

0. NORTH BERWICK WITCH TRIALS - Story Preface

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As King of Scotland, James VI personally participated in what is now known as the “North Berwick Witch Trials.” *Newes from Scotland* reported on these infamous events. We can view these contemporary materials, thanks to the Special Collections section of University of Glasgow’s Library, where we [learn the following](#):

“*Newes from Scotland* is the earliest tract on Scottish witchcraft. It claims to give a true account of a famous trial of alleged witches in North Berwick which had far reaching effects due to the fact that King James VI himself played a prominent part in it, giving credence to the existence of witchcraft and setting the standard for later trials.”

Two years after his mother’s death, James VI [married](#) Anne of Denmark. Crossing the North Atlantic then was no easier than it is today.

During the trip to her new home, Anne [encountered](#) fierce storms and was forced to turn back. As a result, James sailed to meet his new bride and likewise endured terrible weather. The monarch, and some of his courtiers, became convinced [witchcraft](#) had caused those storms.

Many so-called [North Berwick](#) “witches” were arrested; about 70 people were ultimately tortured, tried or killed. The King himself [participated](#) in questioning [some](#) of the accused. Jurors in one trial, who had voted for acquittal, were later tried themselves for “willful error on assize, acquitting a witch.”

By all accounts, King James approved horrendous torture for the accused. [Agnes Sampson](#), whom the [king](#) [questioned](#) at Holyrood Palace, was fastened to the wall of her cell by a [witch’s bridle](#). That torture device was made of iron and had four sharp prongs that were forced into her mouth. Two prongs were forced against her tongue while the other two were forced against her cheeks. She was later strangled and burned as a witch.

The North Berwick witch hunt remains infamous to this day. The trials, beginning in 1590, took two years. But those trials were not the last in Scotland. King James’ 1597 book, *[Demonology](#)*, became a guide for future Scottish witch hunts. From 1590 to 1690, about 3,400 people were burned as witches in Scotland.

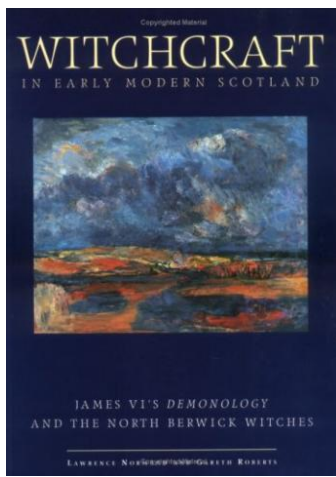
King James ceased to believe in witchcraft later in his life. But at the age of 24, while he was in the middle of questioning the North Berwick accused, he did the wrong thing even though he *thought* it was right.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/NORTH-BERWICK-WITCH-TRIALS-King-James-I>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.

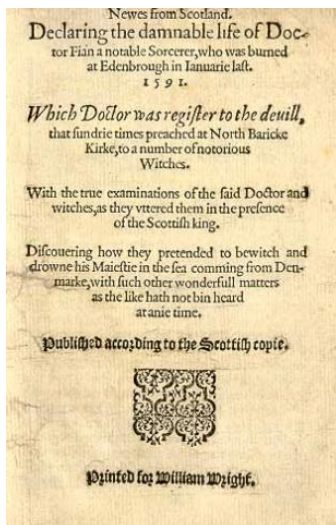
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North Berwick - Location in Scotland

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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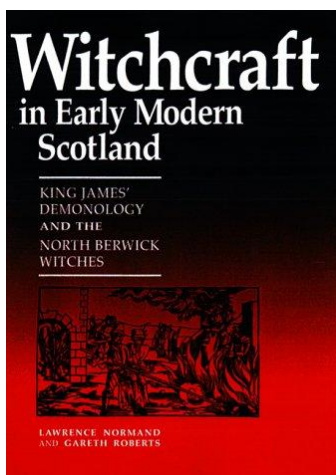


Notice of Execution - Burned at the Stake

Image online, courtesy U.K. National Archives.

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King James' Demonology and the North Berwick Witches

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