

# **THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT!**

## **(GHOST STORIES OF MIDDLETON CHENEY)**

What is a ghost? We might say an event recording itself on the surrounding area, replayed if the circumstances and the situation are suitable, (like a video / DVD) to those in the right time and place. A glimpse of energy from the past re-enacted. A life cut tragically short by murder, execution, illness, accident or suicide, before its allotted time. A sense of wrong to be put right, whether by revenge or justice. Perhaps unable to leave a place much attached to in life, it can either be seen as a vague white shape shimmering and fluttering over a field or a road, or clothed in a darker transparent garb. It can be felt as a chill current of air, or as a weight sinking on a bed. It can be heard as a whisper, shriek or sob. Of all the beliefs that our ancestors had, this is the one that has survived and intrigues us just as much today, and the ancient buildings and winding, isolated country lanes and pockets of woodland of our county are ideal places for the imagination to wander - or is it imagination?

### **THE SNOB AND GHOST**

Our first story from Middleton Cheney has been recorded in Bill Wheeler's Book entitled Grist For the Mill. Bill recalled that his mother had taken over the family business when her parents died. Richard and Mary Ann Spencer had been landlords of a pub in Church Lane since 1882. This business originally had no name, although it was sometimes referred to as, 'The Nest,' but about the time of the First World War a local agent from Hunt Edmunds brewery in Banbury had called to inform Mary Ann that all public houses should be registered with some sort of 'title'. Bill's mother remembered a story that the previous occupant of the house, which was now their pub, was a shoemaker who supposedly committed suicide in one of the upstairs rooms. The previous residents had allegedly seen his ghost although none of the Wheeler family had received a visit from a supernatural being. Consequently the pub became known as 'The Snob & Ghost' Shoemakers had generally been known as 'snobs' in Northamptonshire but the origin of this term is obscure. Census records show that this house had indeed been occupied by a John Braginton and his son James, the occupations of both being that of shoemaker. So... could there be any truth behind this story?

### **'DING DONG BELL, WHO'S IN THE WELL?'**

In the 1940s there was a row of very old cottages situated in Braggingtons Lane, opposite the site of an arched well in the road, (still visible). Nowadays an attractive property stands on this site; built, we are led to believe, using the old stone from some of the cottages, particularly a fireplace in the new house.

The old cottages were occupied by various well known Middleton families, the Preedy's, Taylors and the Rodhouses. A passage-way divided the cottages, next were the Harvey family, and finally John Aries and family. Stood back a little was a house where Ben Merry lived and further on up the road was the Jarvis's. Opposite the Jarvis household was the home of Sam Taylor. The cottages were in time, condemned and some of the residents were re-housed in The Avenue. The floors of these cottages were made of earth and the entry to them was along an old brick path (the remains of which can still be seen). These cottages only had one door at the rear and all were accessed via the old path.

A past resident of one of these cottages (and the narrator of this story), still lives in the village today and was then a little girl aged about 8 years old. She distinctly recalls being told to go to bed one cold wintry night by her mother, and on her way to the stairs she saw to her surprise a small girl sitting on one of the steps reading a book. She was dressed in dark clothes with a white apron over and had fair hair done up in ringlets. The little girl who was sat on the stairs looked up from her book to the child of the house and smiled. The child of the house was so startled by the presence, she shouted for her mother and said, 'I've seen a ghost, I've seen a ghost!' Her mother told her very calmly, not to be so silly, there was no such thing as ghosts and to hurry up and get to bed! When she looked again the apparition had disappeared.

This experience happened several times for the child of the house and to this day she says if she was to see her ghost again she would recognise her instantly, the image is so clear, and she can still see her face!

Who was the little girl reading a book sat on the stairs...?

More recent occupants of the property on the site of the old cottages have said that they have never felt happy or at ease in their home, one room of the house being always cold and with a general feeling of unrest prevailing! An unwanted presence being felt, a feeling they could not explain.

A story circulates, that a small girl was pushed down the well opposite the cottages in a game that was being played, but the game went terribly wrong and the little girls' body was never recovered.

Could this be the little girl that our past resident saw on her way to bed that cold wintry night...?

### **THE TRAUNSELL GHOST**

Bill Wheeler also told the story of a village legend known as the 'Traunsell Ghost.' He relates that one evening a butcher known as 'Tip' Wilkins together with a companion, Purcell had been to Chacombe to slaughter some pigs and they were returning, late in the evening along the Chacombe Road. As they reached the top of Traunsell Hill ( near the present day golf-course), an eerie shape appeared on top of a gate illuminated in the moonlight. A strange noise was emitted from the ghostly

apparition whereupon the terrified pair took to their heels. Their flight was considerably hampered by the rough surface of the road and the clumsiness of their ill-shod feet. The ghost glided effortlessly along behind. Tip, not daring to look, called to his companion, 'Purcell, is he still coming!'

