

Data Biography: The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft

The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, available at <https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/>, is a dataset of 3,837 people who were accused of witchcraft in Scotland between 1563 and 1736. The database has three levels: the first provides biographical information about the accused witches, including name, sex, residence, and occupation; the second provides a description of each witchcraft case, including the specific accusations, the investigation process, and the outcome of the case; the third provides both the trial process, which includes information about the type of trial and the people involved, and the references, which provide a list of sources for each case (Database Documentation and Description).

The project was directed by Dr. Julian Goodare, with Dr. Louise Yeoman as the co-director and Dr. Joyce Miller and Ms. Lauren Martin as full-time researchers. Dr. Goodare is a lecturer in Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh, and the University owns the website and the database. The project started in 2001, funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council, and the data was made available online in January 2003. The project then received a small research grant from the British Academy, and supplemental information about the people involved in witchcraft investigations and prosecutions was improved in Autumn 2003, but the original researchers have not updated the dataset since. The data was collected and made public for research and educational purposes, as well as to raise awareness about this period of Scottish history: more specifically, the project states that “[t]he web interfaces and database were designed to enable the public and academic researchers to examine biographical and social information about accused witches; cultural and sociological patterns of witchcraft belief and accusation; community, ecclesiastical and legal procedures of investigation and trial, national

and regional variations; and the chronology and geography of witchcraft accusation and prosecution” (About the Survey).

In addition to the database, the project also includes web-based user interfaces that allow the users to search for accused witches, cases, and trials, as well as supporting material that helps users understand the history of witchcraft. It appears that the website previously included “graphing and mapping capabilities” (About the Survey) in addition to searching, but these no longer appear to be available on the primary site. However, in 2019, the University of Edinburgh published an interactive map, available at <https://witches.is.ed.ac.uk/>, of the locations recorded in this database. This map allows users to visualize where the accused witches lived, where they were detained, where they were tried, and other relevant geographic information. The mapping capabilities on the original website may have been removed when this map was made available online. This visualization project had the aim of building Wikidata pages for each accused witch in the Survey and geolocating them using sources such as Ordnance Survey maps, place-name books, and gazetteers. The Wikidata pages, created from 2017 to 2019, and the improved geographical information, added in Summer 2019, could be viewed as more recent updates to the original project. The visualization project was led by the University of Edinburgh’s Wikimedian in Residence, Ewan McAndrew, and the geographical identifications were primarily recorded by Emma Carroll, a Data and Visualization intern at the University.

The original Survey dataset was mostly compiled from earlier surveys of Scottish witchcraft, including George F. Black’s 1938 *Calendar of Cases of Witchcraft in Scotland, 1510-1727*, which lists specific witchcraft cases and their summaries during this time period, Christina Lerner et al.’s 1977 *Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft*, which lists witchcraft cases in less detail, and Stuart Macdonald’s 1990s *Scottish Witch Hunt Data Base*, which corrects the *Source-Book*,

adds cases, and transfers the data to CD-ROM. In addition, the researchers cite many sources from the National Archives of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland, as well as several court books, papers, and judiciary records. The dataset includes a total of 3,837 accused witches, 3,212 of which were named. Of the accused, 84% were women, 15% were men, and 1% were of unknown sex, and most of the accused were between the ages of 30 and 60. Most of the accused came from Scotland's central belt, but not all of the accused witches' locations were known; of the 3,212 whose names are known, the locations of 3,141 were recorded, and these 3,141 are the ones that are shown in the 2019 visualization.

Given these numbers, the data is clearly incomplete, as many names and locations are missing – likely because the relevant information has yet to be collected by modern researchers, or because it was not recorded or preserved to begin with. It's possible that the missing information correlates with accused witches of some specific age, origin, social status, and/or other characteristics, which might contribute to a biased view of accused witches in Scotland. Additionally, though 99% of the accused witches had a recorded sex, no genders were recorded, so it might be difficult to pose questions regarding the gender identities of the accused. Another limitation is that the Survey specifically deals with witchcraft cases in Scotland from 1563 to 1736, so the data might not be generalizable to other locations or time periods. It's also likely that there is some bias regarding which locations within Scotland are included – for example, the *Scottish Witch Hunt Data Base* has additional cases from Fife because Macdonald's doctoral research was focused on that area, suggesting that the scope of the cases may be affected by interests of the authors of the primary sources. The researchers themselves also acknowledge the issue of gaps in the dataset: most cases do not have detailed records, and they state that often, “we have a record that a trial was authorised, but we do not know for certain whether the trial

took place or what its outcome was” (Introduction to Scottish Witchcraft). Thus, while the Survey includes a lot of information about witchcraft accusations, there seems to be much less information about the outcomes of the cases, so it might be difficult to draw conclusions about rates of acquittal or how common various types of punishments were. Moreover, since the available information was likely originally produced by court officials and others in positions of power, their biases could have influenced the recording process. Yet another factor to consider is that since the primary sources were compiled from trial records and other similar data, the Survey does not include cases of witchcraft accusations that did not go through a formal investigation and trial process.

Though this dataset was developed in an academic context, and thus should adhere to modern ethical standards of research, an important ethical consideration of this dataset is that many of the accused witches were ostracized, tortured, or even executed. Even though these individuals lived hundreds of years ago, it is still important to remain mindful of how they are being represented in modern times and how their stories are being used for research. There is also a risk that this dataset could be used to sensationalize the Scottish witch trials, which the researchers attempt to mitigate in their Introduction to Scottish Witchcraft page by addressing demographic stereotypes associated with accused witches, such as being widowed, and popular stories related to the process of prosecuting accused witches, such as the swimming test.

Spreadsheet:

Dataset Name	Link to data source	Link to storage source	Who collected the data	Who owns the data	How was the data collected	Sample Size	Who was included/excluded from sample	When was the data collected	When was the data last updated	Why was the data collected	Notes on data quality	Notes on data usage conditions
Survey of Scottish Witchcraft	https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/ https://witches.is.ed.ac.uk/		Original dataset: Dr. Julian Goodare Ms. Lauren Martin Dr. Joyce Miller Dr. Louise Yeoman Visualizations: Ewan McAndrew Emma Carroll	University of Edinburgh Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the British Academy	Database first designed by project team, then populated by basic data compiled in electronic form by Stuart Macdonald, largely derived from Lerner et al.	3,837	84% female 15% male 1% unknown sex 7% were aged under 20 8% were between 20 and 30 22% were between 30 and 40 22% were between 40 and 50 31% were between 50 and 60 7% were between 60 and 70 4% were over 70	Project began in 2001 and went online in January 2003	Autumn 2003 Geolocated for visualizations in 2019	To create a database of people accused of witchcraft in Scotland between 1563 and 1736	Lots of missing information (625 records for unnamed people or groups) Only 305 cases have known sentences (less than 10% of total)	Can view the database and download it to file or print for the purposes of private reference, research or study Need permission for other uses

Sources (in the order mentioned)

Survey of Scottish Witchcraft: <https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/>

Database Documentation and Description:

https://datashare.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10283/45/Witchcraftsurvey_download.pdf

About the Survey: <https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/about/>

Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Visualization: <https://witches.is.ed.ac.uk/>

Introduction to Scottish Witchcraft: <https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/faq/>

This assignment represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

/s/ Helen Gao