

Burnt at stake for doing the devil's work

by ALAN HENDRY

At the far end of a quiet lane in the Littleton area of Dornoch stands the Witch's Stone, marking the site where Janet Horne was burnt at the stake in 1727.

To modern sensibilities, the circumstances surrounding her fiery demise are shocking and horrific. But the early 18th century was a very different time, and the law was uncompromising against those adjudged to be in league with the devil.

Janet would be the last person to be judicially executed for practising witchcraft in Scotland – although, even had she been aware of it, that historical footnote would have been of little consolation as the flames began to engulf her.

Dornoch's excellent museum, Historylinks, has a small display devoted to the case and provides a summary of the key details.

Janet lived at Kintradwell with her daughter, who had deformities in her hands and possibly in her feet. This was unfortunate for the girl, but even more so for Janet.

Superstitious neighbours reckoned the deformities resembled hooves. They accused Janet of being a witch who turned her daughter into a pony so that she could ride around carrying out the devil's work; the deformities were seen as evidence that on one occasion the daughter had not been restored completely to human form.

Both were arrested for alleged

witchcraft and were taken to the old Dornoch tollbooth, although the daughter managed to escape. Janet was brought before a depute sheriff and, when asked to recite the Lord's Prayer in Gaelic, she didn't exactly enhance her prospects when she used the past tense – "Our Father who *wert* in Heaven" – instead of the present tense.

Her fate was sealed. Janet was tarred and feathered, and was then paraded around Dornoch in a barrel before being taken to Littleton for the burning. It is said that Janet may have been suffering from senility and failed

to understand what awaited her; on seeing the fire that had been prepared for her, she reputedly held out her hands and remarked that it was "a bonny blaze".

Nine years later, the law was changed and witchcraft ceased to be a capital crime (although it could still result in a prison sentence). It is not known when the commemorative stone was erected in Dornoch's Carnaig Street, close to the golf course. The date inscribed on it – 1722 – is acknowledged to be a mistake, although in any case the last digit has gradually become obscured by lichen.



Artwork in Dornoch's museum, Historylinks, depicting the burning of Janet Horne and (below) the Witch's Stone marking the site where it took place. Photo: Alan Hendry



The 'witch mark' was telltale sign

JAMES Paterson, the Inverness witch-finder of the 1600s, was by all accounts a mysterious and terrifying figure. Paterson's method involved sticking a pin into the body of an alleged witch to establish whether she was in league with the devil.

There must have been quite a sensation among the good folk of the Highland capital when it emerged that "Paterson the Pricker" was in fact a woman disguised as a man.

In their 2009 book *The Lore of Scotland: A Guide to Scottish Legends*, Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill noted that Paterson was roughly contemporary with Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled Witch-Finder General who operated across parts of south-east England.

Witch-finding was a profitable enterprise at that time and Paterson earned enough to employ two servants. After rubbing the naked body of a suspected witch, "he" would insert a long brass pin into any spot or blemish found on the skin. This was the so-called "witch mark" left as a sign of a bargain with the devil. If the victim felt no pain and no blood seeped from the wound, she was deemed to be a witch.

James Fraser, a 17th-century Inverness minister, wrote that Paterson was eventually "discovered to be a woman disguised in man's clothes". Westwood and Kingshill pointed out: "It is an intriguing but not a unique story of a woman playing a man's part in a man's world."

It seems likely that Paterson was an alter ego of a woman called Christian Caddell who may also have pricked witches in the Elgin, Forres and Tain areas.