**Witchcraft in Exeter:**

**The Cases of Emlyn Bullar and Mary Sowden**

In the Autumn 2020 edition of *DCNQ*, I examined the cases of two Exeter women who were formally accused of witchcraft in the city’s quarter sessions court shortly after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.[[1]](#endnote-1) In the present article, I would like to consider the stories of two more female Exonians who were unfortunate enough to be denounced as ‘witches’ by their neighbours during the early part of Charles II’s reign: this time in the year 1663. About the first of these individuals, a woman named Emlyn Bullar, we know almost nothing, apart from the fact that she was clearly very poor and that - like so many of those who were accused of being witches in early modern Exeter - she dwelt in the large and populous suburban parish of St Sidwells.[[2]](#endnote-2) Bullar first surfaces in the city sessions records on 11 March 1663, when Richard German, also a resident of St Sidwells, and a butcher, was brought before John Butler - one of the aldermen of the city and a justice of the peace - and examined ‘touching the hurtinge [or wounding] of one Emlen Bullar’. [[3]](#endnote-3) German proceeded to confess to the magistrate that, upon returning to his house that afternoon after a trip into the country, he had ‘found the said Emlen Bullar sittinge att his doore, begginge’. This was evidently not the first time that the butcher had been greeted by the unwelcome sight of Bullar soliciting the charity of passers-by from before his threshold, because he added that he had ‘often warned her from his doore’ in the past. Yet on this particular occasion, German admitted, he had lost his temper, ‘& did nowe againe bidd her begonne, & suspectinge her to be a witch & havinge a sworde with him & the pointe of his sworde being out of the scabbard, this examinant did unwittingly & unknowne unto him give her a little pricke with the pointe of the sword’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

It was clearly as a result of the injury that he had inflicted on Bullar that German had been apprehended by the constables - and the fact that these officers had chosen both to take the butcher up and to bring him before a magistrate suggests that Bullar’s wound was by no means as insignificant as German subsequently sought to suggest. His claim that he had hurt the woman without meaning to do so - and, indeed, without having even *realised* that he had done so - and that the point of his sword had been ‘out of the scabbard’ by simple chance is hard to credit, and we may surely suspect that the injury which German describes as just ‘a little pricke with the pointe of the sword’ had in fact been a good deal more serious than that. It is possible that, infuriated by Bullar’s persistence, the butcher had slashed at her with his sword in order to terrify her into staying away from his premises for good - but German’s allusion to the fact that he believed Bullar to be a witch also raises the distinct possibility that he may have been attempting to draw blood from her in order to break the force of her malefic powers: a practice known as ‘scratching’, or ‘blooding’, which had certainly been resorted to by other Exonians who feared themselves to be bewitched in the past.[[5]](#endnote-5)

As German continued to tell his tale, moreover, it became increasingly clear that what appeared, on the surface, to be a fairly straightforward case of a disgruntled householder attempting to drive a persistent beggar away from his door had, in fact, been something rather different. The butcher went on to explain to the magistrate that the reason that ‘he did suspecte the said Emlen Bullar to be a witcht [sic]’ in the first place was ‘because one night aboute sixe weekes since she came to this inform[an]ts house & did butt touch the childe about the face & said it is a prettie childe & will not live long & the same night the childe dyed being well enough before she came in’.[[6]](#endnote-6) German did not name ‘the childe’ to whom he was referring, but the parish register of St Sidwells reveals that, on 29 January 1663, ‘Mary, the daughter of Richard Jarman’ had been buried in the churchyard there.[[7]](#endnote-7) This was almost certainly the little girl of the same name who had been born to German and his wife some thirteen years before, in April 1650.[[8]](#endnote-8) Once we realise that German suspected Bullar of having bewitched his twelve-year old daughter to death, it becomes much easier to understand why - upon seeing the woman whom he believed to be a murderess begging brazenly, once more, before his door - the butcher should have flown into a violent rage.

