

The Witch finder's step-sister.

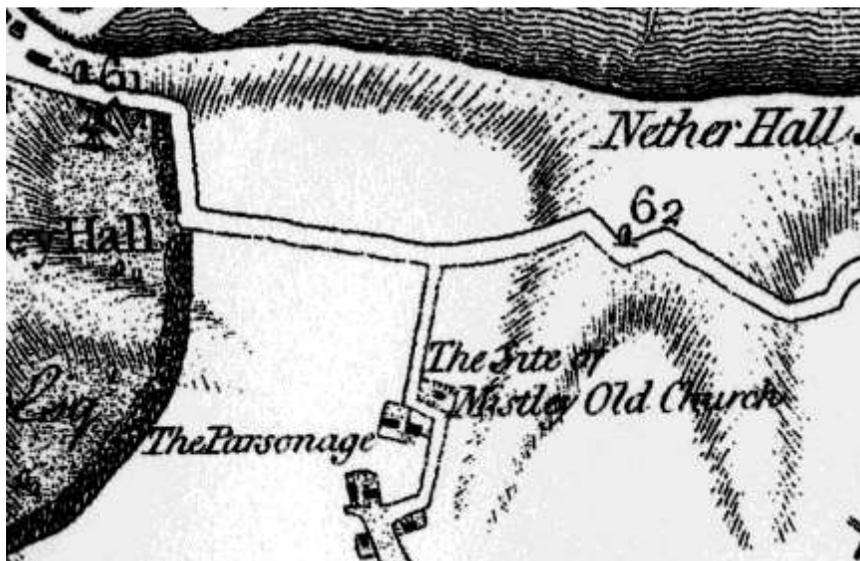
People make up lots of stories, which go off in all directions, about the so called witches, hunted by Matthew Hopkins in Manningtree. There are however more than enough facts to tell the real story, which is equally as fascinating. These are available both from the court papers, 'confessions' of the women extracted under duress and the written work of the witch finders, who afterwards sought to justify their actions.

For a change let us look at what happened in the run up to events that started in spring 1645, why Matthew Hopkins started his cruel investigations and if we can set the record straight about where he lived and operated before he set off on his crusade.

The Hopkins family came from Great Wenham, just a few miles over the border in Suffolk where his father James was rector, having studied in Cambridge University at the same time as Thomas Witham, who in 1610 became the parish rector in Mistley. At that time the small hamlet of Mistley surrounded St Mary's parish church located in the area we now regard as Mistley Heath, a mile and half away from Manningtree, along what is now the Essex way footpath. 'New' Mistley, Mistley Thorne, the 'Towers' Church, Hopping Bridge/lake and Mistley Quay, were developed much later on farmers' fields known as Le Thorne. The Thorne Inn in its present form also came after Hopkins time and Manningtree was still very much the principal port for shipping. The only other noticeable feature there at the time may have been an old wind mill which stood on top of Mistley Hill. Manningtree Town came within the wider parish of Mistley and to make worship easy had its own chapel and curate.

A new chapel to St Michael had been built in Manningtree High Street in 1616 and consecrated in 1633 at the invitation Of Thomas Witham by Bishop Laud, later Archbishop of Canterbury and another controversial figure.

Thomas Witham would have lived in the parsonage just opposite the church in Mistley (Heath), the rural centre of the parish, surrounded by a number of cottages and Manor houses. He had a number of children before his wife died in 1633, leaving several motherless youngsters.



A year later in Gt Wenham Matthew Hopkin's father also died and it seems that afterwards his mother Marie married the Mistley rector, moving into Mistley with some of her family. Matthew was still relatively young (fifteen) and likely joined her along with his brother John in the parsonage, which may have felt a familiar setting to the two of them. His mother may have completed his education there, as directed in his father's will. His other brother Thomas was instructed to go to New England, in pursuit of ambitions his father once had to join the new religious colony there.

In November 1639 the Mistley pastor's daughter Susan Witham married Richard Edwards who came from a well-off, local Manningtree family and had his own farm. His father had given a plot of land called 'Harkesteades' for a new graveyard and house for the Curate on the land opposite the Chapel. This land we think now lays behind the war memorial in Manningtree High Street.



Manningtree Chapel.

The couple lived in Manningtree. Unfortunately their first son born in 1640, died after only a month. Quickly pregnant again their second child lived just 9 months. It is not clear whether their third child (called Free-Love) survived childhood.

There was further family tragedy in 1641 when Matthew's older brother John died of consumption (TB). He was buried in Manningtree, possibly in the new grave yard, suggesting he could have been living with his step-sister or cared for close by. About the same time Matthew came of age (22yrs) and finally received the 100 marks legacy set out in his father's will. He may have been a man of leisure and had means enough to keep an expensive greyhound that plays a part in the witch hunting story, as he walked the dark streets of Manningtree town.

