

Official pardon for victims of anti-occult hysteria that swept the country

By Dawn Thompson

AT the height of the hysteria, simply owning a black cat or choosing to live alone was enough to earn a woman torture or execution.

One of the most famous cases saw several people burned at the stake for trying to sink the king's ship with a magical storm.

Now, however, Scotland's 'witches' are to be officially pardoned for their supposed crimes - more than 400 years after the vicious wave of persecution that claimed their lives.

This Sunday, on Hallowe'en, a special ceremony will be held vindicating 81 victims of the witch-hunts that swept the country in the 16th and 17th centuries.

It will include a public declaration of a pardon secured through Scotland's soon-to-be-abolished baronial courts by Dr Gordon Prestoungrange, 14th Baron of Prestonpans.

Several suspected witches were burned in the East Lothian town at a time when fear of 'dark forces' was causing panic among even the most highly educated of people.

Now 15 descendants and namesakes of the victims will gather in its Gothenburg pub to commemorate the injustice they endured.

The baronial courts, which are due to be scrapped by the Scottish Exec-

'Strangled and burnt at the stake'

utive next month, still theoretically give barons the right to dispense justice on their land.

Dr Prestoungrange, 55, speaking from his winter home in Queensland, Australia, said yesterday: 'In a way we are righting the wrongs committed by our own ancestors, because many of the individuals wrongly sentenced to death were condemned by the then barons of Prestoungrange.'

Witch-hunting reached its bloody peak during the late 16th century, under the rule of the strongly Presbyterian King James VI - later King James I of England.

Before the Protestant Reformation, witches had been widely accepted in Scotland as 'a force of nature', and executions for witchcraft were virtually unknown.

But the new creed, suspicious of mysticism, was not to be so forgiving. Throughout Scotland, more than 3,500 people - mainly women - were tortured and killed as witches.

To make sure their story is not forgotten, Prestoungrange Baronial Court has also declared Hallowe'en to be a day of remembrance in honour of those executed.

Andrew White, 39, a graphic designer from Prestonpans, who is believed to be a descendant of one

Scotland set to forgive its witches... 400 years too late

■ AGNES SAMPSON was killed in the North Berwick witch-hunt, one of Europe's bloodiest.

The East Lothian midwife was suspected of leading a coven that tried to sink King James VI's ship as it returned from Denmark.

■ When interrogations began, Sampson, from Nether Keith, near Humber, was singled out.

She was tortured and admitted responsibility for the storm and implicated other local women.

■ In all, 70 people were accused and Sampson was burned at the stake in Haddington in 1591.

of the victims, yesterday praised the idea behind the ceremony.

He said: 'I believe that it is a good thing to honour the memory of these individuals. It is also a valuable and unique way of emphasising the history of the town.'

Dunbar-based historian Roy Pugh will publicly declare the pardons at Sunday's ceremony. He said: 'The crimes committed against these individuals were nothing less than a mini-holocaust and I wish more baronial courts had followed the example of Dr Prestoungrange.'

'People were being strangled and burnt at the stake for doing nothing more harmful than brewing up a few home-made remedies or possessing a black cat.'

'It's too late to right the wrongs of the past, but at least this goes some way towards symbolically honouring these individuals who were so cruelly persecuted.'

d.thompson@daily.co.uk



Occult: Cathleen McCarron as Agnes Sampson in *Witchcraze*, the BBC film about the witch-hunts