It is interesting to note that, as far as we can tell, Alderman Butler made no attempt to investigate German’s claim that Bullar was a witch. Instead, the magistrate ordered that the butcher himself should be bound over to appear at the next sitting of the quarter sessions court, in order to answer to the charges - presumably of assault and wounding - which would be brought against him there.[[9]](#endnote-9) A recognisance drawn up on that same day, which survives among the sessions rolls, shows that James Rogers of St Sidwells, weaver, and Richard German of St Sidwells, butcher - in all probability, the accused man’s father - agreed to stand as sureties for his appearance before the court.[[10]](#endnote-10) The case does not appear to have been adjudicated upon at the General Sessions held on 27 April, however, for a second recognisance was drawn up on 5 May, once again binding German over to appear at the next sessions. As this document was subsequently endorsed with the Latin annotation ‘*Compt. & dmmtit*’ [i.e., ‘(he) appeared and was dismissed’], it would appear that he was eventually found not guilty and released without charge.[[11]](#endnote-11) This in turn permits us to assume that the wound which the butcher had inflicted on his victim had not, in the end, proved fatal.

Richard German’s subsequent history is difficult to trace, because, as we have seen, there were at least two men of this name living in St Sidwells during the post-Restoration era, but as both of these individuals were rated for modest dwellings - or, at least, parts of dwellings - by the hearth tax collectors in 1671, it seems fair to assume that the man who had wounded the alleged witch in 1663 was still living in the parish then.[[12]](#endnote-12) Of the beggar woman whose dark prophecy had caused German to believe that he and his family had been ‘overlooked’, on the other hand, no further trace has been found among the contemporary tax and assessment records: a fact which surely reflects her extreme poverty. We may be confident that German’s victim not only recovered from the violent attack which the enraged butcher had launched upon her, however, but also managed to scratch out a living in St Sidwells for many more years to come, for the burial of one ‘Emlin Buller’ was recorded in the parish register there as late as 1683.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The second case of alleged witchcraft to be examined here is one which was reported to the city magistrates just three months after German had assaulted Bullar. On 10 June 1663, Philippa, the wife of William Triggs of St Sidwell’s, weaver, appeared before the mayor of Exeter, John Martin, and his fellow-justice John Butler - the same magistrate who had examined German in March - to complain about an alleged occult attack on her son, Joseph.[[14]](#endnote-14) Philippa informed the justices that Joseph - who we learn from the parish register had been born in June 1654, and was therefore about nine years old at the time of this case - had come to her a month before and whispered that he had something that he wanted to tell her - but only on condition that she would promise never to speak of it to anyone else.[[15]](#endnote-15) Anxious to hear what her son had to say, but at the same time unwilling to keep secrets from her husband, Philippa had assured Joseph that ‘she would not [speak of it] except it were to his Father’, at which point the frightened boy had immediately clammed up. Yet, at length, Phillipa had persuaded her son to reveal what was troubling him, and Joseph had tremblingly informed her ‘that Marie Sowden wid[ow] … had tolde him that morninge that he did speake well enough nowe, but senight [i.e., a week] hence he should not speake halfe soe well & … that he was afraide unlesse she would bewitcht him’. Nor had her son’s fears been misplaced, Philippa now lamented to the magistrates, for ever since this unsettling encounter Joseph had ‘beene troubled with shakeing in all his limbes … [and] cannot speake plaine, nor never stand still’.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Joseph himself was now brought forward to provide his own account of events. He informed the justices that, about a month ago, he had been lying in his bed in St Sidwells when he had decided to ‘call out’ to ‘a little maid named Marie that was nursed in his Father’s house & laie in a Chamber under him’. Unfortunately, for him, Joseph’s shout had clearly both disturbed and infuriated one of the Triggs’ neighbours, Mary Sowdon, who ‘laie in the next house & adioyninge to the Chamb[er] where … [Joseph] laie’: a reminder of the uncomfortably close proximity in which most early modern Exonians were forced to dwell. For when she ‘heard this inform[an]t to speake to the little maid’, Joseph went on, ‘the said Marie Sowden called to him & said “You speake well enough nowe but a senight hence you shall not speake halfe soe well”’. These menacing words had clearly terrified Joseph, for he went on to testify - using exactly the same phraseology as his mother had done before him - that, ever since his encounter with Sowden, ‘he hath beene troubled with shakeing in all his limbes & cannot speake playne nor stand still, & beleiveth that the said Sowdon hath bewitched him’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

