

# WITCHCRAFT IN WARBOYS

by ENID PORTER

AT Michaelmas, 1589, there came to live in Warboys, in a house next to the church, a Mr. Robert Throckmorton, his wife and six children. On November 10th one of these children, 10 year-old Jane, was suddenly seized with a fit of sneezing after which she fell into a trance-like state, her body completely stiff. Then her head and shoulders arched backwards and presently one of her legs became affected by a violent trembling; when this stopped her other leg began to shake and the tremors passed to her head and arms. These attacks continued at intervals for two or three days during which time several neighbours, hearing of them, came to the house to see the child. Among these visitors was an old woman named Alice Samuel who lived next door to the Throckmortons.

When Alice came into the room Jane was sitting, her mother and grandmother nearby, on one of the neighbour's laps, so Alice sat down on a chair by the fire. Suddenly Jane pointed at her and screamed:

"Look where the old witch sitteth; did you ever see one more like a witch than she is? Take off her black-thumbed cap for I cannot abide to look on her."

Mrs. Throckmorton scolded the child for her rudeness and put her to bed, but Jane continued to make her accusations and no one could pacify her. Alice, meanwhile, made no attempt to defend herself.

The fits continued, so Jane's parents sent a sample of her urine to Dr. Barrow, a well-known Cambridge physician. He inspected it and reported that he thought she might be suffering from worms and sent some medicine for her to take. But there was no improvement in her condition so some more urine was sent to him and more medicine was prescribed which proved as ineffective as the first. A third specimen was then sent and again Dr. Barrow reported that he could find no signs of disease, but this time he asked the parents if they had any suspicions that Jane might be the victim of sorcery or witchcraft. They sent back word that they had no reason to suspect any such thing, so the bearer of the message was told by Dr. Barrow that he might, if he liked, go to any other doctor in Cambridge for advice.

The man went to William Butler who, although he had been granted a licence by the University to practise medicine, had never taken a doctor's degree. He was, however, a man of high reputation and was, later, often consulted by James I whenever the king was in Newmarket

or elsewhere near Cambridge. Mr. Butler, having examined Jane's urine, said that she *might* be suffering from worms and prescribed the same medicine that Dr. Barrow had given. None of it was, however, given to the child because, in the meantime, Dr. Barrow had told her father not to waste any more money on medicine because he was sure that Jane's fits were caused by witchcraft.

A month or two later two of Jane's sisters fell ill with the same seizures as she herself continued to have. Both of them accused Mrs. Samuel of causing their illness: "Take her away," they called out "she hath bewitched us and will kill us if you do not take her away."

A few days later yet another sister, aged 9, began to have fits and she, too, accused Mrs. Samuel of causing them, while shortly afterwards the eldest girl, 15 year-old Joan, became affected. Her attacks were even more severe; she kept arching her body and throwing herself about so violently that she had to be kept in bed. Like her sister, though, when she recovered from each attack — and all the girls had, sometimes, as many as seven a day — she declared that she had been asleep and knew nothing of what had been happening.

On February 13th in the following year, 1590, the children's uncle, Gilbert Pickering, came over from Titchmarsh in Northamptonshire on a visit. Half an hour after he arrived he was told that some friends of the Throckmortons had gone to Mrs. Samuel's house to beg her to come to see the children because she had often declared that she would shed her blood to make her well. She had not yet appeared and Mr. Throckmorton was sure that this meant that she was indeed a witch and was afraid to come lest someone tried to draw blood from her, the usual practice at that time for ending a witch's powers.

Mr. Pickering volunteered to go and fetch her and, arriving at the house, found the old woman flatly refusing to come. He threatened to bring her by force so eventually she went with him, accompanied by her daughter, Agnes, and another Warboys woman, Cicely Burden, whom the villagers suspected also of being a witch. On the way to the Throckmorton house Gilbert Pickering overheard Alice telling her daughter that she was not to confess to anything.

