

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of East Anglia		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 - History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Spellbound: Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> Between 2007 and 2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Malcolm Gaskill	Professor of Early Modern History	2007 to present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> Between August 2018 and January 2019		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p><i>Spellbound: Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft</i> was a major exhibition mounted at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford, from August 2018 to January 2019. Co-curated by Malcolm Gaskill, it emerged from his three-year Leverhulme Trust funded project, Inner Lives. Drawing upon his original research into witch-beliefs and witchcraft prosecutions in the early modern world, the show made innovative use of bespoke architectural design, specially commissioned artworks and comic books, dramatic reconstruction, sound installations, and lively storytelling sessions, with Gaskill's role central throughout. <i>Spellbound</i> attracted over 45,000 visitors, including more first-time visitors (37%) than any previous Ashmolean exhibition, and was extensively and enthusiastically reviewed in the press, on blogs, and across social media. In the longer term, it has enhanced popular understanding of belief systems, both ancient and modern, helped inspire the design of a new witchcraft museum in Denmark, and enhanced the public profile of the Ashmolean, one of the UK's most ancient and prestigious public collections.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The <i>Spellbound: Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft</i> exhibition, specifically the third gallery devoted to the fear and loathing of witches, represented the material expression of original research into the cultures, practices, and emotional dimensions of witchcraft in early modern Britain, Europe, and America, conducted by Gaskill over two decades. His earlier work, emerging from the 'new social history' and the history of crime, focussed on the reconstruction of the dynamics of accusation in early modern communities, exploring how learned and visual stereotypes of the witch circulated in local society, and how witch-trials (and the tangled webs of accusation and counter-accusation preceding them) were intimately connected to the economic and neighbourly tensions that animated the 'little commonwealths' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (3.5). This culminated in bestselling work (3.3), including a new narrative of the East Anglian trials led in the 1640s by self-styled 'Witchfinder General' Matthew Hopkins: an episode represented in <i>Spellbound</i> through the inclusion of learned treatises and demonologies, pamphlet trial reports, and contemporary paintings, woodcuts, and engravings, many of the latter hand-picked by Gaskill from the Ashmolean's extensive Douce Collection.</p> <p>Gaskill's more recent work has focussed on the emotional dimensions of witch-trials and accusations (3.2, 3.4), a shift in line with the 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences, reflecting an increased scholarly sensitivity to the role of emotional states as drivers of historical experience and change. This research has explored in particular how confessions, witness statements, and other testimonies might be read for their emotional resonances or 'lexicons', and how witchcraft prosecutions developed within a complex affective network of jealousy, anxiety, resentment, hatred, anger, and fear (3.2, 3.4). These dimensions were expressed in <i>Spellbound</i></p>		

through the display of emotionally freighted objects and images, such as an eighteenth-century ‘witch scale’ borrowed from the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle, and several legal manuscripts, including depositions made against hanged witches, and their own confessions (3.1).

Gaskill’s route into the emotive attributes of early modern witchcraft was enhanced by the major Leverhulme Trust research project (3.7) ‘Inner Lives: Emotions, Identity, and the Supernatural, 1300–1900’, that he directed between 2015 and 2018 (<https://innerlives.org>). This resulted, amongst other things, in his latest monograph: a case study of the emotional dimensions of the 1650s witch panic in Springfield Massachusetts (*The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New World*, forthcoming November 2021 with Penguin/Allen Lane). More generally, the Inner Lives project provided the impetus, personnel, initial funding, and overall conceptual and organisational framework for *Spellbound*. Reflecting the temporal, thematic, spatial, and emotional structure of Inner Lives, the *Spellbound* exhibition was divided into three discrete galleries: the first, curated by project Co-I Sophie Page (UCL), focussed on medieval magic, the scale of cosmos, and the emotion of love. The second, curated by Co-I Owen Davies (University of Hertfordshire), showcased modern ritual protection, the scale of the home, and the emotion of anxiety. The third, curated by Gaskill, focussed on early modern witchcraft prosecutions, the effects of community identity and politics, and the emotion of fear.

### 3. References to the research

#### Academic Publications

- 3.1** Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England  
**Malcolm Gaskill**, (*Past & Present* **2008**), 198(1), pp.33-70. DOI: 10.1093/pastj/gtm048
- 3.2** ‘Witchcraft, Emotion and Imagination in the English Civil War’, in John Newton and Jo Bath (eds), *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*  
**Malcolm Gaskill** (*Leiden*, **2008**), pp. 161–78. ISBN: 9789004165281
- 3.3** *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*  
**Malcolm Gaskill**, (*Oxford University Press*, **2010**). ISBN: 978-0199236954
- 3.4** ‘Afterword: Passions in Perspective’, in Laura Kounine and Michael Ostling (eds), *Emotions in the History of Witchcraft*  
**Malcolm Gaskill** (*Basingstoke*, **2016**), pp.269–79. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-52903-9
- 3.5** ‘Little Commonwealths II: Communities’, in Keith Wrightson (ed), *A Social History of England, 1500-1700*  
**Malcolm Gaskill** (*Cambridge*, **2017**), pp.84-104. ISBN: 9780199251032

