



## Enfield Poltergeist

In August 1977, a series of disturbances that were soon characterized as a case of poltergeist phenomena or even demonic possession began in Enfield, a northern suburb of London. The subject of a forthcoming movie, the occurrences, including the actions of an eleven-year-old girl who repeatedly “levitated” above her bed, “held the nation spellbound” for over a year, according to Britain’s *Daily Mail*; “no explanation other than the paranormal has ever been convincingly put forward” (Brennan 2011).

A female police constable witnessed a chair wobble and slide but could not determine the cause of the movement. By the next morning, marbles and Lego toy pieces began to “zoom out of thin air and bounce off the walls.”

“Janet, did you throw that?” Her mother’s question began a long series of witnesses’ suspicions—or outright accusations—that Janet was the cause of the trouble that centered on her. According to Guy Lyon Playfair—who, with colleague Maurice Grosse, observed and recorded much of the phe-

found on the stairs with one leg extended behind her in a manner that could easily be explained as play-acting. She was also involved in other incidents, and when on one occasion the girls were separated (with Peggy sent to a neighbor’s home), the antics continued at both houses; moreover, when neither girl was present—for example when Playfair spent a night alone in the house—there were no disturbances at all (1980, 80). Were both girls playing tricks, or could the poltergeist be in two places at once? When Janet was in the hospital for six weeks for evaluation, some incidents occurred only at home (Playfair 1980, 69, 90, 102, 263).

Still, says Playfair,

Janet was all energy, big for her age, jumping up and rushing around on the slightest pretext, and talking so fast that I had some difficulty at first in understanding her. She had an impish look, and I could understand why some visitors to the house in the later months would suspect her of playing tricks. (1980, 44)

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### Suspicious Acts

The events began on August 30 in the Enfield home of Margaret Hodgson. The divorced Hodgson lived there with her four children—Peggy, thirteen; Janet, eleven; Johnny, ten; and Billy, seven—whose names, in early accounts, were fictionalized. Two of the children, Janet and Johnny, attempted to convince their mother that their beds were unaccountably shaking. The next night brought mysterious knocking sounds and the sliding of a chest of drawers in the girls’ room. There were more knockings, and soon Hodgson had a police car making a call to 284 Green Street (Playfair 1979; 1980, 12–33).

nomena over their course—Janet was the “main focus” or “epicentre” of incidents. “She was always near when something happened, and this inevitably led to accusations that she was playing tricks, although Grosse was already fully convinced that she could not be responsible for *all* the incidents” (Playfair 1980, 37).

Was her sister, Peggy, partly to blame? Although Janet was by far the most frequently present suspect, with disturbances even following her to school, her older sister was also central to some events. Once, for example, when Peggy shouted, “I can’t move! Something’s holding me!” she was

### Children’s Tricks

Even Playfair himself, who chronicled the events in his book *This House is Haunted: The True Story of a Poltergeist* (1980), had occasional doubts. After a chest of drawers tipped and jammed at an angle against a wall, Playfair played his tape recorder and heard suspicious creaking noises, as if someone like Janet had slipped up to the chest. “Could they have been made by her?” Playfair asked. “I was beginning to have my doubts again” (1980, 52).

There were reasons aplenty for suspicion. The poltergeist, a.k.a. “The Thing,” tended to act only when it was not being watched. Stated Grosse: “It’s

smarter than we are. Look at its timing—the moment you go out of a room something happens. You stay in the room for hours, and nothing moves. It knows what we're up to" (Playfair 1980, 53). Indeed, when Janet knew a camera was on, nothing occurred (1980, 53). Incredibly, Playfair and Grosse found that the children were sometimes "motivated to add to the activity with some tricks of their own." When members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) made visits, the children's trickery was the main feature of their interest, whereas, says Playfair, "it did not bother us very much. We had already seen incidents with our own eyes that the children could not possibly have done deliberately" (1980, 70). (More on this presently.)

The incidents involving "curious whistling and barking noises coming from Janet's general direction" suggest the extent of Playfair and Grosse's credulity. In time, the entity began to voice words, including obscenities, and although Playfair wondered if it were really Janet acting as "a brilliant ventriloquist," he did not think so. His faith in Janet continued even though "the Voice" *refused to speak unless the girls were alone in the room with the door closed* (Playfair 1980, 138, 146). Moreover, the credulous investigators noted that, when the growling voice occurred, "as always Janet's lips hardly seemed to be moving" (1980, 190).

Evidence of ventriloquial fakery was even taken as proof of authenticity! According to Playfair, "The connection between Janet and the Voice is obviously very close. There have been several occasions when she says something it obviously meant to say, and vice versa. Would she slip up like that if she was faking the whole thing?" (1980, 173).

Is he kidding? Even after professional ventriloquist Ray Alan visited and concluded that the girls were producing the Voice because they "obviously loved all the attention they got," Playfair and Grosse were not persuaded that the girls were faking. In fact, they were quick to claim that even if the girls

faked the Voice, the other mysterious happenings remained unexplained (Playfair 1980, 233).

This remained Playfair's and Grosse's defense even when Janet was caught at trickery (Playfair 1980, 196–7) and when Janet and Peggy confessed their pranking to reporters. The two investigators soon elicited a retraction from the girls (1980, 218–21). Others, such as the professional ventriloquist, were not so quick to rationalize.

Anita Gregory, who was investigating for the SPR, reported on the events in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. She suggested that the case had been overrated, describing several episodes of behavior on the part of Janet and Peggy that were revealing. Gregory concluded that the girls were *nonpsychically* responsible for many of the incidents that were attributed to "poltergeist" phenomena. Although she thought the outbreak *might* have origi-

nated paranormally (Gregory was a British parapsychologist inclined to believe in the paranormal), she concluded it had turned quickly into a farcical performance for investigators and reporters desiring a sensational story (Gregory 1980; Clark 1981).

