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## Robert Lenkiewicz: Witchcraft Collector

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ROBERT LENKIEWICZ:

WITCHCRAFT COLLECTOR

Ashley M. Hood

May 23, 2022

## Abstract

In 2018, Portland State University purchased a medieval codex containing a 1490 printing of Werner Rolewinck's *Fasciculus Temporum* and a 1490 edition of the *Malleus Maleficarum* printed in Speier, Germany, by Peter Drach. Based on information from the bookseller in France, PSU has concluded that the codex most likely came from the collection of Robert Lenkiewicz (1941-2002), a twentieth-century English figurative painter who amassed a significant collection of rare books and incunables during his life. Lenkiewicz's artwork, interests, and book collection revolved around addiction and fanaticism, and one of the more noteworthy sections of his library focused on witchcraft and the occult. Lenkiewicz owned at one time as many as ten copies of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and his artwork and collecting habits demonstrated his fascination with all things witchcraft-related. From early editions of works by occultists like Robert Fludd, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, and Johannes Nider, to a sixteenth-century witch's remains, Lenkiewicz's ongoing obsession with collecting artifacts of what he referred to as the "crazy notion" of witchcraft culminated in an early book collection that rivaled that of the British Library. By examining Lenkiewicz's interest in rare books and witchcraft, and the marks left by these interests in some of his artwork, we can create a picture of the environment in which PSU's codex existed in recent years, and get a glimpse into its history through the lens of an eccentric and often enigmatic owner.

Robert Oscar Lenkiewicz (1941-2002) is best known in the seaside town of Plymouth in South West England as a talented painter, lover of women, friend to vagrants, and eccentric "bogeyman."<sup>1</sup> He is a paradoxical figure whose history is littered with exaggeration, innuendo, myths, and untruths, often propagated by the artist himself. His unconventional methods and charisma were polarizing and often annoyed and disgusted those around him, while also drawing faithful admirers into his orbit. Lenkiewicz was in many ways a collector: of people, of objects, and perhaps most significantly, of rare and antique books. His library at the time of his death numbered around 25,000 volumes and covered subject matter ranging from philosophy,

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Ellison, "Portrait: The Wild Man of Plymouth - He Has Fathered 15 Children, Keeps a Dead Old Friend around as a Paperweight And Once Faked His Own Death. Welcome to the Weird World of Artist Robert Lenkiewicz," *The Guardian*, January 6, 1994.

sociology, and psychology, to art history and biography, to more macabre subjects such as death, fascism, witchcraft, and the occult. His collection of medieval books was significant, and even said to be “second only to the British Library.”<sup>2</sup> His witchcraft and occult book collection at one time contained ten volumes of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, including, almost certainly, a codex featuring a 1490 printing by Peter Drach of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and a 1490 printing of Werner Rolewinck’s *Fasciculus Temporum*, which was acquired in 2018 by Portland State University’s Library Special Collections. Other works by John Dee, Robert Fludd, Nicholas Flamel, Johannes Nider, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, and Nostradamus were present in Lenkiewicz’s collection, as well as several grimoires.<sup>3</sup> Lenkiewicz’s interest, and later obsession, with collecting rare books on witchcraft and other subjects played into the themes of his many “projects” and murals and informed his curiosity about the concept of fanaticism and addiction in all its forms.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Books: From Interest to Obsession**

Robert Lenkiewicz grew up with his two brothers in London at the Hotel Shemtov (meaning “Good-name”), a Jewish hotel run by his parents who had escaped Nazi Germany in

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Nichols, *Robert Lenkiewicz: The Artist and the Man* (Tiverton: Halsgrove, 2005), 57. Dr. Jonathan Barry of the University of Exeter was invited by Keith Nichols to assess some of Lenkiewicz’s collection and made these remarks. Dr. Barry toured the collection with Lenkiewicz himself before his death.

<sup>3</sup> Sotheby’s, London, *Witchcraft and the Occult: Selected Books from the Collection of the Late Robert Lenkiewicz: London Thursday 20 November 2003*. (London: Sotheby’s, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Lenkiewicz used the term “project” for the themed studies he did throughout his career. Some of these themes included *Death and the Maiden*, *The Artist with Women*, *Love and Relationships*, *Jealousy*, *Education*, and others. Each of these projects consisted of a collection of paintings based on the theme as well as a notebook created by the artist and his sitters with sketches and commentary on their shared experience working on the project, research by the artist, and preliminary sketches.

