

STATE OF THE SPECTRAL NATION

DR PAUL LEE shares the results of a survey he undertook into the UK's haunted sites, and paints a depressing picture of disappearing spooks, over-hyped accounts of paranormal activity and greedy ghost hunting groups charging the public inflated fees.

Before the advent of popular televisual forays into ghost hunting in the early 2000s (see **PT342:54-55**), investigations into the nature of ghosts were confined to a relatively small number of teams across the globe. Ghost hunters were happy to sit in the darkness, clutching their thermometers, cameras, notepads and tape recorders, and record the smallest occurrence, hoping to obtain a clue or proof of survival, with the contentious issue of 'orbs' being the only thing to disturb the status quo.

Then everything changed. Groups, pre-armed with confirmation bias, would enter reputedly haunted locations expecting to find ghosts – and in nearly every instance, that is exactly what they discovered. The smallest sound, sensation or incident, normally ignored in any other location, would be presented as “compelling proof” of ghosts. Vague shapes would be published in papers; the word ‘pareidolia’ was never uttered. Press reports veered into the territory of pure bunkum: a photo said to show ‘The Green Lady’ in Glasgow’s Scotia Bar turned out to be the light of an exit sign; two out-of-focus shapes in Liverpool’s Adelphi Hotel were compared to the spooky twins in *The Shining*... until it was pointed out that it was a snap of some fire extinguishers.

SHOW ME THE EVIDENCE!

Coincident with this boom in credulity was the adoption of codswallop contraptions. The appearances of a new, untested gadget in a TV show was all the endorsement required, and no thought was given as to its suitability for ghost hunting. A familiar part of the ghost hunter’s arsenal is the EMF meter, but some makes are susceptible to interference from mobile phones and leaky microwave ovens: the results they give can also be highly dependent on how they are held – and yet we see them being waved around like sparklers.

EVP, or electronic voice phenomena, are the aural equivalent of orbs, and usually submerged in an overarching mass of noise. Plenty of perseverance (not to mention imagination) is required to discern anything. In an example of ‘lead-



LEFT: ‘Spooky twins’ straight out of *The Shining* photographed in Liverpool’s Adelphi Hotel; they turned out to be a pair of fire extinguishers.
BELOW: Television shows like *Ghost Hunters* have helped sales of ghost hunting gadgets like the EMF meter shown at bottom left.

ing the witness’, people are told what they are expected to hear before the recording is played back, and of course there is then agreement, regardless of the clarity. Ideally, people should record their observations independently of one another. These recordings should not be considered as evidence unless they are crystal clear and no trace of contamination by interference can be detected, but usually there is an absence of critical analysis and the EVPs are simply accepted. There are cases on TV where ‘researchers’ are shown manipulating audio software until something coherent is obtained. One wonders if the operator has any training in acoustics, as the impression is that the various controls are operated quite randomly. This does not inspire confidence that the final results are genuinely paranormal.

In short, there is no point using equipment if there is no appreciation for how it is to be used, how it works or even how it might produce false positives. Amateur groups simply assume that their equipment is free from flaws, even if it is used in a manner for which it was not designed.

These groups of ‘Most Haunted Wannabes’

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are almost entirely medium- or psychic-led, everything else being window dressing. But how much verification is performed on the resultant utterances, assuming that they derive from means other than normal research techniques? How much of the information is simply accepted as factual? Is it a matter of people preferring the mystically obtained information over the provenance of actual historical documentation? And how much is pure fraud like the notorious Derek Akorah/'Kreed Kafer' incident? (For the full story of Akorah's 'possession' by an entirely fictitious spirit, see FT390:24-25)

Not too far from where I live is Bircham Newton, where three dead airmen are said to reunite in the old squash court. It has been known for a long time now that the information given in 1971 by attending mediums is completely bogus and that the crew never existed; and yet the story is often repeated. Even worse, the basic tale is embellished. Based on psychical visits, and an unclear photograph, we are told that the girlfriend of one of the airmen was on board a doomed flight and perished with the three airmen. The word of the psychics is accepted, unquestioningly.

