

# FORTEAN CROYDON

To describe a thing as Fortean means it's just plain strange. Charles Fort, an American, collected stories of inexplicable events from around the world. It caught on, and Forteans, as the people he inspired have come to be known, are active in the UK, with an almost annual conference in London called the Fortean Times UnConvention (get it?). ASSAP has appeared there most years as a side show, whether introducing visitors to the rigours of paranormal investigation, organizing the runaway success that was the Paranormal Olympics, or encouraging people to pose for a photo with their own orb. To find out more about Fortean activities in the UK and elsewhere, check out the website of the *Fortean Times*, the UK-based Fortean journal, at [www.forteanimes.com](http://www.forteanimes.com).



The Fortean Times' Bob Rickard tries his hand at dowsing

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Of Monsters and Miracles



Alan poses with some UnConventional orbs

# SCARE BEARS AND OTHER CREATURE FEATURES

**Cryptozoology is the study of out-of-place or unknown animals. Most are known to science, many turn up in the wrong place and cause mayhem. Some sightings will be explained, others explained away. A few remain to baffle scientists. These include ABCs or 'alien big cats'. 'Alien' is used here in the sense of out of place, not extraterrestrial, although some researchers have suggested that these pesky felines can cross from one reality to another. That would explain why they're rarely caught, but it's impossible to prove. By the way, the 'Surrey puma' has never been reported near Croydon, so maybe it respects the 1965 boundary changes and knows not to cross into London. And the 2005 Sydenham big cat stayed to our north.**

## BEAR GOLF

In 1961 a group of four golfers spotted a 'big black animal' in the autumn mist on Croham Hurst golf course. One of them bravely moved closer to get a better view. He ran back and told them it was a bear. He judged it to be about 3' tall. It then disappeared into the woods as the golfers peered at it across the field. The police were called out by the former mayor of Croydon, Alderman Monk, a member of the golf club, because he thought the bear might frighten women and children. No trace of the mystery animal was found. The police suggested it was a large dog, while the report in the *Croydon Times* mentioned the presence of large male badgers in the wood. Fingers were also pointed at local Saint Bernard dogs.

## CARMO'S MENAGERIE

In the 1920s 'Carmo Manor' on the Ham Farm Estate in Shirley was owned by the Great Carmo, an Australian music hall illusionist, juggler and circus owner whose real name was Henry Cameron. His menagerie was housed there when it wasn't touring, and the men from Carmo's Circus would often wash the

elephants in the old estate pond. Some neighbours would complain about the lions and tigers roaring at night, but most locals enjoyed seeing sea lions swimming in the pond. An elephant also reportedly helped pull a lorry out of the mud on a path.

There is a story that an insurance man had to visit a poultry farmer near The Glade in 1928. There were paths and cart tracks, with overhanging trees. He lost his way and had to follow a narrow footpath. He came face to face with a bear on its hind legs - but it turned out that it was on a lead, being exercised by Carmo's men.

When a woman rang the police station to report an escaped leopard, the duty sergeant was on the point of organizing a full-scale leopard hunt. The creature had been seen to force its way through a hedge and then jump over a fence. Stopping for a moment to check the facts, he rang Carmo's and found they had no leopards. The circus's dalmatian dog had apparently slipped out during training for a new act, so the late afternoon winter's light was accused of

turning a dog into a vision of a leopard.

Carmo was ruined when his Big Top caught fire in Birmingham and he had to leave the farm. He died in England in 1944. One local reportedly used an old tiger cage as a tool shed. If you're looking for Carmo Manor on a map, you won't find it as it has since been covered by a housing estate.

## ESCAPE FROM THE BLAZING PALACE

Two stories of animals surviving against all odds date from 1936, when the Crystal Palace was destroyed in a blaze. The Palace cat had already been rescued, but she dashed back into the burning building several times to save her kittens, before being restrained by firemen.

