

CHAPTER ONE ALIZON THE WITCH

The evidence of John Law.... About the eighteenth of March last past, he being a peddler, went with his pack of wares at his back through Colne-field: where unluckily he met with Alizon Device... who was very earnest with him for pins, but he would give her none: whereupon she seemed to be very angry; and when he was past her, he fell down lame in great extremity.

(*The Wonderful Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster* by Thomas Potts.)

“Unluckily he met with Alizon Device....” Eleven people died because John Law was at Colne-field that day. His argument with a teenage girl triggered one of the most dramatic and horrifying witchcraft cases in English history. The trials caused such controversy that a pamphlet, *The Wonderful Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster*, was written “by commandment of his Majesty’s Justices of Assize in the North Parts” to give the official version of what had happened. It’s a blatantly biased account; but in spite of all its distortions it still can’t hide the fact that the defendants suffered an appalling miscarriage of justice.

At the heart of the case was the conflict between the local Justice of the Peace, Roger Nowell, and Alizon Device’s family. *The Wonderful Discovery* includes the statements Roger Nowell took from them – from Alizon herself, her older brother James, her sister Jennet (about nine years old), her mother Elizabeth, and her grandmother Elizabeth Sothernes. It’s a disturbing record of a battle of wills fought out through a series of grim interrogations. Roger Nowell ruthlessly falsified evidence, but for a simple reason. He was convinced of his suspects’ guilt.

Alizon and her family openly practised magic. Their lives and values were shaped by a complex magical culture – a strange fusion of Christian and pre-Christian elements. Magic gave them practical ways to deal with everyday problems – illness, bad luck and unhappiness in love. But it also had a profound effect on their spiritual beliefs. There was very little evidence that they had committed any of the crimes they were accused of. But their magic called on the help of supernatural forces that Roger Nowell sincerely believed were evil.

The case of the Pendle witches raises questions that are still important today. Questions about guilt and truth; about the relationship between the material world and the realm of the spirit; about good and evil; and about the nature of magic and the nature of power.