

The Witchfinder General
Matthew Hopkins
A Beginners Guide

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A Season of Upheaval and Bread

In the mid-17th century, England was a nation deeply fractured and undergoing immense upheaval. The reign of King Charles I had led to increasing tensions with Parliament, culminating in the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642. This conflict pitted Royalists (Cavaliers) against Parliamentarians (Roundheads), tearing communities apart and creating a climate of uncertainty and fear across the land.

The traditional structures of authority were weakened or broken down in many regions. Royal courts were disrupted, and local governance was often in flux, depending on which side held sway. This environment of instability created a power vacuum in some areas, allowing individuals to step into roles they might not have otherwise been able to occupy.

Alongside this political and social turmoil, there was a deeply ingrained and widespread belief in witchcraft. For centuries, people had believed that malevolent individuals could use supernatural powers, often granted by the Devil, to cause harm – blighting crops, causing illness, death, or misfortune. This fear was not unique to England; witch hunts were occurring across Europe during this period.

Religious fervour was also high. The Puritan movement, which held significant influence in Parliament and among many of the common people, emphasised a strict moral code and a constant vigilance against the forces of evil, including the Devil and his earthly agents, witches. They saw the Civil War itself, and the societal unrest, as potential signs of God's displeasure or the Devil's influence.

Into this volatile mix stepped Matthew Hopkins. A man of relatively obscure background, he would soon seize the opportunity presented by the chaos and fear of the time to become the self-proclaimed "Witchfinder General," leaving a bloody trail across East Anglia and etching his name into the darker pages of English history. His emergence and the success of his witch hunts were inextricably linked to this backdrop of war, religious intensity, and a profound belief in the power of witchcraft.

Of the Beginning and Raising of Matthew Hopkins

Matthew Hopkins was born around 1620 in the small village of Great Wenham, Suffolk. This rural setting, like much of England at the time, was steeped in tradition and a strong sense of community, but also susceptible to superstitions and fears regarding the supernatural.

A significant influence on Hopkins' early life was undoubtedly his father, James Hopkins. As the vicar of Great Wenham for many years, James Hopkins was a respected figure within the community and, importantly, a Puritan clergyman.



Puritanism was a powerful religious and social movement in 17th-century England. Puritans advocated for a stricter form of Protestantism, emphasising personal piety, a literal interpretation of the Bible, and a strong moral code. They were deeply concerned with sin and the perceived influence of the Devil in the world. This theological framework fostered a heightened awareness of evil and a belief in the real and present danger of witchcraft. Growing up in such a household, Matthew would have been immersed in these beliefs from a young age. Discussions about the Devil, temptation, and the battle between good and evil would likely have been commonplace.

Beyond his family's religious beliefs, the general societal context also played a role. Superstitions about witchcraft were widespread across all levels of society, not just among the uneducated. Belief in magic and the ability of certain individuals to wield supernatural powers for malevolent purposes was a common thread in folklore and popular culture.

Information about Matthew Hopkins' education and early career is scarce. As the son of a vicar, it's reasonable to assume he received some level of education, perhaps tutored by his father or attending a local grammar school. His later ability to write and publish "The Discovery of Witches" indicates a degree of literacy. Some historians have speculated that he may have had some legal training or aspirations, given his later role in interrogating and presenting evidence (however flawed) during the witch trials. This is largely based on his actions rather than concrete evidence from his early life.

For the most part, however, Matthew Hopkins appears to have lived a relatively unremarkable life in rural Suffolk until his move to Manningtree in Essex sometime in the early 1640s. He wasn't a long-established or particularly prominent figure in Manningtree when his witchfinding activities suddenly began in 1644. This suggests that his transformation into the "Witchfinder General" was likely triggered by specific events and circumstances in his new community, rather than being a lifelong pursuit.

So, while the details of his life before 1644 are somewhat shadowy, we can surmise that his upbringing in a Puritan household, steeped in religious teachings that emphasised the reality of the Devil and witchcraft, laid a crucial foundation for his later beliefs and actions. His move to a new community in a time of upheaval seems to have provided the spark that ignited his infamous career.

When Devilry Befell Manningtree

Matthew Hopkins' arrival in Manningtree, an Essex port town near his Suffolk birthplace, in the period leading up to 1644, was the crucial catalyst for his emergence as the self-proclaimed Witchfinder General. This move coincided with a period of significant anxiety in the community, fuelled by the disruptions of the early English Civil War and a potential weakening of local legal structures.



