

had a lease of her life for 47 yeares, where of seaven are yet to come. Lucy Thompson had a lease of two and forty, whereof two are yet to come, and, her lease being near out, they would have persuaded this informer to have taken a lease of three score years or upwards".³ Once a witch had "signed-on" for a certain lease with the devil, he or she met every so often in covens of about thirteen. The Newcastle meeting was at "the rideing house in the close on the common"⁴ where ten men and women and three more (unknown to Ann Armstrong) were present. Another meeting was held at "Rideing Millne bridg-end", where Ann Armstrong saw "the said Anne Foster, Anne Dryden, and Luce Thompson, and tenne more unknowne".⁵ The prolificacy of witches is shown by a meeting at the house of John Newton of Riding Mill where "Lucy wished that a boyl'd capon with silver scrues might come down to her and rest, which were five coveys (covens) consisting of thirteen person in each covey",⁶ and at a large meeting at Allensford, a great many witches were present, "every thirteen of them had a divell with them in sundry shapes".⁷

What actually happened at these covens can only be surmised from the scraps of evidence that have remained. We are told that "Ann Baites hath severall times danced with the divell att the places aforesaid, calling him, sometimes, her protector, and, other sometimes, her blessed saviour, . . . she saw Forster, Dryden, and Thompson, and the rest, and their protector, which they call'd their god, sitting at the head of the table . . . when this informer used meanes to avoyde their company, they threatened her, if she would not turne to their god, the last shift should be the worst".⁸ The "protector" or "god" does not appear to have been one of the coven, as Ann Armstrong tells us "she see the said

³ *Surtees Society*, XL (1861), p. 196.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

⁵ *Denham Tracts*, II (1895), pp. 300-302.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁸ *Surtees Society*, XL (1861), pp. 191 and 193.

Ann Foster (with twelve others and) a long black man riding on a bay galloway, as she thought, which they call'd their protector".⁹

At the bridge-end of Riding Mill a vivid description of a meeting on the Sabbath indicates the importance of ritual to the participants of witchcraft. "She and the rest had drawne their compasse nigh to a bridg end, and the devill placed a stone in the middle of the compasse, they sette themselves downe, and bending towards the stone, repeated the Lord's prayer backwards."¹⁰ Then "their particular devill, in the forme of a little black man and black cloaths (as opposed to the long black man in⁹), called of one Isabell Thompson of Slealy (Slaley), widdow, by name, and required of her what service she had done him. She replyd she had gott power of the body of one Margaret Teasdale, and call'd of one Thomasine, wife of Edward Watson, of Slealy."¹¹ The Margaret, surname unknown, of Anne Thompson's list,¹² may have been this possessed unfortunate woman.

Public attitude towards the witches of Northumberland varied from the sceptical to the convinced. Thomas Wilson¹³ saw "the highly-gifted race of 'witches' tending towards extinction". He knew one of these "poor creatures", Mabel, whose power never extended further than raising a wind to blow off the roof of a neighbour's cottage or shake his standing corn. He was aware that she was accused of more serious mischiefs, but found it difficult to say how far these accusations were true ". . . she was neither deformed nor ugly, but she was in the habit of amusing her young auditors with the birth and parentage of 'Dick the Deevil', who often rode over Black Fell to his work upon the 'Porto Bello Brag', a kind of wicked sprite that was well known in

⁹ *Denham Tracts*, II (1895), p. 301.

¹⁰ *Sur. Soc.* XL, p. 197; *Den. Tracts*, II, p. 307.

¹¹ *Sur. Soc.*, XL, pp. 195 and 197; Harrison, J. V., AA.4, XLIII (1965), pp. 281 and 282. On April 25th, 1718, Margaret Teasdale was left £10 by her brother Hugh Teasdale of Barrhaugh, in his will. This may be the Margaret Teasdale possessed of the devil by Isabell Thompson.

¹² Murray, M. A., (1963), p. 254.

¹³ *Den. Tracts*, II, p. 160.

that part of the neighbourhood".¹⁴ This area was around Felton on the Coquet a few miles to the east of Rothbury.

The activities of this "harmless" old lady can hardly have contrasted favourably with the activities of Ann Armstrong, Anne Driden, and Anne Foster. Ann Armstrong admits that she "hath beene severall times lately ridden by Ann Driden and Anne Foster, and was last night ridden by them to the rideing house in the close on the common".¹⁵ She also reports that one night a little before Christmas about the change of the moon "Anne Foster came with a bridle . . . and ridd upon her cross-leggd, till they came to (the) rest of her companions at Rideing Millne bridg-end, where they usually mett".¹⁶ Ann Armstrong continues; "upon Collup Munday last, being the tenth of February, the said persons mat at Allensford, where this informant (herself) was ridden upon by an enchanted bridle by Michael Aynsley and Margaret his wife".¹⁷ "On Monday last at night, she, being in her father's house, see one Jane Baites, of Corbridge, come in the forme of a gray catt . . ."

