

•'Ships Yud Row' at Littledean. Roy Close has been told the woman on the left has been identified as Ellen Hayward. Standing next to her is Jane George and the child is Alice George.

When we published the photograph of the Littledean cottages known locally as 'Ships Yud Row' submitted by postcard collector Roy Close we expected little response. It was thought to be around 100 years old. However Roy has been given the identities of three members of the group including, on the left, none other than Ellen Hayward, the woman who became famous as 'the wise woman of Cinderford' and the last woman in England to be charged with witchcraft. Bob Smyth investigates.

The last woman in England to be charged with witchcraft

Possibly the last case case involving witchcraft in the UK occurred at Littledean's magistrates court 100 years ago. The accused was an elderly widow, Ellen Hayward, 68, living near Cinderford's St John's Church.

She was widely known as Old Ellen, and famed as a healer and "wise woman." A herbalist, she used potions to cure ailments and dress sores – of animals as well as human beings.

She was a phrenologist – offering advice based on her "readings" of a person's head – but didn't engage in palm-reading or fortune telling. Nor did she charge set fees, but accepted what satisfied customers offered.

Inevitably there were occasional unsatisfied customers. John Markey, a farmer from May Hill who had £50 taken from a drawer, visited Ellen in May 1905 to see if she could assist.

She thought he was ill, and advised him to go home and rest. She declined the 5 shillings he proffered.

"Within a week of Markey's visit three of his family became violently insane," writes C.J. Brown in an article in a 1954 *Countryman* magazine.

"A daughter and granddaughter were taken away, one to Gloucester Asylum and the other to Newent Workhouse Hospital."

Markey's wife disappeared. There were searches for her in the surrounding woodlands over the weekend, but she reappeared on the Monday. Dishevelled and holding a hazel stick, she explained it was to ward off witches.

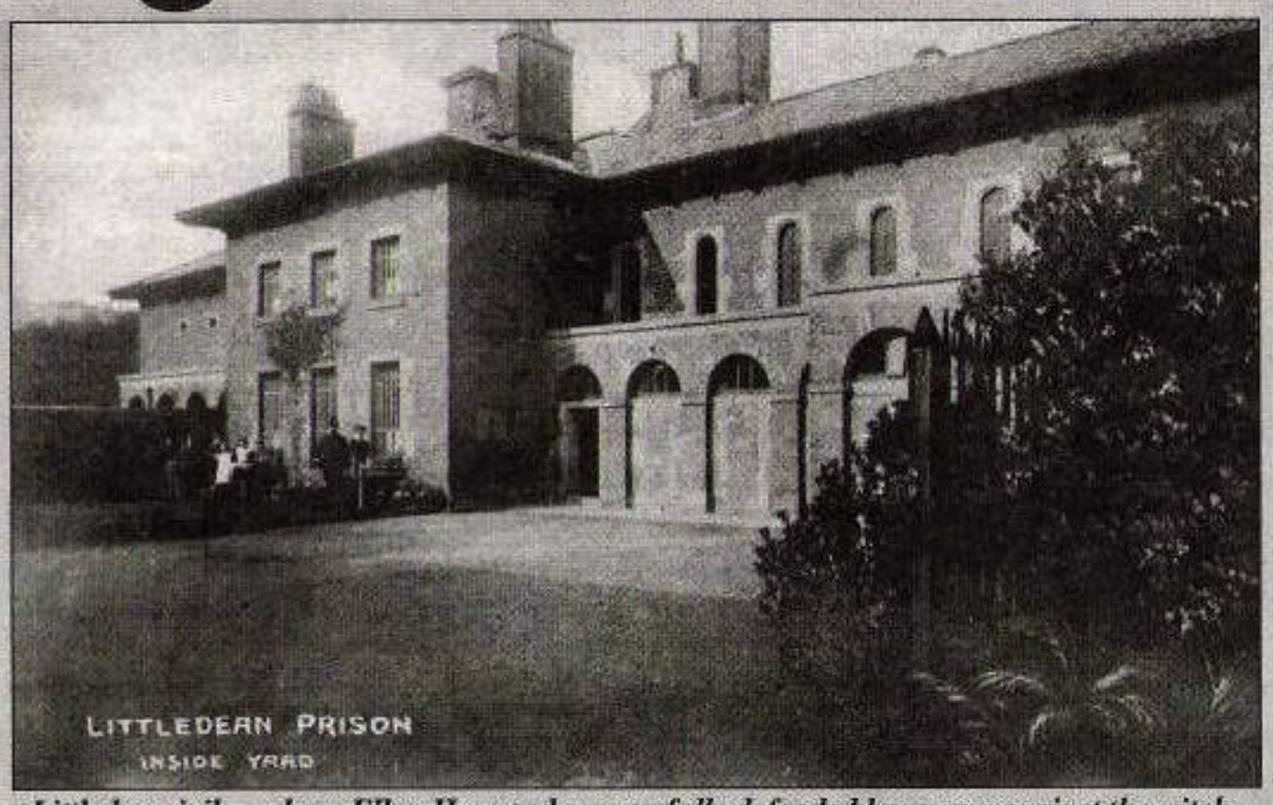
Her son George, from Blakeney, had been among those looking for her. The strain was such that he became violent – and in the course of a struggle impaled his eye on a spike.