It was in Manningtree that Hopkins claimed his interest in witchcraft ignited. According to his own account, he witnessed suspicious gatherings of women and overheard them discussing their interactions with the Devil and their "familiars" – demonic spirits in animal form believed to aid witches. In his 1647 pamphlet, "The Discovery of Witches," he specified that these initial observations began in March 1644.

Whether these claims were genuine or fabricated remains a point of historical debate. Regardless, Hopkins presented his alleged sightings as direct evidence of a witch coven operating within Manningtree, positioning himself as uniquely capable of identifying this hidden diabolical activity. This single assertion provided the justification for his subsequent actions.

The unsettled atmosphere in Manningtree, coupled with Hopkins' self-proclaimed expertise, allowed his accusations to gain traction. His initial, likely informal, investigations and accusations paved the way for more systematic and brutal methods. The weakened local legal authority may have contributed to the lack of effective challenge to his burgeoning authority.

The perceived success of his early cases in Manningtree fuelled his ambition and reputation, leading to demands for his services in neighbouring communities across East Anglia. The initial spark in this Essex town quickly ignited a region-wide conflagration of witch hunts under his control. Thus, the move to Manningtree, against a backdrop of local anxiety and Hopkins' initial claims, directly led to his infamous career as the Witchfinder General, exploiting the volatile social and political climate of the English Civil War.

Whence the Witchfinder General Did Exalt Himself

One of the most striking aspects of Matthew Hopkins' career is that he held no official legal appointment or formal authority to act as a "Witchfinder General." Unlike judges or local magistrates who were part of the established legal system, Hopkins was essentially a private individual who took it upon himself to investigate and prosecute suspected witches.

The power vacuum created by the ongoing English Civil War played a significant role in allowing Hopkins to assume this unofficial authority. As the traditional legal structures were disrupted or weakened in many parts of the country, particularly in the eastern counties where the fighting was prevalent, local governance could be inconsistent. In this environment of uncertainty, communities might have been more willing to accept the intervention of someone who presented themselves as capable of dealing with a perceived threat like witchcraft.



Hopkins was adept at self-promotion and gaining influence within these uneasy communities. He often arrived in a town or village at the invitation of local officials or concerned citizens who were experiencing unexplained misfortunes or who already harboured fears of witchcraft. By presenting himself as an expert in identifying witches, he could quickly establish a position of authority.

His methods also contributed to his perceived legitimacy. He employed specific techniques of interrogation and "discovery" (like pricking and sleep deprivation) that, while lacking any scientific or legal basis, appeared systematic and convincing to a populace already steeped in superstition. The confessions he extracted, often

under duress, further solidified his image as someone who could effectively uncover the Devil's agents.

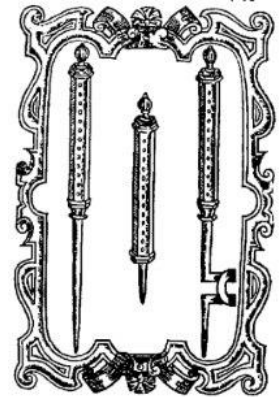
Furthermore, Hopkins was not working entirely in isolation. He often employed assistants, most notably John Stearne, who travelled with him and participated in the witchfinding process. This "team" approach likely added to the impression of a professional and organised operation.

It's important to note that Hopkins' authority was not universally accepted. As we will discuss later, he did face criticism and questions about his methods and the legitimacy of his role. However, for a significant period, particularly between 1644 and 1646, he wielded considerable power over the lives of many in East Anglia, effectively acting as a self-appointed prosecutor, judge, and jury in witchcraft cases.

The fact that a private individual could rise to such prominence and exert such influence highlights the extraordinary circumstances of the time – a nation at war, traditional authority weakened, and widespread fear of the unseen. Matthew Hopkins masterfully navigated this environment to become the infamous "Witchfinder General," despite lacking any formal mandate to do so.

