there are strong suggestions, not least on the strength of witch-trial pamphlets, that something like it existed. At the very least, demonic ideas entered English witchcraft beliefs through the notion of the witch’s familiar spirit.\textsuperscript{36} The exact nature of the familiar varied, and the origin of the belief in the familiar remains obscure. Nevertheless, familiars were of central importance to English witchcraft: one of the accused whose witchcraft was described in the first English trial pamphlet, concerning three Essex witches tried in 1566, reportedly had a familiar called Sathan, with which she entered into a pact and gave her blood in return for the ability to do harm to her enemies. In English witch lore, the familiar and the devil were frequently conflated, with confessing witches telling how the devil appeared to them in animal form, and how they entered into a pact with these strange creatures. More elusive is evidence of English belief in the witches’ Sabbath. Although it was not a central feature of either official or popular belief in Scotland, witch trials there occasionally threw up accounts of the Sabbath, although these were normally folklorised versions of the phenomenon, with peasant feasting and dancing at their core, rather than the cannibalistic orgies described by some continental demonologists. In England there is less evidence even of this type, although occasional glimpses can be obtained of popular beliefs concerning witch’s meetings. Perhaps the most remarkable instance came in 1673, when a woman named Anne Armstrong gave the Northumberland justices of the peace a remarkable series of depositions in which she gave an account of
being ridden to a number of witches’ meetings in the shape of a horse, where witches feasted, danced (sometimes in animal forms), and gave their fealty to the devil.\textsuperscript{37}

In 1736 the British Parliament (British since the Act of Union of 1707) passed an Act which abolished the Scottish Witchcraft Act of 1563 and the English one of 1604, thus effectively decriminalising witchcraft. In both countries, prosecution and executions had been in decline for some time. In England, prosecutions had been in decline in all areas for which records survive from the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the last execution came in 1685, and the last conviction, with the alleged witch being remanded by a sceptical judge, came in 1712. In Scotland, the mass craze of 1661–2 seems to have alerted the central judicial authorities to the dangers of uncontrolled witch hunting, and Edinburgh judges exercised greater control over witchcraft prosecutions. Trials continued, and there were incipient panics in East Lothian in 1678 and Paisley in 1697, this latter incident, with an allegedly possessed girl named Christian Shaw at its centre, resulting in seven executions. But the last execution recorded by the central authorities came in 1706, with a final witch-burning, following a trial of dubious legality, occurring at Dornoch in 1727, when Janet Horne became the last person to be executed as a witch in Britain. For England, if less certainly for Scotland, the 1736 legislation came when witch hunting had clearly lost its validity.\textsuperscript{38}

Modern historians of witchcraft in Britain have reached no consensus about the reasons for, or indeed the nature of, the retreat from witchcraft beliefs which the 1736 Act might logically be assumed to have symbolised. One point on which they are generally agreed is that the view which has occupied mainstream thinking on this issue since the Enlightenment, that the ‘Age of Reason’ which supposedly pervaded Europe by the mid-eighteenth century, and which dismissed witch beliefs as irrational and superstitious, cannot be invoked to explain the decline in the belief of witchcraft in England and Scotland. The ‘mechanical philosophy’, associated with René Descartes and, later, with Isaac Newton, was making its impact on the intellectual life of England, and, it has recently been claimed, Scotland, but it was not sufficiently advanced to explain why there were no witch executions in England after 1685 or in Scotland, if we may discount the Dornoch case, after 1706. There were religious changes, identified in England as Latitudinarianism, which envisaged a less interventionist God and a more marginalised devil. In England, this religious tendency was firmly entrenched among the elite by 1736, but its progress had been uncertain at earlier points. In the late seventeenth century, Joseph Glanvill in England and George Erskine in Scotland had published compendia of stories aiming at proving the reality of the existence of the spirit world and of witchcraft, while even Francis Hutchinson, the clergyman and future bishop whose \textit{An Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft} is regarded as a key sceptical text, considered the acceptance of the reality of spirits and their operations as an essential part of Christian belief. Scotland provided the one outspoken opponent of the 1736 Act, James Erskine, Lord Grange, who appears to have regarded the Act as an attack by proponents of what he regarded as the increasingly unsound Christianity practised in England on the more robust values of the Scottish kirk. Indeed, no full-scale denial of the reality of witchcraft was published in Scotland until 1815, when James Paterson’s \textit{Witchcraft unsupported by Scripture} appeared.