the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> It was often populated with other Jewish refugees from Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Treblinka, as well as second- and third-generation English Jews.<sup>6</sup> According to Lenkiewicz's brother John, their mother would often read to a blind antiquary who regarded Mrs. Lenkiewicz as "the light of his life."<sup>7</sup> Robert had a "special bond" with his mother and it is speculated that his love of rare books may have been something they shared. As a child, Lenkiewicz was fond of *The Three Musketeers* and *Robin Hood* stories, and had a small makeshift library in his room on a single marble mantle shelf which he labeled according to subject.<sup>8</sup> There were sections for Horses, Philosophy, Art, and Anatomy.<sup>9</sup> Lenkiewicz was accepted to St. Martin's School of Art and Design in London in 1957 based on a "series of anatomical drawings of dissected pigeons" he submitted, and although he was later expelled from the school, he enjoyed his time there, "particularly the library."<sup>10</sup> In 1964 Lenkiewicz left London after attending the Royal Academy of Art and teaching at various schools around town. He first moved to Cornwall after accepting a teaching position there and then in 1966 to Plymouth, where he was eventually offered studio space on the city's famous Barbican.<sup>11</sup> By this time Lenkiewicz was already building a small library and made sure to bring it with him each time he moved with his family.<sup>12</sup> Lenkiewicz did

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<sup>5</sup> R. O. Lenkiewicz, *R.O. Lenkiewicz* (Plymouth: White Lane Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R.O. Lenkiewicz*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Nichols, *Robert Lenkiewicz*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R.O. Lenkiewicz*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R.O. Lenkiewicz*, 16. This library only comprised about 8 books at the time.

<sup>10</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 9, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Plymouth's Barbican is most likely named for the fortified gate, the "Castle Barbican" which was one of the entrances to Plymouth Castle. The castle was located in this area between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. This area of Plymouth also contains the largest concentration of cobblestone streets in England and is a popular tourist area with restaurants, art galleries, and historic points of interest like the Mayflower Steps.

<sup>12</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 32.

not sell his artwork as a means of support so he, his first wife Mouse (Celia), and daughter Alice had to “scrape through on a very low standard of living.” What money he did earn went to “paints and books.”<sup>13</sup> Lenkiewicz did not think his work was worth anything, so a process of exchange of art for rent money, painting supplies, bills, food, and books became his standard practice for the rest of his life among friends and patrons.<sup>14</sup>

Lenkiewicz often painted vagrants, homeless alcoholics, and the mentally ill around Plymouth and welcomed them into his studio on the Barbican. These “dossers,” as Lenkiewicz liked to call them, needed food and shelter and that was often provided for by Lenkiewicz’s exchange practice with patrons, but also by other less legal means. The City Museum of Plymouth housed a collection of old books that, according to Lenkiewicz “had not been looked at since before the First World War.”<sup>15</sup> With the assistance of the museum staff, Lenkiewicz was able to view these books and make notes about their pagination and possible value. Utilizing the occasional distraction within the museum, Lenkiewicz would steal countless books from the museum without notice. These books were then sold to antiquarian booksellers who believed the books were from Lenkiewicz’s own collection, and the money collected would go towards food for the dossers. Lenkiewicz was eventually caught after four years and imprisoned for a

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<sup>13</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Although Lenkiewicz utilized this practice throughout his adult life, it did not serve him well financially. He was often evicted from flats, and he and his family struggled frequently. When he died, he owed several friends as much as £8,000 worth of loans for paint, books and other items. Often Lenkiewicz would ask friends to settle past due bills for him or pay his rent for months at a time. When he died, he owed millions in unpaid taxes to Inland Revenue and local tax collectors. Late in life and on occasion he did accept money for paintings and commissions but was very secretive and often kept those at the Lenkiewicz Foundation out of the loop when he accepted paying commissions. It isn’t clear why he was so secretive.

<sup>15</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 43.

few months at Exeter Prison.<sup>16</sup> Later in his career, Lenkiewicz would exchange artwork directly for books and then trade those with book dealers for other volumes he wanted for his library.<sup>17</sup>

The bulk of Lenkiewicz's collection of incunables and antiquarian books was primarily acquired starting in the late 1970s and continued until his death in 2002. He was most intrigued with the idea of owning an "actual artefact" like a first edition or an edition that might have a special provenance.<sup>18</sup> In the case of books on witchcraft, ceremonial magic, and alchemy, Lenkiewicz felt that these "crazy notions" of Western culture and the fanaticism he believed to be inherent in them were visible not only in the contents of these books but in their binding, dimensions, and the longevity of the volume.<sup>19</sup> Witchcraft, for Lenkiewicz, was another example of "othering" which led to inhumane treatment of people and was a consistent theme within his art and book collecting habits.<sup>20</sup> Lenkiewicz viewed witchcraft as an antecedent to the modern racism and the holocaust, and through the study of its root causes, one could understand these instances of "othering" better.<sup>21</sup> Marginalia and inscriptions that were "just as crazed as the original text" therefore gave these texts "extra pathos."<sup>22</sup> Lenkiewicz was fascinated by alchemy and witchcraft and the fact that even though their "ideas are quite defunct," their "mystical mumbo jumbo" had survived into modern day and was

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<sup>16</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Nichols, *Robert Lenkiewicz*, 75.