When the women entered the house three of the children, Jane among them, immediately began arching their bodies and groaning. Jane, the worst affected, was carried up to her bed where she lay scratching with her nails on the counterpane and muttering: "Oh that I had her." Her uncle placed his hand near hers but she made no attempt to touch it, but when he fetched Mrs. Samuel and forced her to put her hand on the bed Jane dug her nails into it and drew blood. The old woman was then taken to the other two children, one of whom also scratched her, but Mr. Throckmorton and Dr. Dorrington, the rector of Warboys who was a frequent visitor to the house, refused to let the third child do the same.

The next day Gilbert Pickering returned to Titchmarsh with one of his nieces, Elizabeth. She stayed in Northamptonshire until September 8th, scarcely a day passing without her having a fit. Any reference to Mrs. Samuel seemed to bring on an attack, while if the Bible was read to her, or prayers were said for her, she became particularly badly affected, as she had always been and as her sisters at home continued to be, whenever the name of God was pronounced.

Meanwhile, back in Warboys, Lady Cromwell, wife of Sir Henry Cromwell of Ramsey had gone over one day to see the children and to commiserate with their parents who were close friends. Seeing how things were Lady Crom-

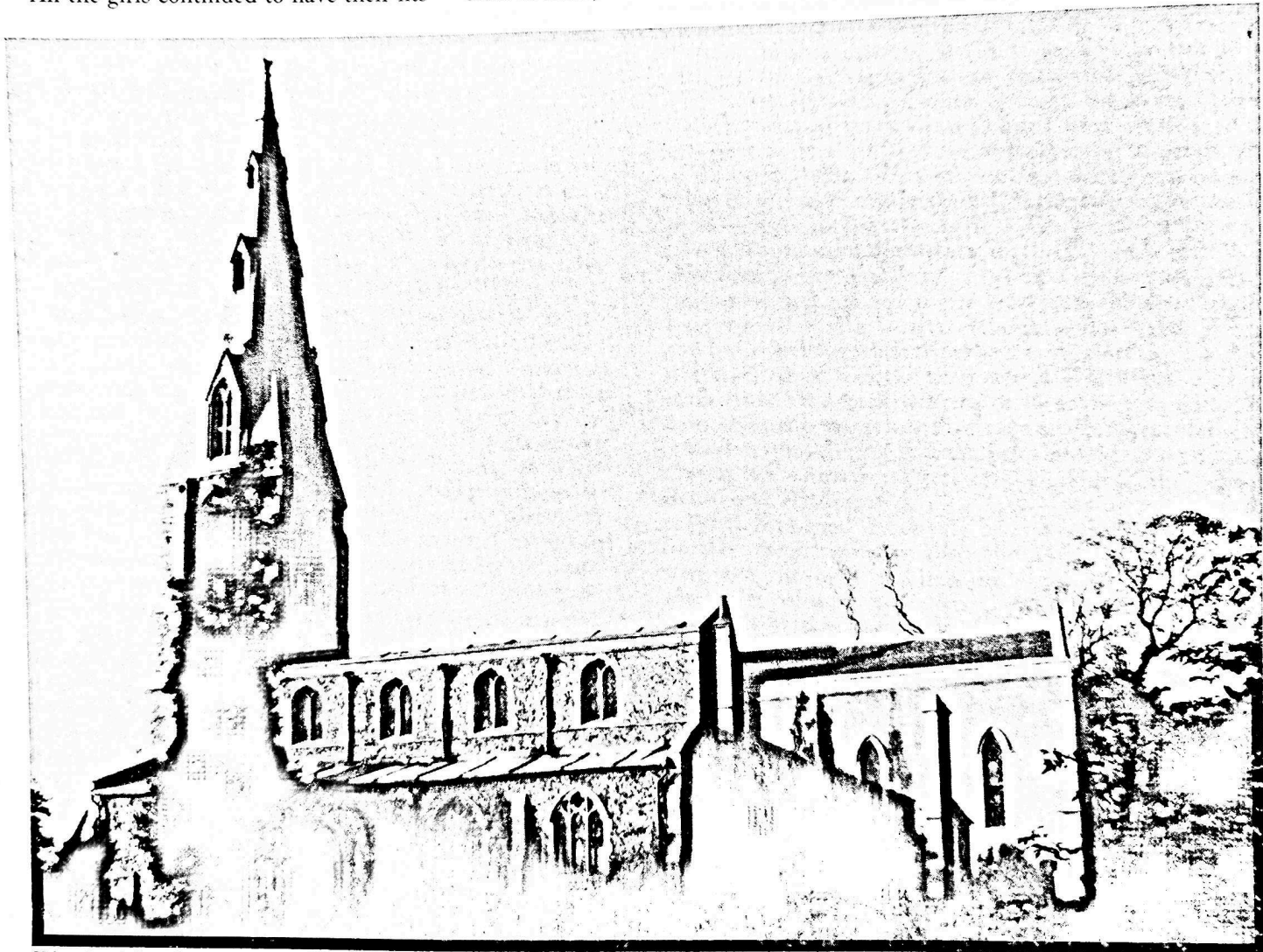
well asked for Mrs. Samuel to be sent for; the old woman dared not refuse to come because her husband was one of Sir Henry's tenants. When she arrived the girls' fits became worse than ever, so Lady Cromwell accused Mrs. Samuel of bewitching them. She denied it, whereupon Lady Cromwell went over to her, cut off a lock of her hair and gave it to Mrs. Throckmorton telling her to burn it. That night, having returned to Ramsey, Lady Cromwell had a terrifying nightmare in which, so she told her daughter-in-law, she had dreamed that she was being tormented by a cat sent by Mrs. Samuel. Very soon afterwards she began to suffer great pain in her legs, arms and hands and 15 months later she died.

