

The Tedworth Drummer

The 'Drummer of Tedworth' is a mid-seventeenth century case of unexplained disturbances, of the type that later came to be known as 'poltergeist' phenomena'. The case was notable for having been investigated by Joseph Glanvill, a member of the newly-created Royal Society, making it one of the first haunting episodes to receive serious scrutiny.

Beginnings

In March 1662 a drummer named William Drury was arrested and questioned by John Mompesson, an excise officer, who found that his licence certificate was forged. The drum was confiscated and later kept by Mompesson. Returning on 4 May from a visit to London to his home in the Wiltshire village of Tidworth (then commonly spelled Tedworth) he was told of what he at first took to be a series of attempted burglaries. As he described in a letter:

... my wife told me that my house had like to have been broken up, and they had been much affrighted in the night with thieves, I rejoiced with her at the deliverance, and after I had been at home three nights, it was come again, so I arose and took some pistols in my hand, and went up and down the house, and heard a strange noise and hollow sound, but could not see any thing ... So then it came oftener, five [consecutive] nights, and absent three ...

[It would] thump very hard all in the outside of my house, and then it came to the room where the Drum lay, being my Mothers Chamber, where he was thrown under a board, for my children did use to knock and play with it, and she delighting [in] their company caused it to be put there. There it would be four or five nights in seven, and make very great hollow sounds, that the windows would shake and the beds, and come constantly within half an hour after we were in bed, and stay almost two hours, and when it came we could hear a perfect hurling in the air over the house, and when it went away many times the Drum beat the same point of War that is usually beaten when guards break up as truly and sweetly as ever Drum beat in this world and so continued two months ...[1](#)

Mompesson also records: 'We often tried what prayer would do, and sometimes it would move a little way, and sometimes it would not.'[2](#)

New Phenomena

After Mompesson's wife gave birth the disturbances stopped for three weeks, before again plaguing the family. Mompesson wrote:

It would make Chairs, Tables, Trunks & all moveables walk up and down the Rooms. And often come tumble down the stairs, some times [making a noise] like a bowl & other times as if it drew a Chain after it.[3](#)

Objects were also thrown about. Scratching noises began to be heard in the children's bedroom - sounding to Mompesson as though they were made by 'iron talons' - and followed the children around the house. These noises were heard by Joseph Glanvill (see below.) Since the children appeared to be the focus of the disturbances Mompesson sent them to live with neighbours, except for his ten-year-old daughter. However, this did not stop new incidents occurring. Glanvill records that at one point the haunting entity attached itself to a baby, presumably the one born in 1662, 'which it so persecuted, that it would not let the poor Infant rest for two nights together, nor suffer a Candle in the Room, but would carry them away lighted up the Chimney, or throw them under the Bed.'⁴

Mompesson wrote to a correspondent about other incidents that occurred during the first year:

It has taken our servants up in their beds, bed and all, and hath lifted them up a great height, and laid them down softly again, and lays often on their feet with great weight. Sometimes the candles will not burn in the room where it is, and though it come never so loud and on a sudden, yet no dog will bark: it hath often been so loud that it hath been heard into the fields and has wakened my neighbours in town.⁵

In December 1662, a neighbour mentioned to Mompesson's mother stories of fairies leaving money behind in maiden's shoes. Mrs Mompesson replied: 'I should like that well if it would leave us some money to make us satisfaction for the trouble and charge it puts us to.' That night the drumming was replaced with the sound of money chinking throughout the house. By the beginning of 1663 events were being preceded by a 'tinging in the chimney' and 'blue and glimmering' lights were seen.

