

The Jewitt family ghost

In the mid to late 1950s my father was fulfilling his lifetime ambition to build his own family house. He acquired an isolated plot on a hill on the south going Hartfield road in Kent, something less than an acre in extent. South of Croydon, this was in London's Greenbelt, where building was prohibited. But the existence of a ruin on the site enabled rebuilding permission. He erected a hut on the site in which to do his freelance work, plan and work on the build, and sleep.

It was and is still a lovely site, with many mature trees, some overhanging the road making a contrast with the hedges bordering fields either end: in sunlight, a few moments of shade as you pass down the road; in rain, a few moments of shelter. What was then the largest tree in the district occupied the lower part of the site, visible for miles, a huge elm. Perhaps I will write down its story too one day.

As his eldest son, then in my teens, I was despatched to help with the work during school holidays, which also got me out from under my mother's feet in North London, who had three others to look after, and the fifth on the way early in the building process. So she was I believe happy to see me off, cycling right through London with camping gear on the pannier.

Mind you, camping on a hill in January during a blizzard rather put me off any long term affection for camping. The tent blew down in the night. I probably broke some tent erecting speed record, in my pyjamas, in bare feet in the whirling snow. Dad apparently slept blissfully through it all in his nice snug hut . . .

I did learn a lot about house building, at least the rather traditional kind preferred by Dad. For example I erected the gate posts and five barred field gate at the road entrance. The oak posts were to be buried three feet into the ground. For three days I charred the ends on a fire built for the purpose: no chemical protection for these posts! Hand mixed concrete filled the holes around them when erected. The post taking the weight of the gate I supported with a steel cable angling down to a buried lattice of steel rods. Dad just left me to get on with it, which I appreciated.

Some thirty years later I paid a visit to the house, now owned by someone else. The gate and posts were still standing, unmoved by the years. I felt proud to have done such a lasting job.

On one of those school holiday trips after the remains of the ruined old house had been cleared away and new foundations laid, Dad had hired a couple of brickies to do most of the work of erecting the walls. These were local lads, and after work one day one of them told us this tale:

The old house now gone had been occupied by a bachelor gentleman with a somewhat cranky and absent-minded character, name of Marriott. He would cycle the quarter mile up the road to the Queen's Arms, walk home, and next day tell the local

constabulary that his bicycle had been stolen. Or he would drive to the nearby town of East Grinstead and get the bus back, reporting his car stolen the next time he looked into his garage. We are talking about the 1920s. The local police constable got used to this of course, and merely told him where to look, his habits being quite predictable.

Local tradition had it that the only thing he really cared about was his library, occupying one room of his house. Whether that was pertinent to his income is not reported. He had a live-in housekeeper. Whether she was anything more than that no one knows, but reportedly he treated her abominably. One night a fire burnt down that part of the house containing his library. That apparently sent him over some kind of edge. The brickie, repeating local tradition, said that Marriott then treated his housekeeper so badly that she hung herself from a meat-hook in the kitchen. What else went on in that house will remain a mystery, particularly since, reportedly, one day, with breakfast left on the table, Marriott disappeared, and, the story goes, was never seen again.

The housekeeper's ghost is said to haunt the site. Many locals would not go past after dark. The kids kept away. One regular at the Queen's Arms was so afraid that every night he cycled a two and a half mile detour going home in order to avoid going past the now ruin and its ghost. Those big trees giving shade over the road took on a menacing aspect at night, if you let them . . .

After he had gone, Dad said firmly to me:

"Don't tell your Mother or your Sister!"

"OK Dad." And I meant it, and kept my mouth shut on the subject.

In June 1957 the whole family moved home from North London to Dad's creation, Lambert Cottage, my youngest brother now three years old. And I said nothing.

After some time had passed one of my younger brothers came to me and asked:

"Have you heard about the ghost?"

"What's that then?" says I. And he proceeded to tell me the whole story: library, fire, housekeeper, meat-hook, the lot.

"Ah, well don't tell Mum or Viv" (our sister) I said when he had finished. He proved obedient to that injunction too, I believed. He'd perhaps heard it at the local school.

Some time later the next brother came to me eager to tell the story of our ghost. He was in school in one of the local towns, so I know less about where he heard it, but he had all the ingredients too: grumpy absent minded old codger, suffering housekeeper, library burnt down, kitchen hanging.

"Mmm. Don't tell Viv or Mum" says I.

I'm not sure I have the order of these events exactly right, but at a certain point my

sister asked if I had heard the ghost story. She had always been antagonistic to the whole idea of moving to Kent, and kept herself to herself when home from university (not that she regarded Lambert Cottage as home). Maybe she had been fraternising with the local 'enemy'?

"No" I lied. So she gave it to me yet again, pretty much as the brothers had and the brickie had to Dad and I years previously: this story was firmly concreted into its formula!

