



by **Jenny Friel**

JUST before Christmas 2019, Sophie Brady finally felt ready to tell one of the most important people in her life the full truth about her childhood.

She sat down with her older sister and tried to find the words to adequately explain how their cousin, David Hamilton, had sexually abused her for the guts of three years from when she was seven years old.

This was not the first time she had confided in a close family member about the abuse. When she was ten, she says she told someone else, in the hope they might make it stop.

As it happened, the assaults did come to an end around then, but she now believes it was because her family moved houses and Hamilton no longer had the opportunity to get her on her own.

Ten years later, sitting in front of her sister, she took a deep breath and once again spoke aloud the vile secret she'd held tight inside throughout her teenage years.

'The second it came out of my mouth, my sister said to me: "I know, I believe you," and she told me it had happened to her too,' Sophie recalls.

'I was devastated, I had absolutely no idea. I never, never would have thought she'd gone through it as well.

'All during my teens I'd wondered why was it just me? But here she was telling

After he raped her, he told his brother: 'Now you need to have a go'

me that all that time she'd been abused by not just David, but his brother Jonathan as well.'

In fact, her sister, who is five years older than Sophie, had been subjected to 'inappropriate behaviour' at the hands of Hamilton from when she was a small girl. She was first raped by him when she was ten years old and continued to be regularly raped for several years.

A subsequent court hearing heard that on one of these occasions David's older brother Jonathan was also in the room and after he raped Sophie's sister, he told his brother: 'Now you need to have a go.'

On Monday, David Hamilton, 33, of Woodtown West, Athboy in Co. Meath, having pleaded guilty to the sexual assault of Sophie Brady on dates between 2004 and 2008 and guilty to the rape, oral rape and sexual assault of her older sister, was sentenced to seven-and-a-half years in jail, with the last 12 months suspended.

Jonathan Hamilton, 34, had also pleaded guilty to raping Sophie's older sister on one occasion in 2005 and was sentenced to three years with the final six months suspended. Because the men were minors at the time of the abuse, both had their initial sentences reduced by half.

Sophie and her sister are distraught at David's sentence, which they believe was far too lenient for the long reign of abuse he subjected them to.

'All the sleepless nights, the therapy, the nightmares, the screaming and crying in the middle of the night with PTSD – they [the brothers] don't have any of that,' Sophie tells the Irish Daily Mail. 'The most David will spend in jail now is probably less than three years. I want him to

sit in a prison for at least five years, if not more.'

The sisters are now calling on the Director of Public Prosecutions to appeal David's sentence. This week, Sophie went on social media to describe her disgust at the punishment her cousin received. She called it in a 'slap in the face' and wants legislation around sexual abuse cases, espe-

cially involving perpetrators who are minors, to be re-examined.

'By the time it stopped they were both old enough to know how wrong it was,' she says.

While Sophie is happy to have gone public, she says her sister is still reeling from the court appearances and is 'not as comfortable about coming forward'.