A voice was heard saying 'A witch, a witch'. Items began to appear in unusual places, such as a long piked iron in Mompesson's bed, 'a naked Knife upright' in his mother's bed, and a Bible in the ashes of the fire. Glanvill records that an apparition was seen by one of the men of the house at the foot of his bed: 'The exact shape and proportion he could not discover; but saw a great body, with two red and glaring eyes, which for some time were fixed steadily upon him, and at length disappeared.'⁶ This phenomenon continued: sometime after April 1663, seven or eight 'spectral' human shapes were seen.⁷

Visitors

As reports of the haunting spread, the Mompessons began to receive visits by strangers hoping to witness the phenomena, with mixed results. One was the architect Sir Christopher Wren, whose experience was later described as follows:

He could see no strange things, but sometimes he should hear a drumming, as one may drum with one's hand upon the wainscot; but he observed that this drumming was only when a certain maid-servant was in the next room; the partitions of the rooms are by borden-brass, as we call it. But all these remarked that the Devil kept no very unseasonable hours: it seldom knock'd after 12 at night, or before 6 in the morning.⁸

Similar disappointment met the Earl of Chesterfield, Philip Stanhope, and the Earl of Falmouth, Charles Berkeley, sent by King Charles II to report on the phenomenon. Writing several years later Chesterfield remarked that 'we could neither see nor hear any thing that was extraordinary'.⁹

According to Mompesson the visitors who came between May and December 1662 were all convinced of the truth of the story. In a letter to William written in December that year he wrote:

Here have been many spectators as well Divines as others, persons of judgement, who doe all conclude it to be witchcraft, and the truth is, it doth so many antic things impossible to relate, that there is no great question I think to be made of it.

However, he later added that the visitors were now becoming a nuisance: 'These strangers are not only troublesome and chargeable, but hinder us from doing our duties.'¹⁰

Glanvill's Investigation

In January 1663 Joseph Glanvill, who was at the time Vicar of Frome in nearby Somerset, stayed with Mompesson, getting confirmation from members of the household and neighbouring families of the reports he had previously received. The description contained in his 1681 book *Saducismus Triumphatus* gives a detailed record of phenomena that he observed in the children's room:

At this time it used to haunt the Children, and that as soon as they were laid. They went to Bed that night I was there, about Eight of the Clock, when a Maid-Servant coming down from them, told us it was come. The neighbours that were there, and two Ministers who had seen and heard divers times went away, but Mr. Mompesson and I, and a Gentleman that came with me went up. I heard a strange scratching as I went up the Stairs, and when we came into the Room, I perceived it was just behind the Bolster of the Children's Bed, and seemed to be against the Tick. It was as loud a scratching, as one with long Nails could make upon a Bolster. There were two little modest Girls in the Bed, between Seven and Eleven years old as I guessed. I saw their hands out over the Clothes, and they could not contribute to the noise that was behind their heads ...

I standing at the Beds-head, thrust my hand behind the Bolster, directing it to the place whence the noise seemed to come. Whereupon upon the noise ceased there, and was heard in another part of the Bed. But when I had taken out my Hand it returned, and was heard in the same place as before. I had been told that it would imitate noises, and made trial by scratching several times upon the Sheet, as 5, and 7, and 10, which it followed and still stopped at my number. I searched under and behind the Bed, turned up the Clothes to the Bed-cords, grasped the Bolster, sounded the Wall behind, and made all the search that possible I could to find if there were any trick, contrivance, or common cause of it; the like did my friend, but we could discover nothing.¹¹

Glanvill attributed the phenomena to 'some Daemon or Spirit'. After about half an hour, the noise moved again:

... it went in to the midst of the Bed under the Children, and there seemed to pant like a Dog out of Breath very loudly. I put my hand upon the place, and felt the Bed bearing up against it, as if something within had thrust it up. I grasped the Feathers to feel if any living thing were in it. I looked under and every where about, to see if there were any Dog or Cat, or any such Creature in the Room, and so we all did, but found nothing. The motion it caused by this panting was so strong, that it shook the Room and Windows very sensibly. It continued thus, more than half an hour, while my friend and I stay'd in the Room, and as long after, as we were told.[12](#)

He added:

During the panting, I chanced to see as it had been something (which I thought was a Rat or a Mouse) moving in a Linen Bag, that hung up against another Bed that was in the Room. I stepped and caught it by the upper end with one Hand, with which I held it, and drew it through the other, but found nothing in it at all. There was no body near to shake the Bag, or if there had, no one could have made such a motion, which seemed to be from within, as if a Living Creature had moved in it.[13](#)

Glanvill also described other phenomena, including a 'great knocking just outside' the chamber where he slept.[14](#)