While Richard German’s claims that he had attacked Emlyn Bullar because he believed her to be a witch had apparently been ignored by Alderman Butler just three months before, Butler and Martin clearly felt obliged to act in the case of Joseph Triggs, as a formal accusation of witchcraft had been laid against Sowden by the boy’s mother. Accordingly, later that same day, ‘Maria Sowden of St Sidwell’s, widow’ was bound over to be of good behaviour until the next sitting of the quarter sessions court, and three Exeter men - William Combe, Roger Giles and Thomas Toole, all labourers - agreed to stand surety for her in the sum of £60.[[18]](#endnote-18) Unfortunately, the recognisance which records the name of these three individuals does not record whereabouts in the city they lived, so it is impossible to be sure of their precise identities. We do know that a man named William Coombe was living in St Mary Arches parish, in the heart of the city, in 1660, however, and that Coombe was subsequently assessed for the hearth tax in that same parish in 1671, as was a man named Roger Giles.[[19]](#endnote-19) The coincidence of these two names being recorded in the same, relatively small, parish makes it seem possible that these two individuals were Sowden’s sureties, then, but, so far, no hard evidence has been found to link either of the St Mary Arches men with the accused woman. Yet, in the case of Thomas Toole, it is possible to make a much stronger connection: a connection which casts a good deal of light on Mary Sowden’s past life and antecedents.

Toole - an anglicised form of the Irish name O’Toole - was an unusual surname in early modern Exeter. Indeed, only one man of this name was assessed for the poll tax of 1660: a tax which was supposed to be paid by all Exeter residents over the age of sixteen who were not in receipt of alms. The man in question was ‘Thomas Tooll’, of St Mary Steps: a poverty-stricken parish which lay on the western side of the city.[[20]](#endnote-20) Tooll and his wife were rated by the poll tax assessors at the minimum sum of 12d, indicating that they were of relatively low social status.[[21]](#endnote-21) It seems highly probable that the ‘Thomas Tooll’ who was rated towards the poll tax in St Mary Steps in 1660 is identifiable with the ‘Thomas Toole, labourer’ who stood surety for Mary Sowden in 1663, therefore. A further, and quite independent, piece of evidence appears to clinch this association, moreover, for, in the parish register of St Sidwells, we find that, on 1 August 1640, a certain John Sowden had married a woman named ‘Mary Tuell’.[[22]](#endnote-22) It would appear, then, that the Thomas Toole who was named in the recognisance of 1663 was either the father, the brother or the uncle of Mary Sowden, *nee* Toole, and that he had come to the assistance of his daughter, sister or niece in her hour of need. The record of this marriage is especially valuable to us as we attempt to unpick the past history of the accused ‘witch’: not only because it establishes that there was a long-standing connection between the Tooles and the Sowdens, but also because it permits us to be fairly certain that it was John Sowden - rather than one of the other male Sowdens who are recorded as living in St Sidwells during the mid-seventeenth century - who had been Mary’s deceased husband.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Armed with this knowledge, it is possible tentatively to reconstruct some of the key events which had occurred in Mary’s life during the 23 years between her marriage and her public denunciation as a witch. The fact that, in 1641, a certain ‘John Sowden’ had taken the Oath of Protestation in St Mary Arches, for example, suggests that, soon after the wedding, the newly-weds had returned to live in Mary’s home parish.[[24]](#endnote-24) The fact that, in April 1647, the burial of one ‘John Sowden’ had been recorded by the parish clerk of St Sidwells, however, suggest that, at some subsequent point, the pair had returned to the suburb in which they had originally been married and that John had died there.[[25]](#endnote-25) The fact that, in November 1649, the same clerk had recorded the burial of ‘Sowden, Robert, son of Mary’, finally, not only suggests that John and Mary had had at least one child, but also tends to confirm that by this time Mary was already a widow, for the clerk’s normal practice was to record the name of the *father* of each buried child, rather than that of the mother.[[26]](#endnote-26) That he did not do so on this occasion is a strong indication that the dead child’s father was no longer around. It is possible for us to be fairly confident, therefore, that by the time that she was accused of bewitching Joseph Triggs, in 1663, Mary Sowden was a middle-aged woman with at least two life-tragedies already behind her: the death of her husband and the death of her son. It is quite possible, too, that - like most of the other inhabitants of St Sidwells - she had also experienced the trauma of being burned out of her home and turned into a refugee when the suburb was razed to the ground by the Royalist defenders of the city during the English Civil War of 1642-46.

