

The Calder Witch Hunt



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This comic discusses themes of torture, violence against women and death.

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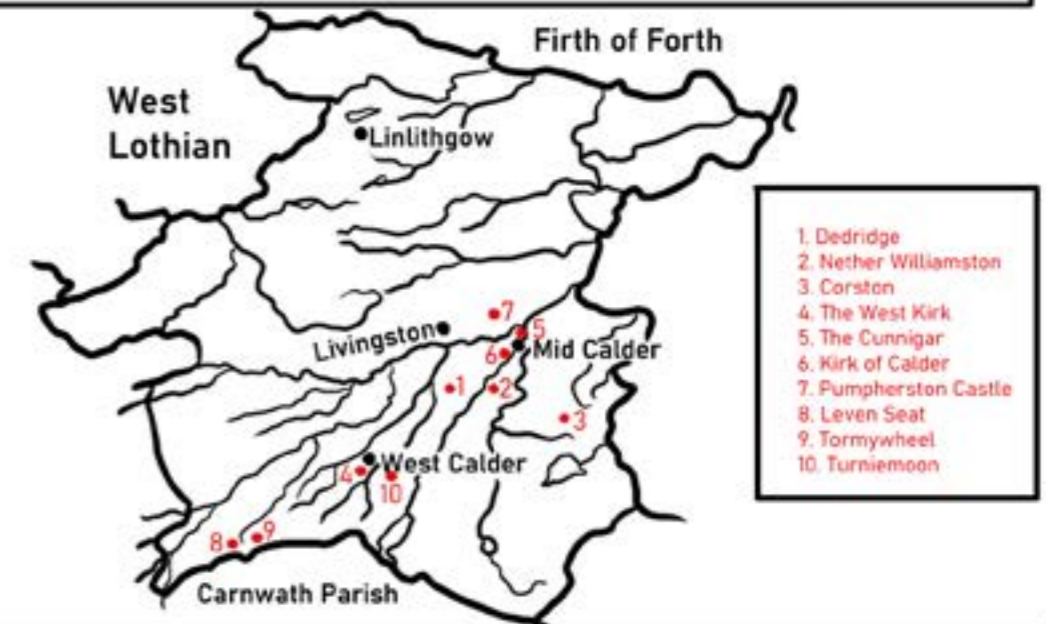
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On the 13th of April 1643, the Calder kirk-session appointed a new minister - 22-year-old Hew Kennedie. Almost as soon as he was ordained Kennedie, along with local nobleman Sir William Sandilands and kirk bailie James Sandilands, began a ferocious mission to eradicate witchcraft from Calder parish.



All the accused at Calder were women and the witch hunt crossed local boundaries to involve people from Carnwath and South Leith parishes.



The people who were accused were not witches, they were ordinary local folk caught up in a process outwith their control that led to barbaric treatment and death.

On the eastern edge of the parish at Mid Calder is Kirk of Calder. There has been some form of church here since the 12th Century. The kirk that stands now was built in 1541 by Lord Torphichen on land next to his home, Calder House. The church has been extended over the years but the original building remains at its heart.



The Old West Kirk was built in 1643 -the same year that the witch hunt began at Calder. A new West Kirk was built at West Calder in 1880 but the ruin of the old West Kirk remains in the centre of the village.

The kirk session was very, very powerful in the community. They ran schools and helped the poor, but were very strict and wanted people to behave in a "Godly" way at all times. They made local laws and were able to accuse, try and punish people in the parish.

A common punishment given out by the kirk session was public humiliation in the stocks. At Calder the stocks were attached to a large plane tree, said to be of remarkable size and great age. The tree stood between Calder House and Kirk of Calder in a busy area where fairs and markets were held.



There were few prisons in the 17th century and the women who were accused of witchcraft at Calder were imprisoned in the church vestry or could be taken to Linlithgow to be held in the Tolbooth, now the Burgh Halls. At that time it was also common for accused people to be held in private homes, even barns or any other place they could be contained.



The Calder witch hunt started in December 1643 and lasted about 18 months. At Calder all of the people who were accused of witchcraft were women and at least five of them were executed:

Helen Stewart,
Jonet Bruce,
Agnes Bischope,
Agnes Vassie and
Marion Gibsone.



Margret Thomsone was accused too and suffered horribly but was eventually ordered to be freed. Others including Isobel Ewart, Jeane Anderstoun and Bessie Stevenson also suffered.



Records are incomplete and more people from Calder were probably accused and executed for witchcraft but we may never know their names or what happened to them.



Agnes Bischope was the first person from Calder parish to be accused of witchcraft and she was probably singled out because she was an older woman who had a bit of a reputation for arguing with her neighbours.

