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strange days

- 014 SCIENCE
- 016 GHOSTWATCH
- 020 ARCHÆOLOGY
- 021 CLASSICAL CORNER
- 023 ALIEN ZOO
- 024 FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS
- 025 KONSPIRACY KORNER
- 026 NECROLOG
- 027 STRANGE DEATHS
- 28 THE UFO FILES

reports

- 030 BLASTS FROM THE PAST
No. 44. Those damned invisible things.
- 042 FORTEAN BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
No. 108. Folklore Society Conference.
- 050 FORTEAN TIMES DICTIONARY OF THE DAMNED
No. 36. Contactees.

forum

- 055 THE CASE FOR CRYPIDS
- 056 THE OCCULT MOUSTACHE
- 058 'CROP CIRCLES' IN CYBERSPACE

regulars

- 014 EDITORIAL
- 016 SUBSCRIPTIONS
- 020 REVIEWS
- 021 LETTERS
- 023 READER INFO
- 024 PHENOMENOMIX
- 025 TALES FROM THE VAULT

32 SPURIOUS SPIRITS

JACOB MIDDLETON looks back at the largely forgotten Victorian activity of ghost impersonation and asks what this bizarre pastime can tell us about changing attitudes to the supernatural in an era of social transformation.

48 CEMETERY DOGS

Greyfriars Bobby was by no means the only canine with a reputation for keeping vigil at his dead master's grave. JAN BONDESON looks at the forgotten career of Médor, the Dog of the Louvre, and other cemetery dogs.

FEATURES



32 SPURIOUS SPIRITS



48 CEMETERY DOGS



28 STORM WARNINGS

THE GHOST REACHED INTO ITS COSTUME AND DREW A REVOLVER

the ghost of Darley Abbey

SPURIOUS SPIRITS

SPURIOUS SPIRITS

JACOB MIDDLETON looks back at the largely forgotten Victorian activity of ghost impersonation and asks what this bizarre pastime can tell us about changing attitudes to the supernatural in an era of rapid social transformation.

It was on the evening of 27 September 1885 that a young man named Frank Grey went for a walk with his sweetheart, Isabella Scanlan, on the fringes of the English town of Derby. Grey and Scanlan had chosen to promenade on Darley Grove, a quiet, leafy lane, far from the town centre. It was a local beauty spot, overlooking the river Derwent, and leading to the old grounds of Darley Abbey, a place popular with courting couples and those people who wished to escape the bustle of the town.

This particular evening would prove to be an eventful one for Grey and Scanlan; as they walked through the grove, they spied a ghostly figure standing in a shady spot by a gate. For the past six weeks rumours had swept through Derby about an apparition that was said to be haunting the town. The supposed ghost had appeared in the late evenings, pouncing upon unwary pedestrians and making varied forms of mischief. The sight of the figure in Darley Grove suggested to Grey and Scanlan that they had come face-to-face with the subject of Derby's gossip.

Grey's response to the situation, however, suggests that the ghost didn't project a particularly fearful presence, for the young man approached it and asked it as to its business. When the phantom did not respond, Grey struck it round the head twice. This drew a somewhat surprising reaction, as the ghost reached into its costume and pulled out a loaded revolver. Not to be deterred, even by a firearm, Grey fell upon the figure; a struggle ensued, which ended with Grey in possession of the pistol, and the ghost taking to its heels.

The story of the 'ghost with the revolver' became a brief media sensation throughout Britain, and newspaper readers were amused and amazed at the story, which was at once sensational and ridiculous. "If this represents the average conduct of the dwellers in the World of Shadows," noted one magazine, "the Psychological Society must be careful how it carries out its enquiries." The ghost was eventually tracked down and was revealed to have been a young man named Christopher Burrows; he was charged with firearms offences and narrowly escaped prison.