The indoor pool with its goldfish was famous. It was assumed that the fish would have been boiled to death during the fire, but legend has it that they were found next day alive and swimming around, but blackened.

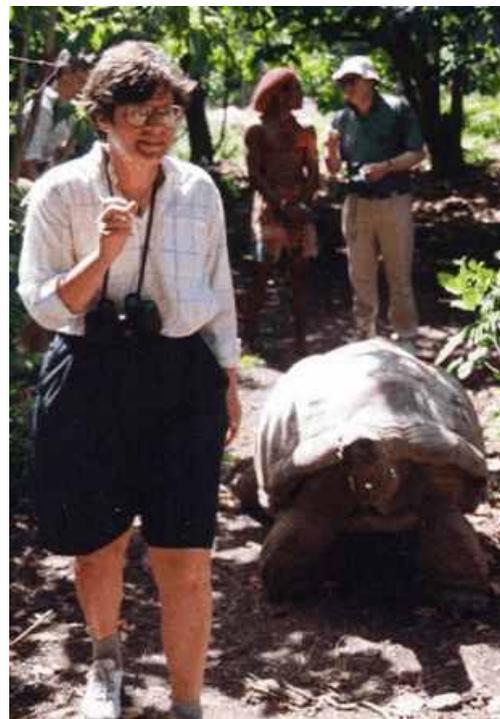
According to historian Muriel Searle, quoted in the *Croydon Guardian* in 1991, both these stories turned out to be true. The aviary's occupants didn't have such good luck - although people managed to get to the cages to free them, most of the birds were overcome by smoke. These days the most obvious animals at Crystal Palace are the Mesozoic saurians and early mammals in the lakes. These were the world's first dinosaur sculptures, produced by Waterhouse Hawkins with advice from palaeontologist Richard Owen.

In another article in the *Croydon Guardian*, this time dating from 1998, it is reported that one of the Palace's elephants went on the rampage in

February 1900, smashing partitions, tables and glass walls. It killed a keeper and was shot. A report in *The Spear* asked 'What is worse than a bull in a china shop? Elephants in the Crystal Palace!'

## ARCHIEPISCOPAL TORTOISE

This is not a tale of a tortoise causing pandemonium and death, but an account of amazing longevity and the unreliability of second-hand accounts. According to Yvonne Walker in *Lords of Croydon Palace*, Archbishop Laud's pet tortoise was accidentally killed by a gardener 108 years after the prelate was executed for treason during the Commonwealth. It had foraged in Croydon Palace gardens before being moved to Lambeth Palace. The animal's shell is said to be preserved in Lambeth. According to the Tortoise Reserve's website, this tortoise was released in the



George the tortoise, Seychelles garden at Lambeth at an unknown age in 1633, and two different labels on the

shell place its death at 1730 and 1753. Another source gives the year of the tortoise's death as 1750. To confuse matters further, a book review on *The Spectator's* website in 2005 said it was a giant tortoise, not the smaller Greek tortoise.

If it was a giant tortoise, how about this for a coincidence - on holiday in Seychelles a few years ago I met the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, who was very much taken with a giant tortoise who happened to be called George. What is it about archbishops and tortoises? In addition to George the Seychelles tortoise, my photo shows a Canadian academic, not me, plus George the Archbishop chatting to the resident naturalist.

### THE CROYDON MONSTER

Not exactly an animal, the 'Croydon Monster' stalked the streets around the old General Post Office (on the site of the Hare and Hounds) in Purley Way in Waddon in 1803. Dressed in a black mask and cape, he attacked over 50 people, escaping by leaping over 12-foot walls. This brief report from the *Croydon Guardian* in 1992 is all I have managed to discover, although a report in the *Croydon Times* in 1921 mentions a post office opening on the site of the Hare and Hounds in 1816. Can anyone shed any light on this?

