



Origins of Wicca: A Primer

Witchcraft has existed in all parts of the world from time immemorial as an outgrowth of man's first religion, shamanism. Today, the word 'Witchcraft' is commonly translated as meaning "the Craft of the Wise," a translation supported with the argument that the Witch was the 'wise one' of his or her village and served as resident healer. However, from the Middle Ages up until fairly recently, the word 'Witch' was used very differently from today. Witches were thought to work magic only for personal malice or entertainment. When someone felt they were under a Witch's spell, they turned for help to those who were the real precursors of today's Witch: the Wise Women and Cunning Men. These Cunning Folk specialized in working magic to help others. One of their specialties was breaking the spells of Witches. Virtually all Cunning Folk were astrologers and herbalists, and they stood out among the generally illiterate population as people who read and collected books. They often wrote their own book of spells and recipes, made from notes they took from their books, including passages from the Bible of the "Old Religion," Catholicism. Cunning Folk were almost always solitary individuals, but there were also many hereditary family Clans of a type of village Witchcraft who often lived around standing stones and ancient earthworks.

England saw a general rise in the interest of magic in the late 1800's, and a number of magickal societies helped to collect and disseminate the knowledge of magick to a wider audience. Far and away the greatest of these was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (founded in 1888). The Golden Dawn collected a vast amount of occult information together into a coherent synthesis in its nine major rituals, and admitted both men and women as members (unlike many other Orders of the time). The Golden Dawn and its offshoots had hundreds of members, including many scientists, physicians, ministers, and writers, the most famous of whom was W.B. Yeats. A large number of Rosicrucians and Masons joined the Order. The Golden Dawn's most infamous and successful initiate was Aleister Crowley, who probably had a hand in founding a new Witchcraft religion called Wicca.

One of the earliest English covens we hear about in modern times was the Canewdon Coven of Cunning Murrell, who died in 1860. This Coven was taken over by George Pickingill, a Cunning Man who died in 1909. The Canewdon Coven was a type of village Witchcraft, and its operation can be traced at least to the beginning of the 1800's. Pickingill is said to have started several Covens, including one in Hampstead by the New Forest. The best evidence of modern hereditary covens comes from the New Forest, where hereditary covens were operating in Lymington, Lyndhurst, Brooks and Burley. The best known was the Horsa Coven near Burley, whose famous initiate, Sybil Leek, wrote several books on Witchcraft. Burley, as well as nearby Beaulieu, had been known for their Witches for centuries. Sybil was initiated at Gorge de Loup outside of Nice in the south of France in 1932, at the Horsa's mother coven. Covens were said to have been operating in France since the time of the invasion and occupation by the Moors of Africa. Certainly the inclusion in Witchcraft lore of Berber words such as 'athame' and the 'Eco, Eco' chant point to African origins, and cults similar to Witchcraft are known to have existed in northern Africa since the 9th century.

The Leeks knew about other New Forest covens, and they were sometimes a topic of conversation when they had visitors such as Aleister Crowley. Sybil recalled that as a little girl, she was fond of sitting on the lap of "Uncle Aleister" during his visits to her home. In 1964, Sybil formed the Witchcraft Research Association in Britain, and she emigrated to the US soon thereafter.

A number of new covens were created in the New Forest in 1939, according to Cecil Williamson, the founder of the Witchcraft Museum on the Isle of Mann. The Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship,

located in Christchurch, Hampshire by the New Forest was active in the late 1930's. One of the participants in the Witchcraft venture was a retired British civil servant who was also an amateur archeologist and author: Gerald Gardner. In 1938, Gerald Gardner moved to the Highcliffe area just south of the New Forest, and he soon joined the Crotona Fellowship. At a Fellowship Meet in 1939, Gardner met with Aleister Crowley, Cecil Williamson, Dorothy Clutterbuck and a number of local New Forest members. Williamson says that the group decided to form several Witchcraft covens, including one run by 'Old Dorothy' Clutterbuck. They were inspired in this undertaking by the 'Castle of Heroes,' the Irish magical group founded by W.B. Yeats and Maude Gonne. Their plan was to combine information on village Witchcraft from the hereditary covens in the New Forest with ceremonial magick. It was at Clutterbuck's covenstead at Highcliffe that Ms. Edith Woodford-Grimes (Dafo) initiated Gerald Gardner in early September of 1939. During World War II, Gardner continued studying Witchcraft with Dafo, who had studied with hereditary Witches. After the War he made contact with the man who helped set him on the course to creating the modern Witchcraft religion of Wicca: Aleister Crowley.