'Ye-es!' came the reply from his terrified friend, who by now had cut his toes so his own wails were added to that of the ghost.

Eventually the apparition vanished and the two gentlemen made their way to their home in Lower Middleton, near Salmons Lane where they rushed in to the house of their neighbour, Steve (Richardson) who was smoking his pipe in front of the fire. The two breathless and terrified friends related their experience to him - and no doubt continued their tale in the nearby New Inn and the story of the 'Traunsell Ghost' came into being.

Steve Richardson however, had the reputation of being something of a cross-country runner and was not adverse to the occasional practical joke. Only a few onlookers noticed the glint in his eye and the occasional shaking of his shoulders as his friends related their ghost story, whilst he quietly continued to smoke his pipe by the fire.

#### HORSEMEN RIDING BY

The Braggins family had some stories to tell, although it may just be that their Dad had a great imagination! About fifty years ago, whenever the children walked back up the hill from Chacombe late in the evening he would tell them to look out for a white horse and it's rider, seen galloping across the fields which now are now part of the golf course (near the present day garage). Of course this story was quite frightening to young children and they always hurried past the hedges bordering this area, so it might just have been a cunning ploy by their Dad to stop them loitering on the way home! Their father also told them that they must not touch a white stone which sat on the steps of the house called Rose Hall, located in the lane with the same name. The children were really scared as they were warned that if they laid a finger on this stone they would disturb the resident, 'Ghost of Rose Hall.' Another tale refers to a headless horseman who rides down Blacklocks Hill as midnight strikes when a full moon is in the sky. The hapless rider carries his head underneath his arm and if you should be unfortunate enough to spot this eerie apparition you will be assassinated! Other families also claim to have seen this rider and have said that the horseman comes across the fields from the Warkworth Castle / Overthorpe direction.

#### 'NAN GAN'

Another ghostly apparition was referred to by members of the Aris family who spoke of a local witch known as 'Nan Gan' who appears on Hallowe'en night near the barns in Carpenters Lane, situated along an old track which led across the fields towards the old Farthinghoe railway line. (Nowadays the Middleton by-pass cuts across the old path). This story has been confirmed by other village residents who have said that Nan Gan was in fact an old shepherdess who lived in a hut out in the fields. The remains of some sort of hut or hovel could be seen in the top left hand corner of a field named Valenciennes. As children, the people who related this story were always told that Nan Gan haunted Carpenters Lane.

#### A STRANGER AT THE DOLPHIN

Not so many years ago one of the landlords at The Dolphin was having a quiet drink in the bar, accompanied by a friend at the end of a busy evening. As they were chatting a lady dressed in an old fashioned, dark blue or black dress walked past them, through the pub, entering by the old front door which is now located behind the bar. At the time the landlord did not consider this strange but suddenly turned to his friend and said, 'Did you see that? The friend confirmed that she hadn't but that she had suddenly felt very cold. The landlord had been resident at the pub for about six years and had never had a similar experience before. However, when he told some of his regulars the tale they said that they were not surprised as they already knew of the mystery lady. Evidently local legend has it that she is, 'Old Mrs Waters,' a regular customer who always used to sit on the right hand side of the window sipping her way through a crate of Guinness. A number of residents claim to have seen this lady in the same area of the pub and also in the passageway that runs along the side of the main building.

Incidentally recent research has revealed that, in everyday life, 45% of the British public use the Guinness advertising slogan, 'Good Things Comes to Those Who Wait'. It would seem that the ghost of Mrs Waters indicates that this saying is also applicable to the after-life...

#### A REGULAR AT THE NEW INN

Martin Howes remember when the landlady at the New Inn, in lower Middleton was Edna Hume. Edna was an interesting character in her own right and used to work in the linen factories up north (winding the bobbins). Edna maintained that the image of a face could be seen in the polished wood of the old door which led down to the cellar. She always said that the face on the door was 'Old Nep,' who used to sit in one of the original old seats in the window at the front of the pub. Martin said the face was on the door where the dart board used to hang. Old Nep was William James Gascoigne who lived for many years at the bottom of Glovers Lane, and previously in a cottage at the bottom of Thenford Road near the Police Station. A shoemaker by trade, he was also employed by the Parish Council as the last of the official village criers, there is a photograph of him in Len Jerrams' book about Middleton Cheney.

