

**The mystery of
Cleworth Hall Tyldesley
Wizardry and demons**



**An interesting piece of research into the case of
Edmund Hartley
Tutor to the Starkie family of Cleworth Hall**

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I assisted Bill Aldridge, Secretary of the Wigan Archaeological society resistivity survey at Cleworth Farm, in November 2011. It was at the site of the old Cleworth Hall, now long demolished. We had been trying to locate evidence of the old Roman Road that went from Millgate to Manchester. I had embarked on some research on the hall, prompted by a reference made by the farmer Ray Gee. My quest had revealed a strange tale of wizardry and possession involving the children living at the 16th century hall.

The site, in fact, has been occupied for much longer than that. It was mentioned at the beginning of the 14th century as a portion of land granted by Henry Lord of Tyldesley to his younger son, Adam. Over the years, the 163-acre, estate passed through various owners until, in the late 16th century, it ended up in the hands of the Starkie family, who remained in occupation until the early 1900's. The old timber framed hall itself was demolished a century before and its exact position is now lost.

It was around 1589, however, that the trouble at Cleworth first started. The picturesque Tudor Hall of Cleworth, demolished in 1805, was then in possession of the Starkie's who were also of Kemnough and Huntroyde. It was a place of consequence, moated about, constructed upon a stout timber frame with gables and bays, and set on high ground in the manor of Tyldesley.

Nicholas Starkie of Huntroyde had married the heiress, Ann Parr of Cleworth, and their children, John and Ann, with five others, were to become possessed by demoniacal spirits. Ann, aged 9, first drew attention to herself by her glum countenance and fearful twitching of the body. John, aged 10, began shouting uncontrollably on the way to school and at length fell into "extreme fits". Their anxious father sought relief from a conjuror called Hartley who came and used certain popish charms and herbs which wrought a temporary improvement; but eighteen months later, when Hartley prepared to move off, young John fell to bleeding and the conjuror was hastily recalled.

Hartley declared that "if he had been gone 40 roods, no man could have stopped the bleeding". Mr. Starkie begged Hartley to remain, offering first bed and board and later a pension of 40s. yearly. With rising confidence, the greedy Hartley increased his demands, requesting next "a house and grounds"; when refused, he threatened to "make such a shout as never was at Cleworth". That very day the old Tudor Hall was turned into a madhouse. Seven members of the household fell into noisy fits and hysterical behaviour. They were Mr. Starkie's

two children; three young female wards; Margaret Byrom (33), a poor kinswoman of his wife's; and a serving woman, 30 years old Jane Ashton.

What with barking like dogs and howling "like a ring of five bells", they raised "such a strange supernatural and fearful noise and loud whupping as the like was never heard". There was also an occasion when Mr. Starkie visited his father's home at Whalley, accompanied by Hartley, and spent the whole night "tormented sore". Nicholas became ill that night, and the next morning Hartley proposed a remedy. He took Nicholas to a small wood near the house. There he drew the outline of a circle on the ground, about a yard and a half wide with crosses in it. He told Nicholas to tread out the circle, but Nicholas, probably fearing that this was some kind of sorcery, refused. This instance would later prove to be Hartley's undoing. By now Nicholas was tiring of Hartley's services. When Hartley demanded "a home and ground to go with it" Nicholas refused, and Hartley flew into a rage. Nicholas decided he needed more help for his children, and to get rid of Hartley.

By now thoroughly weary of the interloper's unwholesome grip on his household, Mr. Starkie set out to consult Dr. John Dee, then Warden of Manchester College. The royal astrologer declined to interfere, though he spoke sharp words to Hartley whose every ill mood sent young John Starkie into repeated attacks of madness. Dr Dee then sent for Edmund Hartley and rebuked him for his methods employed while treating the Starkie children. In turn Hartley fell out with Nicholas for not having faith in him, and for trying to get Dee involved.

Another factor in this unsavoury affair was Hartley's predilection for "much kissing" which, they said, he used for "breathing the divell into his victims". Around the first of January 1597, the children went to stay with a relation, and Hartley accompanied them. On the way back home they said they wanted to see Dr Dee, who had requested that they visit him. Hartley refused, but they continued to insist, and he relented. After they had seen Dee, Hartley became enraged, and told them it would be better for them not to have changed an old friend for a new one. He walked before them all the way to their home, refusing to speak further.

On Tuesday 4th January, trouble started up again. John was quietly reading when "something gave him such a blow on the neck, that he was suddenly stricken down with a horrible scryke, saying that Satan had broken his neck, and lay tormented and pitiful for a space of two hours". That night he "lept out of bed with a terrible cry that amazed all the family, then he was tossed and tumbled a long time, was very fierce like a mad-man or mad dog, snatched and bit everyone

that he laid hold of, with his teeth, not sparing his mother". Anne too began to suffer fits again, and others were now drawn into the drama.

Margaret Byrom (an adult relative of Mrs Starkie) was visiting Cleworth Hall when Edmund Hartley himself began to throw a fit. She was asked to sit down behind him, hold him and speak to him. When he recovered himself, Margaret was unable to stand back up, became "benumb and giddy", fell down and could not be roused. When she came to her senses, she then "nicknamed and tormented everyone present", railing mostly against Hartley, and hit him angrily. Hartley said he feared he had harmed her, tried to comfort her. She would not be placated, and said that he had bewitched her, and that even when she closed her eyes she could still see him. In subsequent days, she began having fits, and claimed to have been thrown by an unseen force towards the fire.

Staying at the Starkie household at that time were three children that Nicholas was being paid to tutor. These were Margaret Hurdman (aged 14), her sister Elizabeth (or Ellen) (aged 10) and Ellinor Holland (aged 12). These three children, together with John and Anne, would all now have fits. They would bark and howl one after the other until they all joined in like a "ring of 5 bells". After they finished howling, they "fell a tumbling" and after that were "speechless, senseless and lay as if dead".

The five children began to expand their behavioural displays. Elizabeth displayed a 'miraculous' ability to sew, far beyond her capability. Ellinor would call for an hourglass and be able to tell when it needed turning, each quarter of the hour, without looking at it. One time John preached, praying for the queen and peaceable government, and exhorted those listening to uphold the gospel. After two hours of this he stopped, and later denied all knowledge of his behaviour.

The children started to refer to their demons as their 'lads'. Margaret Hurdman would discuss with her 'lad' all manner of fine clothes that she would own. Hartley was sent to see the magistrates, but before he went was allowed to call at Cleworth Hall to gather his clothes. On seeing him, the children flew into rages and had "very violent and outrageous fits". They ran at him and wanted to strike him, but were forcibly restrained. Eventually, in 1596/7, Hartley was examined before two magistrates who packed him off to Lancaster Assizes. There he was condemned and hanged for witchcraft, largely on the evidence of that magic circle marked out in the woods near Whalley.

Thus ended the paranormal events at the old Cleworth Hall

Researched and written by Ken Scally 2011

Engraving unknown source

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The Site of Cleworth Hall

Picture courtesy of Lancshirespast.com