Maryland's New Forest Connection

Gerald Gardner

According to Crowley's personal diary, he met with Gardner and Arnold Crowther on 01 May 1947, and Gardner immediately began making weekly visits to Crowley. The two men were both world-traveling adventurers with much in common, and Crowley's vastly superior magickal knowledge undoubtedly acted as a catalyst to Gardner. Gardner obtained from Crowley a charter to run the British branch of Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), a sex magick Order. Crowley made Gardner, who was a 3rd degree Freemason, a Fourth Degree OTO initiate, giving him authority to teach three degrees. Crowley felt that changes were needed in the OTO, and he urged Gardner to set up many small groups of initiates instead of centrally located main temples. When Crowley died in December, 1947, Gardner was in the United States conferring with Jack Parsons, the rocket scientist and OTO member.

Parsons was one of the founders of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and inventor of the fuel that took the Apollo astronauts to the moon; in 1972, a crater on the dark side of the moon was named in his honor. Parsons had been deposed as acting Head of the Agape Lodge of the OTO in California (the only active OTO Lodge at the time) by Crowley. Parsons had neglected the Lodge because he and L. Ron Hubbard had been spending time in the desert invoking Babalon of the Stars to manifest in the flesh, as well as to send Parsons a Scarlet Woman. Shortly afterward, a beautiful young redhead named Marjorie Cameron showed up seeking to become a student. Parsons was very interested in the idea of Witchcraft, and had written about what he thought would be a coming resurgence of Witchcraft on several occasions. He had written instructions for creating a Thelemic Order based on paganism and Witchcraft, which he shared with Gardner.

Back in Britain, Gardner began working on a Witches' workbook he called *Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical*. Gardner's Book contained material from the Key of Solomon, the Goetia, the Kaballah, Crowley's works and Witchcraft material he had received from Dafo. He had a system of three initiatory degrees. Attainment of the First Degree made one a Priest or Priestess; attainment of the Second Degree made one a High Priest (Magus) or High Priestess, and allowed initiates to hive off and start their own covens. The optional Third Degree was an OTO sex rite from Crowley's 'Gnostic Mass' designed to aid the Great Work of spiritual transformation. Gardner then set out to create his own coven. He published a fictionalized account of Witchcraft in his book, High Magic's Aid, giving some of the hereditary information he received from Dafo. Gardner joined the Five Acres Nudist Club at Bricket Wood, Hertfordshire, where he found some students and started teaching Witchcraft. He and Dafo bought a wooded lot next door and started holding meetings in an old chicken shed until he obtained a modern replica of a 'Witch's Cottage' from J.S.M. Ward's Abbey Folklore Museum and moved it onto his lot. Ward, seeking to avoid debt, moved to one of Gardner's properties in the West Indies.

By 1949, when Gardner participated in an OTO ritual with Kenneth Grant to invoke extraterrestrial entities using some of chaos magician A.O. Spare's methods, he had a working group of Witches with Dafo as his High Priestess. The magickal energy generated by these activities was the seed from which Wicca later grew.

In Britain, what Witchcraft existed was still underground because it was against the law. Thanks to the Spiritualist Movement, this was soon to change. When the Central Association of Spiritualists had dissolved in 1883, the Rev. Stainton Moses resurrected it as the London Spiritualist Alliance in 1884. The group attracted such influential members as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was president of the society in the 1920's. Spiritualists, whose medium-ship was affected by the law against Witchcraft, lobbied to have the law repealed. The British Parliament repealed the Witchcraft Act of 1735 in 1951.

In July of 1951, Cecil Williamson moved his Folklore Centre of Superstition and Witchcraft to an old mill at Castletown, Isle of Mann.

Williamson had studied Witchcraft for many years and was acquainted with a large number of village Wise Women and Cunning Men. Gardner moved to Castletown and became the resident Witch at the Centre, where he gave many interviews about Witchcraft.

Williamson worked with Gardner and other Witches there until too much conflict developed between Gardner and the other Witches. One point of contention was Gardner's insistence that two persons of the same sex should never work magic together because this could lead to homosexuality; he described homosexuals as being "cursed by the Goddess." Williamson sold his Isle of Mann Witchcraft Museum to Gardner in 1953 and moved out, eventually settling in Bocastle, Cornwall, where he opened another Witchcraft Museum.

Williamson retired in 1996 and turned over the Witchcraft Museum to Graham King and Liz Crow; he died in 1999.

