

A NIGHTMARE ON EAST DRIVE

A small, semi-detached ex-council house in Pontefract is home to the most violent poltergeist haunting recorded in European history. Its alleged perpetrator is a hooded monk executed for rape during the 16th century. As a relative of its occupants chronicles those events in a chilling new film, *Bizarre* braves a trip to the now abandoned abode...

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Not everyone believes in ghosts, but for the many to have encountered 30 East Drive in the West Yorkshire town of Pontefract, the 'other side' remains a very plausible possibility. Prior to the mid-1960s, this end-terrace council abode was as indistinct as any other, blending into its residential, old market town estate with quiet anonymity. Only the rotting ruins of Pontefract Castle, lurking atop a hill a mere 20-minute walk away, tarnished the area with unsettling history, the murder of King Richard II its dark and sinister burden.

All that changed, however, when the working class family of Joe and Jean Pritchard took up residence at 30 East Drive. It felt quiet at first, like

any typical house. Then, during one August weekend in 1966, 15-year-old son Philip and grandmother Sarah witnessed strange puddles materialising in the kitchen and clouds of white powder seeping mysteriously into the living room. Swiftly dismissed as an isolated incident, it wasn't until two years later, when daughter Diane entered her teenage years, that the bizarre phenomena became a sudden and almost daily occurrence. Green slime spurted out of kitchen taps, grandfather clocks flew down stairs, doors slammed violently, temperatures plummeted and animal noises resonated through its walls. There were even violent physical attacks, with Diane the prime target.

"It tried to strangle her," insists current next-door neighbour Carol Fieldgate as we meet her in the house's semi-bare kitchen. "It tipped her out of bed and tried to smother her with a mattress. It tried to push her down the stairs... I always say to everyone when you come down these stairs, *always* hold onto both rails."

Minutes later the stark reality hits us as we explore the house: the flight of stairs at 30 East Drive has handrails running down *both* sides of the stairs. "In case you're pushed," someone in our small tour group chillingly assesses.

THE BLACK MONK

While the above events, which supposedly lasted until the mid-70s, may sound like Hollywood fantasy, the list of eyewitnesses is intriguing. Neighbours, police, plumbers, priests, psychic investigators and even the town mayor are among

those claiming to have witnessed the terror first-hand. The local press had swooped on the eerie happenings with initial disbelief, and the acclaimed novelist Colin Wilson wrote about the family's woes in his book *Poltergeist! A Study In Destructive Haunting* in 1981, constructing a further convincing argument for authenticity.

Carol, who has lived in the attached house next door for the last 25 years and is now in her 50s, claims to have seen and heard many things – long since the haunting supposedly ceased in the mid-70s. She, like many others, attributes the poltergeist activity (noisy, unseen entity wreaking havoc on its material surroundings) to the ghost of the Black Monk of Pontefract. It was the investigator / historian Tom Cuniff who researched the Black Monk legend as part of Colin Wilson's book. His findings suggested that the renegade holy man belonged to the local Cluniac Monastery, and was hanged for the rape and murder of a girl during Henry VIII's reign in the 1500s. The gallows are said to have once stood just down the road. Such a theory carries weight if one considers that the haunting abruptly coincided with Diane's pubescent years, suggesting there may be a sexual motive to the attacks on the young Pritchard.

Carol claims that mediums have spoken with the Black Monk and that his nickname is 'Fred', although the infuriated Pritchard family referred to him as 'Mr Nobody'. And, unusually for a poltergeist, the spirit has reportedly manifested itself in physical form, which has been witnessed by a few people – Carol included. →



“When we see him, there’s no face,” she says, grimly. “You see him in his black ‘thing’. It looks like string with knots in and a cross at the end of it, and a big hood. But you don’t see his face.”

A FAMILY HAUNTING

Earlier this year, the filmmaker Pat Holden (*Awaydays* (2009)) fulfilled a childhood ambition by making a film based on the haunting called *When The Lights Went Out*. As much family drama as spooky chiller, his interest in the Black Monk of Pontefract far transcends that of mere ghost enthusiast, however, as he’s the nephew of Joe and Jean Pritchard.