At nearby Castle Rising, the ghost of Queen Isabella is said to be a demented wraith, screaming into the night. But there is nothing in the record to indicate that her mental health degenerated in her later years. Far from it: she seems to have been *compos mentis* to the end. The same tired tales get paraded again and again, with no corroboratory research being done.

With this litany of 'evidence' proffered by ghost groups and excitable publications, audiences are constantly regaled with declarations that their own hometown is the most haunted in the UK and, indeed, that the UK is the most haunted kingdom in the world.

Is it, though? Just how replete is the UK with spectres? Perhaps a survey could determine the answers...

SURVEYING THE SPOOKS

There is an abundance of allegedly haunted locations tabulated in books, newspapers, online and, of course, in the personal experiences recorded by witnesses over the years. Conceivably, all of these locations could be contacted and the stories associated with them assessed for genuine 'ghostliness'.

The sheer scale of such a project was daunting. I found over 5,000 sites listed, but not all were contactable or likely to reply (roads, ruins, hospitals and so on.) This tally was whittled down to 4,000 and then reduced by another 1,000 when no form of contact (email/website/Facebook page) could be ascertained. I also focused on locations that had had some form of ghost report in the last 40 years.

I initially estimated the survey would take a year to complete; in the end, it took two and a half years, as Covid lockdowns meant that venues were unable to answer my queries. Some replies continued to come in after the end of the survey, but these did



ABOVE: Hampton Court – guilty of ghostly hypocrisy? BELOW: The Dog and Partridge in Bury St Edmunds was worried about opening "portals to the less understood and also dangers of the Unknown".



not affect the results. The tardiest reply was Dartford's Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel, who said they had "lots [of ghosts] ... too many to list." One might have hoped for more after a 16-month wait.

To ease analysis, the list was broken down into categories: pubs/clubs, hotels/b&bs, museums, and so on. Results varied from place to place, as not everywhere replied to my messages. On average, the response across the categories was 40 per cent. Included in the numbers are places that had given recent interviews to journalists.

Most responses boiled down to a simple 'yes' or 'no', while others were vague ("I haven't seen anything myself, but I have heard that my staff have..."). I wasn't interested in replies that said that ghost hunters had obtained positive results, and I explained that I was only interested in the experiences of staff and customers as they went about their day-to-day business. My attempts to obtain further information were often met with silence.

A few locations tried to generate an air of mystery. The Dog and Partridge in Bury

St Edmunds spoke of not wanting to risk "another shift in [the] parameters of [badly intentioned spirits] as it may open up more portals to the less understood and also dangers of the Unknown... our force is strong within." While at Sheffield's The Old Queen's Head, I was told: "I am not asking, and no one is saying anything..." And that was the end of that.

No respondents were rude, but a few did flirt with the boundaries of politeness. Pluckley's The Dering Arms said that they didn't get involved with ghost hunters: "The haunted stuff just brings idiots to the village. Ten customers all sharing one coke and all using the toilets... not for us!" Sandringham House in Norfolk responded with notable pomposity, seemingly disgusted that I'd had the temerity to contact them about their spectres.

The Maid's Head in Norwich obviously found the subject of ghosts to be so abhorrent that they wanted me to help in expunging the record of their phantom claims. Obviously there had been a change in management, as they had been happy to speak to a paranormal magazine in 2005.

My exchanges with Hampton Court were bizarre. Tour guide Ian Franklin (now retired) had ascertained from records that the most famous ghosts were almost certainly inventions from the Victorian era, possibly used to drum up publicity; the remaining stories were almost exclusively far less spectacular. But when asked, a customer services advisor told me that they "do not allow paranormal investigations" in order to protect their valuable items from damage. I told them that I was purely interested in staff and visitor reports, but the mantra of "we do not allow paranormal investigations at our sites" was merely repeated. It was frustrating that they simply ignored my point – and yet every year we see Hampton Court repeating the same tired, and almost certainly untrue,



ABOVE LEFT: Least Haunted? Ettington Park Hotel seems to have shed its spooks, with none reported for years, but still appears in outdated lists of 'Most Haunted' properties. ABOVE RIGHT: The Cellar Bar in Stamford can boast either an impressive list of phenomena or no sightings at all, depending on who you ask.

tales about Catherine Howard running down the Long Gallery and so on.

