

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE LEFT ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S
HISTORY**

by

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'John Gaule: Preacher of the Word at Great Staughton'

In the mid-1640s, a malignant moral hysteria swept with devastating rapidity throughout East Anglia, a stronghold of strict Puritanism and home to the Parliamentary cause. Wherever it manifested itself, it caused panic in some, rejoicing in others. It originated in Manningtree in Essex and over the course of two years, it spread eastwards, reaching as far as Huntingdon, St Neots and Kimbolton, and it was only due to one man that it did not blight the village of Great Staughton. The author of this moral panic was Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled Witchfinder General and in the havoc he wreaked, he was ably accompanied by his loyal henchman John Stearne. The only man who possessed the necessary courage, resolve and the intellectual armoury to stand up to this collective madness was the priest-in-charge of the church of St Andrew in the Huntingdonshire village of Great Staughton. His name was John Gaule.

John Gaule was born in Lincolnshire in 1603 or 1604. About his parents and childhood nothing is known but as all men of the cloth were obliged to do at the time, he studied at both Oxford and Cambridge but left in 1623, at the age of twenty, without obtaining a degree. In 1625, he was ordained in Peterborough and employed as chaplain by Robert Bertie, 1st Earl of Lindsey, but his career began to prosper when he was taken on as chaplain to Baptist Hicks, 1st Viscount Campden, in 1629. When Baptist Hicks died in that same year, it was John Gaule who delivered the eulogy and a year later, his sermon was published under the title, *A defiance to death, Being the Funebrious Commemoration of ... Viscount Camden*. It was through the offices of Lady Campden, the wife of Baptist Hicks, and with the assistance and approval of Valentine Walton, then at the beginning of his political career, that Gaule became curate of the parish of Great Staughton in 1632, at the age of twenty-nine and vicar five years later. On 2 June 1637, Lady Elizabeth, Viscountess Campden, conveyed the advowson of the vicarage to Archbishop Laud who immediately sold it in perpetuity to St John's College Oxford, in whose possession it remains to this day.

From an early age and throughout his life, Gaule was a prolific and industrious author. His interest in witchcraft, magic and astrology had first become apparent on 7 September 1628 when he preached a sermon at St Paul's Cross, entitled, *The practique theorists panegyrick*. Between 1628 and 1630 he published several collections of what he termed 'votive speculations', the treating of significant episodes in the bible: *Distractions, or the Holy Madnesse* (1629), *Practique Theories, or Votive Speculations, upon Iesus Christs Prediction, Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection* (1629), *Practique Theories, or Votive Speculations upon Abrahams Entertainment of the three Angels, &c.* (1630).

Until the mid-1630s, with the country riven by religious and political divisions, Gaule was shrewd enough to wear his Royalist sympathies lightly and was grateful for Valentine Walton's influence in gaining his benefice. When, on 3 May 1641, Parliament drew up a Protestation, obliging all citizens to swear an oath of loyalty to the 'true Reformed Protestant Religion, expressed in the Doctrine of the Church of England', it was dutifully signed by John Gaule and the newly elected Member of Parliament for Huntingdonshire, Valentine Walton.

At the time, John Gaule may not have been fulsomely enthusiastic about the Protestation, but if he did have any qualms, he swiftly suppressed them. Gaule's attitude to the religious and political divisions of the time seems to have been equivocal: in the 1620s he favoured the Royalist cause, but political reality moved him to sympathy for Parliament. In a petition to Parliament during the Civil War, he claimed that he had been imprisoned on Cromwell's orders during the first Civil War

(1642–45) on a charge that he had declared the war against Charles I unlawful. The general of the army, Edward Whalley, had threatened to have him executed by firing squad, but 'a soldier prevented it'.

Over a period of two years, between 1645 and 1647, a mass witch-hunt occurred in East Anglia, organised by Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne. The two traversed the towns and villages of East Anglia offering to seek out and eliminate people, mainly old women as it turned out, who were thought to be possessed by evil forces in the shape of imps, familiars and devils. In the turmoil of the Civil War, a 'world turned upside down', it was perhaps not surprising that people resorted to superstition and witchcraft to explain the upheaval that was uprooting their lives. After the battle of Edgehill, for example, there were reports of a battle in the sky observed by numerous witnesses. Such was the concern that Charles I sent heralds to check the veracity of the account. There were other signs and wonders. A lake in Leicestershire was said to have turned to blood. Pamphlets describing terrible events were widely read. An example came in 1645, with the appearance of a pamphlet entitled, *Strange and fearfull newes from Plaisto, in the parish of West-Ham, neere Bow, foure miles from London*. The householder, a silk weaver by name Paul Fox, recorded that: 'dayly to be seene throwing of stones, bric-bats, oystershels, bread, cutting his worke in peeces, breaking his windowes, stones of fifty wayt coming up the stayers, a sword flying about the roome, books going up and down the house'.