### FIERCE FOXES

In 1996 the local newspapers reported the story of how an old grey fox in Norbury had sat on a pram and bitten a baby. The mother was the only witness to the attack and insisted it was a fox, despite claims by wildlife experts that it was totally out of character for foxes. People came out for and against urban foxes. A local fox expert claimed the marks were not consistent with fox

bites. Nurses from Mayday Hospital confirmed the injury was a bite, but didn't name the culprit. The family had contacted Croydon Council about the danger of foxes when their baby was born, as they reportedly dreaded such a thing happening. The foxes were due to be dealt with by humane trapping, testing for diseases and then release into a more rural area. Croydon Council subsequently produced advice on discouraging foxes.

### CANINE RESCUE

An Addiscombe dog overcame its own disability in 2005 to rescue an elderly woman who had fallen. The 7-year-old German Shepherd dog, which goes by the name of Trooper, had suffered spinal collapse in 2004 and had limited movement in his back legs. When he realized that fragile Edith couldn't get up again, he dragged himself up the stairs, pushed a bedroom door open and raised the alarm by barking at Edith's sleeping son.

### NOT JUST A PRETTY POLLY

A parrot from Sutton called Jem would presumably turn his beak up at such feeble pooch heroics. This red lory was clever enough to call 'fire' back in 2001 when he saw smoke coming from a room. Jem's squawking gave his owners enough time to call the Fire Brigade and evacuate the family's remaining pets from the house before they could be harmed.

# FALLING OBJECTS

**A Fortean classic, but I've not found many reports from Croydon. The *Fortean Times* has published reports of strange stuff found lying around, seemingly after falling out of the sky - bits of aeroplane, blocks of ice, fish, dead birds, fine scatterings of Saharan sand caught up by the wind. However, in Croydon on a Friday evening it looks as if we have pizza boxes and burger cartons falling out of the sky.**

In 1998 a pensioner pulled back her curtains to see the garden and street covered in dead frogs. She rang the Meteorological Office in Bracknell to report it, but didn't give her name. A spokesman said that she had sounded very distressed. The Met Office said it had rained heavily overnight and there were 'unstable conditions which you would need for this to happen'. A mini tornado would be needed to 'suck aquatic life from a pond and then deposit it elsewhere'. See our next article for a fuller account by Phil Walton, originally published in *ASSAP News* No. 67 of May 1998.

It's not just frogs and fish that fall - blocks of ice have been known to crash out of the sky. In 1995 the *Croydon Advertiser* reported that a man's conservatory had been hit by a lump of ice three times the size of a football. He heard it crash through the roof. The Civil Aviation Authority said they received about 20 such reports each year, the ice usually coming from a 'leaky valve, around which freezing water accumulates at high altitudes'. Insurance redress was only possible if the aeroplane could be identified.

I'll add more reports as I come across them.

## SHIRLEY HIT BY FLYING FROGS

**Shirley, not an unfortunate female but a district of Croydon, was reportedly the victim of a frog fall in early spring. An elderly lady phoned the local meteorological office and asked if there had been any unusual winds in the area. She went on to say that the lawn was covered with frogs, but rang off without leaving her details.**

The Met Office then contacted the local papers and the story grew legs, in this case frog's legs. Several papers reported that a Fortean event had occurred, namely a frog fall. A closer examination of this statement leads to some curious observations. The lady said that the lawn was covered with frogs. Why not newts, fish or aquatic plants as well? What agent could have lifted frogs out of a nearby pond? Could it be that the frogs sensed the event that was about to happen and gathered on a lily pad, ready to be whisked off?

Such behaviour indeed sounds strange, but I think I have heard of and witnessed enough Fortean events to believe in them. Over a decade ago, Orpington was the victim of a straw fall

that covered the high street and unsuspecting shoppers with straw from a local farm. The event made it into the main evening weather forecast. I came out of work one evening only to find my car and many others covered with red sand. Next day the papers were full of the story of the Sahara sand being whisked up by a freak wind into the high atmosphere and deposited over south-east England.