#### Exhibition Catalogue Chapter

- 3.6** ‘The Fear and Loathing of Witches’, in Sophie Page and Marina Wallace (eds), *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*  
**Malcolm Gaskill** (*Oxford*, **2018**), pp. 97–142. ISBN: 9781910807248

#### Grants

- 3.7** Project: ‘Inner Lives: Emotions, Identity, and the Supernatural, 1300–1900’.  
 PI: **Malcolm Gaskill**. Funder: Leverhulme Trust. Grant value: GBP249,524. Project dates: Sept 2015–Sept 2018. (<https://innerlives.org>)

### 4. Details of the impact

**The Exhibition:** *Spellbound* was opened by Philip Pullman on 31 August 2018 and ran for four months to 6 January 2019. Created with Professor Marina Wallace, from the Artakt consultancy, and [REDACTED] from architects Stanton Williams (5.6), it displayed 194 objects, images,

manuscripts, and books from 48 institutional and private lenders: more than for any previous Ashmolean exhibition. It drew 45,585 visitors (including 1,372 on educational visits), exceeding a target of 30,000 and doubling attendance at the Ashmolean's 2017 *Imagining the Divine* exhibition (21,249). Exit survey data from 1,583 visitors (5.1) revealed that *Spellbound* was attended by more first-time visitors than any previous Ashmolean exhibition (37%), with a marked increase in the 25–34 age bracket (accounting for 35% of survey respondents), roughly double the Ashmolean's norm. Its reach was extended by a programme of workshops and public lectures (including a sell-out 'Live Friday': 2,600 visitors); catalogue sales of over 1,000; an outdoor advertising campaign (shortlisted as 'Marketing Campaign of the Year' at the 2019 Museums + Heritage Awards) with an estimated reach of 24,576,000; 131,995 unique visits to the website (more than for any previous Ashmolean show), and features on *BBC South Today*, *BBC Radio Oxford*, *BBC Radio 3*, and the *BBC World Service*. Total ticket sales grossed GBP395,965.50 (5.1).

**Media Reviews and Survey:** According to the survey (5.1), visitors found *Spellbound* a deeply affecting, even transformative experience. 80% of survey respondents rated their experience as 'excellent' or 'good'. The show was enthusiastically reviewed (5.2) in nearly 100 print and online publications (from flagship broadsheets, via specialist art and archaeological outlets, to personal blogs), and extensively praised on social media. It was declared to be 'mesmerising' (*The Times*), 'literally and metaphorically enchanting', 'truly magical', 'spellbinding', 'bewitching' (*The Economist*), 'beguiling', 'beautiful and haunting', 'entrancing', 'captivating', and 'a dream come true for me'. The darker themes explored by the show in conjunction with its innovative and atmospheric architectural design meant that it was also 'genuinely spooky', 'irresistibly creepy' (*The Telegraph*), 'visceral', 'scary', 'eerie', 'unsettling', 'unusual', 'disturbing', 'unnerving', 'grim and compelling', 'exciting', 'chilling', 'macabre', and a 'wicked delight', possessed of a 'powerful energy', and responsible for 'many chills' and a 'shiver down the spine' (5.2). For many commentators, *Spellbound* represented a profound exploration of what it means to be human. It was 'enthralled and emotive', 'heartrending', 'surprisingly moving', 'powerful', and 'deeply thought-provoking'. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Bel Mooney concluded that 'despite the advance of science and technology, people are pretty much the same under the skin as we always were [...] That's what *Spellbound* makes you realise' (5.2). 70% of survey respondents reported that the show stimulated an awareness of the role of magical thinking in their own daily lives (5.1).

Many visitors (5.1, 5.2) found the gallery curated by Gaskill to be especially 'shocking', 'stomach churning', 'painful', and 'heart-breaking' - 'the most potent [gallery] of all', according to *The Lancet*. Prints and drawings conveyed how men 'really had a horror of older women', while diagnostic devices such as the weighing chair drove home the 'realities of witchcraft'. This gallery also communicated the complexity of accusations and the 'intense emotional forces' at work (TLS). Writing in the *Guardian* (5.2), Maev Kennedy drew particular attention to Gaskill's material discoveries, not least the length of ectoplasm from the Spiritualist medium, Helen Duncan (convicted under the Witchcraft Act and imprisoned in 1944, and previously the subject of a best-selling biography by Gaskill), found by Gaskill by pure chance in Cambridge University Library. Simon Ings (*Financial Times*) observed that Gaskill's gallery contained much of the 'connective tissue' of *Spellbound*'s argument, reporting that Gaskill 'pulled off something remarkable: a series of cases that comprehensively pricks our assumptions, humanising not only those accused of witchcraft, but also their accusers', and demonstrating that accusations 'had far more to do with personal relationships and intense emotions than hysterical superstition'. Ings concluded that *Spellbound* 'will make you want to be a kinder person'.