“My Auntie Jean and her family were the first people to experience the haunting, but I was very young when the ghost was around and wasn’t allowed in the house,” says Pat, the film database *IMDB* revealing that he was born in 1966. “But my mother was very excited by the whole thing. She was at the house quite often and experienced [the ghost] several times, so I got to hear most of the stories first hand. My sister too, took an interest. Dad was blasé about it. But then again, he was blasé about most things...”

Pat believes that the haunting possibly began as a reaction to the teenagers living at the house, one theory being that poltergeists feed off the energy from children. However, he altered a few things for his film. It’s set in 1974 rather than the late-60s, the names have been changed, and there is no teenage son, leaving 12-year-old daughter Sally, played by newcomer Tasha Connor, to feel the full brunt of the sinister force. Not to be dismissed as yet another *The Exorcist* (1973) clone despite the inevitable exorcism scene, the film ripples with period colour and benefits from a witty script, brought to life by its earthy characters. It’s reminiscent of Mike Leigh reinterpreting *The Exorcist* with a smattering of TV series *Shameless* for added working class Brit spirit. “Actually a mate described it as *Kes* (1969) meets *The Exorcist*,” smirks Bil Bungay, the film’s producer, whose previous credit was the modern sci-fi classic *Moon* (2009), directed by David Bowie’s son Duncan Jones.

Despite the factual discrepancies and the deliberate over-dramatisation of certain scenes – plus the tacked on “big ending” – both Pat and Bil maintain that around “70 percent of events”



“HOLY WATER SEEPED FROM THE WALLS, THERE WERE THUMPS, BUMPS AND SO ON”



portrayed in the film remain faithful to eyewitness accounts. They even shot it 20 miles away in Huddersfield, with a local crew for added authenticity. “Because it’s in some ways a personal story I wanted it to be true to the spirit of the events,” insists Pat. “I would rather have not made it than it be false or contrived.”

As for the exorcism scene, the filmmakers are adamant that there were in fact multiple attempts to rid the house of the entity, all performed by different clergymen. Carol earlier corroborated this, claiming that one such attempt in 1974 severely antagonised the spirit. “They all resulted in failure and rebuttal,” reveals Bil. “Holy water seeped from the walls, there were thumps, bumps, doors slamming and so on. We also contacted a woman that lived with a poltergeist in Holbrooks in Coventry. Hers was a real bad boy who managed to hurt two dogs so badly they have had to be put down. She had Derek Acorah [the famous TV medium] visit and he performed an exorcism, of two entities interestingly – but sure enough a couple of weeks later it appeared again. The truth of it seems to be that you can’t exorcise a poltergeist for some reason”



TRUE STORY: BIZARRE SLEEPS IN THE HOUSE

And we wished we’d stayed at home watching *Scooby Doo* cartoons!



When the film company Revolver invited us to take part in a sleepover at the house, we expected a thrill-ride that involved scoffing pizza and trembling in the dark. What we didn’t bank on was being overrun by rival ghosthunter groups and mediums (the film company wasn’t either), who spent the early hours conducting experiments in the upstairs bedrooms while we cowered downstairs in the living room. The teams reported the following incidents:

- one chap had his mobile phone fly out of his backpocket, another had his air mattress kicked by an unseen force
- one lady says she felt nauseous, had her top yanked, and saw a shadow walk down the stairs

- loud banging and knocks were apparently sounded at the request of a medium
- a growling voice recorded on a dictaphone which sounded like an old man clearing his throat (we did hear this)
- tiny white orbs were caught shooting past on camera (we did see this)
- a lady was put in a trance during an experiment and her face allegedly contorted into that of a man’s (we kept well away from this)

Ultimately, whatever your beliefs, we reckon this sort of thing is *waaaaayyy* best left alone. Proper scary stuff. We lived to tell the tale. Phew.

THE BRITISH AMITYVILLE HORROR

The Pritchard’s were the last family to live in the house and today it stands empty. Joe has long since passed away, the children moved on, and the elderly Jean moved to an old people’s home four years ago, having resided at 30 East Drive on her own for many years. Her family photo still sits neatly over the fireplace in the living room, along with, strangely, a toy doll that heightens the creepiness. Upstairs the three bedrooms are stripped of beds and earthly possessions. Patterned, period-style brown carpet flows throughout much of the rest of the building. There is a bathroom too, sitting immediately at the top of the staircase.