<sup>18</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 118-119.

<sup>20</sup> Personal conversation with Dr. Jonathan Barry, June 14, 2022. Dr. Barry emphasized Lenkiewicz's interest in the "other" and its reappearing theme in his work and collecting.

<sup>21</sup> Personal conversation with Dr. Jonathan Barry, June 12, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 119.

closely tied with “human instinct and emotion,” as were the “impulses which gave rise to it.”<sup>23</sup>

As Lenkiewicz aged, his obsession with acquiring rare occult books and manuscripts grew to such a point that at his death, his collection was the “largest private library of witchcraft texts in the country.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, his collection “proved both a representative selection of original demonological texts— both published and unpublished—from the Early Modern period” as well as a “thorough overview of recent scholarly research on witchcraft” from the 1960s until his death in 2002.<sup>25</sup>

Lenkiewicz organized his library of 25,000 volumes into separate rooms by subject throughout its evolution. Much of his collection was moved to St. Saviours, a deconsecrated church building given by the city of Plymouth to Lenkiewicz as a space to house his library in 2002.<sup>26</sup> The space within St. Saviours used for the library was the old Sunday school because the rest of the church had been heavily damaged by bombing during World War II.<sup>27</sup> The building was ill-suited for book storage as it was mostly derelict and had issues with moisture,

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<sup>23</sup> Lenkiewicz, *R. O. Lenkiewicz*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> John Callow, *Embracing the Darkness: A Cultural History of Witchcraft*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 186.

<sup>25</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 188.

<sup>26</sup> Nichols, *Robert Lenkiewicz*, 13. Lenkiewicz, in interviews, often inflated the number of books he owned to as high as 250,000 to 700,000 volumes and said they were housed all over Plymouth in various buildings he had access to. His estate puts the number at 25,000 at the time of his death and its worth at around £3 million based on cataloging and assessing the collection.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Malone, “Robert Lenkiewicz's Library of Thousands of Books Are Going to a New Home,” *Plymouth Live*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/history/robert-lenkiewicz-library-thousands-books-769549>.



but it held a charm for Lenkiewicz.<sup>28</sup> The subject rooms at St. Saviours included theology; philosophy; art biography and art history; death, euthanasia and suicide; fascism; antisemitism and slavery; erotica and sexuality; poetry, and literature. The rarest books in Lenkiewicz's collection were housed in the Metaphysics Room at his Barbican studio and contained his volumes on witchcraft, magic, and the occult.<sup>29</sup> These books were broken up even further into subsections on "Neo-Platonic thought; demonology, alchemy and the Cabala" and amounted to around 3,000 volumes. The Metaphysics Room also housed a collection of "magical artefacts," including the remains of Ursula Kemp, a sixteenth-century woman executed for witchcraft.<sup>30</sup> Some of the special rare books included in this room were a first edition (1487) copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum* printed in Speier by Peter Drach, a 1484 second edition of Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*, Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus*, Ulric Molitor's *De Lamiis et Phitonicis Mulieribus* from 1500, and "early editions of practically all of Robert Fludd's extant writings."<sup>31</sup> Lenkiewicz bought every book and item on witchcraft "he could get his hands on,"

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<sup>28</sup> Malone, "Robert Lenkiewicz's Library of Thousands of Books Are Going to a New Home."

<sup>29</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 187. It isn't clear if his entire Metaphysics Room collection was housed at the Barbican Studio or at St. Saviours. Some of his most prized books were kept at his home so getting a definitive picture of what was where has been difficult with contradictory accounts. The remains of Ursula Kemp, which Lenkiewicz kept in his Metaphysics Room, were reported by visitors as having been at his Barbican Studio and St. Saviours. Based on my research it appears that the collection was at the studio and then moved to St. Saviours along with the bulk of his library.

<sup>30</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 187. More information on Ursula Kemp is in the section "Lenkiewicz's Witches."