'She's fine about me speaking

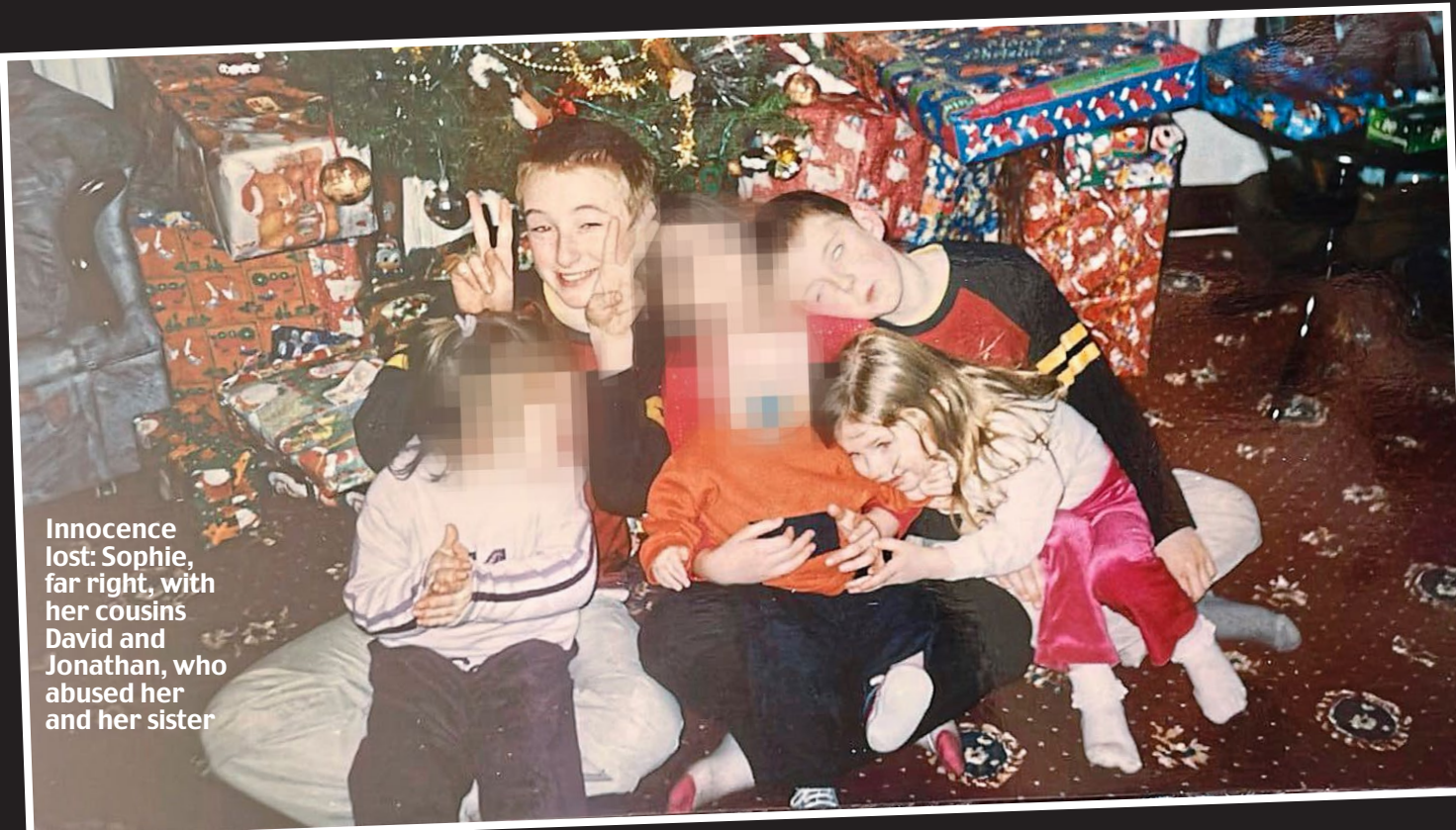
out and fully supports me,' says Sophie. 'She lives in the west of Ireland, but I'm still living here in Athboy, so there's a lot more chance I'll run into our family members, that's why I feel so strongly about this.'

Sitting in the lobby of a local hotel this week, Sophie is remarkably composed when it comes to discussing the horror

that she and her sister experienced as small girls. The 26-year-old says therapy has helped, but her calmness is mostly down to her ability to 'detach' herself from what happened.

However, she's aware of how deeply it affected her, and believes some of her behaviour as a teenager, especially in school, was a direct result of the abuse.

The cute family photo that hid a vile secret of lies and abuse



Innocence lost: Sophie, far right, with her cousins David and Jonathan, who abused her and her sister

When this was taken, two of the young girls were being sexually violated by their older male cousins – who this week received sentences that one of their victims calls a 'slap in the face'

Let down:
Sophie Brady
today and,
inset, as a
youngster



During the court hearings, it was revealed how her family was torn apart by the disclosure of the Hamiltons' abuse. In their victim-impact statements, both sisters mentioned how their mother's family refused to believe them and how they've had no contact with any of them for the last number of years.

'When I finally spoke up about it, I wasn't believed by my family,' Sophie's older sister explained. 'They actually shut us both out. This has compounded the sense of shame and worthlessness. Sophie is the only one who understands all I have lost.'

It's a tragic and unsettling tale, one that began when Sophie's parents split up when she was three years old. It was an acrimonious break-up, Sophie says, and her parents have had little to do with each other ever since.

'Mam moved us into her parents' house,' she explains. 'They lived between Athboy and Devlin, it's very rural. A short time later my uncle and aunt's house went on fire, so they came to live there too with their sons, Jona-

than and David.' She describes David as having the 'more powerful personality' of the brothers.

'He was always the golden boy,' she says. 'His parents and our grandparents were wrapped around his finger, he could have

'I've carried a sense of being unclean for my entire life'

done or said anything and would have got away with it.'

While the Hamiltons waited for their home to be rebuilt, the families all lived together in apparent harmony.

Indeed, the photo you see here from that era shows the cousins happily celebrating Christmas

together. Sophie's sister explained in court exactly how deep the betrayal was.