**Inspiring a new Museum in Denmark:** As proof of international impact, besides overseas visitors to the exhibition and the consequent boost to the visitor economy both national and international, Gaskill's work helped inspire the design of Denmark's first witchcraft museum in Ribe, opened in June 2020 and attracting over 10,000 visitors in its first month (5.3, 5.4). Having first met them informally, in December 2018, Gaskill invited the museum's curators to a tour of *Spellbound*. The Danish team found the 'design choices, art style, and atmosphere' of *Spellbound*'s marketing campaign 'stunning [...] setting the mood in a wonderful way' (5.4). In particular, but for Gaskill's drawing their attention to the use of apotropaic charms scratched on doors and other surfaces, they would not have identified an important category of exhibits for their own museum, duly hunted

down and now far better known as a result of their visit to Oxford (5.3). As reported by [REDACTED] (5.3), 'None of this might have happened had I not met Professor Gaskill and visited his wonderful exhibition'.

**Inspiring Artistic Expression and Impact on Creative Practices:** Attracting further external media notice, Gaskill helped to produce two multimedia installations which contributed to his gallery's emotional impact (5.7, 5.8). The first was an audio dramatization of the testimonies against two accused women from the East Anglian witchfinding campaign, 1645–47. With Gaskill's guidance, an immersive booth displaying the original manuscripts from Cambridge University Library was created by radio producer Andy Jordan and sound designer Andy Cox, featuring the voice of Anton Lesser (*Game of Thrones* etc.) as magistrate Thomas Castell. This was described by *Museums Journal* as 'delivering the strongest emotional punch of the show' (a verdict echoed across multiple reviews 5.2). As one blogger put it: 'To read the confession of one accused witch – tormented by the death of her husband and children, and living in abject poverty – would be moving, but hearing it proved, appropriately, haunting' (5.2).

The second such installation was *Voracity I* and *II*, a video and sculptural interpretation of early modern witch-trials by contemporary artist [REDACTED] (5.7, 5.8). One of three original highly praised artworks, and the result of a two-year collaboration with Gaskill, *Voracity I* is a filmic representation of the containment and explosion of emotion in witch-plagued communities (expressed the metaphor of fire and smoke), while *Voracity II* comprised domestic implements violently inscribed with the gendered language of witchcraft accusations. Informed by a relationship with Gaskill characterised by [REDACTED] as one of 'creative dialogue', 'mutual understanding', and 'trust', and inspired by visits arranged and guided by Gaskill to trial documents at Cambridge University Library and engravings at the Ashmolean, [REDACTED] felt compelled to work in film for the first time (5.7). She incorporated elements of 'theatricality', 'exaggeration', and 're-enactment', and channelled her own 'anger' and 'emotional intensity'. She felt 'recalibrated' by her experience, which for her has opened new professional and creative doors. *Voracity* was another inspiration internationally for the Ribe curatorial team: 'an innovative, emotive idea that inspired a new concept for one of our rooms where we had not yet found the right angle; we're now considering an artistic approach for this gallery' (5.4).

Amongst other successes, in collaboration with historical cartoonist Hannah Sackett, Gaskill produced a comic, sold online and in the exhibition gift shop: *A Most Certain, Strange and True Guide to Witchcraft* (5.7 & 5.9). He also worked with storyteller Olivia Armstrong on a session delivered at the Ashmolean entitled *Spellbound Stories* (5.7), bringing accused seventeenth-century witch Anne Bodenham to 'captivating' new life.

Enhancing the awareness and interpretation of existing museum heritage, assisting with the production of new cultural artefacts, encouraging cultural tourism, stimulating the visitor economy, and in the process, through the popular dissemination of research previously targeted at an academic minority, delivering a powerful emotive stimulus, Gaskill's work on *Spellbound* was both innovative and impactful. Its longer-term effects continue to resonate, not only in memory or print, but from Oxford to Denmark, both nationally and internationally.

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact:

5.1 The official marketing, exit survey and visitor summaries prepared by the Ashmolean

5.2 Evaluative Reviews and Social Media Comments

5.3 HEX! Museum of Witch Hunt, Denmark testimonial

5.4 Project manager, HEX! Museum of Witch Hunt blogpost

- 5.5** Interviews with Head of Exhibitions, Exhibitions Coordinator, Ashmolean Museum. Video downloaded from YouTube, accessed and downloaded 13/8/2020, digital evidence held on file at UEA
- 5.6** Interview Exhibition Designer from Stanton Williams. Video downloaded from YouTube, accessed and downloaded 13/8/2020, digital evidence held on file at UEA
- 5.7** Interviews with Artists contributing to exhibition and workshops led by creative practitioners, including performance of *Spellbound Stories* and video footage of *Voracity I & II*. Videos downloaded from YouTube, accessed and downloaded 13/8/2020, digital evidence held on file at UEA
- 5.8** Marina Wallace, 'Installations by Contemporary Artists', in idem & Sophie Page (eds), *Spellbound* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 153–176; Olivia Armstrong, (2018), held by UEA
- 5.9** Drawing the History of Sorcery, Ritual and Witchcraft blog post detailing illustrated comic *A Most Certain, Strange and True Guide to Witchcraft*