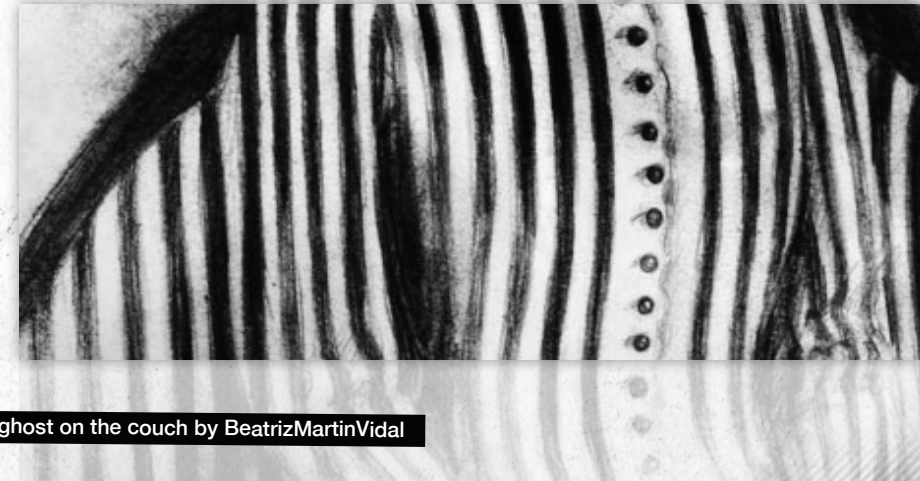
A Nation Plagued by Spirits

The act of dressing up as a ghost, and wandering the night-time streets for the purposes of scaring lone pedestrians, is a practice with a long-standing history. It's likely that for as long as people have believed in spirits, unscrupulous individuals have taken on their guise for a variety of purposes. However, the practice was particularly common during the Victorian era, with hundreds of cases being reported throughout the period. Typically, rumours of ghostly activity would surface around the later autumn or early winter. These would tell of phantoms prowling around the churchyards and lanes at the edges of towns and villages; often, the ghosts were reported as particularly favouring the lonely and under-lit urban fringes of settlements. Thus, as one writer noted about the preferred haunt of the Derby Ghost: "It is a most favourable spot for a ghost, one side being a tall wood fence... and the other a hedge backed by tall umbrageous fruit trees, which make a sort of roof over the footway, and keep out the light in such a way that one has only to walk up there in the dark and think of ghosts to enjoy that peculiar sensation known as the 'creeps'."

Such eerie spots were chosen by impersonators to heighten the impression which they might make on their victims; even if the apparitions were generally believed to be nothing more than a man in a sheet, the appearance of a ghostly figure in a darkened lane could still be genuinely unnerving. The effect could, moreover, be amplified by a careful choice of target. Thus, when the Stonehaven Ghost was active in the Scottish town in the

winter of 1899, it was complained that the person responsible, "with the cowardliness characteristic of those assuming such a role, is said to appear only to women and children". Such behaviour was not untypical, and many ghost impersonators sought out those people who they thought would be most easily frightened. The ultimate effect of ghostly manifestations in a given area was a general atmosphere of fear and apprehension. As the night drew in, people would shut themselves away indoors, anxious to avoid becoming the next victim of a particular roaming spectre. Such behaviour was reported throughout the 19th century. When, in 1895, a ghost was

ghost on the couch by BeatrizMartinVidal



reported as stalking a number of villages in the vicinity of Windsor Forest, it was said that the local people were "all afraid to go out after dark, and the road is entirely deserted". The prospect of meeting a ghost could have a direct effect upon the lives of those who lived in an afflicted area.

THE GHOST TURNED OUT TO BE A LOCAL LABOURER

“The ultimate effect of ghostly manifestations in a given area was a general atmosphere of fear and apprehension”

