

Edinburgh witches: Thousands of women and men were killed after being accused of witchcraft– many of them tortured and executed in the Capital

Edinburgh has a dark and bloody history, and few scars run deeper than the persecution and murder of thousands of women and men accused of witchcraft in the 16th and 17th century.

By Rachel Mackie

A rocky and stormy voyage taken by King James with his new wife Anne is said to have started the witch trials in Scotland.

Witchcraft was a popular crime Europe, especially Denmark where the King had just been, so when he was told East Lothian 'witches' caused the storm, he was ready and willing to believe.

Witch hunts would normally take place during political upheaval, war, famine, disease, times of uncertainty and fear were exploited, and innocent people, mainly women, were scapegoated and killed.

In the National Museum of Scotland sits tools and devices used to torture and punish those accused of witchcraft across the country.

The Witch's Iron Collar, also called a joughs, is one such exhibit.

The joughs was attached to the wall of the Kirk in Ladybank, Fife and was wrapped around the neck of the person accused, exposing them "for censure and ridicule."

Another way of 'discovering' a 'witch' was witch pricking.



A group of supposed witches being beaten in front of King James I (King James VI of Scotland) around 1610

A person was pricked with a needle, and if a spot was found where they did not bleed, they were said to be a witch in communication with the devil.

Rolling people downhill in spiked barrels, beatings and assaults were common once someone had been arrested with witchcraft, causing wave after wave of false confessions.

People were also compelled to name others as witches, and would do so under unbearable pressure and continuous torture.

Once found guilty, the 'witch' was strangled to death and then their body was burned at a stake in [Edinburgh](#) Castle, an area now covered by the esplanade.

In 1894, a small fountain was built against the wall near the spot as a memorial to those who died.

In the Scottish Parliament on International Women's Day this year, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon gave a formal apology to all those captured and killed by the state in the name of witchcraft.

It is thought 4,000 Scots were accused of breaking the Witchcraft Act between 1563 and 1736, and around 85% of them were women.

She said: "It was injustice on a colossal scale, driven at least in part by misogyny in its most literal sense, hatred of women.

"Today on International Women's Day, as First Minister on behalf of the Scottish government, I am choosing to acknowledge that egregious historic injustice and extend a formal posthumous apology to all of those accused, convicted, vilified or executed under the Witchcraft Act of 1563."

An ongoing campaign run by The Witches of Scotland has created a petition which asks the Scottish Parliament to formally pardon all those accused, tortured and killed.