Even more skeptical was American magician Milbourne Christopher, who investigated briefly at the house. On one occasion, when Janet claimed she was unable to open the bathroom door to get out, Christopher stated that he could not determine paranormal causality if he could not see an incident. Playfair writes, "It almost seemed that the poltergeist was out to incriminate her, by producing third-rate phenomena in the presence of a first-rate observer" (1980, 170). Another time, when Janet was sent to her room and the Voice manifested, Christopher slipped upstairs to observe. He saw Janet quietly steal out of her room to peer down the stairs as if to make sure she was

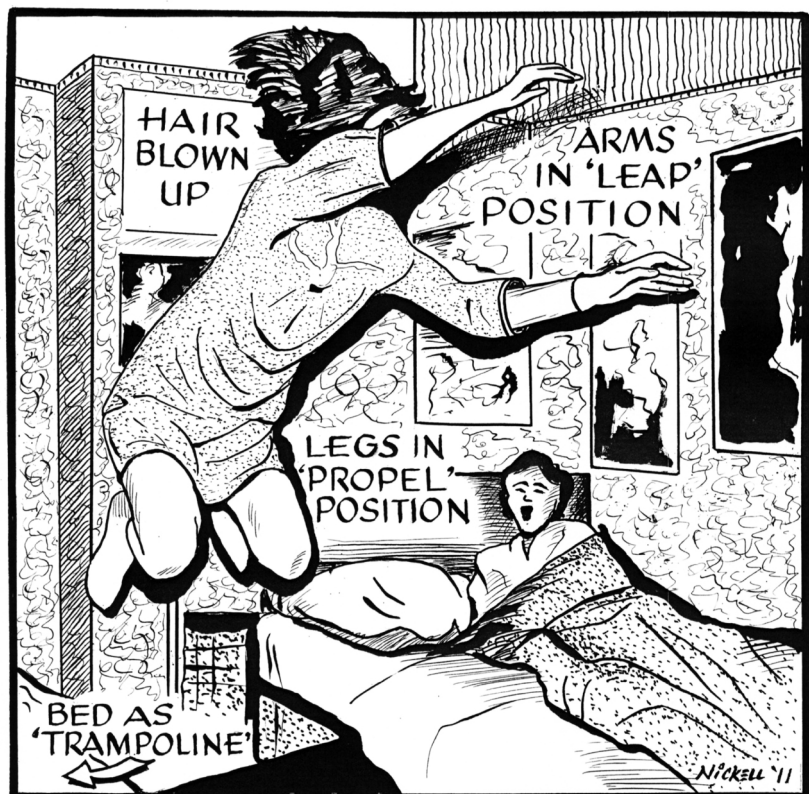


Figure 1. An eleven-year-old girl is supposedly levitating during the poltergeist outbreak of 1977–79 in Enfield, England. [Forensic illustration by Joe Nickell based on a photo in *This House Is Haunted*, 1980.]

not being watched. Seeing Christopher clearly flustered her. Christopher would later conclude that the “poltergeist” was nothing more than the antics of “a little girl who wanted to cause trouble and who was very, very, clever” (1984–85, 161).

Paranormal investigator Melvin Harris also weighed in on a fast photo sequence that supposedly “recorded poltergeist activity on moving film for the first time” (Playfair 1980, 106). Harris (1980) demonstrated how the photos actually reveal the schoolgirls’ pranking. While demonologist Ed Warren claimed that Janet at least once

suspect tension in the household following the parents’ divorce—eventually ran its course. But the question remains: Is it true that Janet and the other children really could not have caused certain disturbances, as Grosse and Playfair insisted? Let us look at just one instructive incident. Maurice Grosse reported that “[the poltergeist] just threw a slipper while we were all in the room. It was not within the reach of the children, it was down near the end of the bed” (Playfair 1980, 82).

However, all that would have been necessary would be for Janet, say, to have earlier gotten hold of the slipper and then

best one—well applies here. Interviewed by the London *Daily Mail* (Brennan 2011), Janet at age forty-five (living in Essex with her husband, a retired milkman) admitted that she and her sister had faked some of the phenomena. “I’d say 2 percent,” she admitted. The evidence suggests that this figure is closer to 100 percent; however, as another eleven-year-old girl insisted after confessing to playing poltergeist to attract attention in an earlier case: “I didn’t throw all those things. People just imagined some of them” (Christopher 1970, 149). ■

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was “sound asleep, levitating in midair” (Brittle 1980, 223), the photographs did not record these levitations nor did independent witnesses see them. Warren was notorious for exaggerating and even making up incidents in such cases, often transforming a “haunting” case into one of “demonic possession” (Nickell 2009). Harris dubbed the photographed levitations “gymnastics,” commenting, “It’s worth remembering that Janet was a school sports champion!” (1980, 554). (See Figure 1.)

#### History’s Verdict

By 1979, the Enfield “poltergeist” had left the Hodgson home “inexplicably,” except for an occasional isolated incident. The motivating force—we may

waited for the proper moment—when Grosse was not looking at her—to toss it. Time and again in other “poltergeist” outbreaks, witnesses have reported an object leaping from its resting place supposedly on its own, when it is likely that the perpetrator had secretly obtained the object sometime earlier and waited for an opportunity to fling it, even from outside the room—thus supposedly proving he or she was innocent.

As a magician experienced in the dynamics of trickery, I have carefully examined Playfair’s lengthy account of the disturbances at Enfield and have concluded that they are best explained as children’s pranks. The principle of Occam’s razor—that the explanation requiring the fewest assumptions is the

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