Interrogation techniques:

- **Physical Examination and "Devil's Marks":** Hopkins and his assistants, often women known as "searchers" or "prickers," would meticulously examine the bodies of the accused. They looked for any unusual marks, blemishes, moles, birthmarks, or extra nipples, which were believed to be "Devil's marks" where familiars would suckle. These marks were often pricked with pins or needles. If the area was insensitive to pain and did not bleed, it was considered strong evidence of witchcraft. Some "prickers" may have used retractable needles to feign insensitivity.
- **Sleep Deprivation and "Watching":** Suspects were often kept awake for long periods, sometimes days, and forced to walk. The aim was to exhaust them, making them more likely to confess under pressure. They were also "watched" continuously, as it was believed that their familiars would appear to them when they were at rest. Any unusual animal that entered the room during this time could be interpreted as a familiar.
- **Swimming Test (Ordeal by Water):** This was a widely used, though legally dubious, method. The accused would be bound (often thumbs to big toes) and thrown into a body of water. The belief was that water, being a pure element used in baptism, would reject witches who had renounced their faith by floating them. If they sank, they were considered innocent (though they might drown in the process). Hopkins did use this method but was warned against it without the victim's permission.
- **Confessions under Duress:** Through exhaustion, intimidation, and leading questions, Hopkins and his associates would pressure the accused to confess to acts of witchcraft and their pacts with the Devil. The details of these confessions often included interactions with familiars and carrying out malevolent acts.
- **Accusations by Others:** Evidence could also come from the testimony of other accused witches or from children claiming to be possessed.
- **Familiars:** The identification of "familiars" (animals believed to be demonic spirits serving the witch) was a key part of Hopkins' methods. If a suspect had animals around them, or if animals appeared during interrogation, they could be used as evidence.



It's important to remember that these methods were based on superstition and fear, not on any legitimate legal or scientific basis. They were often cruel and designed to coerce confessions from vulnerable individuals.

The Laying Bare of the Devil's Instruments

Once Matthew Hopkins had established himself as the Witchfinder General, he embarked on a period of intense activity across several counties in East Anglia. From 1644 to 1646, he and his associates travelled from town to village, responding to invitations (often prompted by local anxieties and fears) to uncover and prosecute witches.

The primary counties where Hopkins' influence was most strongly felt were Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Huntingdonshire, and Cambridgeshire. Within these regions, numerous towns and villages experienced the arrival of the Witchfinder and the subsequent investigations, accusations, and trials.

Estimates of the number of people accused and executed under Hopkins' influence vary, but most historians agree that it was substantial. It is believed that between 100 and 300 people were executed as a direct result of his activities. This figure is particularly shocking when considering that the total number of executions for witchcraft in England during the entire preceding century and a half was likely similar. Hopkins' brief career thus accounts for a significant spike in witch hunt fatalities in England.

Some notable examples of places where Hopkins conducted major witch hunts include:

- Chelmsford, Essex: The site of a large assize trial in 1645 where nineteen people were hanged as a result of Hopkins' investigations.
- Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk: Another significant trial occurred here in 1645.
- Towns and villages across Norfolk, such as King's Lynn and Great Yarmouth, also saw Hopkins' involvement.



The process often followed a similar pattern: Hopkins and his team would arrive in a community, conduct their investigations using the methods we discussed, and then present their findings to local magistrates or assize courts. The confessions extracted under duress, combined with the "evidence" of Devil's marks and familiars, often led to convictions and subsequent executions, usually by hanging, which was the common method of execution for felony in England.

The speed and efficiency with which Hopkins operated, and the high number of convictions he secured, instilled fear in communities. The cost of his services, as we will discuss later, also added to the burden placed on these often already struggling towns and villages.

The 'reign of terror' under Matthew Hopkins was a dark chapter in English history, demonstrating how fear, superstition, and the exploitation of a power vacuum could lead to widespread injustice and tragedy.

Profit and Protest

While Hopkins presented himself as a righteous servant uncovering evil, his work was far from universally accepted, and the issue of payment for his services became a significant point of contention.

The Cost of Witchfinding

Hopkins and his assistants, including John Stearne and the female "prickers," charged fees for their services. Records from towns like Stowmarket show that Hopkins' fees could be substantial. In Stowmarket's case, they amounted to £23 plus his travelling expenses, a considerable sum at a time when the average daily wage for a farm labourer was just a few pence. To put this in perspective, £23 in the mid-17th century would be equivalent to a significant amount of money today (hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds).

Hopkins himself claimed that his fees were simply to cover his expenses, stating that he needed "twenty shillings a town" to maintain his company of three horses. However, the records suggest that the actual amounts charged often far exceeded this, leading to accusations of profiteering.

The cost of these witch hunts placed a significant financial burden on the communities that employed Hopkins. In some instances, such as in Ipswich, a special local tax rate had to be levied to cover the expenses of the witchfinder and his retinue. This financial strain likely contributed to growing resentment towards Hopkins.