Hunting Ghosts

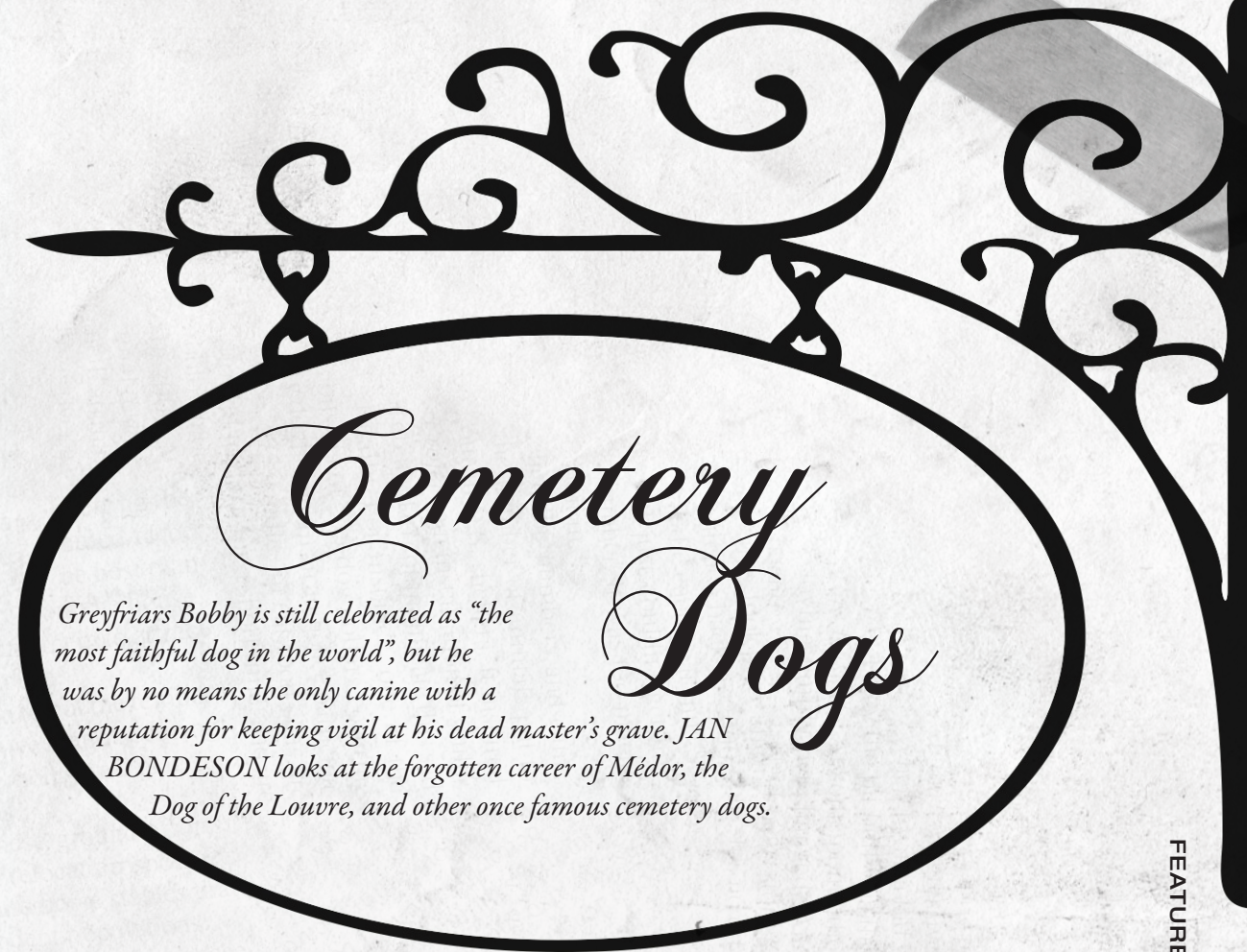
Although the activities of ghost impersonators were greeted with a considerable amount of consternation from the general public, it's important to note that few people believed that these were genuine wandering spirits. In fact, both press and public thought that the ghosts that prowled around the streets at night were invariably men in disguise. This often led to a communal response in which gangs of people took to the streets after nightfall, in an attempt to track down those responsible.

In the case of the Derby Ghost, crowds assembled in the vicinity of earlier sightings, in an attempt to seek out the apparition. A few years earlier, reports of a ghost impersonator in the vicinity of Windsor met with a similar response, with a group of men armed with horse-whips keeping a nightly vigil, intending, if they caught the person responsible, “to administer such a castigation as he will remember to the day of his death”. Occasionally, such groups were successful in their aims. In 1894, for instance, a search party in the village of West Stafford in Dorset located a prowling ghost which had been haunting the area, and administered a severe beating; the supposed ghost turned out to be a local labourer whose own wife had joined in the attack. Another sham apparition, active in Shrewsbury in 1888, narrowly avoided the same fate. The local people, upset by the “dangerous pranks” to which they had been subjected, formed a mob, and effected the capture of the Welsh farmer who had been responsible; although their natural inclination was to lynch the culprit, they were persuaded to release him after he provided a donation of £5, then a considerable sum, to the Salop Infirmary.



victorian pendant worn by the ghost

“Inside the fence, asleep near the grave, was a large white poodle-like dog...”



