CERTAIN NOCTURNAL DISTURBANCES

GHOST HUNTING BEFORE THE VICTORIANS

BY

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The front cover illustration is "Nunnery of Mannel or Emauel," drawn by Francis Grose. It appears in his *The Antiquities of Scotland,* vol. 2 (Printed for Hooper and Wigstead, 1797) between pp. 66-67. The back cover illustration is "Athenodorus Confronts the Spectre," drawn by Henry Justice Ford. It appears in Leonora Blanche Lang's *The Strange Story Book* (Longman's, Green, and Co., 1913) p. 81.

INTRODUCTION

Before the Victorians

The Victorian era began in 1837 and ended in 1901, the years that Queen Victoria ruled what was then called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. In this time and in this place, the question of why *ghosts* have tantalized and baffled humanity across the globe for millennia garnered serious, scholarly attention. Among those voices calling for such study was Catherine Crowe, who gathered a wide variety of reports about supernatural and occult experiences, then organized them into a surprisingly popular book titled *The Night Side of Nature; Or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (1848). Meanwhile, around 1850, a number of Cambridge University students began to meet with the intention of examining reports of hauntings. Apparently, not much came of the project, but it inspired the more formal Ghost Club, founded in 1862—and this led to the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882. The latter two organizations still exist today, and neither has confined its focus to only ghosts. Along with mesmerism, clairvoyance, and similar topics, both groups were especially motivated to validate or debunk the phenomena occurring at Spiritualist séances.

Consider, too, the contribution the Victorians made to the literary ghost-story tradition with writers such as Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), Charlotte Riddell (1832-1906), and Edith Nesbit (1858-1924). It's little wonder, then, that in the early 2000s, we envision the ectoplasm of ghosts swirling with the fog of Ripper-era London and sense something charming—yet slightly chilling—in those cornices, cupulas, and other

ornate flourishes of houses built during the 1800s. One might reasonably conclude that *ghost hunting* started in the Victorian era.

But there's a substantial history to this noble quest that predates the Victorians. In fact, the term *ghost hunt* and its derivations *ghost hunting* and *ghost hunter(s)* appear in pre-1837 publications with some regularity. The longer I look, the farther back in time I go, but so far one of the earliest uses I've unearthed is in Elizabeth Gunning's 1794 novel, *The Packet.* There, a character named Sir William Montreville interviews people who claim to have seen a specter at the local church. Though he's skeptical, Sir William joins with his servant to form what Gunning calls a "ghost-hunting party." Late at night, the duo patiently hide in one of the pews at the haunted site to conduct some nocturnal surveillance, the time-honored practice of ghost hunters. Other documents that use the term include 1804 newspaper and magazine articles about that year's Hammersmith Ghost case (covered in Chapter Seven of this book), an 1808 play, an 1817 book about premature burial, and an 1820 family history.[1] Remember that the term *ghost hunt* was quite likely spoken before written. Figure in any documents using it that have been lost or that remain untouched on dusty library shelves or in decaying trunks. With this in mind, I suspect various forms of ghost hunting were fairly well known with that label in Britain for about four or five decades before the Victorians.

Ghost hunting *teams* have a history that reaches back even further. They certainly looked differently than how we see them today on television, YouTube, and elsewhere, but Chapter Four addresses how assembling a committee to investigate claims of ghostly phenomena dates back at least to 1534. That's the year Francis I, King of France, appointed a group—a mix of clergy and lay people—to investigate claims that a church graveyard in Orleans was haunted. One of the most famous paranormal investigative teams was

assembled in 1762, when a ghost was purported to be visiting Cock Lane in London. I discuss this in Chapter Four.

All along, ghost hunters have had to position their work against those who insisted that phenomena being misinterpreted as *supernatural* or *paranormal* were, in actuality, entirely *natural* and pretty darned *normal.* Indeed, as we'll see, many important ghost hunters were among those seeking to debunk a haunting. It's misguided to assume that "everyone back then believed in ghosts," a sweeping generalization often aimed at people in some vague part of the past. An example of this appeared in 1863, when George Cruikshank described people of a century-and-a-half earlier this way: "The gullibility of the public was much greater at that time than now, and they would swallow anything in the shape of a ghost." As discussed in Chapter Three, Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680) was carefully *debating* such things about the time Cruikshank indicates. Even Pliny the Younger—a man born when years had only two digits and who died when they had three[2]—retold the story of a ghost hunt to someone he knew might think it questionable, if not complete baloney. (This ancient investigation is discussed in Chapter One.) In other words, debates about whether or not ghosts are real seem to be almost as old as recorded encounters with them. It is as if disagreement is embedded into the DNA of humanity.

The opposition faced by those working to prove the existence of ghosts leads to the need for sound, convincing evidence. A conscious pursuit of exactly that also comes before the Victorians. The above-mentioned Glanvill was an investigator who strongly believed in interaction between the supernatural and natural realms, but who also valued reliable, firsthand testimony supporting the reality of that interaction. We'll see that he applied this method to his investigation of a case commonly called "The Drummer of Tedworth."

Even the notion of the purposeless ghost—a ghost with

no clear mission for manifesting and no special message to convey—appears *prior* to the 1800s. This has been presented by some ghostlore scholars as something unique to the nineteenth-century.[3] However, in Chapter Five, I make the case that the Hinton Ampner haunting of the late 1760s features exactly this kind of phenomena despite various attempts to make the haunting fit the traditional pattern of a ghost returning to, say, guide the living to a hidden deed or to serve as observable evidence of the cursed existence following a sinful life.