Some venues I contacted were disappointing for other reasons. Glasgow's Tron Theatre seemed keen to chat but deferred contact due to upcoming Christmas shows. After a suitable period of waiting, contact was again attempted, but with no reply. It was therefore upsetting to find that they had instead become involved with a team they obviously regarded as having a better pedigree: The *Spooked Scotland* TV series. Michelham Priory in Sussex didn't respond to my survey, even though I was twice told that the property manager had been made aware of it. It was galling to find that, meanwhile, they had granted interviews to the press and, of course, regularly hired out the building to ghost hunting groups.

But a few venues did provide fascinating tales, sometimes resulting in reams of correspondence or lengthy phone calls.

What was fascinating was the nature of the stories. The majority of locations reported poltergeist-like activity, with very few recognisable human or animal forms being visible, and only black shapes being seen, usually human-sized and observed out of the corner of the eye. The most spectacular instance was at the Llindir Inn in Henllan, Wales. Here, the manageress was at the bar serving a few farmers when a massive black shadow rushed through the front door and into the back room; a search revealed nothing – and all three witnesses saw the same thing.

The quantity of experienced phenomena varied, with the majority of activity at the locations being fairly mundane: footsteps, interference with electrical equipment and so on. There were exceptions, with one of the best examples being Stamford's The Cellar Bar. The manager regaled me with

THE CENTRE'S BAR MANAGER TOLD ME THAT IN HIS 25 YEARS THERE HAD BEEN NO SIGHTINGS

an impressively long list of phenomena experienced during his tenure, from 1997 to 2018. He also told of some encounters in the main body of the Arts Centre, which had not been mentioned previously. But the manager of the whole building, whose time overlapped that of the bar manager, told me that in his 25 years there had been "no sightings anywhere". One wonders who is telling

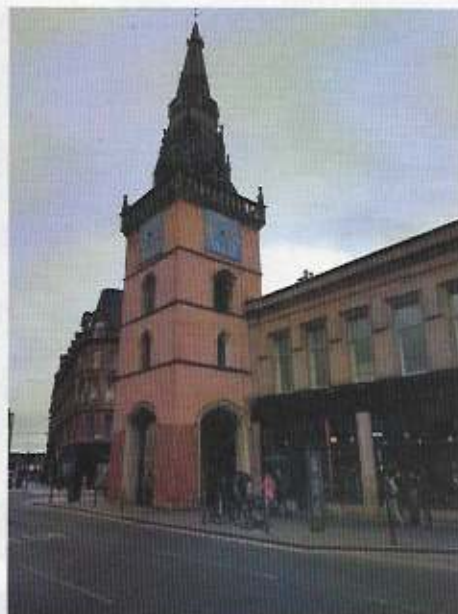
the truth.

The keeper at Berwick Town Hall also denied any "manifestations of uncleanness", even going so far as to question the accuracy of a paranormal researcher who had quoted him.

One gratifying aspect of the survey was the number of new locations it threw up, mainly via proprietors who said: "Nothing here – but did you know about my last place?"

A number of sites that frequently appear on 'Most Haunted' lists, such as The Ettington Park Hotel, told me that nothing had been reported for many years. It was abundantly clear that most listings of haunted sites are woefully out of date and are probably just recycled. Indeed, some places on newspaper lists have now changed

Venue type	Contactable venues	Tallied Statistics	
		Yes/probably	No/Probably not
Pubs & clubs	1020	183	17
Hotels, b&bs etc.	733	85	153
Restaurants	73	15	15
Royal ghosts	33	4	6
Tea rooms/coffee shops	30	6	9
Cinemas	0	1	0
Roman ghosts	3	0	1
Government & Council	35	2	11
Theatres & Music Venues	144	20	43
Museums (including art galleries & libraries)	220	38	110
Mansions	183	12	64
Castles	134	19	47
Miscellaneous	358	32	113



ABOVE LEFT: The Llinidr Inn in Henllan, Wales, provided fascinating reports of shadowy figures and poltergeist-like activity. ABOVE RIGHT: Glasgow's Tron Theatre didn't manage to respond to the survey, but were happy to get involved with the *Spooked Scotland* television programme.

names, been repurposed, closed or even been demolished. One wonders what could be gleaned if English Heritage, the National Trust or the press were willing to do some original research.