All the girls continued to have their fits — their brother,

they would not be well even though Mrs. Samuel might be in the house, because she was there against their will. Nevertheless, their father allowed the old woman to remain because, when they were actually having their fits, it was only to her that his daughters seemed able to speak.

On December 23rd, 1591, Joan, the eldest girl, had a very bad fit and her sisters begged Mrs. Samuel to confess that she was the cause of all their troubles. At first she refused to do so, but finally declared to Mr. and Mrs. Throckmorton that it was true; she had forsaken God and given her soul to the Devil. She seemed to be so genuinely contrite that they assured her they forgave her.

The following day Dr. Dorrington preached in the parish church on the subject of repentance and openly referred to



*The Parish Church of Warboys, parts of which date back to the sixteenth century and before. Dr. Dorrington, rector of Warboys at the time of the famous Witchcraft trial, preached from the pulpit on the subject of repentance and named poor Mrs. Samuel from whom he subsequently obtained a confession. She was later sentenced to death by Judge Fenner at Huntingdon.*

Robert, alone escaped them — and in them they began to declare that Mrs. Samuel's spirits came to them to tell them they would only be well when they were in the old woman's company. So Mr. Throckmorton, with some difficulty, persuaded Mr. Samuel to let his wife come to stay. She remained for ten days during which the girls were all perfectly well, but on the eleventh, when she was given permission to go home to fetch something she wanted, the attacks began again, the girls now saying that, in future,

Mrs. Samuel who sat, weeping loudly, in one of the pews. Mr. Throckmorton asked her to come forward and say whether her confession of the night before had been made of her own free will; she declared that it had, so that evening she was allowed to return to her own home. There, apparently, her husband and daughter persuaded her to withdraw her confession and, hearing this, Mr. Throckmorton went at once to see her. She told him she had *not* told the truth — she was *not* guilty of being a witch.

Mr. Throckmorton consulted Dr. Dorrington who ordered her to come to the church to repeat her confession of the day before; on her refusing to do so she was told that she and her daughter must appear before the Bishop of Lincoln. The constables were sent for, whereupon Mrs. Samuel gave in and confessed that she had indeed caused the children's fits. Asked why she had previously denied it she replied: "I would never have done so but for my husband and my daughter who said I was a fool in confessing it."