Innocent people were accused of witchcraft and many, mostly women, were put to death. Evidence to substantiate the accusations ranged from the improbable to the grotesque. Trials were hastily convened and even hastier judgements delivered, as a result of which people were hanged, burnt or sacrificed in the so-called swimming test. For Hopkins and Stearne, it was an extremely lucrative enterprise. Like many in the population, Hopkins believed that certain women make a satanic pact with the devil, made evident by obvious marks on the body, through which 'familiars' (usually in the form of malignant beasts) and imps do the work of the devil. Evil was everywhere, in the form of witches possessed by the devil and Hopkins was the man to root it out. His prescription was simple: identify the witch, usually a woman, usually of low social status, usually over fifty years of age, often querulous and generally considered objectionable by her neighbours and townsfolk. Examine the woman for signs of satanic infection, take account of circumstantial evidence, gossip and innuendo, bring her to trial and submit her to horrendous torture to extract a confession. A credulous public applauded and then asked for more.

Thus buoyed by popular acclaim, Hopkins and Stearne proceeded to expand the campaign to the rest of East Anglia. They were well paid for their work; 'his fees were to maintain his company with three horses;' he took 'twenty shillings a town'. In Stowmarket, Hopkin's fee came to £23 (some £2,500 by modern reckoning). Hopkins and Stearne claimed that their work was authorised by Parliament (it was not) and that they had letters of protection, ensuring that they could carry out their activities without interference or fear of molestation.

There were several methods employed to determine the guilt or innocence of a woman accused of witchcraft; nearly all resulted in the death of the unfortunate victim. The most notorious method was the 'swimming test'. Since witches had renounced baptism, water would reject them. The accused was tied to a chair and submerged in the river. If they floated, they were witches and executed. If they sank, and drowned, they were innocent. A typical accusation and trial took place in July 1645. 'A true relation of the arraignment of thirty witches at Chensford in Essex, before Judge Coniers, fourteene whereof were hanged on Friday last, July 25, 1645 ... Setting forth the confessions of the principall of them. Also shewing how the divell had carnall copulation with Rebecca West, a young maid.'

From his pulpit in Great Staughton, John Gaule observed the Hopkins phenomenon with increasing alarm. Whilst Gaule was a firm believer in witches and witchcraft, he was convinced that the present madness was driven by superstition and public credulity. His reasoning was that anyone who denied the existence of witches would then go on to deny there was a devil. From there it was an all too easy step to denying there was a God. Gaule was appalled that popular superstition, rather than biblical authority, was driving the witch-hunts. He poured scorn on those who claimed to be able to identify witches by quirks of physical appearance: 'They conclude peremptorily ... that ... every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furr'd brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voyce, or a scolding tongue ... is not only suspected, but pronounced for a witch.'

John Gaule was no ordinary 'preacher of the word' although there are some who assert that he was little more than 'an unlearned and wearisome ranter', but he felt that the moment had come to confront this madness. He had been visiting a woman, Frances Moore, held in St Neots gaol, charged with witchcraft when, to his dismay, he learned that Hopkins was intending to investigate the case.

One Sunday in 1646, John Gaule stepped up to the pulpit in St Andrew's Church and began a lacerating series of sermons denouncing any witch-hunt not supported by biblical authority; he condemned in forthright terms the methods used to extract evidence; he poured scorn on the flimsiness of the so-called evidence. Most of all he condemned the actions of Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne. He was unsparing in his language: Hopkins, he maintained, targeted 'every poore and peevishe old creature'. The proceedings were based entirely on 'ignorance, humour and superstition'. Remarkably, for these times of intense religious fervour, Gaule cast doubt on the infallibility and reliability of the 'confession without fact', a bold move. He asked whether a confession possibly borne out of delusion, or forced under duress, could be admissible. He rejected the tedious stories of 'witches upon broomsticks' and other fantasies conjured up by fevered imaginations, but with an eye to monetary gain.

This was not just a single sermon; for a whole month his astonished congregation found their beliefs in witchcraft being comprehensively undermined and then utterly demolished. Gaule lambasted Hopkins for his excessive methods including his use of torture, at that time illegal, for obtaining evidence. It must have taken some nerve. He did not have long to wait for the inevitable response. Hopkins had heard of Gaule's sermons and his intervention with the unfortunate woman in St Neots gaol and on 30 June 1646, an incensed Hopkins wrote a venomous letter to someone, apparently in the parish of Great Staughton, known only by their initial M. N., although the initials match no known name in the Protestation Returns of 1641.

Hopkins stated his intention 'to come to a Towne called Great Staughton to search for evill disposed persons called Witches', braving the attacks of the minister 'farre against us through ignorance'. His visit would be unannounced: 'I intend to give your Towne a Visite suddenly' as he would be in Kimbolton the same week. 'Tenne to one but I will come to your Town first,' he boasted but discretion proved more compelling than valour and the face-to-face confrontation with John Gaule did not take place.