'I trusted my cousins, I loved you,' she told them in her statement. 'Before Sophie was born you were my only friends. You betrayed that trust almost every day.'

Sophie has no chronological memory of how and when David's abuse began.

'I can't remember those kinds of details,' she explains. 'It started when I was about six or seven and I have about five big moments in my head, of the most horrific stuff. I think my brain got rid of a lot of it, to protect myself.'

She says that when David gave his statement to the gardai, he was able to relay other incidents to them about the abuse, things Sophie and her sister had forgotten.

'He had more memories because he was older,' she says.

While he didn't have full sexual intercourse with Sophie, he did 'badly sexually' abuse her until she was about ten years old.

'I didn't know what it was, but I

knew it was wrong,' she explains. In her own victim-impact statement, she addressed her cousin directly and told him about the long-term physical damage he inflicted on her.

'I attend many different hospital appointments due to bladder and kidney problems,' she said. 'My doctors are all confident I wouldn't suffer from these issues had it not been for your actions and the things you performed on me as a child that was growing and developing.'

Sophie's sister also directed parts of her victim-impact statement directly to their cousin, telling how her 'very first

'Gardaí told me I had been raped over 1,000 times'

memory' was of being abused by him when she was about three years old.

'I don't remember anything before it,' she said. 'My entire life has been warped by abuse. You've made me feel worthless. I've always seen myself as unlovable, not worthy of respect or care. I struggle to build meaningful relationships and trust people. I've carried a huge sense of shame and of being unclean for my entire life.'

When Sophie was ten, she disclosed her abuse to a family member, who she says assured her that the matter 'would be dealt with'.

'I trusted them, and believed them,' she says. 'Around that time, my mum, sister and me moved back into Athboy, so the abuse stopped. I always thought it was because David had been spoken to.'

Oblivious to her sister's abuse, and relieved that her own had stopped, things carried on as normal, with the cousins continuing to gather for special occasions.

'I sat beside David at Christmas and birthday parties, I just believed he'd been spoken to,' says Sophie. 'It was as if it had never happened. To then find out in my late teens that [her family member] never believed me. They thought I was being dramatic and I made it all up. They still do.' This refusal to believe

both sisters was addressed by Justice Tony Hunt during one of the sentence hearings.

He said he found it odd that people did not believe the women, especially after the accused Hamilton brothers pleaded guilty, and that there was no acceptance in the wider family.

He also acknowledged that sometimes people have difficulty accepting horrible things, but said he was not going to speculate.

In December 2019, after years of emotional and physical pain, Sophie told her older sister about the abuse. The women were horrified to discover they'd both been attacked as small girls.

Sophie has a good relationship with her father, and a few months later in March 2020, she disclosed to him what had gone on in her grandparents' house.

'He made me go to the guards straight away,' says Sophie.

It was only when officers went to Sophie's older sister a few weeks later to discuss Sophie's allegations, that she finally gave her own statement to the guards.

'That's when they realised this was a lot more serious than they originally thought,' says Sophie. 'My sister was raped hundreds of times by David Hamilton.'

So prolific and damaging was her sister's abuse that Sophie is unsure if it would ever have come to light, except that she made her own report.

'I don't think she'd have been ever ready to go to the guards,' says Sophie. 'But she wanted to support me.'

Sophie's sister's court statement was particularly devastating when describing how the Garda investigation affected her.

'When the guards read back my statement to me, I burst out crying,' she said.

'It all hit me at once. I had never told anyone most of what had happened to me. I haven't been able to speak about most of it again since. They told me that I had been raped over 1,000 times. Hearing that number out loud made me want to curl up and die of shame.'

She added: 'I have often, throughout my life, contemplated suicide to finally bring me some peace. I feel unsafe every day.'

While her sister has vowed never to have her own children, because she fears 'the same things happening to them', Sophie says she is looking forward to having a family of her own. She has been in a loving relationship with her partner Conor for the last three years and works full-time with children with additional needs.

'I can't wait to be a parent, I think I'll be fantastic,' she says with a broad smile.

'I'll do everything my own family didn't do.'

'We were babies when we were abused, I look at the kids I work with now and it would kill me if it happened to them.'

'I would go insane and they're not even my kids.'

'For years it was said that I was dramatic and an attention seeker, all because I had an interest in drama school and acting. I was called a liar.'

'I've had to be quiet for five years about this case, I couldn't say a thing because it could have damaged the outcome. Now look at the outcome, so what harm in speaking out like this?'

'I've been thinking about it for so long, it's been at the forefront of my mind from every morning I wake up, to when I go to sleep, I can't escape from it.'