Whether Hopkins had any legal training or occupation has been speculated on, but there is no evidence so far. His legal and religious knowledge could have been part of his general education as a young gentleman of an establishment, church family. He said his witch finding knowledge was gained solely from experience and he had never 'travelled far for it', which implies he had not gone overseas to learn about witchcraft as some have also suggested.

Meanwhile Richard Edwards was becoming more of an authority figure and in 1642 he became Constable of Tendring Hundred and may have still held that position when the witch hunting started in earnest.

Another shock to the system for Matthew Hopkins was when in late 1643 his mother and step-father gave up the parish living and moved to take on a new church and home in London. The lack of a replacement priest left a religious power vacuum in the parish for several years that Hopkins may have felt obliged to step into. There was also no lord of the manor at that time as Viscount Paul Bayning (Jn) had recently died.

If not before then Matthew was at that point forced to move, likely to Manningtree, possibly with his step-sister Susan as a temporary measure. The departure of both their surviving parents could have drawn them even closer together.

The Edwards couple had another child in 1644 called John, again he died when only a few months old in very distressing circumstances, with 'very strange fits, extending the limbs, and rowling the eyes'. No surprise then that the couple started to look for answers as to why their children had been so afflicted and worried about the chances of any further children. Baby John, Hopkin's step Nephew, had been cared for by a wet nurse (Goodwife Wyles) who lived near Elizabeth Clark (alias Bedingfeild or Benefield), one of the first women he pursued early in the new year. So the reasons and emotions that spurred him into action may have been personal as much as religious. His step brother-in-law Richard Edwards also blamed the local witches for the death of some of his cattle. Elizabeth Clark was said to be the ring leader and he blamed her for killing his pigs, trying to kill him by spooking his horse and for turning his beer bad (he had brewing interests as well and supplied some of the local Inns).

Matthew Hopkins said that the witches met on Friday evenings every six weeks and did so in Manningtree at the house of Elizabeth Clark, who lived next door to him. He had a house and yard with a large gate. Another witness said Clark lived a little up the hill from them, making South Street (formerly Wormwood Hill) a likely setting for events. So by 1645 and the start of his investigations, if not before, Hopkins was living and operating in the Town, not Mistley. In terms of accommodation, he may have had help from Edwards, his wealthy relative who owned properties in the Town.

After being tortured for several days in her Manningtree home, Elizabeth Clark finally confessed to Hopkins about her witchcraft and persecution of his family. He went straight round to inform Susan & Richard Edwards at their home nearby. Clark's group included Anne Leech, Anne West & Elizabeth Gooding (or Goodwyn). They along with Margaret Moone a widow from Thorpe Le Soken confessed that they had sent their

imps to kill baby John, which must have been even more shocking for Hopkins and his close family. Susan & Richard Edwards later provided evidence on this to the Chelmsford court which then convicted Elizabeth Clark and others for the child's murder and other crimes.

Hopkins' investigations took place mainly in the women's own homes, so he did not need local premises as a base, with the initial magistrates' hearings taking place at a court held in the Town, possibly in one of the Inns or a civic building on the 21st March 1645. Hopkins did not actually sit as a judge; his role was as an investigator and informant. None of the women tried at Chelmsford as far as we know, had been 'Swam' by him.

After the trial Elizabeth Clark was hanged at Chelmsford along with about thirteen others including her friends Anne West & Elizabeth Gooding. To set a local 'example' four were however picked out and sent back to Manningtree for execution.

It is not clear where this took place. Possibly the market place or the 'Green'. The Town itself was not a large expanse but had several fields within and from later records a 'Green' where the four might have met their fate. What is left of Manningtree Green is the small triangle of grass in front of Hill House on South Street, just past the Red Lion. This Inn is one that would have been there in Hopkin's day, having been built in about 1600. There is some speculation that Hopkins lived in a house on the now empty plot next door and this hillside spot cannot be far off his residence and that of his neighbour Elizabeth Clark.

Only two of the four women executed here on the 1st August 1645 were actually locals, Helen Clark (daughter of Anne Leech) was from the Town and Anne West from Lawford. Anne Cooper who shared the gallows with them was from Gt Clacton and Marian Hocket from Ramsey. Neither had links with Manningtree other than that they were first investigated by the Town's two magistrates (not Hopkins) who also had lands and responsibilities in those parts of the Tendring Hundred, as did Richard Edwards.

Even so the hanging would have been quite an event and drawn a large crowd. This would have included, Susan and her husband Richard there to see two of the coven they thought had murdered their baby, finally get the punishment they deserved.

Following in the footsteps of his father, Susan's brother John Witham, eventually took on Mistley parish, perhaps after a gap whilst he completed his ministry training and was ordained. One of his first recorded duties in 1647 was to bury his step-brother Matthew Hopkins, who, like John Hopkins, died of consumption. Unlike his brother, Matthew was buried in Mistley (Heath) church yard, in the puritan tradition which involved little ceremony. His short reign as a 'Witch finder' causing much controversy and story writing that continues to this day.



Demolition of the remains of Mistley (Heath) Church

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