Gaule did not let go. In a direct response to Hopkins, Gaule vigorously protested that there were no such 'great enemies' in his parish, and in 1646 unleashed the most devastating and withering riposte to Hopkins in a pamphlet entitled: *SELECT Cases of Conscience TOUCHING Witches and Witchcraft*. So influential was this work that it was consulted half a century later at the time of the Salem Witch trials. A prominent Puritan and theologian, John Downname (1571–1652), authorised the publication of Gaule's pamphlet 'finding it to bee very solide and seasonable, I allow

it to bee Printed and published'. Gaule dedicated his work to Valentine Wauton [*sic*] Esquire, 'Colonell, and one of the Honorable House of Commons' and 'all the good people of the Parish of Great Staughton'.

In the pamphlet's exposition, Gaule sought to examine, in twelve questions of clinical brevity, whether witches actually existed, why they had turned to sorcery and whether they could be redeemed. He began with a fundamental question: *Whether it ought to bee beleaved, that there are any Witches?* If indeed there were witches, the next question posed by Gaule demanded evidence of their existence: *What are the signes and marks of a Witch, whereby such an one may bee rightly discerned, and so Censured?* With his next question, Gaule was in effect asking Matthew Hopkins to justify his campaign of terror: *Whether Witch-seeking or witch-finding be an Art, Vocation, Profession, Office, Occupation, or Trade of Life, allowable in a Christian Church, or State?* The answer to this question must have been clearly evident to Gaule's readers. The Witchfinder General had made a considerable business out of persecuting largely innocent women as alleged witches. Gaule posed one final question: *Whether a Witch may repent, and so be saved?*

Gaule's pamphlet attracted much favourable publicity and 'queries' began to be raised about Matthew Hopkins and whether he himself was a witch. His reputation was coming under fire and in response he published a self-serving justification for his campaign in *The Discovery of Witches*. The matter came to the attention of Parliament who noted that more witches had been executed as a result of Hopkins' campaign than at any other time in English history. Parliament also noted that Hopkins and his associates were making a tidy living from their activities. A special 'Oyer and Terminer' Commission was set up to 'hear and determine' the consequences of Hopkins's activities. Events overtook the Commission's deliberations. Matthew Hopkins died in 1647, apparently of consumption and was buried in August 1647. The reign of terror he instigated and successfully prosecuted gradually dwindled, although John Stearne continued his campaign for some years afterwards.

The successful campaign against the witch-hunt panic was the very considerable high point of John Gaule's career and thereafter he reverted to his role as priest-in-charge of a rural Huntingdonshire parish although he continued to publish pamphlets and preach sermons. One such, *A Sermon of the Saints judging the World*, was delivered at the Assizes in Huntingdon in 1649, the year of Charles I's execution. By the early 1650s he was very well aware of the political realities shaping the country and in an astute move, in 1652 he dedicated to Oliver Cromwell, then at the height of his power, his book *Pusmantia. The Mag-Astro-Mancer, or the Magicall-Astrological-Diviner, Posed and Puzzled*, an attack on astrology and kindred magical arts, lamenting popular enthusiasm for consulting almanacs rather than the Bible. Gaule fiercely denounced the methods of the astrologers who took advantage of human credulity in an attempt to persuade people that the alignment of stars and planets would somehow predict the future success or otherwise of their children or ensure a prosperous marriage. In the dedication of his book, Gaule praised Cromwell for 'superabounding favours for those sundry favours past', favours he would have no hesitation in regretting less than a decade later when Charles II returned to England to claim the throne.

By 1659, shrewdly realising that England was close to abandoning its republican experiment, Gaule issued a fawning tract, *An admonition moving to moderation*, dedicated to the future king, deploring the excesses of the 1640s and 1650s. In the tract, he attacked all forms of what he now called 'immoderate belief' during the turbulent period of the Civil Wars and the Protectorate. Gaule was motivated by a desire to retain his living in Great Staughton and in this his obsequiousness was successful. Indeed, he was sufficiently emboldened in 1660, at a time when he was demonstrating his Royalist sympathies, to petition the estate of the now disgraced Valentine

Walton for arrears on the grounds that the regicide had seized the benefit of his living, which was valued at £400 per annum, over a period of six years. After 1660, the pages of history concerning John Gaule are blank. He died in 1687 and was buried on 10 July of that year. He left three daughters, Elizabeth, baptised 6 January 1632, Anna, baptised 5 April 1635, and Eleanor, baptised 5 January 1639.

John Gaule's courageous stand against the prevailing orthodoxy has not gone unremarked in the present day, as is revealed from a surprising source, the engaging antiques dealer Lovejoy: 'let's hear it for brave John Gaule of Great Staughton village... a lion. What makes a wimp suddenly heroic? He'd fawned and grovelled, bowed and scraped. Until that fateful day when he became a lion. Light a candle to his courage. He deserves it.' Amen to that.