In 1953, Gardner initiated Doreen Valiente, whom he had met over tea at Dafo's house. Gardner launched a publicity campaign to make the public aware that Witchcraft was still around. Dafo dropped out of Gardner's coven because she didn't like the publicity, and Doreen became his new High Priestess. At the Witchcraft Museum, Gardner exhibited his OTO charter from Crowley. The fact that Gardner's OTO charter was hand written by Gardner but signed by Crowley may have led some who saw both the charter and Gardner's magical workbook to believe that Crowley had written the Witches' workbook himself. Sometime after he started his coven, Gardner started using the term 'Book of Shadows' to refer to the Witches' workbook. Doreen didn't think Gardner's magical workbook was right for Witchcraft, so Gardner let her rewrite it. She changed Crowley's Scarlet Woman ("in whom all power is given"), a vessel for stellar forces, into the coven High Priestess who ruled the coven with its solar and lunar rituals. Doreen deleted much of the ceremonial magick, but left in Gardner's addition of scourging. She is best known for re-working Crowley's Charge of the Goddess using Leland's Aradia: Gospel of the Witches of Tuscany, and for her own work, the Witches Rune. Today, Doreen is credited with establishing the basic form of the Gardnerian Book of Shadows. In 1964, Doreen became president of the Witchcraft Research Association after its founder and first president, Sybil Leek, left England to live in the US.

In 1954, Gardner published Witchcraft Today, and started initiating new Witches and forming covens. Gardner used the Masonic term 'the Craft' to refer to his version of Witchcraft. He made only passing reference to having heard Dafo use the term 'Wica,' and he used the term in his published books to refer to hereditary Witches. The resurrection of the term and its widespread use today with the spelling 'Wicca' can be laid to those followers of Gardner, and the later Alexandrians, who started using the term to define their form of Witchcraft. Hereditary Witches spell Wica with only one 'c,' when they use it at all.

In addition to the hereditary Witches who worked with Cecil Williamson, there were others who disagreed with the Gardnerian way. One of these was Roy Bowers, who liked to call himself Bob Cochrane.

Bowers, a blacksmith with hereditary Witches in his own family, studied village witchcraft and added his own Druidic ideas to create his group, the Clan of Tubal Cain. After Bowers' death in 1966, his wife destroyed all of his private papers. Some of Bowers' followers merged his teachings with Plant Bran, a Welsh village Witchcraft spread by Ruth Wynn Owen. In the US, Witch Joe Wilson spread Bowers' work under the title '1734 Tradition.'

Gardner was called a fraud because he was claiming that his Book of Shadows was hereditary Witchcraft,

but it contained many things unknown to other Witches. Among other things, he invented the Law of Three and the Witches Rede. Gardner had added techniques of High Magick to the magic of hereditary Witches, and turned diverse secret teachings about magic into a unified religion for the masses that emphasized the erotic, with ritual nudity and sex. Gardner also knew and drew inspiration from anthropologist Margaret Murray and the poet Robert Graves, and insisted that his Witchcraft descended from an organized Witch cult from Medieval Times. Although hereditary Witches deny this and both Murray and Graves have been discredited by modern research, most Witches still quote them as proof of the antiquity of the religion of Witchcraft.

When Doreen Valiente objected to Gardner calling his Witchcraft hereditary and to his constant seeking of publicity, a parting of the ways was at hand. Doreen had suffered emotionally from the results of his early publicity, when the newspapers had accused him of practicing devil worship and black magic. The government even tapped their phones, and in 1955, she and Gardner destroyed many documents of their early work and contacts to prevent them falling into the hands of government investigators. The final straw for Doreen occurred when Gardner suddenly produced the 'Ardains,' a set of supposedly ancient Witchcraft laws that allowed him to replace the complaining Doreen with a younger High Priestess.

In 1957, Doreen, Ned Grove, and several of the older members of Gardner's coven left to seek real hereditary Witches who didn't court publicity. Gardner's coven maid, Dayonis, became his new High Priestess, and those who had left took up with Roy Bowers. According to Doreen Valiente, who would never again identify herself as a follower of Gardner, Roy Bowers coined the term 'Gardnerians' to refer derisively to the followers of Gerald Gardner. Bowers believed Gardner was damaging Witchcraft by popularizing it, and he characterized the Gardnerians as lacking real magical knowledge or power. When Bowers declared he was going to undertake a holy war against the Gardnerians to protect traditional Witchcraft, Doreen decided it was time to leave and start her own coven.

In 1960, Gardner initiated Eleanor (Rae) Bone and started the Whitecroft line of Witches. In 1961, he initiated Pat Crowther (Thelema) and started the Sheffield lines of Witches. Gardner, described by one of his coveners as "an old man in a hurry," took to initiating as many persons as he could. In 1962, Gardner initiated a French woman named Monique Wilson (Olwen) he had met in the French West Indies, and she became his last High Priestess. She was much younger than Gardner, and was euphemistically referred to as his "niece."

