In a small district in the heart of northern England 400 years ago, eight women and two men were put to death on charges of witchcraft. The place is Pendle, nestled in the countryside of east Lancashire, and the legendary stories of magic, witchcraft and murder still live on. These legends, rumours and folk tales have become an important part of local history in Lancashire, and numerous books, documentaries and films have been made to portray the happenings of 1612. These are the most famous witch trials in English history and are one of the most recorded of the 17th century. Today, the story of the Pendle Witches is still taught in schools, celebrated at Halloween and is an everyday part of life in Lancashire.

Forget pointy hats and flying broomsticks—in 17th century Britain, witchcraft was a real and terrifying part of everyday life. It was a time of great change in the country, fuelled by suspicion, paranoia and religious persecution. The change from the pre-modern world to the Age of Reason was under way, and the fear of evil was thick in the air.

King James I, a Protestant who ruled the country. On the return from his honeymoon, he was convinced that witches sank his boat, and in 1597 he wrote a book called “Daemonologie”. The book, thought to have inspired Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”, encouraged people to be wary of witches and contained instructions on how to identify and hunt them. The king wrote that “witchcraft is akin to treason” and that all witches should be hanged.

It was against this backdrop that the trials of the Pendle Witches took place. Lancashire, according to records at the time, was known to have a reputation of disobedience, rabble-rousing and rebellion. It is unclear exactly what started the events of 1612, which took place in the shadow of Pendle Hill. According to the BBC documentary, “The Pendle Witch Child”, filmed in 2011, a poor young girl named Alison Device was begging in the countryside, and when a local merchant refused to give anything, she placed a curse on the man’s head. The man fell down dead, and Alison was convinced she had caused his death with the power of her words.

Alison was a member of a local family renowned in the village...
for being witches. The matriarch of the family, Granny Demdike, was an important woman in the community, known to be a healer, and was said to have the ability to heal or harm with her charms and spells. When Alison was interviewed by the local authorities, she and all of her family were accused of witchcraft. The Device family were having a feud with their neighbours, and shocked at having been caught by the authorities, accused the rival Chattox family of bewitching and killing four people. All the members of these poor families were sent to trial. At the end of the two-day trial, the jury decided that the families were guilty of causing death or harm by witchcraft and were sentenced to hang.

I talked to Ashley McAuliffe, a local resident, about the witches. “People, especially women, who were different in any way, because of age or mental health problems or physical disabilities were bullied and used as scapegoats to explain why things went wrong.” Women who worked as healers and midwives, who used herbs and other methods of curing illnesses, were particularly targeted.

Local people believe that the trials were not about witchcraft at all. The Lancashire historian, John Clayton, writes “many social factors, such as inflation, land shortage, religious insecurity and crop failure conspired to bring about the witch roundup of 1612.” Like most of history, the witches themselves, poor and uneducated, did not give their own accounts. The evidence we have today often only comes from the elite who judged and sentenced them to death.

In 1998, a musical called “In the Shadow of Pendle Hill”, based on the tale of the Pendle Witches, was performed in the town of Barley. Four years later, in 2002, the same production team made a film using local actors and actresses to portray the ill-fated men and women.

Daniel Morville, who acted in the film, says, “It was filmed on location in Pendle, with a base in Barley. The whole film was based around the last few days of the witches’ lives before they were taken to Lancaster to be sentenced and hanged. We filmed in Lancaster castle, where the accused were tried and we visited the actual dungeons where the witches were held. They were tiny!” He continues: “The stories are great and to have something that is so famous so close to home is incredible. Locals blamed this group of people for ill livestock, crops not growing and unexplained deaths in the area. My relation, John Bulcock, was one of the men to be hanged.”

In fact, many of the descendants of the accused still live in the area and hold their families’ histories dear. One of the founders of the Facebook group “Remembering the Witches of Pendle”, Terri Louise, is descended from one of the witches. “The group was started in memory of the witches and to discuss if they were really
as evil as portrayed in the stories.”

With over 700 members, the Facebook group comes together to pay tribute to the memory of the Pendle Witches.

Another founder, Cheryl Fretz Carlyle says: “I feel it is up to us to keep the memory and the history alive of all those witches tortured and accused. We cannot forget them. The stories are very meaningful to me and I want to keep them alive. These people were different from the rest. They knew healing and herbs and magic. Everything was hearsay, so they were accused. It is our duty to keep the history and memories alive.”

In 2012, to mark the 400th anniversary of the Pendle Witch trials, over 40 events were held to commemorate the accused. Most notable was the figure of “1612” featured on the side of Pendle Hill.

Pendle trades on its dark past. “Hundreds of thousands of visitors a year are drawn to Pendle because of this most dramatic episode in our country’s history,” says Councillor Jonathan Eyre. “These visitors help boost the local economy and bring in £78 million a year, helping to support local jobs and services.”

Tourists who visit Pendle can experience the Pendle Witches Way Route—a 48-mile countryside hike past the houses of the Device and Chattox families and key monuments. Visitors can even visit Witches Galore, a shop dedicated to selling merchandise and gifts. Anyone who visits Pendle or takes a trip to the nearby city of Manchester can also see the Witch Way buses.

Whatever the reason for the hangings of the 10 accused: black magic, a king’s obsession, or social and political factors, the trial of the Pendle Witches is amongst the most famous in the world.

Fact Box:

In the 16th and 17th centuries throughout Europe and the United States, witches were burned at the stake or hanged.

The most infamous witch trials in the world, the Salem Witch Trials, were very similar to Pendle and resulted in 20 people, 14 women and six men, being hanged for the crimes of sorcery and black magic.

In British legal history, following the trials, The Witchcraft Act of 1736 made it illegal for anyone to claim that a person practised witchcraft or had magical powers.

Belief in witchcraft still exists today in the UK, represented by neo-pagan movements such as Wicca and Druidry, and it is thought that over 60,000 people are believers.