"Bootless and hatless he ran away, but he was later detained by the police," Brown continues. "The next morning he was certified insane."

Newspapers reported these goings-on, which added to the rumour mill. May Hill and Huntley villagers went around with hazel twigs as a precaution, and it was alleged that Ellen had shown Markey the face of one of his relatives in a crystal ball.

Almost incredibly, the matter was even raised in Parliament.

"The Home Secretary was asked in the House of Commons whether his attention had been called to the practice of



•Littledean jail ... where Ellen Hayward successfully defended her name against the witchcraft charge.

witchcraft at May Hill and other parts of Gloucestershire and, in view of the alarm in the locality, what action would be taken by the authorities to suppress witchcraft," Brown reports.

The reply was that inquiries had been made, and if there was sufficient evidence, proceedings would be taken.

Ellen wrote (or had a friend write) a dignified letter to the *Dean Forest Mercury*: *"I am widely known throughout Gloucestershire and the surrounding counties and I wish to emphatically deny that I am a witch (so cruelly called by the press) nor am I fortune teller or hand reader.*

"I have no knowledge of such pagan ideas. I have no power or ability to bewitch anyone nor do I believe in any such thing. I have a knowledge of phrenology but from this get no portion of my living.

"I make no charge but leave it entirely to those who have required my services to give me as they please. I have the happy consciousness of knowing I have been able to render good to many hundreds."

She took the opportunity to make a plea for cash, however: *"I am suffering from a cruel attack made upon me by the press which has incapacitated me from earning my living, [and] do hereby appeal to the sympathetic public for their kind consideration and help. Any small subscription will be most thankfully received and acknowledged."*

She was still in business nevertheless, because in September she was visited by James Davis, 66, from Pauntley near Ledbury. He was a hurdlemaker (fence-maker) and smallholder.

He had bought a pig which had become poorly. He thought someone had charmed it for spite, and a travelling woman confirmed his suspicions.

He said the pig, together with two other pigs and a couple of cows which had fallen ill earlier, had been charmed by a local woman called Amos.

Davis wrote to Ellen explaining his problem and enclosing 2/6d. He later went in person. Ellen advised him to wait until the moon changed.

He handed over a further 5s, which produced more advice. Returning home, he found the pig did indeed get better.

He on the other hand fell sick, and in December travelled for another consultation. She diagnosed flu and told him to stay indoors until February. He offered a guinea for her pains, but she said it was too much.

In February he got the notion that the Amos lady had paid Ellen to put a spell on him. He went to confront her, threatening that if she didn't lift the curse he would complain to the authorities.

She sighed that this was looking like a re-run of the Markey affair. Davis offered her 2/6d to hex the Amos family – which Ellen naturally declined.

Three months later, in May 1906, she was arraigned at the Littledean court. The charge was "that between the 24th November 1905 and 1st March 1906 at Cinderford she unlawfully did certain craft or means or device, to wit by pretended witchcraft deceive and impose on one of HM subjects, to wit one James Davis."

She pleaded not guilty, and somehow conducted her own defence. The police sergeant who interviewed her read out her statement.

"I have been ill 12 weeks and cannot remember any men coming to me from Redmarley or Pauntley. Numbers of people have been to see me for different complaints and brought me money.

"I have given advice for the treatment of pigs, cows and horses. I tell them what to do and they put it down on paper. I have been very cautious in my advice since Markey's affair."

In evidence she agreed she could recall Davis's last visit.

She had told him that no one could put a spell on him or his pigs, Brown summarises. "There had been nothing in the cup of tea she gave Davis."

She was later supported by a large number of character witness testimonies in the form of letters to the court, citing instances of her good works. The magistrates threw out the charge.

A letter in the *Mercury* the following week, protesting at "this haunting of a poor and respectable old woman," proposed some sort of subscription for Ellen to compensate her for the persecution. Nothing appears to have come of this.

When she died in 1912, however, she was not forgotten. Her tomb in the St John's churchyard reads: "Erected by her friends in loving memory."