

The Ghost of Christmas Past?

During many years of being a researcher, I have heard dozens of amazing anecdotal stories concerning ghosts and whatever they might be or represent. It has left me having little doubt whatsoever that there is a phenomena, generally unknown let alone accepted, behind it all. However, as good and convincing as other people's stories may be it is far more rewarding if you can call on evidence from your own personal experience. Well, you can't usually force a ghost to appear or meet with one, but this unexpectedly seems to have happened to me during the late 1990's when my wife and I travelled down from the North East having resigned ourself to looking after grandchildren thus allowing their mum to go out at the time of the Christmas festivities. Little did we know that this innocent occupation would be taking place in a most ridiculous location - a haunted derelict asylum on a Christmas eve, something you could only expect (for those of you old enough to remember their movies) from Bob Hope and Bing Crosby.

The derelict asylum was that of St John's in Lincoln, built in 1852 then known as Lincoln and District Lunatic Asylum. Originally built to house just 250 patients it went on to accommodate thousands from all over Lincolnshire, finally closing its doors in December 1989. At the time of our visit its caretakers were my wife's daughter and her boyfriend. The property was Grade II listed meaning it couldn't be demolished and had just been bought by 'Bungalow' Bill Wiggins then the boyfriend of glamorous Hollywood starlet Joan Collins and who was to convert the main building into flats. At the time building had only just started and so we were offered a luxurious penthouse room for our stay, in the midst of all the dereliction and empty, decaying, wall peeling eerie corridors. It was quite simply surreal having to leave the warmth and safety of the suite to have to go along dimly lit dank and neglected corridors to the nearest toilet situated in the old asylum quarters. You swore you could hear whispering voices at the dead of night.



St Johns



The Asylum's neglected and eerie corridors

On our first night, two days before Christmas eve, Lincoln was snowed in. My wife and I retired around about 11am after a hectic day's babysit and nestled down into the extra comfy bed, switching the light off and expecting a quick descent into slumber. After maybe no more than ten minutes and whilst still fully awake we nearly jumped out of our skins when the silence in the dark room was broken by an enormous crash at the foot of the bed. It sounded as if something very large had fallen. After our initial shock we put on the light to see what it could be, already knowing that it couldn't have been anything as there was

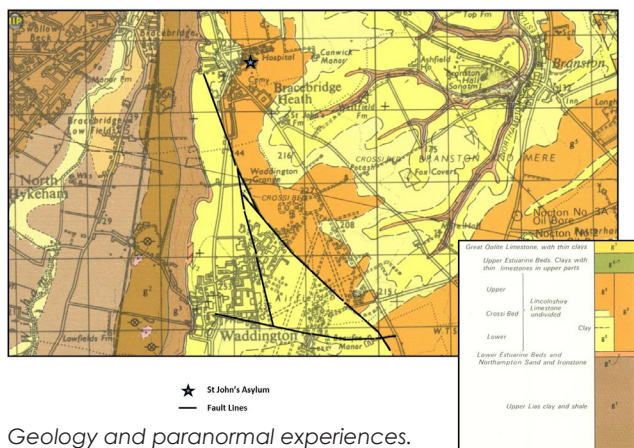
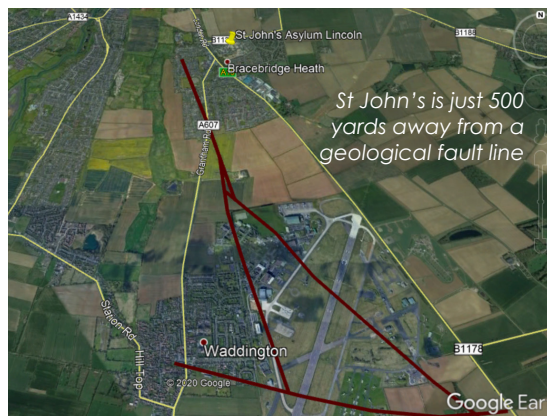
nothing there and not even anything else in the room that could have provided such an alarming crash. My wife was insistent for an explanation and I gave then what was perhaps the most lame and most unbelievable excuse ever – it was the flag on the balcony outside blowing in the wind. It was all I could think of. Both of us knew it wasn't or anything remotely like it.

The following day it and would be about 7pm at night, Christmas eve. The snow was all around, a white blanket, and I stood outside marvelling at the sound of silence, the thousands of falling flakes amidst darkness all around in the vastness of the grounds. It was then that I heard the lone sound of a bugle being sounded. 'It must be an early reveller', I thought, although a bugle wasn't the sort of instrument I would usually expect or associate with an early Christmas celebration.

I was keen to locate exactly where the sound was coming from, expecting that to be easy amidst the otherwise total silence, absence of any other person or activity, and the totality of the space around me. But I could not place it. I moved myself around some distance but still could not pinpoint the sounding bugle. I listened until I could hear it no more. It was very clear and distinct but not a musical masterpiece. Strange!

On Christmas day my stepson came to join us and we offered him another swish suite not far from our own. We decided best not to tell him about the bedroom crash or highlight anything else about the building that might possibly spook his nervy temperament. It wouldn't have mattered. In the morning he told us how no sooner trying to sleep he saw what he described as a "floating, black bin bag" in the room moving about! I was glad when we could all leave this premises before anything else might present itself.

A week or two later I was recounting my incident with the phantom bugle player to my mother-in-law. It was then she informed me that long ago one of the asylum inmates had escaped on Christmas eve, a fellow who was renowned for wandering the grounds playing a bugle. However, his escape was a tragedy - he had no sooner sneaked out of the premises playing his instrument when he was hit by a bus and killed outright. I hadn't known anything about this. Had I encountered his ghost on the calendar night he had lost his life? If so, then this must rate as a first class ghostly encounter.



Geology and paranormal experiences.

I've since spoken to others about our nights at the old asylum and wasn't surprised the things I learnt from them. My stepdaughter confirmed that both she and her boyfriend had seen things – her a 'human sized figure made up out of speckles, like what you get when a faulty tv aerial disrupts the screen'. She had decided not to tell us anything about her experiences in case it put us off coming to stay. The asylum certainly had a ghostly reputation. A care worker I met years later who had worked at St John's confirmed how staff had to contend with lights suddenly switching themselves off on and off and the sound of footsteps being heard above them in

empty rooms. The grisliest tale he told me was when a room had been found after a wall had been broken into, and there around a table sat upright skeletons, the table having rotted food upon it as if a feast had once been prepared. With no windows or doors in the room they had all been entombed in there. We were also told by my stepdaughter that the previous caretakers, a husband and wife, had left the building at the dead of night - in the pyjamas! They never returned, leaving costly personal belongings.

So, the old asylum at St John's - haunted? Hard to think otherwise, although I'm sure psychologists would offer a bland explanation for it all, rather like my flag blowing in the wind...