

# Sauchie Poltergeist

This episode of poltergeist-type disturbances occurred in the village of Sauchie in Scotland during November and December 1960, and centred on 11-year old Virginia Campbell. It was investigated the following month by ARG Owen, who talked to Virginia and family members, also local professional people who had witnessed the phenomena – a vicar, three doctors and a teacher.

## Virginia Campbell

Virginia was the youngest child of James and Annie Campbell, Irish citizens. Her older siblings were adults, and her situation was effectively that of an only child. She and her mother were staying with Virginia's thirty-year-old brother in Sauchie, with a view to settling in Scotland; however, her mother worked at a job at a boarding house a few miles distant, where she was also accommodated, so Virginia was mostly alone with her brother and his two children, sharing a bed with nine-year-old Margaret. The household seemed stable.

Virginia was enrolled in the local school, where she was found to be extremely shy, but otherwise normal. Outwardly she was placid and unemotional, with a mature outlook and a sociable nature, although at this time she was starting to go through rapid puberty changes.

## Testimonies

Anomalous disturbances occurred between November 22 and December 2, centred on Virginia. They were reported in a local newspaper, which repeated the statements of five witnesses, whom Owen was able to interview on a visit in January. They were the Rev TW Lund, the local vicar; Dr WH Nisbit, a local doctor; Dr William Logan, in practice with Nisbit; Dr Sheila Logan, Logan's wife, also a practising physician; and Margaret Stewart, Virginia's class teacher. He also interviewed Virginia and her brother and sister-in-law.

## Diary of Disturbances

On Tuesday November 22, when Virginia and Margaret were going to bed they heard a 'thunking' noise like a bouncing ball, first in the bedroom, and then on the stairs and in the living room. The noise ceased when Virginia went to sleep, as was the case with all subsequent manifestations.

Virginia did not go to school on the following day. At teatime in the afternoon, when she and her brother and sister-in-law were in the living room, they all saw a sideboard move out five inches from the wall and move back in again. The sideboard was beside Virginia's chair but she did not move it.

That evening when she went to bed, loud knocks were heard all over the house. The family got neighbours in, who also heard the noises. The local vicar, Rev Lund, was called and arrived at around midnight. Lund established that knocking was coming from the bed head, and that it was not being caused by Virginia or anyone else. While he was in the room he observed a large wooden chest full of bed linen rock and levitate slightly, move some eighteen inches across the vinyl floor, and then return to its original position. The suggestion that Margaret get back into the bed with Virginia was followed by an outburst of 'violent and peremptory knocking'.

The following day, the third day of the disturbances, Virginia again stayed home from school. In the evening they were visited by Lund, who observed Virginia's pillow rotating some 60 degrees, while her head was lying on it, in a manner that it would have been impossible for her to do herself. Lund also heard knockings and saw the linen chest rock. On this occasion the disturbances were also witnessed by the family doctor, Dr WH Nisbit, who heard knockings and a sawing noise, and observed an odd rippling movement along the surface of the pillow.

On Friday, Virginia went to school in the afternoon. Here her class teacher, Margaret Stewart, saw the girl's desk lid rise steeply, although she did not appear to be moving it; later she observed Virginia trying to hold it down. In the afternoon she saw an unoccupied desk behind Virginia rise about an inch off the floor and settle back down. She went over to it and established that there were no strings, levers or other devices that might have caused the effect.

That night Nisbet kept watch in Virginia's bedroom before she went to sleep, observing the same phenomena as the previous night. The linen chest moved about a foot, the lid opening and shutting several times. The pillow rotated

horizontally. A rippling movement appeared on the bedclothes, which Nisbet described to Owen as a ‘puckering, as if due to traction by an invisible agency’.<sup>[1]</sup>

This puckering motion and pillow rotation were observed on the Saturday evening. Otherwise, the weekend was relatively quiet. On the Sunday, Virginia appeared to fall into a trance, during which she called out for her dog and her best friend, both of whom had been left behind in Ireland.

On the Monday morning more disturbances occurred in her classroom at school. While the class was studying individually, Virginia went up to the teacher, Margaret Stewart, standing to the left of her chair and away from the desk, a table the size of four feet by two feet. Her hands were clasped behind her back. While Stewart was helping her with the class work, a blackboard pointer lying on the desk started to vibrate and eventually fell onto the floor. Stewart put her hand on the desk and felt it vibrating, although the desk itself was not moving. Then one side swung round.

In the afternoon Virginia was taken to stay with a relative, where loud knockings were heard throughout the house.

On Tuesday, Virginia was visited by Dr William Logan and his wife Dr Sheila Logan, who heard the knocking noises near Virginia, and observed that they were evidently not caused by her or anyone else. They described the noises as varying between ‘gentle tappings’ and, when they were about to leave, ‘violent agitated raps’.<sup>[2]</sup> Later in the afternoon there was another occurrence of the trance and the agitated sleep talking. Wednesday was uneventful.

On Thursday, Logan and Nisbit set up a film camera and tape recorder in Virginia’s room, where between 9pm and 10.30pm a variety of noises were heard, ranging from tappings to agitated knocks. The rippling phenomenon on the bedclothes was also observed. After 10.30pm, Virginia’s uninhibited hysterical talking returned in a trance state.

