Criminals, Lunatics and Witches: 
Finding the Less Than Pleasant in Family History
Craig L. Foster AG®

Criminals
The largest portion of the known criminal population were the common sneak thieves which included burglars, pickpockets and other types of thieves. Those involved in more violent crimes such as assault, battery, violent theft, highway robbery, manslaughter, murder, rape and other sexual offenses were fewer in number.


In 1857, at least 8,600 prostitutes were known to London authorities. Incredibly, that was just a small portion of the estimated prostitutes in London. While London had the most prostitutes, there were ladies of ill-repute in every industrial centre and most market towns.


Lists/records of “disorderly women” are found at:
The National Archives at Kew
Bristol Archives
Dorset History Centre
Gloucestershire Archives
Plymouth & West Devon Records
As well as many other repositories

Children also served time in prison. For example, in Dublin, Ireland alone, between 1859 and 1891, 12,671 children between ages seven and sixteen were imprisoned. Prison registers are found at the National Archives of Ireland.

Online Sources for Searching for Criminals:
Ancestry
Birmingham, England, Calendars of Prisoners, 1854-1904
Cornwall, England, Bodmin Gaol, 1821-1899
Dorset, England, Calendar of Prisoners, 1854-1904
England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892
London, England, King’s Bench and Fleet Prison Discharge Books and Prisoner Lists, 1734-1862
Surrey, England, Calendar of Prisoners, 1880-1891, 1906-1913
United Kingdom, Licenses of Parole for Female Convicts, 1853-1871, 1883-1887
Lunatics

“Due, perhaps, to the absence of a centralised state response to the social problem of madness until the 19th century, private madhouses proliferated in 18th century Britain on a scale unseen elsewhere. References to such institutions are limited for the 17th century but it is evident that by the start of the 18th century, the so-called ‘trade in lunacy’ was well established.”

By 1807, London and environs had seventeen “madhouses.”

“History of psychiatric institutions,” Wikipedia,

Online Sources for Searching for Criminals:

Ancestry
England & Wales, Criminal Lunacy Warrant and Entry Books, 1882-1898
England, Criminal Lunatic Asylum Registers, 1820-1843
UK, Lunacy Patients Admission Registers, 1846-1912

Find My Past
Kent, Bexley Asylum Minute Books, 1901-1939
Prestwich Asylum Admissions, 1851-1901
South Yorkshire Asylum, Admission Records, 1872-1910

Other Sources
Ancestors in lunatic asylums
www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/tutorials/miscellaneous/ancestors-lunatic-asylums
Witchcraft

“The great age of witch hunts in Europe and America spanned roughly 1400 to 1775.”

“From Russia to Bermuda, from Scotland to Brazil, witch hunts took place throughout the world.”

https://blog.oup.com/2014/10/salem-witch-trials-infographic/

Between 1400 and 1775, “100,000 people were prosecuted for witchcraft and at least 50,000 people were sentenced to death.”

https://blog.oup.com/2014/10/salem-witch-trials-infographic/

One of the most active centres of witch-hunting was Scotland, where perhaps 4,000 people were consigned to the flames – a striking number for such a small country, and more than double the execution rate in England. The ferocity of these persecutions can be attributed to the most notorious royal witch-hunter: King James VI of Scotland, who in 1603 became James I of England.

Ellie Cawthorne, “James VI and I: the king who hunted witches,” History Extra, 1 October 2013,

In fact, in 1597 James I was the only monarch in history to publish a book on witchcraft. Daemonologie (literally, the science of demons) was “intended to convince the doubters of the existence of witchcraft – it was also to inspire those who persecuted witches to do so with new vigour and determination.”

Ellie Cawthorne, “James VI and I: the king who hunted witches,” History Extra, 1 October 2013,

The Pendle witches of 1612 caused a sensation in Lancashire and was one of the more famous of the English witch trials. Ultimately two men and eight women were hanged as witches.

