

# I MEET BRITAIN'S TOP WITCH

Witchcraft flourishes in Britain today. Is it an evil cult? Or just a harmless craze?

STEWART FARRAR has been investigating

I HAVE just watched an 18-years-old boy, naked and blindfold, being initiated into the coven of the most powerful witch in Europe.

The boy: Indra, son of an Indian father and a half-Irish, half-English mother; a book-shop assistant, due to go to Cambridge University next year.

The High Priest: Alex Sanders, "King of the Witches", acknowledged leader of at least half of Britain's estimated 6,000 white witches, a total which is growing rapidly. (White witches are so-called because they do not practise Black Magic.)

The place: an incense-laden basement flat in Notting Hill Gate, London.

The rest of the coven were two men and a girl in their late teens or early twenties. In keeping with tradition, they too were naked, while Alex wore the purple robe of High Priesthood.

A coven, traditionally consisting of 13, does not have to have all the members present. A quorum is a man and a woman.

A male witch can only be initiated by a woman, and a female witch by a man; so Pat, a shapely young Cardiff-born cashier with long dark hair, acted as High Priestess for the 40-minute ceremony.

It was she who anointed Indra with oil, wine and the threefold kiss. It was she who mimed his ritual "scourging" of three, seven, nine and 21 lashes with a whip of embroidery silk.

## Pretty priestess

It was she who presented him with his "working tools"—the sword, the black- and white-handled daggers, the wand, the pentacle or inscribed disc, the incense burner, the scourge, and the red, blue and white cords.

That she was young and pretty was no accident, for Rule 18 of the witches' age-old Book of the Law lays down that "the greatest virtue of a High Priestess be that she recognises that youth is necessary to the representative of the goddess".



Witches' "tools" laid out on the Altar of Initiation, including the sword, black- and white-handled daggers, scourge, wand, water, wine and salt. Another item is the "Book of Shadows"—the book of rituals each witch must copy out by hand

A High Priestess who retires gracefully in favour of a younger has the consolation of Rule 21, which says that "thereby she will return to that pride of place in another life, with greater power and beauty".

The regular High Priestess of Alex's coven is his wife Maxine, a stately blonde. I imagine she will not be embarrassed by Rule 18 for many years yet.

There are two main cults of British white witchcraft—or "Wicca" (meaning "wisdom"), as the witches call their faith. The two branches are barely on speaking terms.

The "Gardnerians" spring from the revival of witchcraft inspired by Gerald Gardner, who died in 1964 aged 80.

The "Alexandrians" are the covens which were founded by Alex's own initiates, or have "hived off" from them.

Gardner himself was only initiated as a first-grade witch; thereafter, by studying ancient Egyptian and Hebrew texts, he worked out his own rituals.

So Alexandrians regard Gardnerians as mere beginners—genuine witches, but only of the first grade.

The Gardnerians, in turn, look on Alexandrians as publicity-seekers, who make public things which should remain secret.

In addition to these are the handful of hereditary witches through whom the secrets have been handed down.

Alex himself (now a 10th-grade witch) is one, having been initiated by his grandmother at the age of seven.

Except for Alex, these hereditary witches hold themselves aloof, Alex knows of five families, and knows where they are; but they refuse to communicate with him.

Alex's answer to the "publicity-seeking" charge is simple: witchcraft has been so misunderstood and misrepresented that it is necessary to "clear the air" by making the basic facts known, without betraying the "inner mysteries".

That is why the coven invited me, a journalist, to Indra's initiation rites.

I do not endorse the claims of witchcraft; but it is only fair to say that I found the ceremony sincere and moving.

After the first strangeness, the naked young bodies going through their ancient rituals seemed natural and unaffected.

What are the misunderstandings that Alex condemns?

They all arise from the days when religious tolerance was inconceivable, and a man's faith and forms of worship were laid down by law and enforced, if need be, by all means up to burning alive.



Alex Sanders "serying" or crystal-gazing. For this ritual, which is an aid to clairvoyance, Alex anoints himself with oil from the little phial at the front of the magic circle

executed in the worst century and a half, Scotland killed many more, and on the Continent Church records show that over a quarter of a million died at the stake in three centuries.

With all this went the brain-washing. Witches were called "devil-worshippers".

So they were, and are—but the word "devil" merely means "little god"; a man or woman "standing in" during the ritual for the god or goddess, who is

not evil but good. In this sense, the Pat I saw was a "devil".

Satan's horns are another example of mediaeval Church propaganda; they equipped him with them to identify the Horned God of Wicca with the Prince of Evil in people's minds.

In fact, horns are a timeless symbol of the male principle of divinity.

"Christ is shown with rays of light round his head—which are only horns that have become a halo," Alex maintains.

Satanists who worship evil do unquestionably exist; but to mainstream witches they are anathema, a "sick" fringe.

Alex insists that the god and goddess of Wicca are their own personification of the same central mystery which is the God of the Christians.

1500 gods

"The universal truth which is in these things is absolutely compatible with Christianity," he told me. "Whatever part of the world you're in, the divine force is personified differently.

"In ancient Egypt the male side of the force was called Osiris, the passive or female side Isis. Everything must be male and female, otherwise it's not productive.

"The Egyptians had over 1,500 gods—just aspects of the one, so that you could explore all those aspects, and while you were doing it you could get to know yourself.

"The Catholics have personified the female side in the Virgin Mary. We worship our goddess at the north of the magic circle; and the Lady Chapel is always on the north side of a church."

In one way the wheel has come full circle. Alex has himself (assisting a High Priestess, of course) initiated Catholic and Anglican priests and Methodist ministers as witches.

"Afterwards, their congregations tend to start getting bigger," he said.

"They're getting the mystery across. In fact, they're now giving out the living Christ rather than the crucified Christ."

NEXT WEEK

The naked initiation

for "initiates", called Neophyte, tor and Practicus. Grades 4, 5 and 6 "adepts", are Dux Liminus, Adeptus ferior and Adeptus Practicus.

Grades for the "Masters" are Magister Templi, Adeptus Superior, and Magus.

Grade 10, at the top is Ipsissimus. Sanders is one of a few to hold this