**Witchcraft in Exeter: The Case of Sithe Coleman**

In August 1602 a young couple were married in the red sandstone church of St Martin, which stands at the north-eastern corner of Exeter’s Cathedral Close. The groom’s name was George Coleman, while the bride’s - rather unusual - name was subsequently recorded in the parish register as ‘Sithe Michell’.[[1]](#endnote-1) We may presume that the wedding was a joyful occasion for George and Sithe, and for the friends and relatives who doubtless assembled to join them. What no-one can have foreseen, on that summer’s day towards the end of Elizabeth I’s reign, was that, a quarter of a century later, the young woman who was then walking down the aisle would find herself denounced to the city magistrates as a witch.

Little information survives about the newly-weds. There are no references to the birth, marriage or death of anyone else with the surname ‘Coleman’ in the register of St Martin between 1572 - the year in which entries in that volume commence - and 1602, so it seems probable that George was a stranger to the parish. There is no record of Sithe’s baptism in the register either (though it is possible, of course, that she was born a little before the surviving entries begin, and was therefore around 30 when her marriage took place). The register does contain records of the baptism of two other Mitchells, though - ‘Frances Mychell’, daughter of Robert in 1576 and ‘John Mychell’ son of John in 1586 - together with a record of the burial of Robert Mychell’s ‘nursse’ in 1577: a record which strongly suggests that Robert Mitchell then possessed a young family.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is possible that Sithe Michell was one of Robert Mitchell’s children, therefore, or at least one of his relatives, and if this was indeed so, then she belonged to a family which was about to go up in the world. In 1602, there were no Mitchells among the 39 residents of St Martin who had been assessed to contribute to the Parliamentary subsidy of that year: the 39 individuals who may be assumed to have been the richest people in what was then one of Exeter’s richest parishes, in other words.[[3]](#endnote-3) By 1629, however, ‘Robert Mitchell, doctor of laws’ was assessed as being the third wealthiest man in the parish, while two other Mitchells, Tristram and Edward, also appeared on the list of subsidy payers.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Whatever Sithe’s precise family connections with these prominent individuals may conceivably have been, her future in 1602 lay not in the rich intramural parish of St Martin, but in the poor suburban parish of St Sidwell. By 1605 at the latest, she and her husband - who, 20 years later, would be described in a legal document as a ‘labourer’ - had taken up residence in the sprawling suburb which lay just beyond the city’s East Gate.[[5]](#endnote-5) The parish register of St Sidwell indicates that, over the following years, a number of children were born to them: a daughter, Juliana, in 1605; a son, Thomas in 1608; a second daughter, Susanna, in 1609; a second son, Richard, in 1612; a third daughter, Agnes, in 1614 and a fourth and final daughter, Mary, in 1617.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is pleasant to be able to report that there is no record of any of these children being buried between 1605 and 1625, and - as child mortality was then very high, and as St Sidwell was one of Exeter’s most poverty-stricken and unhealthy parishes - this fact, in its turn, hints that the Colemans may have been just a little better off than many of their neighbours.

The terrible plague epidemic of 1625-26 may conceivably have afflicted them, just as it afflicted so many other families in Exeter; on 18 November 1625, the burial of one ‘George Coleman’ was recorded in the parish register of St Sidwell.[[7]](#endnote-7) The deceased person was clearly not Sithe’s husband, however - because we know, from other evidence, that he survived the plague - and, while it is possible that this ‘George Coleman’ was George and Sithe’s son, there is no record of the baptism of such a child, so the individual buried in 1625 may equally well have been a member of another family with the same surname. What is plain, from the register, is that the Colemans did not suffer multiple bereavements as so many other families in St Sidwells did during ‘the plague time’, a fact which again raises the possibility that George and Sithe may have lived in slightly better circumstances than many of their fellow-parishioners.