The Controversy and Criticism

From early on, Hopkins' methods and his self-appointed authority drew criticism. One of his main antagonists was John Gaule, the vicar of Great Staughton in Huntingdonshire. Gaule was concerned about the lack of legal basis for Hopkins' actions and the coercive nature of his techniques. He even attended a woman accused of witchcraft in his parish while Hopkins was away, attempting to offer her pastoral support and challenge the assumptions of witchcraft.

Gaule preached sermons against the witch hunts and directly questioned Hopkins' legitimacy. He argued that Hopkins was exploiting the fears of the people for his own financial gain and that his methods were unreliable and unjust.

The use of certain techniques, particularly the swimming test, also drew criticism. There were warnings against using this method without the accused's consent, highlighting the lack of legal sanction for such practices.

Concerns were raised in Parliament itself regarding the conduct of the witch trials in East Anglia, with reports suggesting that "some busy men had made use of some ill Arts to extort such confession." This indicates a level of awareness and unease at the highest levels of governance about Hopkins' activities.

Despite the controversy, the fear of witchcraft was often so potent that communities were willing to pay Hopkins' price and accept his methods, at least for a time. However, the financial burden and the growing scepticism from more rational voices eventually contributed to the decline of his influence.

How the Power of Hopkins Did Abate

The intense period of witch hunting under Matthew Hopkins was relatively short-lived, primarily spanning from 1644 to 1646. Several factors contributed to the eventual decline of his influence:

- **The End of the Civil War in East Anglia:** As the Royalist threat in the eastern counties diminished and Parliamentary control became more secure, the extraordinary circumstances that had allowed Hopkins to operate with such autonomy began to dissipate. The traditional legal structures, such as the assize courts, started to reassert their authority.
- **The Re-establishment of Legal Authority:** With the return of more stable governance, local magistrates and judges began to question Hopkins' self-appointed role and his methods, which had always lacked a firm legal basis in English law (torture, for example, was technically illegal).
- **The Criticism of John Gaule:** The sustained and vocal opposition of John Gaule, the vicar of Great Staughton, played a significant role in undermining Hopkins' credibility. Gaule's sermons and his influential pamphlet, "Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches and Witchcraft" (1646), directly challenged Hopkins' methods, his motives, and the theological justifications for his actions. Gaule argued that Hopkins was exploiting fear and ignorance for personal gain and that his techniques were leading to the unjust persecution of innocent people.
- **Growing Scepticism:** As the witch hunts continued and the costs to communities mounted, some began to question the validity of Hopkins' findings. The sheer number of accusations and the often-flimsy evidence presented started to raise doubts in the minds of more rational individuals. The questioning at the Norfolk assizes, where Hopkins and Stearne were challenged about their methods and fees, is a significant example of this growing scepticism within the legal system itself.
- **Hopkins' Own Defence:** In response to the criticism, Hopkins published his own pamphlet, "The Discovery of Witches" (1647). However, this attempt to justify his methods and authority was largely unconvincing to his detractors and may have even further highlighted the flaws in his approach.
- **Financial Strain:** As mentioned earlier, the considerable cost of employing Hopkins and his associates placed a significant burden on the finances of the towns and villages that sought his services. This economic pressure likely contributed to a desire to end the witch hunts.

By late 1646 and into 1647, the intensity of the witch hunts in East Anglia began to subside. The restoration of order, the persistent criticism, and the growing scepticism all contributed to the decline of Matthew Hopkins' influence. He effectively faded from the prominent role he had held for a brief but terrifying period.

Concerning His Demise and Enduring Mark

His Death:

Matthew Hopkins' career as the Witchfinder General was remarkably brief, lasting only from 1644 to 1646. He died relatively young, on 12 August 1647, at his home in Manningtree, Essex. The most likely cause of his death was pleural tuberculosis (consumption), a common and often fatal disease at the time. He was buried just a few hours after his death in the graveyard of the Church of St Mary at Mistley Heath, a village near Manningtree.

Interestingly, a popular legend arose after his death, possibly fuelled by the satirical poem "Hudibras" by Samuel Butler, which suggested that Hopkins himself was eventually accused of witchcraft, subjected to his own swimming test, and hanged after he floated. However, parish records confirm his death from illness and burial.