As a poor, middle-aged widow - and as an individual who was clearly possessed of both a quick temper and a sharp tongue - Mary Sowden was precisely the sort of woman who was most likely to find herself stigmatised as a witch in early modern England. If she was indeed of Irish ancestry, moreover - as her maiden name tends to suggest - then this might well have added a further twist of ‘strangeness’ and exoticism to Mary’s reputation among her neighbours - and thus made them even more likely to regard her askance.[[27]](#endnote-27) Yet despite the fact that Sowden appeared to fit the stereotype of the malefic witch so closely, the charges which Philippa and Joseph Triggs had brought against her were almost certainly dismissed. There is no further reference to Sowden’s case in either the order book or the sessions rolls for 1663-64: a fact which suggests that, after having considered the Triggs’ testimony, the magistrates had decided that the evidence was not strong enough for them to proceed to a formal indictment. What we do find in the order book, nearly three years later, however, is a reference to a certain Richard Pedler who was charged with being drunk and swearing ‘4 several oaths by the name of God’ in the parish of St Mary Major on the testimony of three witnesses - one of whom was ‘Mary Sowdon, widd[ow]’.[[28]](#endnote-28) It seems probable that this was the same woman who had been brought before the justices as a suspected witch in 1663 - and at least conceivable that she had given evidence against Pedler because she herself had been one of the targets of his drunken railing. We can be reasonably confident, in any case, that Mary Sowden and the Triggses continued to live in uneasy proximity to each other for some years to come, for in 1671 ‘William Trigges’ was listed among ‘the poore of the parish of St Sidwelle’ - at which time he and his family were noted to live in a dwelling with a single hearth - while in 1673 and in 1678 the clerk of St Sidwells noted the burial of two women whom he described simply as ‘[the] Widow Souden’.[[29]](#endnote-29) The fact that the clerk did not trouble to record the two widows’ Christian names means that we cannot be sure which, if either, of the deceased woman was Mary, but it sees overwhelmingly probable that one of them was - and that this particular ‘witch’ of St Sidwells therefore went to her grave at some time during the 1670s.

*I – The Deposition of March 1663*

‘*Cor[am]* [i.e., in the presence of] John Butler Ald[erman] 11 *die* Martii 1662’

‘Richard German of the p[ar]ishe of St Sidwells in the County of the Cittie of Exeter Butcher being examined touching the hurtinge of one Emlen Bullar of the same p[ar]ishe confesseth that this afternoone he comeinge home from the Countrie found the said Emlen Bullar sittinge att his doore begginge (this examinant had before often warned her from his doore) & did nowe againe bidd her begonne & suspectinge her to be a witch & havinge a sworde with him & the pointe of his sworde being out of the scabbard, this examinant did unwittingly & unknowne unto him give her a little pricke with the pointe of the sword & this examinant further sayeth that he did suspecte the said Emlen Bullar to be a witcht [sic] because one night aboute sixe weekes since she came to this inform[an]ts house & did butt touch the childe about the face & said it is a prettie childe & will not live long & the same night the childe dyed being well enough before she came in’.

‘*Ricus German tradit in ball usq ad px general session pacis com civit Exon pd tenened tun & ibm as compiend & responded &c p pace xc*’.

[Translation: Richard German is bound over until the next general sessions of the peace for the county and city of Exeter, then and there to appear and to respond [i.e., to the charges to be brought against him], and until then to keep the peace etc’.]

[Source: Devon Heritage Centre [hereafter DHC], Exeter City Archives: hereafter: ECA]; Exeter Quarter Sessions Order Book [hereafter: EQSOB], 65 (1660-72), f.97r.]

*II – The Depositions of June 1663*

‘*Cor[am]* Johe Martin Maiore & John Butler 10 *die* June 1663

‘Philipp Triggs the wife of William Trigges of the p[ar]ishe of St Sidwell weaver informeth that aboute a moneth since Joseph Triggs her sonne came to her & tolde her he would tell her something, if she would not speake of it againe, this inform[an]t said she would not except it were to his Father but she [sic: slip for he?] desired that she would not tell him of it neither, att last this inform[an]t p[er]swaded him to tell her & he said that Marie Sowden wid[ow] had tolde him that morninge that he did speake well enough nowe, but senight hence he should not speake halfe soe well & the said Joseph said that he was afraide unlesse she would bewitcht him, & ever since ~~she~~ he hath beene troubled with shakeing in all his limbes, cannot speake plaine, nor never stand still.