The Colemans were soon to face other difficulties, though - as the indictment which is reproduced at the end of this article makes clear. For reasons which remain obscure, they had begun to attract the suspicion of their neighbours and, in April 1628, Sithe - who, must by this time have been at least in her mid-40s, and conceivably in her mid-50s - was brought before the city magistrates and accused of being a witch. Three women - Dewnes Searle, Marie Bampfield and Margaret Clarke - and two men - William Milton and William Searell - came forward to testify against Sithe, and to assure the justices that, a little under a year before, she had killed 20 pigs in St Sidwells through the exercise of ‘Witchcraft’.[[8]](#endnote-8) William Searell, the owner of the pigs, was evidently a St Sidwells man, while Dewnes Searle may possibly have been his wife or daughter. Margaret Clarke and William Milton were also residents of St Sidwell - having been married in the church there in 1615 and 1616, respectively - and, while there is no trace of Marie Bampfield in the parish registers, it is probable that she, too, lived nearby.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The charge which these individuals had laid at Sithe Coleman’s door was a grave one. The Act against ‘conjuration, witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits’, passed by Parliament in 1604, had laid down that anyone found guilty of ‘wasting’ another person’s goods through the use of witchcraft should face a year’s imprisonment for the first offence and death for the second.[[10]](#endnote-10) Several Exeter people had been denounced to the city justices as ‘witches’ during the quarter century since the act had been passed, and one of them - Richard Wilkyns, of Holy Trinity parish, labourer - had not only been tried and found guilty in 1610, but had been hanged at the city gallows for his supposed crimes.[[11]](#endnote-11) The magistrates who considered the initial accusations against Sithe Coleman clearly believed that it was possible that she, too, was a witch, for they ordered a formal bill of indictment to be drawn up against her and presented to the grand jury at the next sitting of the city’s quarter session court at the Guildhall.

It was the town clerk who was responsible for penning such indictments in early modern Exeter, and it is intriguing to note that the holder of that office in 1628, Samuel Izaacke, was himself a resident of St Martin: the very same parish in which Sithe Coleman had been married 26 years before.[[12]](#endnote-12) Was Izacke aware of the back-story of Sithe Coleman, *nee* Michell, as he drew up the indictment against her, one wonders? Could he have heard anything about her from the members of the Mitchell family who were still living in St Martin, including ‘Robert Mitchell, doctor of laws’? And could Sithe’s family connection with the Mitchells of St Martin - if she did indeed possess such a connection - conceivably have had any influence on how her case was viewed by the city’s ruling elite? We will never know the answers to these questions. What we do know is that, by the time Charles I came to the throne in 1625, English jurors were becoming increasingly reluctant to indict accused witches on the charge of having harmed livestock alone - and it is probably this which chiefly explains why, in April 1628, the grand jury at the sessions court decided that there was insufficient evidence to bring Sithe Coleman before a trial jury and the case against her was dropped.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Following the dismissal of the case against her, Sithe disappeared back into obscurity in St Sidwells. Like all the inhabitants of that unfortunate parish, she must have suffered grievously during the Civil War of 1642-46, when every single building between East Gate - on the site of the present day ‘Boots the Chemist’ - and St Anne’s Chapel - at the junction of present-day Blackboy Road and Old Tiverton Road with Sidwell Street - was razed to the ground in order to create a clear field of fire for the city’s Royalist defenders.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nevertheless, it is clear that she not only rode out the fiery trials of the civil war, but that she remained in - or, at least, returned to - the parish which had been her home for almost half a century, for, on 14 April 1656, the clerk of St Sidwell recorded the burial of ‘Siefe Coleman’: a hopeful bride in 1602, an alleged ‘witch’ in 1628, and now, in her final days, an elderly survivor of England’s worst-ever civil conflict.[[15]](#endnote-15)

THE INDICTMENT OF 1628

1 - Transcription of the original indictment:

