

How did King James VI spark witch-hunts?

One of the most active centres of witch-hunting was Scotland, where nearly 4,000 people were consigned to the flames – a striking number for such a small country, and more than double the execution rate in England. The ferocity of these persecutions can be attributed to the most notorious royal witch-hunter: King James VI [of Scotland].

James's obsession with witchcraft can be traced back to his childhood. The violent death of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, seems to have inspired a dark fascination with magic. [...]

Two years after Mary's execution, another dramatic event deepened James's growing obsession with magic and witchcraft. In 1589 he was betrothed to Anne of Denmark, but she almost lost her life in a violent tempest when she set sail across the North Sea to meet her new husband. In an uncharacteristic show of chivalry, James resolved to sail across to Denmark and collect her in person. But on their return voyage the royal fleet was battered by more storms and one of the ships was lost. James immediately placed the blame on witches, claiming that they must have cast evil spells upon his fleet.

As soon as he reached Scottish shores, James ordered a witch-hunt on a scale never seen before. No fewer than 70 suspects were rounded up in the coastal Scottish town of North Berwick on suspicion of raising a storm to destroy James and his new bride. Most of the suspects soon confessed – under torture – to concocting a host of bizarre and gruesome spells and rituals in order to whip up storms. [...] They were swiftly convicted and put to death. [...]

In 1597 James became the only monarch in history to publish a treatise on witchcraft: *Daemonologie* (literally, 'the science of demons').