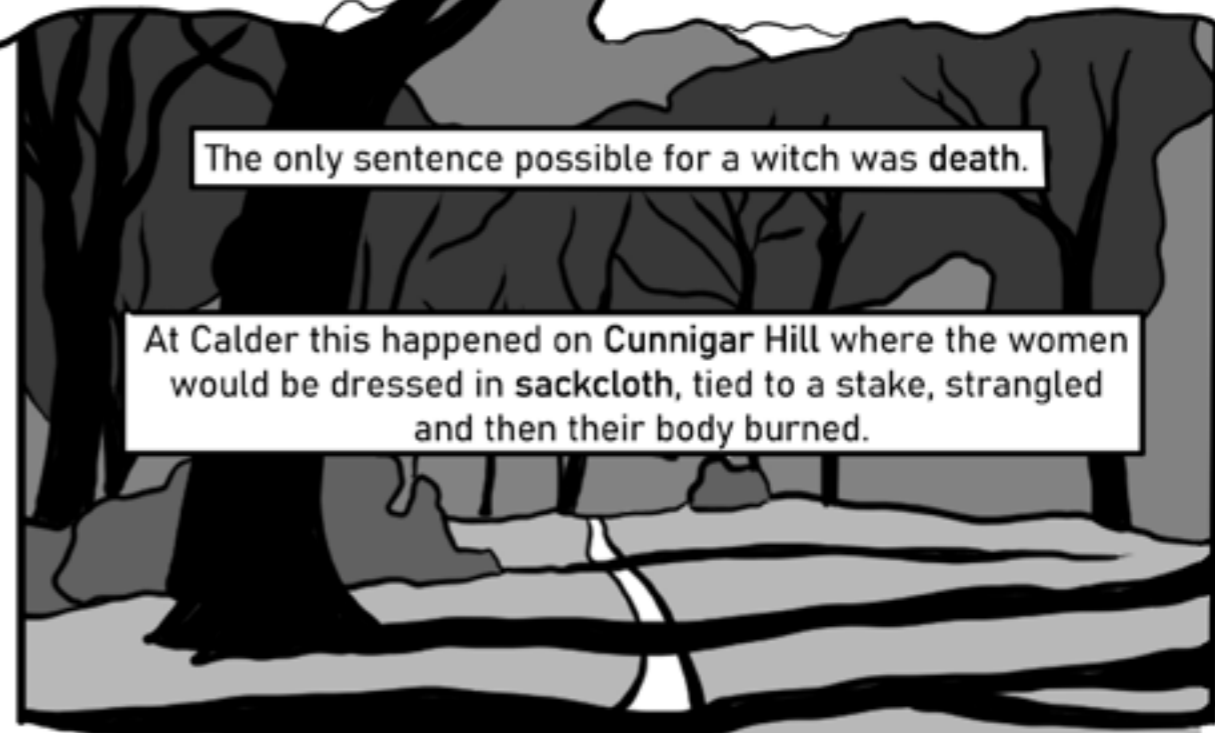


On 20th December 1643, Agnes was accused by Hew Kennedie of being a 'common charmer and a witch' and by 31st January 1644 she had been declared guilty.

Agnes was imprisoned in the Tolbooth at Linlithgow between December 1643 and February 1644 before being moved back to Calder for her sentence to be carried out.

The only sentence possible for a witch was death.

At Calder this happened on Cunnigar Hill where the women would be dressed in sackcloth, tied to a stake, strangled and then their body burned.



Jonet Bruce was accused of witchcraft by the Calder kirk session and was imprisoned, tried and then executed.

Records about Jonet are sparse but we know what happened to her because on the 8th of July 1644 her husband, David Aikmane, had to sign 100 merks {about £700 in today's money} of their debts and possessions over to the Calder kirk session.



Isobel Ewart, wife of a local Laird, was very upset that Jonet had been accused and then killed as a witch. Isobel spoke up about this and was then accused herself by the kirk session of 'scolding and railing' against them.

Isobel was said to have named Jonet as an honest, innocent woman who was killed as a witch.



The minister had done things behind people's backs that he dare not say to their face!

The stories from this time are fascinating, they include forced confessions of encounters with the Devil, shape shifting, and flying on cats and trees. There are accounts of cruel treatment and horrific punishment, but also escape from prison and standing up to those abusing their power.



The Calder Witch Hunt project is a community response to these horrible and unfair events. The project aims to tell this part of our local history in factual, sensitive and interesting ways. Our community have produced artwork, drama, photography and other creative work to commemorate those affected.

The Calder Witch Hunt

Between 1643 and 1645 at least five women from Calder were executed as witches. Others were affected by accusations. None of them were witches.

Their names were Helen Stewart, Jonet Bruce, Agnes Bischope, Agnes Vassie and Marion Gibsone, Margret Thomsons, Isobel Ewart, Jeane Anderstoun and Bessie Stevenson.

The Calder Witch hunt project is a volunteer-led community project supported by West Calder and Harburn Community Development Trust, Museums and Galleries Scotland Year of Stories 2022, and West Lothian Council Museums Service. It aims to commemorate those affected by the 17th century Calder Witch Hunt.