‘Civitas Exon

Jur[ati] p[ro] d[omi]no Rege sup[er] sacr[ament]um suu[m] p[re]sentant q[uo]d Sith Coleman, uxor Georgii Coleman, nup[er] de parochia S[anc]te/ Sativole in Com[itatu] Civit[atis] Exon p[re]d[icte], Laborer, vicesimo die Maii \*\*\*\*\* Anno Regni d[omi]ni n[ost]ri Caroli dei/ gra[tia] Anglie Scotie Franc[ie] et Hib[er]nie Reg[is] fidei defensor[is] &c Tertio deum pre occulis suis non h[ab]ens sed instigac[i]one/ diabolica seducta quasdam malas artes et incantac[i]ones diabolicas Anglice vocat[as] ‘Witchcrafte, inchauntm[en]ts/ Charmes and Sorceries’ apud parochiam S[anc]te Sativole p[re]d[icte] in Com[itatu] Civiti[atis] Exon p[re]d[ict]e nequiter & diabolice/ in et sup[er] viginti Porcos Anglice ‘Piggs’ precii Sex librar[um] de bonis et Catallis cuiusd[am] Will[elm]i Searle/ ad tunc et ib[ide]m usa fuit practizauit et exercuit r[aci]one quar[um] malar[um] artium & incantationu[m] diabolicar[um]/ p[re]d[i]c[t]ar[um] p[re]d[i]c[t]i viginti porci p[re]d[i]c[t]o vicesimo die Maii Anno Tertio sup[ra]d[icto] apud p[re]d[i]c[t]am parochiam S[anc]te/ Sativole in Com[itatu] Civit[atis] p[re]d[icte] int[er]ierunt contra pacem d[i]c[t]i d[omi]ni Reg[is] &c. nec non contra formam/ Statut[i] inde nup[er] edit[i] et pr[o]vis[i].

Izacke’

[On the reverse] ‘Dewnes Searle, Marie Bampfield, Margaret Clarke, William Milton, William Searell’.

[Endorsed] ‘Ignoramus’

2 - Translation:

‘The jurors for our lord the King do present upon their oaths that Sith Coleman, the wife of George Coleman, late of the parish of St Sidwells, in the county of the city aforesaid, labourer, did, on the 20th day of May in the 3rd year of the reign of our lord Charles, by the grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, defender of the faith &c [i.e. 1627], not having the fear of God before her eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil, wickedly and diabolically make use of certain wicked and diabolic arts and incantations, called in English ‘Witchcraft, Inchauntments, Charmes and Sorceries’ in the parish of St Sidwells aforesaid, in the county of the city aforesaid, in and upon twenty pigs, in English called ‘Piggs’, worth six pounds, being the goods and chattels of a certain William Searle, by reason of which wicked and diabolic arts and incantations aforesaid the twenty pigs aforesaid died on the 20 May of the third year [of the reign of Charles I] aforesaid at the parish of St Sidwells aforesaid, in the county of the city aforesaid, contrary to the peace of our lord the King &c, and contrary to the form of the statute regarding the same proclaimed and provided.

[Samuel] Izacke [town clerk]’

[On the reverse] ‘[Prosecuted by] Dewnes Searle, Marie Bampfield, Margaret Clarke, William Milton, William Searell’.

[Endorsed] ‘We find this to be no true bill’

[Source: Devon Heritage Centre, Exeter City Archives, Exeter Quarter Sessions Roll, 21 April 4 Charles I (1628)]

REFERENCES

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2. Ibid, baptisms, pp. 2 and 5; and ibid, burials, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. W. G. Hoskins (ed.), *Exeter in the Seventeenth Century: Tax and Rate Assessments, 1602-1699* (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, New Series, Volume 2, Exeter, 1957), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, pp. 7-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. DHC, Exeter City Archives [hereafter: ECA], Exeter Quarter Sessions Roll [hereafter: EQSR], 21 April 4 Charles I (i.e. 1628), indictment of Sithe Coleman. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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10. B. Rosen, *Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1991), pp. 57-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
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12. J. and J.H. Wylie (eds), *Report on the Records of the City of Exeter* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, London, 1916), p. 157; and Hoskins, *Exeter in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
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14. M. Stoyle, ‘Whole Streets Converted to Ashes: Property Destruction in Exeter during the English Civil War’, *Southern History*, 16 (1994), pp. 75-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1 (Parish Register of St Sidwells, un-paginated).

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