

ADDRESS BY ROY PUGH: October 31st 2004

On the Occasion of the first Remembrance of Prestonpans 81 Witches following the Pardon granted to them by the Barons Courts on July 27th 2004

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentleman. May I begin by welcoming you to the splendidly refurbished Prestoungrange Gothenburg, which I think you will agree is an asset to the community of Prestonpans.

Today is one devoted to children's play – dressing up and games of trick or treat, which I personally find less attractive than what we called 'Guising in my boyhood days. However, there is a more serious side to the festival of Halloween. While in the popular and modern imagination, the festival in folklore became a day associated with witches, the black arts and evil spirits; there is a more and real tragedy behind it. We would do well to remember that so-called witches in Scotland suffered persecution at unprecedented levels during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

So today, we are gathered here to pay respects to but a few of the countless hundreds of women and men who were put to death for the dubious – if not ludicrous – crime of Witchcraft. Today, we remember the 81 victims of the witch hunt in Prestonpans. It is a sensitive subject, which I, for one, treat seriously and I hope you will agree, sensitively.

I now turn to the historical facts of Witchcraft. Witchcraft is as old as mankind itself. From time immemorial, witches, wizards – warlocks in Scotland – were revered for their special skills and predictions. Many were healers who used herbal remedies to alleviate illness and pain. For example, 17th century wise-wives or gude-wives treated dropsy, a condition caused by heart disease by prescribing a concoction consisting of extract of Foxglove known as Foxglove tea. It is a well-known fact in modern medicine that the humble Foxglove is the source for Digitalis, prescribed for people prone to heart disease. This is but one of many country or folk remedies which have since become prescription drugs. But in those days, the price that the gude-wives or wise-wives paid for their natural remedies was heavy; they were accused of practicing Witchcraft and paid for that with their lives.

It is historical fact that so-called witches were persecuted by the pre- and post-reformation Christian Church in Scotland as elsewhere in Europe, although the greatest numbers of persecutions were instigated by the Protestant Church. A witch was considered to be in paction with the devil after renouncing her baptism; in exchange for her soul and by becoming a servant of Satan, she was given supernatural powers. That was the propaganda of the time. In time, the persecution was carried to the extreme.

Although various Scottish kings had legislated against witches, the most infamous legislative measure was given the royal assent by Mary, Queen of Scots. The Witchcraft act of 1563 was copied by Queen Elizabeth I of England in the same year. These measures were introduced to stamp out what was thought to be a growing menace. Witchcraft was heresy; adhering to the Catholic faith was also heresy and so the earliest victims of the act were probably closet Catholics who were classed as witches. After James VI's life was allegedly threatened by the North Berwick witches

in 1590 – the majority of these were actually from Prestonpans and they were originally indicted for treason until James became convinced they were witches – the Protestant Kirk of Scotland was quick to use his example in 1597, when Aberdeen experienced its first epidemic of witch executions.

So for almost 200 years, innocent people, the mentally ill, the misunderstood, the lonely, the wise-wives, the beggars and by far the greatest number, those who transgressed some social code of behaviour, were accused of witchcraft. These people suffered agonising torture and death at the whims of their persecutors, chief of whom were the leaders and the ministers of the Scottish Kirk.

From 1563 to 1727, witches were suddenly being discovered everywhere; there were four major epidemics or outbreaks of witch executions between 1590 and 1662, one of the most shameful periods in Scotland's history. Those who were responsible for these atrocities did so out of religious fanaticism. The Scottish Kirk and its heritors or benefactors – lairds and landowner – never apologised for these excesses, nor is the modern Kirk likely to. In my opinion, it would be an empty gesture.

So, after James VI's crusade against over 100 witches in East and Midlothian in 1590, the Church and the secular authorities felt a precedent had been set by the monarchy. The following 70 years contained no fewer than four major epidemics in the witch hunt, with local outbreaks occurring between 1597 and 1727. In that period, Scotland executed far more so-called witches than religious martyrs executed for their faith. Here, I am referring to the covenanters who conducted two of the worst epidemics; in time, they were proscribed for their unorthodox practices and a small number were executed or transported to the colonies during the period known as the Killing times in 1660 – 1680. The biters became the bitten so to speak. Some saw this as poetic justice.