Greyfriars Bobby is still celebrated as “the most faithful dog in the world”, but he was by no means the only canine with a reputation for keeping vigil at his dead master’s grave. JAN BONDESON looks at the forgotten career of Médor, the Dog of the Louvre, and other once famous cemetery dogs.

Thus begins Ralph Cecil’s translation of the French poet Casimir Delavigne’s celebrated poem ‘Le Chien du Louvre’. In July 1830, the unpopular King Charles X of France was persuaded by his reactionary ministers to change the constitution to the detriment of all but the rich and noble. Since the Parisians of course objected to these measures, there was widespread rioting, with barricades in the streets. The royalist troops were defeated after three days of fierce fighting. Charles X, whose obdurate mind had not been able to appreciate the lesson so harshly taught to

his forefathers, namely that an angry Parisian mob is not to be underestimated, had to abdicate, and the Duke of Orléans took over the throne as King Louis Philippe I.

At the fierce fighting near the Louvre, which was of course a royal palace in those days, not a museum, many revolutionaries fell in the hail of royalist bullets. They were buried in a mass grave at the Place du Louvre, surrounded by a low wooden fence, and with a suitable monument. Overjoyed at the dethroning of Charles X and the fall of his unpopular government, the Parisians were

inflamed with patriotism. It became popular to visit the resting-place of the ‘Heroes of the Louvre’, whose blood had been shed to overthrow the tyrant. One day, these Parisians saw that they were not alone. Inside the wooden fence, asleep near the grave, was a large, white and brown, poodle-like dog!

Surely, the dog should be weeping profusely on the grave of the nameless brave?



An 1884 engraving of Landseer's The Poor Dog

when rollo
died, a
marble
statue was
subscribed
to by the



kind, dogloving locals

EARLIER FRENCH CEMETERY DOGS

Everybody realised that this was the Dog of the Nameless Brave, who had come to keep vigil at the grave of his fallen master! As a result, Médor, the Dog of the Louvre, became a national celebrity. The sixth legion of the National Guards built him a comfortable kennel. The Parisians brought him plenty of cakes, bread and sausages, with the result that the half-starved

The Francophile German journalist and traveller Ludwig Börne visited Médor, whom he described as a stout-looking white poodle. Médor was the Emperor of Dogs, Börne wrote, the most famous canine inhabitant of Paris, for his heroism in the July revolution. Arriving at the Place du Louvre, Börne could see that Médor had already found his Plutarch: from the peddlers

In late 1830, there was scandal when the cemetery attendant Auguste Marchal reported that an Englishman had tried to bribe her with 200 francs to look the other way while he stole the Dog of the Louvre. Outraged that Médor, the most famous dog in France, might be taken abroad to be exhibited for money, the French authorities had the Englishman arrested. Nine months later, he was still in prison.

**When the snow comes fast On the chilly blast,
Blanching the bleak church-yard, With limbs
outspread On the dismal bed Of his liege, he
still keeps guard.**

cemetery dog soon developed into a sturdy, well-nourished specimen. Sometimes, people were disappointed to see the Dog of the Louvre sleeping peacefully in his kennel, or waddling around the enclosure looking quite jolly and carefree. Surely, he should be weeping profusely on the grave of the Nameless Brave, and scraping the ground with his feeble paws, as

surrounding the fenced cemetery, he purchased a pamphlet on the Dog of the Louvre, a song about his heroism, and the dog's portrait from life. Börne wanted to stroke Médor, but the cemetery dog did not like him, perhaps because it offended the radical political sympathies of the Dog of the Louvre to have anything to do with a well-dressed foreigner.

In the meantime, there was further drama when M. and Mme Martin, who owned a property near Vitri, claimed that Médor belonged to them. When they were reminded that he was the Dog of the Nameless Brave, their response was to drive up to the Louvre in their carriage, grab Médor, and speed away with him.