His Legacy:

Despite his short career, Matthew Hopkins left a significant and dark legacy on English history and the understanding of witchcraft:

- **Increased Witch Hunt Intensity:** Hopkins and his associate John Stearne are credited with being responsible for a dramatic surge in witch accusations and executions in East Anglia during their active period. They oversaw more executions for witchcraft in those few years than had occurred in the previous century.
- **Influence on Methods:** Hopkins' systematic (albeit cruel and unscientific) methods of investigation and interrogation became somewhat of a blueprint for later witch hunts, both in England and, to some extent, in the American colonies (though the context differed). His emphasis on physical marks, sleep deprivation, and the role of familiars became recurring themes in witchcraft accusations.
- **A Symbol of Fear and Superstition:** Hopkins remains a potent symbol of the dangers of mass hysteria, fear, and the abuse of power in times of social and political upheaval. His story serves as a cautionary tale about how easily suspicion and irrationality can lead to injustice and tragedy.
- **Popular Culture:** Hopkins has been depicted in various forms of popular culture, most notably in the 1968 horror film "Witchfinder General" (released as "The Conqueror Worm" in the US), which, while fictionalised, cemented his image as a sinister and cruel figure. He has also been referenced in literature, music, and other media.
- **Historical Debate:** Historians continue to debate Hopkins' motivations. Was he a genuine believer in witchcraft who felt compelled to eradicate it? Or was he a cynical opportunist who exploited the fears of the time for personal gain? The truth likely lies somewhere in between, with a combination of prevailing beliefs, ambition, and the chaotic context of the Civil War contributing to his actions.

- **Local Memory:** In the areas where he was active, particularly in Essex and Suffolk, Hopkins remains a figure of local notoriety, a reminder of a dark period in their history.

In conclusion, Matthew Hopkins' brief but brutal career as the Witchfinder General had a profound and tragic impact on 17th-century England. His legacy serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of justice in times of fear and the enduring consequences of superstition.

A Baleful Passage in the Chronicles of This Realm

The story of Matthew Hopkins, the self-proclaimed Witchfinder General, stands as a stark and unsettling reminder of a period in English history marked by profound social and political upheaval, deep-seated superstition, and the terrifying consequences of unchecked power.

Emerging from relative obscurity during the chaos of the English Civil War, Hopkins exploited the widespread fear of witchcraft that permeated 17th-century society. Without any legitimate legal authority, he appointed himself as an expert in identifying and eradicating witches, travelling across East Anglia and leaving a trail of accusations, coerced confessions, and ultimately, the deaths of hundreds of innocent people.

His methods, based on superstition and often involving cruelty and intimidation, highlight the dangers of abandoning reason and due process in the face of fear. The fact that communities, burdened by anxiety and a breakdown of traditional authority, were willing to pay exorbitant fees to employ him underscores the powerful grip that the belief in witchcraft held on the popular imagination.

The brief but intense period of Hopkins' activity serves as a critical case study in mass hysteria and the abuse of power. While he claimed to be doing God's work, his actions were met with growing scepticism from more rational voices, such as John Gaule, and ultimately his influence waned with the restoration of legal order.

Matthew Hopkins' legacy is a dark one. He is remembered as a figure of fear and cruelty, a symbol of a time when superstition and paranoia led to widespread injustice. His story continues to resonate, serving as a cautionary tale about the fragility of justice, the importance of critical thinking, and the potential for fear to be weaponized. The events of the mid-17th century in East Anglia, under the shadow of the Witchfinder General, remain a significant and sobering chapter in England's past.

They that stand charged in the Liberty of Basildon

In 1574 Anne Brewer of Dunton was accused.

Agnes Bryant from Great Burstead (a village near Basildon) was indicted for witchcraft. The indictment stated that on October 20, 1582, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and at other times in Billericay (another nearby town), Agnes Bryant used witchcraft to harm twenty batches ("brewinges") of beer belonging to a man named Gabriel Bee. As a result of her witchcraft, the beer would not ferment properly ("wolde not worke") and would not produce yeast foam ("sporge," likely meaning "sparge" in the sense of the yeast head). Agnes Bryant pleaded "not guilty" to these charges.



In 1589 Thomas Corde of Langdon Hills was accused. It appears that Thomas was acquitted as he was recorded in the Quarter Session Rolls nine years later.

In 1605 Margaret Prentize of Little Burstead was accused.

In 1610 John Skafe of Great Burstead was accused.

In 1616 John Scates of Billericay was accused 'For his conjuration and practising with the devill for money' (engaging in witchcraft or sorcery by summoning evil spirits, and doing so for monetary profit.)

In 1653 Mary Hurst of Nevendon was accused. Records show that Mary was 'to remain in gaol from the last assizes; since dead.'