Trial

Towards the end of 1662 the drummer William Drury was arrested for theft and sentenced to deportation; however he later managed to escape from the barge in which he was being conveyed.[15](#) Mompesson learned that Drury had claimed responsibility for the events at his house while he had been held in prison. Mompesson brought accusations against Drury based on the witchcraft act of 1604.[16](#) He and three other men testified at the court that they had seen chairs, stools and bedstaves move when no one was near them, witnessed parts of the house visibly shake, and heard the beating of drums in the air over the house. A servant testified that he had heard Drury confess to having caused the phenomena: 'Ay, says the Drummer, it was because he took my Drum from me; that trouble had never befallen him, and he shall never have his quiet again, till I have my Drum, or satisfaction from him.' Jurors were divided over the evidence, but Drury was sentenced to be transported to the American colonies for his previous crimes.

Interpretations

Following the publication of Glanvill's description of the case in *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*, nonconformist minister Richard Baxter wrote asking for further particulars. Baxter said he had heard it said in court and in legal circles that John Mompesson had admitted that the whole case was a fraud got up by himself.[17](#) The Earl of Chesterfield, who had visited the house, put around the tale that, during an audience with King Charles II, Mompesson had revealed that he had discovered the

events were achieved by trickery. Such rumours were so widespread that the publisher James Collins took it upon himself to add a preface to Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatu*, stating:

... yet some few years after the Stirs had creased, the truth of this story lying so uneasy in the minds of the disgusters of such things, they raised a report ... that both Mr. Glanvil himself, who published the Narrative, and Mr Mompesson, in whose house these wonderful things happened, had confessed the whole matter to be a Cheat and Imposture ... those Reports raised ... are by the present Edition demonstrated to be false to all the world.[18](#)

Indeed with regards to such rumours, Mompesson had written to Glanvill in November 1672:

I have been very often of late asked the Question, whether I have not confessed to His Majesty or any other, a cheat discovered about that affair. To which I gave, and to my Dying day shall give the same answer, That I must belie myself, and perjure myself also to acknowledge a cheat in a thing where I am sure there was nor could be any ... [19](#)

The family continued to maintain that the case had been one of genuine supernatural phenomena, as for instance when the elder brother of the Methodist preacher John Wesley – a family which itself had experienced poltergeist phenomena in its household – discussed the case with Mompesson's son when both were at Oxford University.[20](#)

Modern historians' narratives of the case have privileged the sceptical narratives which circulated during the Restoration, even though there were two competing contemporary narratives.[21](#)

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Mompesson, Letter to William Creed, 6th December 1662. Transcriptions of letters are based on the edited text given in Hunter, New Light on “The Drummer of Tedworth”: Conflicting Narratives of Witchcraft in Restoration England. References throughout are to the revised version of this paper on the Birkbeck e-prints site, and not the original that appeared in *Historical Research* 78, 311-53. The extract from the letter cited can be found in Hunter (2005), 20-21.
- [2.](#) Mompesson (1662), 6 December, in Hunter (2005), 21.
- [3.](#) State Papers: P.R.O. S.P. 29, 230, no. 177. Hunter (2005), 31.
- [4.](#) Glanvill (1668), 113.
- [5.](#) Mompesson (1662), 6 December, in Hunter (2005), 23.
- [6.](#) Glanvill (1668), 114.
- [7.](#) Glanvill (1668), 115.
- [8.](#) Aubrey cited in Hunter (2005), 12.
- [9.](#) Cited in Hunter (2005), 13.
- [10.](#) Mompesson (1662), 26, in Hunter (2005), 26.
- [11.](#) Glanvill (1681), 100-2.
- [12.](#) Glanvill (1681), 102.
- [13.](#) Glanvill (1681), 102-3.
- [14.](#) Glanvill (1681), 104.
- [15.](#) Stanley & Redgroves (1921), 80.
- [16.](#) This and all subsequent quotes in this section: Mompesson (1674).
- [17.](#) Davies (2010), 2.
- [18.](#) Glanvill (1681), sig. A4 r-v.
- [19.](#) Glanvill (1681), sig. Aa5 v and sig. Aa6 r.
- [20.](#) Davies (2007), 80 ff.
- [21.](#) This is touched on in Newton (2008), 232.