

# MOSTLY GHOSTLY INVESTIGATIONS



## THE WHITESANDS WITCHES

Kathleen Cronie tells the story of the Dumfries Witch Trials

Agnes Cairnes, Agnes Clark, Janet Callen, Janet Corsane, Janet McGown, Janet McNaught, Margaret Clerk, Jean Thomson and Helen Moorheid...

When it comes to the dark and tragic history of Dumfries, these names are of pivotal importance. Why? Well, on April 13, 1659, these unfortunate women were taken to the Whitesands where they were 'wirried' – meaning strangled, and burned at the stake.

Much of the hysteria surrounding witchcraft arose in 1486 when two Dominican inquisitors wrote the *Malleus Malificarum*. This horrific publication focused on identifying, interrogating and convicting people, especially women, of witchcraft. Back in those days it would have been used as a sort of witch-finder's handbook.

The south of Scotland was by no means impervious to witch persecution and around 70 people perished in this area alone.

While researching the case of the nine women mentioned above, we discovered what we believe to be a common link between seven of them. The other two, it seems, were only linked to each other. There is also another woman who we believe was to stand trial along with the others.

Helen Tait is a woman who did not die on April 13 but was on trial with the other nine accused of witchcraft. There were a number of bizarre accusations made against her, including a story of her cat constantly being seen around a sick child. Apparently, when the cat died, the child recovered. There was also talk of a man who had refused to kiss Helen becoming ill. However insubstantial these accusations were, Helen was still made to stand trial. In the end, she was found not guilty; however she was to be of good behaviour under pain of 50 merks and banishment from the Burgh.

Helen Harris is a woman who did not stand trial, but had been kept



prisoner in Kirkcudbright Tolbooth at the same time as Agnes Cairnes and also had links with several of the other women executed on the Whitesands that fateful day. Sadly, Helen, who had perhaps undergone months of sleep deprivation and painful interrogations, decided to take her own life in the squalor of her prison cell. Agnes Cairnes, possibly half deranged with fear, told people that the Devil himself had visited Kirkcudbright and killed Helen Harris in her cell.

Helen Moorheid is a woman whose tragic fate apparently came about through a bitter argument with relatives. It would appear from our research that Helen's brother-in-law started a feud over land rights which would ultimately end in Helen's death. Her own brother accused her of witchcraft and there were three people who gave evidence at her trial who shared the same surname. Could this be a family conspiracy to get Helen out of the way?

I have only touched briefly on the 1659 case, which is absolutely fascinating and abhorrent in equal measures. We plan to conduct further research in the coming months.

This shameful episode in Dumfries's dark history must never be forgotten.

■ *For more information about Mostly Ghostly and the Dumfries Ghost Walks, see [www.mostlyghostly.org](http://www.mostlyghostly.org) or call 07751 722008.*