At 11pm, Lund and three other church ministers arrived to carry out a fifteen minute service of intercession, during which some knockings were heard. Several noises were recorded up until just after midnight, including ‘loud peremptory knocks’, a ‘harsh rasping, “sawing” noise’ and a scream from Virginia at seeing the lid of the linen chest rising<sup>[3]</sup> – all three of which were later broadcast on a BBC radio programme about the events.

From this time the disturbances weakened and died out, although as long as seven weeks later, Stewart reported a flower bowl that Virginia had placed on her (Stewart’s) desk moved across its surface in the same way as the blackboard pointer had on a previous occasion.

Owen considers all these phenomena to be well-attested, coming from credible witnesses. Other less-well attested phenomena that was described to him included the classroom door ‘banging open’ after Virginia had been sent out, shutting it behind her; an apple floating out of a fruit bowl and a shaving brush flying around the bathroom; displaced objects; coloured writing appearing briefly on the girls’ faces; and Virginia’s lips turning bright red. The girls also reported feeling being poked on the torso or legs, pinched or nipped while lying in bed.

## Analysis

Owen considers the possibility of illusion or hallucination impossible to sustain, in view of the fact that five responsible persons witnessed the incidents on several separate occasions over a period of five weeks. He points out that their narratives are generally consistent, despite occasional differences in emphasis, also that the sounds were further substantiated by the evidence of the tape recorder.

Owen goes on to consider the possibility of hoaxing by Virginia or some other person. He notes that the five key witnesses all took account of the possibility of trickery, and excluded it on the basis of their observations. He writes:

Nisbet and Logan were both convinced that the rippling or puckering of the bedcovers was not consistent with elevation from below by Virginia’s hands. Dr Nisbet’s observations of the puckering of the surface of the pillow seems inexplicable as the result of action by Virginia. Movements of the whole pillow seen by Mr Lund, by Dr Nisbet, and Dr Logan on various occasions cannot credibly be supposed to derive from movements of Virginia’s head, neck or shoulders. Again, Mr Lund saw the linen chest move when Virginia’s feet were well tucked in, she was supine in the bed, and no one else was near it. Dr Nisbet’s observations of the movement of the linen chest and its lid were under similar conditions and equally exclude trickery. Knockings were heard when Virginia was lying on top of the bed without bedclothes and seen to be motionless. In any case the Rev Lund, Dr Nisbet, and Dr and Mrs Logan all became quite satisfied that the tapping, knocking, and sawing noises, often very loud, could not be explained by shaking of the bed. Dr Logan experimented in production of sawing noises, he told me, by drawing a fingernail over various

surfaces such as bed sheets or carpets. He succeeded in producing a rasping noise but much weaker in intensity and somewhat different in tone and quality from the sawing noise as heard and recorded.<sup>[4]</sup>

Owen continues:

All observers agreed that the sounds appeared to originate in the room where Virginia was and were not consistent with their fraudulent production outside the room. To sum up, it seems evident that the physical phenomena observed by the key witnesses are incompatible with trickery by Virginia, or by other children or adults.<sup>[5]</sup>

He adds that this view does not necessarily extend to the less well-attested phenomena, however.

Owen also considers a theory proposed by GW Lambert that haunting and poltergeist-type phenomena can be explained in terms of subterranean movements, such as those caused by underground streams. However, he concludes by rejecting this, on the supposition that movements capable of producing this effect would have had to be so strong they would have destroyed the building. He also cites testimony furnished a local surveyor and water engineer that there was no such earth movement in the area of the Campbell's house.

Having established the occurrences as genuinely anomalous, Owen puts aside the idea that they were caused by a discarnate agency. He notes that the witnesses found them surprising but not alarming, and that they were inclined to attribute them to some force or forces originating in Virginia. He writes:

Economy of hypothesis thus suggests that as the result of a peculiar condition of the relevant times in Virginia's body or mind certain unknown physical forces operated on matter in the vicinity. This is the best provisional conclusion.

We are quite in ignorance of the nature of these forces or how they were applied to cause motion of bodies, ie, translated into mechanical force. They appear to have produced noises by setting up vibrations in solid. This is evidenced by the striking fact that the Rev Mr Lund held the bedhead and felt it vibrating strongly in correspondence with the knockings.<sup>[6]</sup>

Owen notes that pubescent girls were the focus of poltergeist-type activity in several other documented cases, but that some other factor or factors are clearly involved, and that these are more obviously psychological than physiological and biochemical. There is no evidence that Virginia suffered discomfort or unkindness following her move to Sauchie, but the change would have constituted a big upheaval: separation from her father, mother, dog, best friend, and familiar surroundings. Having been an only child she became one of three, and had to share a bed with another girl, which he suggests 'can be acutely distressing, especially for a girl in her stage of development.'<sup>[7]</sup> In this respect, the vehemence of the knockings when it was suggested that Margaret return to the bed may be significant.

Robert McLuhan

Source: A.R.G. Owen (1964). *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* (New York: Garrett)

Also of interest are [interviews](#) with Margaret Stewart and other people involved in the Sauchie case carried out by local investigator Malcolm Robinson in 1994.

See also Malcolm Robinson (2020). [The Sauchi Poltergeist \(and other Scottish ghostly tales\)](#). Independently published.

## References

### Footnotes

1.^ Owen, *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* 153.

2.^ 155.

3.^ 156.

4.^ 138.

5.^ 138-9.

6.^ 141.

7.^ 142.