Len also wrote the story about the Rector telling Nep that he was concerned that he visited the village pubs too frequently. The Rector went on to ask him if he could refrain from this activity, whereupon Nep reminded the Rector that if it was not for people like him (*buying a pint on a regular basis*), All Saint's Church would be without an organ! (The money for the organ had been donated to the Church in 1871 by Mr. Hunt of The Holt - Mr Hunt was one of the directors of the Hunt Edmunds

Brewery in Banbury). It would seem, from our story, that Old Nep may have continued to 'frequent' the pub for many years after his demise...

### THE WRITER IN THE RECTORY

A lady in the village worked as a night-time care assistant in the Nursing Home in Middleton Cheney which was originally the old Rectory. When one of her colleagues who lived outside the village started work there, her friends told her that a previous Rector had been a writer and that his ghost could be heard at night, tapping away at his typewriter. This lady was also told that the said gentleman had committed suicide. Research has shown that a brilliant writer had, in fact, lived at the Rectory. The Dictionary of National Biography, (Volume 10) includes William Ralph Churton, the third son of the Reverend Ralph Churton, Rector of Middleton Cheney. William was a prolific writer and had a brilliant university career, receiving many prestigious awards for Latin and the Classics between 1820 and 1825. However he did not commit suicide but died of consumption (*tuberculosis*), on the 29th August 1828, at his father's rectory at the early age of twenty seven. A tablet was raised two years later by some college friends in St Mary's Church, Oxford. So this story is based on some facts but if this is the writer who can be heard at night he must have been a man ahead of his time - the typewriter did not come in to common use until the 1880s; fifty years after the demise of William Ralph Churton.

### MAN'S BEST FRIEND

The residents of an old house at the Main Road end of Royal Oak Lane have recently related a story of a friendly dog who 'resides' in their house. Their house used to be a 'bottle pub' (the predecessor to an off-license), which was known as The Royal Oak. In fact there used to be the remains of a Hook Norton Brewery plaque set into the outside wall. When the family moved in they often heard a dog pattering across the floor in the upstairs bedroom and the sound of the animal as it settled in it's bed in the corner. Sometimes they heard it as it made it's way downstairs and on one occasion a child visiting the house remarked, 'Oh look Mummy—a doggie!' Yet the family did not own a dog of their own.

Sometime later, the family removed some fitted cupboards which ran along the wall of their bedroom, revealing the plaster which needed replacing. When the wall was cleared a fireplace was revealed, along with a small cupboard and a window that would have originally been external but now opened in to the loft of a later extension to the cottage. The fireplace was near to the corner where their canine 'resident' had his bed. Their younger son also told his parents that he had seen a mystery lady in the room, possibly dressed as a servant; she had appeared through the wall where a doorway would have been located when the house was built. In olden days, bedrooms were accessed by connecting doors, there would have been no corridor.

### A BUN IN THE OVEN

Employees who work in the offices in lower Middleton Cheney which used to be the farm belonging to the Lord family have reported that they often experience the strong and pleasant smell of baking on the premises. The Lord family had occupied the farmhouse (originally called Home Farm but later renamed Appletree Farm) for more than one hundred and fifty years, through four generations, before the large old-fashioned farmhouse was sold and is now used for business premises. The Lords have always continued the farming tradition in a happy and loving family, could the evocative smell of baking linger when the residents have all departed from such a contented household?

### GRANNY GHOST

The following account was written by Freda Hill of Litchfield, Staffordshire; a descendant of the Brownsill family who resided in Middleton Cheney in the 1890s and the early 1900s:-

After my retirement I decided to research my family history and planned to visit the village and to spend the day taking photographs etc. and possibly speak to people who might still remember the family. My great-grandfather, John Brownsill, came into the village from Marston St Lawrence where he was born and purchased a whole row of cottages in Queen Street. The family appear on the 1861 census and John Brownsill is listed as a Landed Proprietor (landowner). He and his wife Sophia lived in one of these cottages and had 3 sons - John, David (my grandfather) and Benjamin. They are buried in Middleton churchyard. I understand that my grandmother remained at either the house which became the most recent post office (closed in 2010), or the house next door until she died in 1937. To tell you briefly about my mothers family; Marjorie's parents (my grandparents) David and Elizabeth were very active in the village. David, was a Church organist and choir master. He was also the local Scoutmaster and a school attendance officer and he had a pony and trap which he would hire out for journeys to Banbury and other local places. Elizabeth, his wife was the post mistress and they employed a maid to help around the house, a dwarf named Emily.

Dorethea, my mother's sister had died at the age of eighteen months before Marjorie (my mother) was born, so she was bought up as an only child. I did not know my grand parents as they had died before I was born.