TWISTED TONGUES

Englishman wakes up Welsh, while George Michael goes West country. **HARK INTERRUPTS GOLF**

SHARK INTERRUPTS GOLF An Englishman who suffered a stroke woke up speaking fluent Welsh. Alun Morgan, 81, was evacuated to his grandmother's house in Mid-Wales in 1944 when he was 12. During his time there, he was surrounded by Welsh speakers but never spoke the language himself. He returned to London at the end of the war in 1945. The severe stroke in 2010 put him in a coma; when he regained consciousness three weeks later, he was speaking Welsh and couldn't remember any English. Mr Morgan, a retired Royal Naval Air Commodore, lives in Bathwick, Somerset, with his wife Yvonne. He said: "I must have picked up the Welsh because my nan, whom I went to live with during the war, spoke terrible English. It gave my wife the shock of her life when I started speaking Welsh. After the stroke it was hard-going. I've managed to remember English, but I've forgotten Welsh again." Doctors diagnosed him with aphasia, a form of brain damage that causes a shift in the brain's language centre – but this doesn't begin to explain why he started speaking Welsh.

D.Telegraph, D.Mail, 28 Dec 2012.



Alun Morgan, the Englishman who suffered a stroke and woke up speaking fluent Welsh.

LOOK OUT BELOW!

Rains of chicken and worms; ice from the sky, and a leopard shark on the 12th tee...

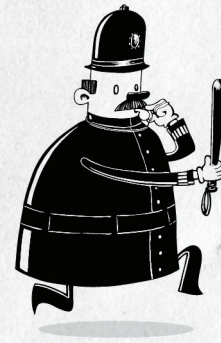
SHARK INTERRUPTS GOLF

On 22 October, a leopard shark, bleeding but alive, fell out of the sky on to the 12th tee at San Juan Golf Course in California. Staff put it into fresh water with added sea salt from the clubhouse kitchen. The 2lb (900g) fish had puncture marks where it appeared a bird had plucked it from the Pacific, about five miles (8km) away. It was returned to the ocean, where it was still for a few seconds before speeding off.

D.Telegraph, Aberdeen Press & Journal, 27 Oct 2012.

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D.Telegraph, D.Mail, 22 Jan 2013, speaking Welsh.

CRETINOUS ROBBERS

Siegfried Koenig (57), brandishing a toy pistol, tried to hold up a bank that had closed 17 years earlier. He stormed into the building in Osnabruck, Germany – now a physiotherapy clinic with a cash machine outside – grabbed a hostage and demanded 10,000 euros (£8,567). Realising his mistake, he ordered a passer-by to withdraw 400 euros (£343) from the cash machine and made off in a stolen car. He later abandoned the vehicle, but left the plastic pistol, covered with his fingerprints, between the seats. He was jailed for seven years and dubbed "Germany's dumbest bank robber".

Sunday Telegraph, 4 Dec 2011.

Dead man 'thrilled at first grandchild'

Bradford Telegraph & Argus, 19 July 2012.

Fish concert to support flood damaged bistro

East Lothian News, 31 Aug 2012.

Missing head of poet found after public appeal

Irish Times, 18 July 2012.

Stone man gives talk

Hartlepool Mail, 31 Aug 2012.

POLICE AND THIEVES

The annals of crime and punishment continue to provide us with tales of incompetence and stupidity.

CRETINOUS COPS

Three Colombians who tried to burgle a convenience store had to abandon the 2am raid when their getaway donkey started braying, alerting police. They had loaded their haul of rum, oil, rice, cans of tuna and sardines on the 10-year-old donkey, called Xavi, which they had stolen 12 hours earlier in the northern Colombian town of Juan de Acosta. They ditched the donkey, which was detained by police until collected by its owner, Orland Olivares. All the stolen items were recovered.

CRETINOUS ROBBERS A thief was arrested after being grassed up by the robotic lawnmower he stole. Keith Herron, 30, broke into a car after stealing the Clever Trevor gadget, which sent out SOS signals in Northallerton, North Yorkshire.

Metro, 6 Sept 2012.



Extra! Extra!

Our favourite headlines from around the world

Ghost revisits zombie victims

D.Mail, 24 Aug 2012.

Itching horse in need of pyjamas

Wolverhampton Express & Star, 14 Aug 2012.



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SPURIOUS SPIRITS

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SPEAKING IN TONGUES
VAMPIRES OF ATLANTIS
'R' MARKS THE SPOT
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