Gerald Gardner died at sea in 1964 at the age of 80, while returning from a visit to one of his covens in Lebanon. He is buried at Tunis. Monique took over running his coven and his museum on the Isle of Mann. In 1971, she sold the Witchcraft Museum to the Ripley Museum in the U.S. and moved to Spain. This was precipitated by the government trying to take her daughter after a local newspaper accused her of practicing black magic, and other Gardnerian Witches turning against her after she stated she was going to undertake Gardner's secret Fourth Degree. The Witches' Mill Coven has disappeared, the Mill itself having been turned into apartments, but the Bricket Wood Coven still exists in England today.

Alex Sanders, a Gemini with Scorpio rising, was initiated into Gardnerian Wicca on 09 March 1963 by Medea of the Derbyshire Gardnerian Coven. Medea also initiated Sylvia Tatham and raised Patricia Kopanski to the Second Degree. Patricia Crowther had refused to raise Kopanski to the Second Degree in her Sheffield Coven, so Pat left. When Medea's husband suddenly died, she closed her Coven and left the area, leaving Pat, Alex and Sylvia without a Coven or a complete BOS. They started their own Coven in Manchester, with Pat as HPS, Alex as acting HP and Sylvia as Maid. After Sylvia received her Second and Third Degree Initiations from Scotty Wilson (Loric) at Gardner's Witches' Mill Coven, she initiated Alex to the Third Degree, and brought a complete BOS from the Witches' Mill. Pat left the Coven when Alex refused to marry her, and Sylvia became the HPS. After Sylvia left for New Zealand and the Coven dissolved, Alex formed a new coven with Paul King and Maxine Morris in late 1964. Sanders made Maxine, a redhead who dyed her hair blonde, his HPS and later married her. In 1967, Sanders moved his coven from Manchester to London, and he went out of his way to conceal his early Witchcraft experiences.

Alex reversed some of the reforms of Doreen Valiente, making the God and Goddess once again equal, adding Kabbalistic ceremonial magick, and changing the coven emphasis from group activity to individual magical development. Sanders proved to be just as passionate about promoting "the Craft" as Gardner,

and, consequently, the number of Alexandrian covens grew to rival the number of Gardnerian covens. Sanders' initiates started calling themselves 'Alexandrians' to differentiate themselves from the Gardnerians in May 1966, after Pat Crowther and Rae Bone denounced Sanders. They claimed, wrongly, that he was not properly initiated, carrying on a feud that had simmered between them and Medea and Pat Kopanski. Medea was one of those Witches Gardner had initiated in a frenzy of initiations that Crowther and Bone considered poor judgement on his part. The Alexandrians and Gardnerians have constantly cross-fertilized each other, until today their similarities outweigh their differences.

In 1970, Sanders and his HPS, Maxine Morris, initiated Stewart and Janet Farrar into their 'tradition'. As a writer, Farrar started writing about the Alexandrians and became a chief proselytizer for Sanders. Later, he mixed the Gardnerian and Alexandrian Traditions in his work. Prior to his recent death, Farrar switched to a Gardnerian format for his Witchcraft.

After splitting from Maxine in the early 1970's, Sanders made a bonfire of his private papers, including those relating to his time as a Witch. Toward the end of the 60's, Sanders had been shunned by many of his previous supporters when he embarked on a series of magickal workings to make contact with extraterrestrial entities. Sanders was a gifted medium from a family of mediums, and he worked with another medium named Derek Taylor. Two of the manuscripts produced were called 'Children of the Stars' and 'The Southern Quarter Speaks: Set and Sekmet.' Sanders also claimed to have been initiated into one of the oldest continuous covens on earth, the Ordine Della Luna in Constantinople. Sanders and Taylor resurrected the group in Britain as the Ordine Della Nova, a coven pursuing the Great Work as the stellar mysteries of the Divine Mother ignored by Wicca. He died in Sussex at Beltaine 1988.

Both Gardner and Sanders conferred a secret Fourth Degree upon those initiates they deemed worthy. Gardner's was the OTO Fourth Degree, while Sanders used the Adeptus Minor Ritual of the Golden Dawn. Although both of their traditions contain some seed of the old Cunning Craft, they contain even more that is different and stand alone as a newly created religion of Witchcraft generally known as 'the Craft' or 'Wicca.' Both the Gardnerians and the Alexandrians exported their Craft to other countries before it came to the US, and neither showed much interest in 'colonizing' the US with Wicca.

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