I went to the church yard first on the day of my visit and took a photo of the family grave, I also went inside the church. I then wandered along Queen Street to the Post Office, which seemed quite familiar as our family album contained a number of pictures of this quiet street at the turn of the century. When we reached the Post Office I asked my husband to take a photograph and we crossed over the road to position ourselves to do so but for no apparent reason the camera, which had been functioning perfectly, would not work.

After various, frustrating attempts we decided that perhaps a new battery was needed. So we went into the Post Office where we were greeted by two ladies behind a post office counter, however there was no general shop. Lorraine, the post mistress asked why we were so interested in the building and I told her the story of it being my family home. Initially she went a little pale then produced an old photograph and it was my turn to pale as the picture showed Elizabeth my grandmother; Emily, the maid and my mother aged about seven years old. The likeness to my own daughter, Joanna to the young girl in the photograph (her Grandmother Marjorie i.e. my Mother), at that same age was startling.

Lorraine went on to tell me that her family had experienced a 'presence' in the Post Office and had regularly had items moved to different places, they had also noticed strange smells in parts of the house – polish, coal and ink. Her family, although not greatly disturbed by the presence, had persuaded her to find out who had lived there before and hence the discovery of the old picture that they had been recently given by the local historian.

After we had continued visiting places within the village and talking to various people who may have remembered my family, Lorraine invited me back for a cup of tea in my own grandmother's parlour. It was a magical experience and far beyond anything I dreamed of when I started out on my family history project. I was guided around every room; attic, bedrooms etc. and the garden. I did not feel anything - no 'presence' just a lovely warm friendly feeling and a vague sense of 'coming home'.

On returning home to Lichfield, Staffordshire I reflected on the day and promised Lorraine and family that we would stay in touch and perhaps see them again one day. My phone call to them two weeks later left me stunned - the ghost of my grandmother no longer was at the Post Office.

They suggested that I had taken 'Granny Ghost' home with me - but I confess I have no experience of that. I just remember the day that my camera would not work and in order to solve the problem I went into the post office...

(My mother Marjorie Brownsill was born at the Post Office in Queen Street, Middleton Cheney in 1903. Elizabeth Brownsill (my grandmother) died in 1937 - I was born in 1942...)

#### SO - WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do our ancestors ask to be discovered and understood? Can they guide us in order to have their stories told? Is it luck? Coincidence? Or is there a psychic dimension or sixth sense to the research process? Whatever it is, its role in genealogical research is far too important to ignore, especially since so many of us have experienced it in one form or another.

THE HELLFIRE CLUB - This story has a Middleton Cheney connection and is taken from the website known as The Dark Archivist, a project of the Oxford Record Office.

A mysterious event took place in Oxford in 1820s when the ultimate villain, the Devil allegedly made an appearance in Brasenose Lane.

A group of undergraduates had formed the Brasenose Hell Fire Club based on the notorious High Wycombe Club during the 18th century. They gathered together in the rooms of one another to drink themselves silly, and not only that. The Club attacked all aspects of society and in particular they attacked religion. It was part of their meetings to yell insults at God and to drink to damnation and the devil.

Then one evening they met in the rooms of one of their members with the windows leading out on to Brasenose Lane (a dark alleyway between Turl Street and Radcliffe Square).

Vice Principal and Fellow of the college, Thomas Townson Churton, (eldest son of the Reverend Ralph Churton of Middleton Cheney), was walking home down the lane as the meeting was taking place. Outside the window of one of the college rooms, he thought he could see a shadowy figure – a tall man in a long black cloak.

Something about the man made him want to turn back, but he kept going and as he did, he saw something – something that wasn't possible!

The tall figure was helping a student out of the window. That was illegal in itself but it was also against the laws of nature. The windows had thick bars at six inch intervals, no human being could get out between them.

The figure being squeezed out through the bars was screaming and Churton recognised him. It was one of the leading members of the Hellfire Club.

Churton raced round the building and hammered on the main gate. When the porter let him in he gasped that they must go to the student's rooms at once. They ran across the quad, but were too late; as they reached the door it burst open. Members of the Hellfire Club came rushing out in terror. Churton and the porter pushed their way past and entered the rooms. On the floor, a student lay dead, his face twisted with fear; it was the man Churton had seen being dragged through the bars.

The other members of the Club told him that the student had lifted his glass in a toast to the Devil and against God and as he did so he had suddenly screamed and collapsed. The inquest said he'd died of heart failure but Churton always remembered what he'd seen in Brasenose Lane...

(Edward Trafford, the President of the Brasenose Hell Fire Club did die that night and is still in college records).