<sup>31</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 188. Dr. Jonathan Barry discusses Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* in his 2012 book *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-west England* in his article on Robert Hunt. He did not get to see Lenkiewicz's copy but was able to use notes of an MA student, Nancy Cooper, who interacted with the book while it was still in Lenkiewicz's possession.

even though he did not have a specific project or purpose for the acquisitions other than to add the items to his library. Lenkiewicz was not literate in either the Latin or High German in which many of his incunables and rare books were written, so the enjoyment of reading these texts was not something he could pursue on his own without a translator.<sup>32</sup> Lenkiewicz was proud of the fact that his library often drew scholars from Europe and the United States for research purposes, and he would often ask these visitors to translate sections of his rare book collection.<sup>33</sup> Lenkiewicz knew where everything was in his library and, according to friends, stored his collection so that one day “he might have the time and leisure to embark on an all-embracing project that would guarantee his reputation and genius for all time.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Lenkiewicz’s Witches**

Lenkiewicz not only lived for a time in a cottage named the “Witches’ House,” with a carved skull on the lintel, but he also owned the remains of one, and painted another. Inside Lenkiewicz’s prized library space at St. Saviours and included in his collection of “magical artefacts” were the remains of Ursula Kemp (or Ursley Kempe) a sixteenth-century midwife, healer, and “cunning woman” who was tried and executed for witchcraft in 1582. She was buried in the town of St. Osyth, where in 1921 a local builder named Charles Brooker found her

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<sup>32</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Nichols, *Robert Lenkiewicz*, 75. This is also mentioned in *Embracing the Darkness* by a doctoral student who was asked by Lenkiewicz to translate Latin for him while working in the witchcraft library on his thesis. I tried searching for information as to the identity of the student without success.

<sup>34</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 189. Lenkiewicz, although suffering from a heart condition later in life, operated like someone who would live forever and had many plans in place for his library and painting when he died.

remains along with another skeleton in a back garden.<sup>35</sup> These remains were buried at a north-south axis rather than the customary Christian tradition of east-west in a location outside the parish churchyard, and perhaps more alarmingly had “iron rivets driven through their ankles, knees, and wrists.”<sup>36</sup> These aspects of the skeletons’ burials lead Brooker to believe the remains were those of witches.

Ursula Kemp had become the target of angry neighbors due to her “ready temper and grasping ways,” refusal of charity, and general unpopularity in town.<sup>37</sup> She was therefore blamed for a spate of deaths and diseases in the village and accused of witchcraft. She was tried along with thirteen other women and one man over the course of several weeks but only she and a woman named Elizabeth Bennett were ultimately executed by hanging.<sup>38</sup> Ursula’s body was also dipped in pitch and left on the gallows for four weeks.<sup>39</sup> Eventually the remains of both skeletons were purchased by Cecil Williamson in 1963 for £99 for his Museum of Witchcraft in Boscastle in Cornwall.<sup>40</sup> Williamson fashioned a purple silk lined coffin for Kemp’s remains and kept her skeleton in the open coffin for viewing. Lenkiewicz was interested in owning the remains starting in the 1980s and offered Williamson around £5,000 for them on several occasions. Williamson finally agreed in 1999 despite having refused countless offers in

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<sup>35</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 190.

<sup>36</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 190. Iron was believed to combat witchery.

<sup>37</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 190.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Durrant, “A Witch-Hunting Magistrate? Brian Darcy and the St Osyth Witchcraft Cases of 1582,” *The English Historical Review* 136, no. 578 (2021): 29.

<sup>39</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 190.

<sup>40</sup> St. Osyth Museum, ed., “1921 - The Witches' Skeletons,” *Village Tales - 1921 - The Witches' Skeletons - St Osyth Museum* (St. Osyth Museum, 2022), <https://www.stosythmuseum.co.uk/village-tales/1921-the-witches-skeletons>.

the past. Lenkiewicz placed the remains at St. Saviours in an attempt to add to the “brooding atmosphere” of his library, which he hoped to model after Duke Humphrey’s library in the Bodleian at Oxford.<sup>41</sup> After Lenkiewicz’s death, Kemp’s remains were returned to the Museum of Witchcraft along with a collection of his books on witchcraft and the occult. The Museum had approached Lenkiewicz during his life about buying the remains back, but he never agreed. Interestingly, there is some controversy over the years regarding the remains in that they may not be those of Ursula at all but any of a number of women executed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>42</sup>

Lenkiewicz found ways to incorporate his interest in witchcraft into some of his artwork, including his project *Death and the Maiden* (1972), which integrated elements of the *danse macabre* and *memento mori* into various paintings, and his *Barbican Mural* (1972) which is located on a large space of wall next to his former studio. The mural, which is in significant disrepair today, shows a number of notable Elizabethan and Jacobean figures including Queen Elizabeth I, John Dee, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, as well as several alchemists and a seventeenth-century witch. The witch, Lady Frances Howard (1590-1632), was a noblewoman and wife to Robert Carr, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Somerset (1587-1645), a favorite of James I. In 1613 she was accused, along with her husband and maidservant, Anne Turner, of having poisoned Sir Thomas Overbury, a former friend of Somerset who not only opposed their marriage but then died

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<sup>41</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 192. Again, there are accounts of Kemp’s remains being held at Lenkiewicz’s Barbican studio as well as St. Saviours.