The said Joseph Trigges informeth that aboute a moneth since he laie in a bed & called to a little maid named Marie that was nursed in his Fathers house & laie in a Chamber under him, & one Marie Sowdon wid[ow] that laie in the next house & adioyninge to the Chamb[er] where this informant laie, when she heard this inform[an]t to speake to the little maid, the said Marie Sowden called to him & said you speake well enough nowe but a senight hence you shall not speake halfe soe well, & ever since he hath beene troubled with shakeing in all his limbes & cannot speake playne nor stand still & beleiveth that the said Sowdon hath bewitched him.’

‘*Maria Sowdon vid tradit in ball p se bene gerend & c*.’

[Translation] ‘Maria Sowden, widow, is bound over and to be of good behaviour etc’.

[Source: DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f. 106.]

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1. M. Stoyle, ‘Witchcraft in Exeter: The Cases of Bridget Wotton and Margaret Nightingale’, *DCNQ,* volume XLII, Part VIII (Autumn, 2020), pp. 227-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Of the 29 men and women who are known to have been accused of witchcraft in Exeter during the century before the Restoration, at least five came from St Sidwells, see M. Stoyle, *Witchcraft in Exeter, 1558-1660* (Exeter, 2017), p. 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f. 97r. John Butler had first been appointed to the Chamber, Exeter’s governing body, during the period in which the city was held by the king during the English Civil War, see M. Stoyle, *From Deliverance to Destruction: Rebellion and Civil War in an English City* (Exeter, 1996), p. 226. Fined for his Royalism after the conflict War, Butler later went on to become a determined opponent of Exeter’s dissenting faction during the Restoration period, see M.A.E. Green (ed.), *Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Advance of Money, 1642-56* (3 vols, London, 1888), II, p. 820; and DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f.356. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f. 97r. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For ‘scratching’ and ‘blooding’, see J. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England, 1550-1750* (London, 1996), pp. 159-60; and R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs* (London, 1947), pp. 148, 158, 190, 199. For previous threats, and attempts, to use this form of counter magic against alleged ‘witches’ in and around the city, see Stoyle, *Witchcraft in Exeter*, pp. 13 and 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f. 97r. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1 (Exeter St Sidwells, Parish Register, 1569-1733), unpaginated, entry of 29 January 1663. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., entry of 11 April 1650. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f. 97r. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. DHC, EQSR, Box for 15-16 Charles II, roll dated 27 April 1663, recognisance no. 11, dated 11 March 1663. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. DHC, ECA, EQSR, Box for 14-15 Charles II, roll dated 13 July 1663, recognisance no. 9, document dated 4 May 1663. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. W.G. Hoskins (ed.), *Exeter in the Seventeenth Century: Tax and Rate Assessments, 1602-1699* (DCRS, New Series, Volume 2, 1957), pp. 67 and 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1, entry of 28 December 1683. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f.106. Martin, like Butler, had been a supporter of the king during the Civil War, see Stoyle, *Deliverance*, p. 226. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1, entry of 11 June 1654. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f.106. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid; and ECA, Sessions Rolls, Box for 14-15 Charles II, roll for 5 October 1663, recognisance no. 27, dated 10 June 1663. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Hoskins, *Exeter in the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 30 and 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 61 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1, entry of 1 August 1640. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. A George Sowden had taken the oath of Protestation in St Sidwells in 1641, for example - see A.J. Howard (ed.), *Devon Protestation Returns* (privately printed, 1973), p. 336 - while both George Sowden senior and junior and Samuel Sowden were rated for the poll tax in that same parish in 1660, see Hoskins, *Exeter in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Howard, *Devon Protestation Returns*, p. 329. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1, entry of 19 April 1647. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, entry of 16 November 1649. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. It is perhaps worth noting, in this context, that Emlyn Bullar’s first name is a typically Welsh one - making it at least conceivable that she, too, was of non-English, or only partially English, ancestry. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. DHC, ECA, EQSOB, 65, f. 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Hoskins, *Exeter in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 68; and DHC, 3429A/PR/1/1, entries of 13 September 1673 and 21 April 1678.

    **Mark Stoyle** [↑](#endnote-ref-29)