



Witchcraft and Magic in England, c. 1400–1920

Collection Summary

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The practice of witchcraft is centuries old, yet we continue to live in a world fascinated by the potential of magic. Witches have existed in many eras and in many forms—**culturally significant and versatile figures who became the object of intense legal, religious, political, and social scrutiny.**

Bringing together **over 57,000 images**, this unique collection **charts the evolution of witchcraft and magic in England over five centuries.** It comprises documents sourced from The National Archives (UK), British Library, University College London Special Collections, and The Folklore Society. It incorporates a broad range of records and texts, exploring an array of key topics and themes, such as **belief, gender, medicine, politics, religion, and science.**

The collection **hones in on the concept of the witch in late medieval thought and literature**, when longstanding beliefs in astrology, ritual magic, superstition, religion, and theories of health and healing tended to compete, but were nevertheless largely co-existent. It then surveys the post-1450 period, when shifting attitudes towards witchcraft led **to legal and secular changes, alongside an increase in accusations against, and persecutions of, those perceived to be witches.** This trend was linked to religious upheaval, political change, and social tensions in English communities, whereby controversy, fear, and hatred were stoked by a growing print culture. Significantly, the collection **features assize records from witch trials of the early modern period** and examines pamphlets and printed material that cast the accused (mainly women) as deviant social forces.

The sources also spotlight groups who escaped suspicion: members of the elite or “cunning folk”, as well as medical practitioners who engaged in “respectable magic”. Indeed, the collection contains **many alchemical tracts, astrological almanacs, and herbals.** The **study of magic, the occult, and witchcraft became a widespread scholarly pursuit during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.** Literature generated by those who studied these compelling subjects, or who were attracted to esoteric societies, features prevalently.

Interdisciplinary in ethos and expansive in terms of its chronological scope and the archival materials that it contains, this collection will appeal to students, educators, and researchers working within a range of scholarly fields, including **anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, religious studies, and women’s studies.** It will likewise interest those situated within various branches of historical study, such as **the history of ideas and the history of science, as well as social, cultural, and political history.**

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Sources Include:



