

This story first appeared in Midnight Feast, a collection of stories to raise money for War Child and No Strings who work all around the world to help children in countries devastated by war and poverty.

Here, Jessica, witch-in-training, tells the story of the first modern witch, Dame Walpurga of the Blessed Warts, inventor of the right-way-up broom.

Witches Who Made History: Dame Walpurga of the Blessed Warts

By Jessica Diamond, Witch-in-Training

As you all know, witches once had iron teeth and ate small children for breakfast. So it was lucky for small children that it was easy to recognise a witch. They had hooked noses, tufts of hair sprouting from their ears and very very long chins. They smelled awful and flitted around the sky at night-time on old-fashioned broomsticks.

What you may not know is that they had to get *really* angry before they could fly off on their broom handles. Only a 100% humdinger of a hissy fit gave them the lift they needed to get off the ground. It was not only exhausting, it was dangerous because if they forgot, even for a split second, to stay in a bad temper, they tended to drop out of the sky like a stone and end up in the nearest duck-pond.

Nothing changed until Dame Walpurga of the Blessed Warts came along. We don't know much about Walpurga's early life although it goes without saying that she never got

along with her sister witches. For one thing, she didn't care to eat small children for breakfast - or at any other time of day; and secondly, she was very jolly and sweet-tempered. Unfortunately, that meant that she could never get angry enough to fly.

Luckily, Dame Walpurga was a genius when it came to Spelling – so, one winter she made up a spell for each twig on her sweeping-brush. On the first day of spring, she cheerfully climbed up on to her roof, mounted her broom with the twigs facing her – and tweaked. What happened? Wey-hey - she took off! The Dame had invented the Modern Witch's Right-Way-Up Broom!

It had twigs for Ignition, Ascending, Descending, Zooming and Reversing. It even had an Eject twig for ejecting unwelcome hangers-on like goblins or young dragons.

Soon, witches from north, south, east and west were dropping by to test-drive Walpurga's brooms. They all agreed that the Modern Broom was fabulous - at last, they could pop up on their brooms anytime they liked and whizz off to a princess' christening or a coven meeting at the crossroads without having to get into a rage first. Flying without having to be mad was so easy and enjoyable. No longer did they risk falling out of the sky if they were distracted by a hunky-looking woodcutter or a gingerbread house. They formed their own flying club, the Broom Riders, and invented games like the Best Zoom in a Room or Synchronised Ducking & Diving. Walpurga even built a twelve-seater Trambroom for witches who were too old to learn to fly the new brooms themselves and took them on excursions up on to the Milky Way. Witch life would never be the same again.

Sadly, Dame Walpurga's invention was not welcomed by the Powers-That-Be, the boss of Witches World Wide. Her name was Pluribella Strega, and I am very sorry to have to

tell you that she was the grandmother of my teacher Miss Bella Strega. Pluribella was the kind of person who didn't like new things but, especially, she didn't like anyone else being more popular than her. She was always cross and liked to be the boss.

One night, she hurtled off, spitting nails, from her home in the lost city of Hagopolis to Dame Walpurga's cottage. She stormed up the path, hurled the New Brooms for Old notice into the well and screamed at Walpurga: "There is only ONE way to fly a broom." She banned the Modern Broom!

But, by now, witches had learned to love flying. They were not going to sit back and let the Powers-That-Be take away their new freedom. They met in secret underground places and muttered and grumbled until, at last, someone said:

"The Boss says we can't fly Dame Walpurga's Modern Broomstick but she never said anything about hot-air balloons."

"Or bath-mats."

"Or kites."

"Or bicycles with wings."

"All it would take is a bit of Spelling and a Charm or two."

Soon the skies were chock-a-block with witches flying everything from space-hoppers to garden forks. There were so many collisions and traffic jams and pile-ups that the other sky-users – flying horses, tooth fairies, dragons, angels on their clouds, Santa's reindeer – were furious. And you can't begin to imagine how cross the Powers-That-Be was.

She threw a massive wobbly and issued another decree.

"All Travelling is OUTLAWED. Flying, on any class of broom, animal or machine is BANNED. Any witch found outside her own neighbourhood will be disenchantified."

(Disenchanted means that she would be stripped of her witchy powers.)

Now everybody was unhappy because although the new Right-Way-Uppers were grounded so were the old-fashioned Wrong-Way-Uppers.

That was the beginning of the Broomstick Battles.

Walpurga's first task was to organise a way home under Cover of Darkness for any witch who had been stranded when the flying ban was introduced. (A Cover of Darkness is a very useful blanket that makes you invisible – if you would like one, my teacher Miss Strega sells them in her shop in the High Street for only three maravedis.)

Needless to say, there were spies everywhere, owls who couldn't help hooting to the Powers-that-Be, as well as bad fairies and evil goblins who switched road-signs. But within six months most of the Right-Way-Uppers had got home.

Then Walpurga hung loudspeakers on every tree and lamp-post offering the Wrong-Way-Uppers free Walpurga brooms to encourage them to join the Reclaim the Skies Movement. She and her supporters carried out daring midnight flights over Hagopolis, cackling happy flying songs at the Powers-That-Be while she squirted eye-of-newt and dragon-blood bombs back at them.

The Wrong-Way-Uppers fought too. There was a very brave group of ace pilots who called themselves The Besoms-R-Us Gang. They still liked their old-fashioned brooms but they didn't care for Pluribella's bossiness. Night after night, they zipped over Hagopolis, screeching down the chimney-pots at Pluribella and her cats.

As the Broomstick Battles raged, normal witch life almost came to a standstill. Cauldrons burnt dry, cats and other familiars ran wild; spells were left uncast and everyone began to run out of basic brewing ingredients. You couldn't find a White Crow's Tail Feather or a Mandrake Root at any price. Moreover, Walpurga had no time to invent and the Powers-

That-Be was too tired to be cross and bossy. Things fell apart. Everyone was sick of war. It was time to talk.

Judge Portia, an Italian witch (and incidentally the first judge to wear a wig made of cocker spaniel ears), locked Dame Walpurga and Pluribella in a room together. They were not allowed to leave until they saw sense. Finally, on 5th January of the witch year 380, they signed the Peace Agreement. The Broomstick Battles were over. Walpurga was declared the new Powers-That-Be. The Right-Way-Up Broom became the broom of choice for every modern witch.

But a curious thing happened after that.

Pluribella became quite sweet as soon as she lost her job. I interviewed her one time when I Spelled Backwards and travelled back in time.

“Frankly, my dear,” she told me, “I was stuck up in Hagopolis for years with nothing but an attic full of smelly cats for company and the Bezoms-R-Us gang screeching down my chimney-pots night after night. I had had enough of being the Powers-That-Be. It’s a terrible job. Walpurga is welcome to it.”

And blinking cats and frisky bats, didn’t Walpurga become very fierce when she became the boss. She even grew iron teeth and once threatened to gobble me up.

What was even stranger was that Pluribella and Walpurga went into business together and made a fortune selling bottled water from the well in Walpurga’s cottage garden.

Needless to say, it was a runaway success.

The capital of Witches World Wide moved to Coven Garden, Dame Walpurga’s old home, where it has remained to this day. The cottage itself has long since disappeared – all that remains is one ivy-covered wall - but there is a statue of Dame Walpurga in the garden, seated on a three-legged stool beside her well under a gnarled hawthorn tree.

It is one of the Seven Wonders of the Witch World, visited by more witches than any other witch attraction anywhere. Visitors hang little offerings on the hawthorn tree – tiny broomsticks, scraps of cape, wands, shoe buckles and scraps of paper covered with spells and incantations. They throw coins in the well for good luck and take home bottles of water to mix up their brews. Some witches like to rub the wart at the end of Walpurga's nose for good luck - it's like a shiny brass button now from all the fingers that have touched it.

Whether her blessed warts are magic, well, your guess is as good as mine but it is a fact that Dame Walpurga was one of the greatest witches in history.

Without her invention of the Modern Broom, we would still be huffing and puffing and working ourselves into a terrible tizz just to get airborne. Even our noses and chins seem to be getting shorter since we stopped all that scowling. That means that we are less easy to recognise nowadays so be careful – those old-fashioned witches who like to eat young children for breakfast haven't all gone away, you know. They just look the same as you or me.