"We'd better not tell Mum. Do you agree?" She did.

Then youngest brother, now attending the local primary school, excitedly gave me a slightly juvenile version which left out some of the gorier bits. By this time I too had left home, visiting from time to time, but the germ of an idea was occurring to me, so I said to little brother:

"OK, but it's a secret. Don't tell anyone else in the family!" And Big Brother's word was Law! (or so I liked to believe).

So only Mother, apparently, had not heard the story. But then, during one of our habitual kitchen conversations when I was home on a visit, she asked if I had heard about the ghost. By this time I wasn't going to give any answer but denial, so I heard the story yet again in all its historic detail: absent mindedness, persecuted housekeeper, the fire, meat-hook hanging, ghost haunting the site.

"And don't tell your sister", she concluded.

"Of course not!"

So now everyone in the family knew the story, and all of them thought no one else did but me. Or so I thought. So a denouement was in order.

Sunday dinners in my Father's house were formal affairs, conducted following obligatory church attendance in the morning, with Dad at the head of the table wielding the carving knife over the usual roast meat, mother at the other end serving out the vegetables onto the best crockery, and the rest of us ranged down the sides of the fine oak table Dad had brought to our London home sometime in the early 1950s. The serving rituals having been completed, we were free to converse.

So, during a slight pause in conversation at one Sunday dinner, I fixed my eye on one of my brothers on the other side of the table and said, loudly and firmly: "Do you know about the ghost?"

There was a moment of horrified silence, then all perceived that everyone knew, and we all had a good laugh.

The ghost? you will be wondering, was it real? (whatever that might mean) I

never saw, heard or felt anything myself, though I have a memory of one of the brothers claiming to have seen 'something' crossing his bedroom one night, which he denies now. My 'memory' could be imagination, of course. As far as I can tell it was only my youngest brother Nick who had any ghostly experiences, but then he was young at the time, which correlates perhaps with much work which shows that children tend to be more open to the unseen realms than adults. Here are his reports.

"I was alone in the house one day in the kitchen and I believed that I was hearing furniture scraping on the floor in the dining room, for what seemed a relatively prolonged period. I was scared stiff [*he was about nine*]. Some time after it stopped I plucked up courage to go and look, but don't remember seeing anything amiss.

"Mother used to tell a story that one day, when I was still very young, I was alone in the next room (presumably the dining room, or perhaps upstairs) and she heard me talking and shortly after asked me who I was talking to and I told her I was talking to the "grey lady". I believe the ghost, whom I had heard of somehow, was known by that name. I do remember something about her having hanged herself in the kitchen, but I have always associated the story (and the haunting) with Claydene Lodge, just down the road."

Which nicely illustrates the confusion that surrounds most tales of hauntings. One possibility is that the housekeeper actually lived down at Claydene, a small cottage, but worked for Marriott at his house. Another is that there are two ghost stories which have become somewhat entangled. Who knows! 'Grey ladies' or 'White ladies' have been reported in many places, at many times, linking back perhaps to ancient tales of the Fair Folk, dwellers in the Otherworld who under the appropriate circumstances appeared sometimes to ordinary mortals. Who knows, indeed.

What is certain is that the locals took *our* haunting seriously.

AFTERWORD A note on the Queen's Arms pub.

A relic of a past era even in our times half a century ago, it was run when we moved there by old Annie and her daughter Elsie, who remained unmarried and took it over after her mother died. Annie, a local institution, gave the impression of being somehow primordial, and Elsie's subsequent reign lasted into the 21stC with no change to the basic arrangements in the Bar. I could very easily imagine a time when straw would have been strewn over the bare boards we stood on, in that small space no bigger than an average living room. Only a very few passers-by ventured into the Lounge, which, though a larger room, was distinguished from the Bar only by some minimal seating, the lino on the floor and the ladies loo. Lack of use generated through time a rather mournful, perhaps slightly spooky atmosphere in there, thus creating a somewhat unwelcoming impression which naturally helped the lack of usage to continue.

The Bar itself had only a bench or two against the wall to sit on, and boasted no fancy beer taps: the new barrels of the basic bitter and mild (no modern fancy stuff like lager!) were hauled into place by one of the regulars, perhaps Annie's youngest brother, Charlie, always to be found there, a champion darts player who could accurately throw nails into the board, totally uninterested however in fame and fortune. A jovial, friendly man, but who stood no nonsense from fools, his firmly grounded presence guaranteed good behaviour even from the local bad boys.

At the time of writing Elsie was still licensee, though now rather frail, sitting down most of the time, and taking trips out in a wheelchair. Google Queen's Arms Cowden Pound (or Markbeece) for recent accounts.

Clement Jewitt, August 2010
with thanks to siblings' reminiscences