Some modern historians argue that there was no single explanation for the motives of the witch hunters; they contend that it was a combination of Calvinistic zeal; a narrow-minded Church, a search for scapegoats to blame for natural calamities – storms, floods, crop failure and subsequent famine and most of all, the alleged sins of an unrepentant population. When researching my book, *The Deil's Ain*, very early on, I recognised that there was indeed one single motive. It was about controlling the population through religious fanaticism. The ingredient of the witch hunt included putting the fear of God into the population, encouraging hysteria, paranoia, hypocrisy, self-righteousness and prejudice – vital ingredients in a crusade which was based on superstition masquerading as Christian principles. The hapless victims of the witch hunt – eight out of ten were women – became the scapegoats for all the ills which afflicted that predominately rural society, in which illness struck without warning and animals died suddenly and mysteriously. In my researches, I found a connection between the witch epidemics and the dearth of food which threatened survival. The witch hunt was as much a mirror of a crisis of the intellect as it was the product of a harsh climate, periodic economic crisis and personal misfortune.

The Kirk readily grasped the potential for propaganda. It saw that the ills of society could be blamed on those who had strayed from the faith or left the path of righteousness. As I said earlier, the leading lights in this crusade, were the ministers and landowners, the 'better off' minority of the time. In this, they were aided and

abetted by the secular authorities – the local provosts and bailies who served on local commissions appointed by the Privy Council of Edinburgh – the Scottish Executive of the day – to give these commissions some veneer of legality. The majority of witch trials were held under these commissions, as the court system would have ground to a halt if the trials had been held in the High Court in Edinburgh. These kangaroo courts – allowed neither legal counsel for the accused, nor did they permit a jury. Witnesses – usually hostile and prejudiced – gave evidence to the commission, a process which did not allow cross-examination.

Witchcraft trials were legal insofar as suspects were indicted under the Witchcraft Act of 1563. Where I take issue with this is the manner in which the trials were conducted and the ludicrous evidence which was used to obtain a guilty verdict. The nonsense which passed as evidence was only surpassed by the ignorance, stupidity, superstition, self-righteousness and paranoia of those who were appointed to try their victims. The hell fires burnt longer and more often in Scotland than in England. The Scottish Ecclesiastical and secular authorities brought to trial three times as many as their counterparts in England, which then as now, had a population ten times that of Scotland. My conservative estimate of victims executed is in the region of 3,500; it may have been as high as 4,500 but owing to poor, incomplete, non-existent or destroyed official records, we will never be able to quantify the true total. My research has revealed that whatever the ultimate figure, the period 1563 to 1727 was a dark, terrifying chapter in Scotland's history.

There are some who have expressed concern that Baron Prestoungrange has chosen Halloween to commemorate the execution of the Prestonpans witches. He did not choose it cynically. While I can appreciate the concerns, on balance, I feel it is the most appropriate day to hold this simple ceremony. It is the one day in the year which focuses the attention of the public on the subject of witches. To have held the ceremony on 1st November – All Saints or All Hallows Day as someone has suggested would be rich in irony. To commemorate the Prestonpans witches on the day would be inappropriate and meaningless; let us not forget that it was the Church which was largely responsible for the witch hunt in Scotland and for that reason, it would be a mockery to hold the commemoration on a Christian festival.

I do not believe in Witchcraft or witches who were disposed to evil. As for forgiveness, did not Jesus of Nazareth exhort his flock to bring to him those who were possessed by demons or the devil, so that he might console them? The Scottish Kirk of the day signally failed to follow that instruction. It pains me to admit that the vast majority of those who suffered under the witch hunt were innocent victims of a propagandist, fanatical Church and a more than usually violent state.

So I am humbly proud to be here today to publicly declare the pardons granted by the Baronial Courts of Prestoungrange and Dolphinstoun [and Declared by the Barons of Prestoungrange and Dolphinstoun themselves and their Common Baron Bailie Mathew Wills Yr. of Prestoungrange]. It is a great pity that other Baron Courts across Scotland have not followed their example before they are abolished on 28th November 2004. This Pardon is the first, and I suspect, the sole of its kind. It is therefore unique and for me, it is something with which I am quietly proud to have been associated.

It is too late to right the wrongs of a previous age. This modest ceremony may go some way towards a symbolical recognition of those countless victims of the witch hunt who were cruelly persecuted. I invite those present – the possible descendants or namesakes of some of the 81 victims in Prestonpans – to lay a floral tribute at the Memorial which commemorates the names of those who were judicially executed. Before we do that, may I say that from now on, the Baron Court has declared Halloween as a Day of Remembrance for the Prestonpans Witches in time to come, a day which will be marked by various means.

Will you now please join me in laying the floral tribute to those whom we remember this day of 31st October 2004?