In a nutshell, then, ghost hunting—its key methods, its main challenges, even the term itself—all predate the Victorian era.

Defining "Ghost Hunter"

Of course, all of this talk about pre-Victorian ghost hunting depends on clarification of who exactly constitutes a *ghost hunter*. The definition used in this book involves individuals who fit the following criteria:

1) Ghost hunters are not themselves the haunted party. Rather, they learn of a stranger's alleged haunting, travel to it, and make the necessary arrangements to investigate. A slight exception here is John Jervis. He investigated weird phenomena at Hinton Ampner, his sister's haunted manor. He didn't permanently reside there, but unlike most of the other ghost hunters I'll discuss, he was related to the residents. If this compromised his objectivity in any way, it might have been counterbalanced by his co-investigators, John Bolton and James Luttrell.

2) While some of the ghost hunters to be discussed have a clear bias for or against the possibility of spirits crossing between the dimensions, they all are

open-minded enough to bother investigating a situation in which such a crossing is suspected. Belief in ghosts might best be understood as existing on a sliding scale. Those on the far ends are so convinced, so rigid, they probably wouldn't bother confirming their convictions or risk having them challenged. The ghost hunters in this book might lean one way or the other—but they do so from somewhere in the middle of that scale.

3) They apply the basic, time-tested strategies of paranormal investigation. This often means interrogating witnesses and/or closely examining the site by listening to how sound travels through walls, vents, or chimneys; looking for evidence of rodents or similar animals; checking the pipes, etc. Almost always, it involves those overnight stakeouts that I call nocturnal surveillance.

My hope is that each of the historical figures I present reflects more than a glimmer of how ghost hunting is understood and conducted now in the early 21st century. Indeed, tracking the evolution of ghost hunting across the centuries might stir feelings of connection between ghost hunters still living and their very long, very fascinating heritage.

Getting All My Ghosts in a Row

The organization of this book is *not quite* chronological. First, it's divided by "Legendary Ghost Hunts" and "Historical Ghost Hunts." This might be slightly confusing, since the legends are historical and some might say the history is infused with legend, too. For the purpose of this book, the key difference is the legends are cases that had been shared orally for several decades before being put to paper. In other

words, there is no reliable documentation of the events *from the time* to suggest those events actually happened. Parson Ruddle's handling of a case often referred to as "The Botathen Ghost" is the most troublesome here, but I address those problems in Chapter Two.

The second section, then, features hauntings and investigations that were documented in writing close to when the events were happening. These cases *are* presented chronologically.

In most chapters, I open by carefully following the original sources to narrate a case's ghostly manifestations and the investigation of them. However, I do so in my own words while sometimes modernizing the language in quotations, which I also do throughout the book. The idea, of course, is to make these stories more easily accessible to my readers without the distractions of archaic punctuation, capitalization, etc. After presenting each case, I offer an analysis of it. This will focus on some recurring element of ghostlore—for example, bones substantiating a haunting—and/or how the investigation illustrates a facet of ghost hunting that is still relevant today—for example, the desire to find reliable evidence.

Despite my efforts to create order, I often found myself entranced by some element of a case and driven to explore that topic before returning to the main thread. It was very much like wandering through a haunted mansion and stepping into a room filled with, say, ghosts of headless horses. I felt compelled to have a closer look at those horses before returning to the hallway. (I'm still stymied by what their necks look like: bloody stumps? carefully sutured? smoothly congealed?) In this regard, this book might read a bit like my own ghost hunt through the long history of ghost hunting. Almost any exploration of history is, in a sense, a ghost hunt and vice versa.

This expedition will take us to several haunted houses, a haunted moor, a haunted field, a haunted neighborhood,

and one sadly *unhaunted* burial vault. At first, the specters we'll encounter are more folklore than fact. The later ones, though, are well documented. Some turn out to be hoaxes. All of them are *centuries* old. However, I don't think that the advanced age of these hauntings makes them any less important and intriguing than more recent ones. You might even find them a bit *more* so.

And I hope you'll discover the same about those who bravely and carefully investigated these old hauntings. They are the pillars of the ghost hunting tradition.

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[1] Elizabeth Gunning, *The Packet: A Novel,* vol. 4 (Printed for J. Bell, 1794) p. 5. Regarding the Hammersmith case, see "Melancholy Accident," *True Briton,* January 6, 1804, p. 4, and "Domestic Incidents," *Universal Magazine* 1 (January 1804) p. 63. The play is D. Lawler's *The School for Daughters* (Printed for the author by R. Juigné, 1808) p. 50. The books are John Snart's *Thesaurus of Horror: Or, The Charnel House Explored!!!* (Sherwood, Neely, Jones, 1817) p. 166, and Henry Nugent Bell's *The Huntington Peerage* (Printed for Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1820) p. 251.

[2] George Cruikshank, *A Discovery Concerning Ghosts; With a Rap at the "Spirit Rappers"* (Frederick Arnold, 1863) p. 6. The actual dates of Pliny's birth and death are circa 61 CE and circa 113 CE respectively.

[3] See Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894) p. 95, and R.C. Finucane, *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead & Cultural Transformation* (Prometheus, 1996) pp. 194-204.