So, what are the results? The trend would seem to be clear and the basic figures are reproduced in the table on the previous page.

As one can see, in many of the categories the number of "no/probably not" responses was significantly larger than the "yes" replies. So why are more places not reporting their phantom residents? There are of course a number of reasons. Reports of hauntings may have been fictitious, merely rumours or hoaxes conducted to enhance trade.

Or the ghosts may have become dormant or extinct. Or the businesses may consider ghosts to be too low-brow or even damaging to business: we have seen possible examples of this above. Or perhaps the respondent's own personal beliefs may play a role; although it was amusing to receive responses from people who claimed to have no belief in ghosts, but admitted that they had witnessed phenomena that defied explanation.

Looking at these numbers, it would seem that the number of ghosts reported in the past has been massively overstated. They may have been there once, but things have been quiet for many years, if not decades.

It was striking to hear, many times, that the spectral status quo has altered only very recently.

SELLING SPIRITS

Coupled with the above survey, I also took the opportunity to inquire further about the ghostliness of various properties, but this time from an entirely commercial standpoint. Using a separate, fictitious profile, and posing as a prospective customer who wished to hire the venues for ghost

hunting activities, I inquired of locations that frequently appeared on the inventory of companies who offered ghost hunting tickets to the public. These were the ones aimed at the 'Most Haunted Wannabes' and using the same clichéd come-ons: "Dare you join us?" and the like.

When I made enquiries about costings, numbers and timings, a fair number of places that hadn't responded to my original queries about their ghosts were only too happy to get back quickly with hire fees; which leads to the depressing conclusion that they are only in it for the money. That, of course, is their prerogative. There was also a greater response than to my other survey.

The credibility of certain venues as genuinely haunted sites was certainly diluted by the impression that they might 'enhance' their location's reputation in order to entice ghost hunters. Surprisingly, some places that admitted to me (as a ghost hunter) that they had no activity to report appeared on commercial listings complete with exciting tales of ghostly phenomena. Had the original owners embellished the spooky stories to ensure that they would be hired, or had the hiring company done so? Either way, the truth appeared to be somewhat malleable. Also offered by many venues or organisers were 'pre-investigation tours' showing the most noted haunted spots, thereby influencing the expectations of the participants.

One surprising realisation was that many venues themselves charged reasonable fees for access, usually £10 per person or less. Most did ask commercial ghost groups for public liability insurance, references from previous locations, a deposit and sometimes a health and safety plan. But it seems that after the commercial groups had secured the location, the prices were extortionately, and sometimes scandalously, enhanced.

An excellent example is a small museum in King's Lynn that charges £200 for 30 people plus staff, so approximately £5.70 per person. The same place is often advertised by ghost groups at a rate of £35+ per person. The few groups that have replied to me via Facebook about this and similar price hikes, all give the same excuse; this is to cover insurance, expenses, websites and advertising costs. But this expenditure is normally spread out over the year and not just for one venue and surely cannot justify a pricing differential of over 600%. The true reason is simple: profit.

One wonders how many of the venues themselves actually know of the hikes. A few places did inflate the prices themselves. For instance, a venue in Newcastle-upon-Tyne used to charge £50 per group in 2003 and offered access for some nine hours for about 20 people. By 2022, the fee had increased to £395 per group for four hours, rising to £1,095 for 11 hours. There were plenty of similar examples. It's clear that such prices would deter many genuine researchers. Obviously one eye was being kept on the balance sheet rather than on the EMF meter.

The advent of televised ghost hunts has obviously made proprietors of reputedly haunted properties and organisers of commercial ghost hunts aware that they can generate huge sums from the gullible, and this shows no sign of abating. With the cost of living crisis sapping the nation's finances, prices remain steep and ghost hunting threatens to become an astronomically expensive pastime.

➡ DR PAUL LEE is currently working on two books, an expanded version of his west Norfolk ghosts volume and a gazetteer of over 900 haunted UK pubs. His website is www.paullee.com