Emma Mason, “Witches in the dock: 10 of Britain’s most infamous witch trials,” History Extra, 1 December http://www.historyextra.com/feature/witches-dock-witch-trials-10-britains-most-infamous

British emigrants brought witchcraft superstitions with them that encouraged witch hysteria producing the Salem and hundreds of other witch trials throughout New England.

As late as 1717, four English women were put to death for witchcraft. They were Misses Clark, Clark, Norton & Norton, all of Leicester.

The last witchcraft trial in England was in 1944. Rebecca Jane Yorke was “an English medium who was the last person convicted under the Witchcraft Act 1735.” She was arrested in 1944 for defrauding people who attended her séances. She was found guilty on seven counts against the Witchcraft Act but was fined only £5 and she promised she would hold no more séances.

Gwen Ellis was the first “witch” to be executed in Wales. She lived in Caernarvonshire and was executed in 1594. She was one of only about thirty-four or so prosecution for witchcraft in Wales.

Emma Mason, “Witches in the dock: 10 of Britain’s most infamous witch trials,” History Extra, 1 December http://www.historyextra.com/feature/witches-dock-witch-trials-10-britains-most-infamous

Ireland did not have the high level of witch hunts that Scotland and England and had. The last witch trial in Ireland was probably the most prominent one. Eight women were charged in County Antrim in March 1711 of demonic possession of a teenage girl’s body, mind and spirit. They were found guilty and placed first in stocks where they were subjected to stones and rotten fruit by a large crowd. They were then taken to prison where they spent a year before being released.

“Over 300 years ago Ireland’s last witch trial condemned 8 innocent women,” Irish Central, 2 April 2017, https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/irish-witch-trials-of-eight-women-revealed-300-years-later-123186248-237788431

On 15 March 1895, Bridget Cleary of Clonmel, Tipperary, Ireland became “the last witch burned in Ireland.” The 28-year-old woman was burned to death by her husband and family members because they believed she was possessed by a fairy.

Her murder became a part of Irish folklore. It is said there is a children’s rhyme, “Are you a witch or are you a fairy? Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?”


Sources for search for Witchcraft and Witch Hunts:

National Records of Scotland
AD14/12/17 Precognition against Robert Murray for the crime of witchcraft 1812
AD14/22/71 Precognition against Isabella Whitefield for the crime of witchcraft 1822
GD1/315 Papers relating to witchcraft in Inverkip and contract for the parsonage teinds of the parish of Kilpatrick 1642-1662
JC40 Witchcraft Papers 1572-1709
RH15/14/11 Note of information whereby to raise criminal letters before Justice General [at instance of Thomas Stewart of Ryland] against George Fraiser in Outlaw [Oathlaw] and Geilles Chalmer, his spouse, who sought help from deceased John Philp, a damned warlock, who was burned in Banff, [1633-1634] 23 February 1631, for witchcraft

The National Archives (UK)
Ref. Q/SB/2/13 Depositions 1651
Ref. Ep/1/11/1 Deposition Books 1571
Ref. EP/13/1 New Castle St. Andrew’s Parish Records Includes list of witches executed on the Town Moor 1650
Ref. RYE/43/138/7 Order of the Mayor of Rye 1645
Ref. HAS/1667W/51 Records of the High Sheriff, Assizes 1667

Online Sources for search for Witchcraft and Witch Hunts
Ancestry
All Scotland, Names of Witches, 1658
New England, Salem Witches and Others Tried for Witchcraft, 1647-1697

Other Websites
81 Scottish “Witches” Pardoned [includes list of the 81 executed people
http://forejustice.org/wc/sp/scottish_pardons.html
The Pendle Witches
www.pendlewitches.co.uk

What does all of this mean?

• We can’t pick our ancestors.
• We are not responsible for what our ancestors did.
• Many of these ancestors were actually good people.
• We can discover good, helpful clues about our ancestors.

For Further Reading


#FHLWebinars
#FamilyHistoryLibrary

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