The judges who were apparently increasingly unwilling to convict witches were likewise unwilling to completely jettison witchcraft beliefs. Perhaps the most interesting
figure here was Sir George Mackenzie, Lord Advocate of Scotland between 1677 and 1686. Mackenzie, early in his career, had been involved as a justice depute in the mass craze of 1661–2, and his experience had left him very sensitive to the dangers inherent in the lack of due legal process that could so easily affect witch trials that were not subject to strict supervision by qualified lawyers. The decline of witch hunting in Scotland owed much to his attitude, expressed clearly in his influential commentaries on the laws of Scotland. Yet he did not deny the reality of witchcraft, and in particular declared his opposition to the important sixteenth-century Dutch sceptic Johann Weyer.39

The growth of judicial scepticism both north and south of the Anglo-Scottish border must have been regarded by many as suggesting that the problems of convicting witchcraft in particular cases lead to a rejection of the very possibility of witchcraft, but this was not a necessary outcome. Similarly, the brief period around 1712, following the trial of Jane Wenham, when witchcraft became a party political issue in England, with (broadly) Tories supporting witch beliefs and Whigs supporting scepticism, demonstrated how debate about witchcraft could reach heated levels unexpectedly.40 Perhaps, in England at least, intellectual objections to witchcraft were underpinned by a cultural distancing of the educated elite away from the common people: witchcraft beliefs, certainly as evidenced in witch trials, were increasingly regarded as appropriate to the world of plebeian superstition rather than that of the refined and fashionable gentleman. Nevertheless, one exponent of fashionable taste, the writer Joseph Addison, probably encapsulated a widely held view when he declared in 1711 that ‘I believe in general that there is, and has been such a thing as witchcraft, but at the same time can give no credit to any particular instance of it’.41 Perhaps the best way of understanding the retreat from witchcraft as an intellectual possibility is not to set sceptics against believers, but rather to analyse positions based on different levels of doubt.

Throughout the British Isles, witch beliefs survived the 1736 Act.42 On a popular level, people continued to identify other people, usually old women, as witches, and take unofficial action against them. Indeed, this phenomenon was demonstrated before the Act, when in 1705 at Pittenweem in Scotland a woman named Janet Cornfoot was brutally murdered after an attempt to prosecute her at the court had failed.43 Similar incidents occurred in England throughout the eighteenth century, with one incident, in Hertfordshire in 1751, leading to the execution for the murder of a butcher who had orchestrated the fatal maltreatment of a supposed witch.44 Less sinisterly, there was a continued acceptance in the powers of cunning folk and other ‘good’ witches, who continued to help people find stolen goods, tell fortunes, provide basic medical services, and give advice to those who thought themselves bewitched. Acceptance of the reality of witchcraft, or at least an inability to totally reject it, was also expressed by elite individuals. Perhaps most surprisingly, the eminent English jurist Sir William Blackstone, surely a paragon of Enlightenment values, thought that to deny witchcraft was ‘at once flatly to contradict the revealed word of God, in various passages both of the old and the new testament; and the thing itself is a truth to which every nation in the world hath in its turn borne testimony’, and adopted Addison’s equivocal position.45 Perhaps less unexpectedly John Wesley, founder of Methodism, regarded belief in witchcraft as a fundamental of the Christian faith, and deplored the way in which belief in it had been discarded, arguing (as
many had done in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries) that giving up witchcraft was giving up the Bible. In 1718 Francis Hutchinson, in his Historical Essay, noted the precarious nature of the escape from witchcraft beliefs which seemed to be in progress at that time: ‘Our present freedom from these evils are no security, that such a time might not turn up in one revolution or another’. Even by the early eighteenth century, this well-informed observer could not regard the end of witch hunting in Britain as a foregone conclusion.

Notes

15 These are discussed in Lauren Martin, “Scottish Witchcraft Panics Re-Examined,” in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Goodare, Martin, and Miller, 119–143; on individual panics, see: Brian Levack, “The Great Scottish Witch Hunt of 1661–1662,” *Journal of


22 Tyler, “Church Courts at York and Witchcraft Prosecutions.”


26 Purkiss, Witch in History, 93.

27 James VI, Daemonologie, in Forme of ane Dialogue, divided in Three Bookes (Edinburgh, 1597), 43–44.


29 Ibid., 53.


32 These data are taken from Richard Suggett, A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales (Stroud: The History Press, 2008).


34 Larner, Enemies of God, 144–145.


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40 Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations*.


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