Despite all that, I find it difficult to come to terms with a selective force whisking up a small crowd of waiting frogs only to drop them onto a nearby lawn. Of course it could be a malicious prank by some children, but I think I have a far better solution. For one thing, the lady never said that she saw the frogs fall. It has just been assumed that, because she did not have a pond and the lawn was covered in frogs, the frogs had fallen out of the sky. Also, she did not mention seeing them on a roof or in a tree, which might have implied such a fall.

When not working on ASSAP investigations, I run a gardening business. One early spring about five years ago we were presented with the unpleasant sight of dead frogs on our customers' lawns. While only some of the customers had ponds, what they all did have in common was lots of dead frogs that had apparently been making their way from ponds as if they had become hydrophobic. Worried that I had poisoned the frogs with the fertiliser applied the previous week, I investigated and found that other local gardens, with or without ponds, had the same problem even when the entire garden was left to nature. Then on Radio Four's natural history programme an expert spoke about widespread deaths of frogs caused by a parasite

either viral, bacterial or fungal.

Over the years more articles have appeared in the media about these sudden outbreaks that leave whole areas devoid of frogs. I think that what was witnessed by the lady was exactly what I witnessed many years ago, namely an outbreak of this illness, and not a selective wind that gathered up a small band of eagerly waiting frogs. So, next time you are out feeding leftover breadcrumbs to the birds, beware. If it is a poor news day you could start reports of a plague of falling loaves.

## PARACHUTING TEDDIES

On 17 September 2005 the Croydon air was due to be full of parachuting teddy bears, so any reports of strange objects in the sky and on the ground around Old Town can be explained without too much trouble. But who would intentionally fill the skies with teddies on parachutes? The culprit you're looking for is the parish church of St John the Baptist. Croydonians will be joining in the celebrations of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Anglican Diocese of Southwark With teddy bears. As one does. Has anyone ever asked a teddy bear what religion it belongs to and whether it wants to plunge to the ground from a tall building? Sooty and his chums often visit the Fairfield Halls, but I expect they'll be boycotting the venue for a while for health and safety reasons.

# CROYDON MONSTER, MARK II

**More monsters came to Croydon in 1995 when the *Fortean Times* held an exhibition in Croydon Clocktower. Entitled 'Of Monsters and Miracles', it highlighted the uncharted wonders of the world, brought in at great expense from museums around the world.**

The show, advertised as 'The World's First Exhibition of Strange Phenomena', included cabinets of artefacts from Victorian séances, including apports and objects that had been moved as if by ectoplasm; alien creatures; interactive displays; tools used by the likes of Doug and Dave to create crop circles; and a cutlery-covered 1976 Cadillac loaned by Uri Geller, who was there on the opening night to demonstrate his metal-bending skills. The cutlery had belonged to Jackie Kennedy, Picasso, Salvador Dali, Tony Curtis, Liberace and others.

The *Croydon Advertiser* listed exhibits such as a haunted tea dress, a weeping statue, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century accordion once played by a spirit, the haunted boots of a seaman that walk by themselves, and tiny fairy coffins from 1835. Visitors could try out dowsing or sit in a row of hair dryer hoods to hear astonishing true stories. Some exhibits fell from the sky, such as fish from 1984, and others were described as having been thrown by ghosts. There were weird creatures such as the rare jackalope, an antlered rabbit now believed to be extinct but which may persist in pockets of Wyoming, where whisky is rumoured to help seekers find it. Looking remarkably tame in her glass case (and with a smile on her face) was Felicity, a stuffed puma. She was captured in Inverness-shire in 1980 and taken to a wildlife park to live out her days. Her mortal remains can now be seen in Inverness museum.

During the run of the exhibition additional attractions the organizers lined up were a lecture on dowsing and table tilting by ASSAP's own Alan Cleaver, a well-known psychical



A skeleton listens to a shaggy dog

researcher with a side-line in stage magic and journalism. Alan launched ASSAP's Project Albion a number of years ago, so see ASSAP's website for news of where to read about his research.