Dr. Dorrington, meanwhile, had thought it best to get her statement down in writing. She repeated it to him with several villagers, hastily summoned by Mr. Throckmorton, listening below the window; thus, when once again she tried to retract she was assured it was too late, there were several witnesses to prove that she had confessed.

Alice was questioned by the Bishop of Lincoln at Buckden on December 26th, 1592 and again by him and two Justices of the Peace on December 29th. She said that the trouble she had caused the children was done by a dun chicken which had sucked blood from her chin; but now the chicken could do no more harm because it had entered her own body which had become so swollen and heavy that she could scarcely do up her dress. She had other spirits, too, she said, and they had all been given to her by a man named Langland, though where he lived she did not know.

With Agnes, her daughter, Mrs. Samuel was sent to the gaol at Huntingdon until the Quarter Sessions to be held on January 9th, 1593. Mr. Throckmorton, however, pleaded that Agnes should be released on bail so that he could take her to his home and observe her closely for further evidences of her being a witch. His request was granted. The lurid report given by Dr. Dorrington at the Sessions concerning Agnes led to her being ordered to appear, with her mother, at the Huntingdon Assizes on April 4th. Old Mr. Samuel, too, was indicted for being concerned, with his wife and daughter, in causing the death of Lady Cromwell and the illness of the Throckmorton girls.

Joan Throckmorton and Agnes Samuel travelled together from Warboys and put up at the Crown Inn in Huntingdon. On the evening before the Assizes the girl had a succession of fits which were witnessed by the Judge who forced a confession out of Agnes that not only had she caused the death of Lady Cromwell and the children's fits but had also, as Dr. Dorrington had said at the Sessions, bewitched Mrs. Pickering of Ellington, an aunt of the Throckmorton girls.

In court next day evidence was given, in addition to the rest, that Mrs. Samuel, while in prison at Huntingdon, had bewitched to death one of the gaol assistants and had caused the illness of one of the gaoler's sons. The vicar of Brampton testified that she had once killed by witchcraft some cattle and horses belonging to one of his parishioners. Judge Fenner pronounced sentence of death on all three Samuels, old Mr. Samuel shouting out to his wife, when he heard it: "A plague of God alight upon thee, for thou art she that hath brought us all to this, and we may thank thee for it."

Alice is said to have confessed on the scaffold to bewitching Lady Cromwell to death at the command of her spirit, Catch, and that she had bewitched the children because another spirit, Pluck, had told her to do so. Her husband, she said, was involved in Lady Cromwell's death but she insisted that her daughter was innocent of all the charges brought against her. After the execution the gaoler, who according to custom became the recipient of the bodies, stripped them and exhibited them, naked, to the crowds who had gathered to watch the grim proceedings.

The affair of the Warboys witches caused a great sensation over a wide area around Huntingdon, while the 107 page-long pamphlet, printed in 1593, which purported to give full and accurate details of the Samuels' misdeeds, gave even greater publicity to the case. The pamphlet, at times rambling and self-contradictory, contains the lengthy Report made at the Quarter Sessions about Agnes Samuel and her behaviour while with the Throckmorton's when she was released on bail. The reverend gentleman's imagination must have been working at its highest capacity, for he described how no less than nine spirits tormented Joan Throckmorton during that time and named them all: One Smack, Two Smacks, Three Smacks, Pluck, Blue, Catch, Calico and Hardname.

What happened eventually to the hysterical girls who brought three people to their deaths is not known; they were not the only children, in the unhappy history of witchcraft persecution, to have behaved in this way. But memories of the case lingered until the 18th century for Sir Henry Cromwell, as Lord of the Manor, came into the property of the Samuels at their death and from it gave goods to the value of £40 for an annual sermon. This was to be given every Lady Day by a Bachelor or Doctor of Divinity of Queens' College denouncing "the detestable practice, sin and offence of witchcraft, enchantment, charm and sorcery." The sermon continued to be preached until 1718.

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