It’s natural to question why the Pritchard’s never moved out. Pat implies that the family, or at least Jean, just simply got used to it, at least once the children had gone: “The ghost was scary, but in a way normalised,” he says. “There was pride involved too, the family weren’t about to be driven from their own home.” It’s a trait that Bil feels is well portrayed in the film. “You really get a strong sense of Jean refusing to be swayed by an uninvited guest. Northern stoicism at it’s finest!”

On an impulsive whim, Bil Bungay purchased the place from Pat’s family a few months ago as publicity for the film. As well as inviting us over for today’s tour and a sleepover tonight (you can read about our own terrifying and unwanted experiences in the boxout), they had been running competitions for winners to cram inside the modest living room for a screening. The film’s very un-red-carpet-like premiere was even hosted here. Leaving the keys in Carol’s possession, the neighbour has been giving her own mini guided tours to the many intrigued locals, pilgrims and



curious passers-by. Even during our visit, there are small gatherings of people collecting at its seemingly harmless front garden path, her own fluffy cat standing guard as he noses the gentle, early autumn air. Weeks later, Bil reveals that the number of visitors had got out of hand, that the police had to be called in.

Carol maintains that the presence is still active, and contrary to claims that the activity died down in the 70s, she and her huge family (she has mothered 10 children) have had numerous experience of it from living next door. In fact, she says the activity has escalated over recent weeks, perhaps caused by this sudden influx of random visitors, with loud banging, a TV blaring through the walls, and strange images caught on her iPhone. Only a day prior to our visit she claims to have guided a couple of curious teenage lads around its walls when a loud crash resonated from inside a wardrobe occupying a corner of one of the bedrooms. When one horrified youngster was encouraged to open the door, its empty shelves remained staunch and resolute. Nothing had dropped. There was *nothing* inside to drop.

“Yeah, well... I tend to the house daily,” she says in her thick native Yorkshire tongue. “When I leave, I come in I always say ‘hello Fred’, and when I leave I say ‘goodbye Fred’. It’s respect. ‘Fred’ is what we call the spirit. He doesn’t call it his house, he calls it his domain.”

It would be very easy and convenient to dismiss the haunting as publicity for the film, but Carol insists she has lived through hell, and her children are terrified to venture into her house.

MINI SCREAM QUEEN: TASHA CONNOR Q&A

Teenage newcomer Tasha plays Black Monk ‘victim’ Sally in *When The Lights Went Out*



Did it freak you out starring in a horror film based on real events?

It weren’t scaring doing it because I knew what was coming, but when I got told it was a true story and I came to the real house, it freaked me out. I thought it was a made up story until I got told the truth.

Do you believe in ghosts? Or have you ever seen anything strange?

My friend Hannah believes in ghosts. She says that there’s a little boy in her house and that she plays with him and sees him when he passes by her. But even though I’ve seen a toilet roll fly, I don’t believe it! I just thought it had fallen off. I don’t know.

Are you anything like Sally in the film? She’s a bit awkward and moody.

[Tasha’s mum interrupts] No, she’s worse! [Tasha again] Haha. The film people told my mum to pick me up everyday. And I didn’t like the food on set, so I always got a *Dominos* or *McDonalds*. And they didn’t wear padded bras back then [in 1974] because they weren’t invented so I had to hide mine. They found it on the last day of filming though, so I couldn’t wear it for that day.

“The youngest ones have now reached 16 and they’ve asked for housing forms for their birthday so that can move out,” she says. “That’s except for the one with brain damage, who’s in the back bedroom and he’s petrified. His door opens and bangs shut. My daughter came into my kitchen two years ago at Christmas to get some gravy. Something grabbed her pocket and she thought it were my granddaughter, and she turned round to go ‘boo’ to her, and there were nothing there. She started screaming the house down. She’s only been back about four times since. I don’t care who believes us. We’ve seen it, we’ve lived it, we’ve felt it, and for us, that’s all that matters.” *When The Lights Went Out* is out to own on DVD and Blu-ray from 7 January 2013