**Doing History: In Search of Alice Molland**

Witch-hunting in English local archives is a fascinating intellectual pursuit. This is partly because of what it can tell us about the beliefs and perceptions of non-elite men and women - the sorts of people whose inner lives tended to go almost wholly unrecorded until the modern era - but also because it requires us to engage with a rich and eclectic variety of historical sources. I suspect that my own interest in Alice Molland was originally piqued by a physical object: the slate plaque in memory of ‘The Devon Witches’ which was set up at Rougemont Castle in Exeter when I was a teenager, during the 1980s. From this initial point of departure, I progressed to reading some of the scholarly books which had been written about English witchcraft over the preceding century and was intrigued to learn from them that, while a great deal of information survived about the three women who had definitely been executed as witches in Exeter in 1682, almost nothing was known about the woman who had, allegedly, been executed for the same offence in the city just three years later.

At some point in my reading I came across a little book by W. Cotton, a pioneering local antiquary, entitled *Gleanings from the Municipal … Records Relative to the City of Exeter*. As its archetypally Victorian title suggests, this work contains a succession of extracts which its author had quarried out from the mass of original manuscripts which lay preserved in the civic muniment room at the Guildhall. Among the original documents which Cotton shared with his readers were several ‘depositions’, or legal testimonies, which had been made against women accused of witchcraft in the city during the 1650s. Cotton had found these ‘witch stories’, as he termed them, in one of the minute books of the sessions of the peace: a series of manuscript volumes which record the activities of the local magistrates. Among other things, the books reproduce the depositions taken before these civic officers, who met four times a year at the ‘quarter sessions for the county and city of Exeter’ to pronounce judgement on those who stood accused of committing all sorts of offences within their jurisdiction. Once I’d begun to delve into the civic archives myself, as a budding historian, I read the minute books from cover to cover and was thrilled to find that they contained several more depositions about alleged cases of witchcraft: depositions which had not been discussed by Cotton.

At the time, my wife and I were living in the heart of the city, in one of its most ancient streets, and, together, we decided that I should write a short popular history of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Exeter, using the session records as my chief primary source. In the end, other commitments intervened, and it took me far longer than I’d originally envisaged to complete the project: almost 30 years! Nevertheless, *Witchcraft in Exeter* finally appeared in 2017, and told the stories of a score of people who’d been accused of harming their neighbours through the black arts in the city during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This book was specifically focused on **Exeter** witches: on individuals who’d lived within the city and who’d been accused of witchcraft before the city magistrates between 1558 and 1660. It therefore referred only in passing to Alice Molland, who’d always been assumed to have lived in Devon, rather than in Exeter, who’d been tried at the Devon Assizes, rather than at the Exeter sessions, and whose case had, in any case, occurred at a rather later date. But having long ago noticed a reference to a woman named ‘Avis Molland’ in the minute books, I couldn’t help continuing to wonder if she might conceivably be identifiable with Alice Molland. When I discovered that Peter Elmer - a distinguished historian of English witchcraft, who’d also made a close study of the minute books - had made precisely the same connection, moreover, I was encouraged to follow up on our shared hunch and to see if any more information about Avis could be found in the city records.

The reference to Avis in the minute book is just a few lines long - simply stating that she was a witness to what someone else had supposedly said - but it contains two key pieces of information which eventually enabled me to discover a good deal more about her life: that is to say, her marital status and her surname. The fact that Avis was described as a widow, first of all, showed that she’d formerly been married, and - as men are usually much easier to trace in the records than women - this at once meant that there was a better chance of picking up her trail. As I note in my article, moreover, the fact that Molland was a highly unusual surname in early modern Exeter was more useful still, because it made it relatively easy to identify adult male Mollands who’d been living in the city at the time and who could therefore potentially have been Avis’s husband. The names of the 12,000 men who were admitted to the freedom of Exeter between 1266 and 1967 - thereby obtaining certain economic and political privileges - have fortunately been published and indexed. As a result, I was soon able to determine that only one man named Molland - Cornelius, a roofer - had been admitted to the freedom during the 1600s. His place of residence was unspecified, so the next step was to try to ascertain whereabouts in the city he’d lived. To do this, I turned to a series of ‘tax and rate assessments’ drawn up between 1602 and 1699. The assessments list hundreds of city householders - together with the precise amounts they were required to pay in tax - on a parish-by-parish basis and, once again, they have been published. It therefore took no time at all to establish, first that only one man with a surname resembling ‘Molland’ appeared in the assessments, and, second, that this was ‘Cornelius Mollen’, who was listed among the poor of Holy Trinity parish in the assessment drawn up for the so-called ‘Hearth tax’ - literally, a tax based on the number of hearths which people had in their houses - which was collected across England and Wales in 1671.

Having established that Cornelius Molland seemed the most likely man to have been Avis’s husband, and that he himself had resided in Trinity parish, the next step was to investigate the original register of births, marriages and deaths for that parish - which is kept at the Devon Heritage Centre - in order to ascertain if there was any trace of their putative union there. And sure enough, there was; I can still remember the thrill of excitement that passed through me when I saw the crabbed entry in the register recording the baptism of ‘Elizabeth, the daughter of Cornelyus and Avis Molland’: the piece of evidence that finally confirmed that my original suspicion that Avis was the widow of Cornelius was correct. There were several other entries in the register alluding to the children of Cornelius and Avis, but no references to their own baptisms, marriage or deaths. So, where had the Mollands come from in the first place, and where had they eventually gone? My only hope of finding out was to work my way through the other Exeter parish registers kept at the Heritage Centre in order to see if they contained any further references to Cornelius or Avis, so this I duly did, over a period of some weeks. My search turned up nothing else about Cornelius, but, at last, in the register of the suburban parish of St David’s, I found an entry recording the burial of ‘Avis Mollin’ in 1693: almost certainly the woman whose name had been so fleetingly recorded in the sessions book in 1685. A final key piece in the puzzle was provided by Peter Elmer, who’d previously consulted the Exeter Cathedral register, which is kept at the Dean and Chapter archives, rather than at the Devon Heritage Centre. Earlier this year, Peter was generous enough both to read a draft of my article on Alice Molland and to let me know that he’d already spotted an entry in the Cathedral register recording the marriage of Cornelius and Avis in 1663. It was this entry which revealed that Avis’s maiden name was ‘Masy’, or Macey - and which thus opened up the possibility of learning more about her antecedents from other local records in due course.

It pains me to admit that, after all the time I’ve spent pursuing the fugitive traces of Avis Molland through the historical record, I still can’t be sure that it was she - rather than some still un-discovered **Alice** Molland - who would eventually come to be celebrated as ‘England’s last executed witch’. But whatever Avis’s precise connection with witchcraft may, or may not, have been, I’ve learnt an enormous amount about the society she lived in while following in her archival footprints – and that is surely what doing History is all about.

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