**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Score: /50**

**Witches in the Elizabethan Era**

Source: www.elizabethan-era.org

 

**C – Circle 6 words and DEFINE**

**A – Ask 5 questions**

**T – Talk to the text 5 times**

**C – Capture a 5 sentence summary at the end or on another sheet of paper**

**H – Highlight key points**

**The Elizabethan Belief in Witches**

During the Elizabethan era people blamed unexplainable events as the work of witches. There were frequent outbreaks of the deadly Black Death (Bubonic Plague) for which there was no cure. The fear and anger about this terrible disease had to be directed at someone - witches were the obvious target. When people died from terrible diseases, when animals died, when there was a bad harvest, when houses were burnt down in fires even when foods curdled - witches were the obvious targets. During the Elizabethan era there was limited medical knowledge or facilities and there was no form of insurance. Such events as those described above were devastating and there was no means of minimising their terrible effects on the lives of Elizabethans - someone had to be blamed - witches were the obvious targets.

**Elizabethan Superstitions**

Who were the people accused of being Elizabethan Witches?

Women were those most often accused of being witches! There were 270 Elizabethan witch trials of 247 were women and only 23 were men! Those accused of witchcraft were generally:

* Old
* Poor
* Unprotected
* Single women or widows (many kept pets for company - their 'familiars')

During the Elizabethan era men were all-powerful. Women had few rights and were expected to obey men. Elizabethan women totally relied on the male members of the family. Society and the culture of England was changing. The convents had been closed. The number of poor was increasing and people were far less charitable. Old, poor, unprotected women needed to be supported - and this was resented by other Elizabethans. Access to doctors and medicines was minimal. Women were expected to produce cures for most ailments as part of their house keeping. 'Wise women' also used herbs for this purpose. The use of herbs and plants such as mandrake, datura, monkshood, cannabis, belladonna, henbane and hemlock were common ingredients in brews and ointments for medical purposes. As the fear of witches and witchcraft increased in Europe the Catholic Church included in its definition of witchcraft anyone with knowledge of herbs as 'those who used herbs for cures did so only through a pact with the Devil, either explicit or implicit.' Possession of such herbs, many of which did have psychedelic effects, resulted in execution by burning in Europe.

**Queen Elizabeth and the Punishment of Elizabethan Witches**

The hysteria and paranoia regarding witches which was experienced in Europe did not fully extend to England during the Elizabethan era. Queen Elizabeth I passed a new and harsher witchcraft Law in 1562 but it did not define sorcery as heresy. Witches convicted of murder by witchcraft were to be executed but the punishment for witches in England was hanging, not burning at the stake which was the terrible death that was inflicted on French and Spanish witches. Lesser crimes relating to witchcraft resulted in the convicted witch being pilloried. Torture was not allowed as part of the investigatory or punishment procedure for witches. As the Witchcraft Law did not define sorcery as heresy the matter of religion was not involved in the prosecution of witches. The attitude of Queen Elizabeth was certainly more lenient than those of her neighbours in France and Spain. Her mother, Anne Boleyn had been accused of being a witch (Anne Boleyn had a sixth finger growing from her fifth small finger. Anne also had a prominent mole on her neck - these deformities were seen by her enemies as a sure sign that Anne Boleyn was a witch.) Queen Elizabeth was known to consult John Dee and she also showed an interest in Astrology. Perhaps these explain her leniency towards witches.

Elizabethan Witches - Black Witches and White Witches ('Cunning Folk' or Healers)

Up to the Renaissance period the wisdom of the 'Wise women' or 'Cunning Folk' - the White Witches - were seen as helpful, if not invaluable, members of the community. Their knowledge of the healing properties of various plants and herbs were often passed down through the generations. Their role was to provide help for people in need. The White witches were clearly distinguished from the 'Black' witches. The 'Black' witches were seen as those who practised the secret arts in order to do physical or practical harm to others. This distinction between 'White' and 'Black' witches was lost during the hysteria of the era of the Renaissance witch hunts

**Elizabethan Witch Trials**

The following information provides details and facts about witch trials which took place in the county of Essex during the Elizabethan era. In the 1580s, 13% of assize trials in Essex were for witchcraft. 64 were accused and 53 were found guilty. The accused were tried for maleficium, the use of diabolical power to cause harm, not for heresy. Most of the accused confessed to the charges although torture was not allowed as part of the investigatory or punishment procedure for witches.

The first witch trial to appear in a secular court in England resulting in a series of witch trials in Chelmsford, Essex. The prosecution of women as the main victims of witch hunts are further explained in details of the trials and those prosecuted

The First of the Chelmsford 'witches' was the decrepit Elizabeth Frances. Elizabeth Frances confessed to using a familiar cat called Sathan in order to harm various people. The cat was given to Agnes Waterhouse and her daughter Joan Waterhouse. Elizabeth Frances was sentenced to one year in prison but poor Agnes Waterhouse was hung. Her daughter, Joan, was found not guilty

The Second Chelmsford Witch trial of 1579 once again brought the unfortunate old Elizabeth Frances to answer accusations of witchcraft, along with several other women ' They were found guilty and hanged

The third Chelmsford Witch trial of 1589 saw the hanging of Joan Prentice, Joan Upney and Joan Cunny for using familiars

In 1572 Alice Chaundler of Maldon was accused of bewitching Mary Cowper of Maldon, aged eight years, and he father Francis, a fletcher, to death; of bewitching to death Robert Briscoe (aged 30 years), his son aged two years, and daughter aged five years. Alice Chaundler was found guilty and hanged. Five years later her daughter Ellen Smythe of Maldon was accused at the Assizes of bewitching Susan Webbe, aged four years, who became ill and then died. Ellen Smythe was found guilty and was hung.