<sup>42</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 193.

mysteriously while imprisoned in the Tower of London.<sup>43</sup> Lady Frances and Anne Turner were found guilty of murder and Somerset was found guilty of being an accomplice. Lady Frances and her husband were spared execution due to their status and Somerset's favor with the king. However, Anne Turner was hanged at Tyburn for her part in the murder.<sup>44</sup>

In the *Barbican Mural* Lady Frances is center stage, staring defiantly, challenging viewers while other, seemingly more important figures, like Elizabeth I, are less prominent, lost in the waves of color and movement caused by the mural's composition. Lenkiewicz's decision to place Lady Frances at the center of this mural, and his choice to include alchemists, rabbis, demons, cowled monks, skulls, and other religious imagery displays Lenkiewicz's fascination with religion, witchcraft, demonology, alchemy, and the occult as well as his talent for large scale figurative painting.

## Epilogue

Lenkiewicz's book collection as of 2022 has been largely auctioned off and spread throughout the world. In 2003, the majority of his books on witchcraft and the occult were auctioned off through Sotheby's in order to help cover the overwhelming tax bill owed by

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<sup>43</sup> Callow, *Embracing the Darkness*, 183. One of Lady Frances's supposed accomplices, Simon Forman (1552-1611) also appears in the *Barbican Mural*. He was an occultist and herbalist who treated Anne Turner and Lady Frances as patients. According to rumor he assisted Lady Frances in ending her first marriage to Robert Devereaux, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Essex, which was annulled due to the Earl's impotence, and provided her with the poison used to kill Overbury. Forman died two years before the murder of Overbury and his connection to Turner and Lady Frances fueled the rumor that he was also involved in the murder.

<sup>44</sup> Emma Poltrack, "A World of Poison: The Overbury Scandal," *Shakespeare & Beyond* (Folger Shakespeare Library, October 22, 2018), <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2018/10/16/a-world-of-poison-the-overbury-scandal/>.

Lenkiewicz's estate. Other rare books were auctioned off in 2007 by Lyon & Turnbull, and still others, like those in the Art Biography and Art History collection, were donated to the Plymouth College of Art and are held in a special reference room.<sup>45</sup> Some books remain at St. Saviours and the Lenkiewicz Foundation, a nonprofit managing the collection of Lenkiewicz's work and library, intends to complete the artist's wish to refurbish St. Saviours and open a public library and lecture space in the future.

In 2011, Ursula Kemp's remains were released by the Lenkiewicz Foundation to John Worland, a filmmaker researching witches in East Anglia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The remains were then examined by an osteo-archaeologist and carbon dated. Unfortunately, the remains had not been well maintained by their owners and by the time they were examined the entire upper jaw and teeth, which had been intact in 1921 were gone. However, according to the St. Osyth Museum, the examination of the remains were still fruitful as the remains were identified as not those of a woman in her mid-fifties but of a man in his mid-twenties.<sup>46</sup> The bones were, however, confirmed to be from the sixteenth century and the

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<sup>45</sup> Malone, "Robert Lenkiewicz's Library of Thousands of Books Are Going to a New Home."

<sup>46</sup> St. Osyth Museum, ed., "1921 - The Witches' Skeletons." There was some question in the mid-2000s about the composition of Ursula's remains since there appeared to be two skeletons combined together to create one. James Dwan's article "*St. Osyth: Which witch is which?*" examines the argument of Dr. Alison Rowlands who thought the skeleton could be any number of women executed in Chelmsford and surrounding areas during the late sixteenth and early to mid-seventeenth century. There was no examination done of the bones in 1921 until 2011 right before they were reinterred. She also argues that local villagers would not have allowed the remains of witches to be returned to their town.

iron rivets were also found to be authentic.<sup>47</sup> In April 2011, the remains were reinterred in an unconsecrated area of St. Osyth Cemetery in a private ceremony. In 2018, the purple silk lined coffin built by Cecil Williamson for Kemp's remains was returned to the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle as well as a number of other items belonging to Lenkiewicz including several boxes of books from his witchcraft collection, and a "witch bottle" containing hair, pins, and residue from an unknown liquid.<sup>48</sup> These items are now part of the Museum's research library and collection.

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