The Rev. J. Hodgson of Hartburn had much to say about a certain woman called Meg of Meldon.¹⁸ He tells us that she seems to have been Margaret Selby, mother of Sir William Fenwick, of Meldon, who died in 1652. On the decease of her husband, Sir William Fenwick of Wallington, she resided at Hartington Hall and was represented as being miserly, pitiless and money-getting. In a picture of her, which was at Seaton Delaval in 1810, she was habited in a round hat, with a large brim tied down at each ear and in a stiff gown turned up nearly to the elbows, with a vandyced sleeve of linen.¹⁹ The shoulders were covered with a thickly-gathered ruff or frill. Hodgson noted that Mackenzie reported her "represented in the costume of a witch . . . her

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Sur. Soc.*, XL, pp. 191-192.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁷ *Den. Tracts*, II, pp. 299-301.

¹⁸ Hodgson, J., *History of Northumberland*, Pt. II, Vol. II, pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ Vandyced or vandyked refers to a wide limp collar with deeply serrated edge as in portraits by Vandyke.

nose is crooked, her eyes penetrating, and her whole countenance indicates that superior acuteness, intelligence and strength of mind . . . acquired her the character by which she is distinguished. She used to go between Meldon and Hartington Hall by a subterraneous coach road, and the entry at Hartington into this underground way was by a very large whinstone in the Hart (river), called the battling stone, upon which people used to beat or battle the lie out of their webs in the bleaching season . . . her spirit was condemned to wander seven years and rest seven years alternately. During the season she had to walk she was the terror of the country from Morpeth to Hartington Hall."²⁰ Meg's haunting activities were concentrated on a well to the south-east of Meldon Tower, where she had apparently hid a bull's hide full of gold, and Meldon Bridge where a little dog was often reported running along the battlements.²¹ Hodgson noted also her connection with a stone coffin at Newminster Abbey, the water within it being used as a cure for warts.²² Mackenzie explains that she often appeared as a beautiful woman in the lane between the bridge and Meldon Park.²³ The connection of treasure with the name of Meg of Meldon is demonstrated by three stories of her hidden bags of gold. Near Meldon Tower, the school-house ceiling fell in "and varlets who were in, had a rare scramble for the coins".²⁴ There was also an effort to recover the treasure in the well to the south-east of the Tower, but Hodgson tells us as they cried "we have her now" the tackle slipped back into the well.²⁵ A stonemason dreamt of a triangular box buried under a large stone in a field. Hodgson reports it "was there truly".²⁶

The influence of these witches and covens upon the

²⁰ Mackenzie, *History of Northumberland*, II, p. 394, (1834).

²¹ The appearance of a dog was commonly an accepted form of a devil or witch in disguise.

²² *Den. Tracts*, II, p. 245

²³ Mackenzie, p. 394.

²⁴ Hodgson, J., p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

general folk of the county, resulted in the use of anti-witch charms in the form of rhymes, incantations and rituals for the protection of the unwary. A bunch of ash keys carried in the hand, or a twig from the rowan or "roan-tree" preserved the bearer from evil influence.²⁷ The rhyme

"if your whip sticks made of rowan,
you may ride your nag thro' any town,"²⁸

and the anti-witch rhyme used in Teesdale in the 1820's and 1830's,

"Black-luggie, lammer-bead,
Rowan tree, and reed thread,
Put the witches to their speed,"²⁹

we must hope provided the necessary protection. A twig of rowan bound with reed thread on the second of May and put in the window served the same purpose.³⁰ To the people who needed protection from the devil, the threat must have been very real. Danaeus commented in 1575 that the devil *was* god, manifest and incarnate; like many other gods, he was sacrificed for the good of the people. They believed in the divinity of their Master. "Then doe they all repeate the othe which they have geuen vnto him; in acknowledging him to be their God."³¹

²⁷ *Den. Tracts*, II, p. 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82; lammer-bead is amber-bead, and Black-luggie is a small wooden vessel made of staves, one of which projects and serves as a handle.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³¹ Danaeus, Lambert, *Dialogue of Witches*, (1575 circa), Chapter IV, E1.