

HAUNTED CROYDON

For many people, ghosts and hauntings are things that actually happen to people, no doubt about it. The spirits of dead people return to cause trouble or look for lost possessions, or maybe to play out a tragic scene over and over again. For others, ghosts belong to the world of fiction, whether Victorian fireside tales or Hollywood adventures. Which camp do you belong to? For or against? Spooked or unspooked? Or do you consider there might be a different set of explanations altogether?



Sheldon's tomb, Croydon Parish Church

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CROYDON'S BEST-KNOWN GHOST STORIES

Some of our undead citizens deserve a mention. Or do they? Were what we call ghosts ever alive? Well, would you want to hang around your local once you'd died? The *Evening Standard* in 1992 ran an article on Croydon called 'Suburb of the living dead' - I hasten to add that it was about our ghosts. Whatever your opinion on ghosts and hauntings, it's likely it has been influenced by sensationalist or fictionalised media reports, TV programmes and Hollywood films.

It seems there's nothing people like doing more these days than going to a haunted location and scaring themselves silly. What do we learn from that? Not a jot. People take photos of 'orbs' with digital cameras and claim these are the first stage in the manifestation of a ghost. Where did they get that theory from? A psychic they've seen on TV? Or their own observations and research? The sceptics (and camera manufacturers) will tell you that people didn't take pictures of orbs before digital cameras, but orb fans will contradict that. And some claim that they saw the orb before taking its photo, although it's usual for the orb to be spotted later, when the photos have been downloaded onto the computer. Video footage is also claimed to show orbs passing through walls or behaving intelligently.

The Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP) was formed in 1981 and over the years has had many anomalous photos submitted to it for explanation. Orbs only showed up when digital cameras started to be carried around on vigils. ASSAP is now launching the Orbit

research project to get to the bottom of this phenomenon. See www.assap.org for more.

People are known to be unreliable observers, and it's the same whether they're giving eye-witness accounts of an incident or reporting a sighting of a ghost. The equipment taken on investigations can help the investigator make observations or could just muddy the waters. People wield meters and jargon like there's no tomorrow, but don't know their electromagnetism from their infrasound. Again, ASSAP offers guidance and training. Dr Jason Braithwaite, a respected neuroscientist conducting brain research by day, has devised the MADS system to test theories about magnetic anomalies and their effects on perception, using equipment beyond the reach of most ghost hunters. Other equipment that ASSAP is assessing on investigations of hauntings includes devices to measure infrasound, which is claimed by some to create a spooky atmosphere.

But let's get back to Croydon's ghosts. Ghost stories are repeated from book to book, by tourist guides, in newspapers

and so on, with some variation in the detail. Some stories are more interesting than others, but most are so anecdotal that any sort of follow-up research is pointless. Names, dates, corroborative witnesses - they're all missing! The whole matter of putting names to ghosts is also problematic - an entire belief system concerning earthbound spirits has been built up on the flimsiest of evidence. It also risks offending the surviving families of the people 'blamed' for the hauntings, as in the recent events surrounding the Sandrock public house in Shirley.

This is a digest of some of the more interesting stories, in no particular order.

GHOST OF GERMAN PILOT

New Addington is reportedly haunted by the ghost a German pilot shot down during the Second World War. He bailed out of his aeroplane during an air battle, but was badly injured. Some locals wanted to kill him, others disagreed and looked after him until the wardens arrived. He later died in hospital. The story is that a man dropped his wallet and went back to look for it in Queen Elizabeth's Drive. It was handed to him by a man with a foreign accent, wearing a flying jacket. The man then disappeared. The witness recognized the pilot from a photograph his wife found.

CROYDON AIRPORT, PURLEYWAY

A group of workmen at the old airport site saw a ghostly biker when they were building the Roundshaw Estate. One version has the biker wearing the uniform of a Battle of Britain airman. The airport is also haunted by the ghost of a Dutch pilot who took off and crashed shortly afterwards. The ghost

of the Dutch pilot is said to have saved the life of a British pilot whom he warned of the fog. The British pilot was found in shock and the flight had to be cancelled. The fog soon descended, as predicted.



Croydon Airport

The Roundshaw Estate is also said to be haunted by the ghosts of three nuns who were burned to death in a plane crash with nine others in January 1947. They walk the streets of the estate, which was built on the site of the old runway. The aircraft had got caught up in a snowstorm and burst into flames on impact. It is said that one of the nuns had a vague premonition.

RAILWAY SHEDS, ADDISCOMBE.

The old British Rail station at Addiscombe closed down to make way for Tramlink and was demolished in 2001. There used to be reports that the

carriage sheds on the site were haunted by the ghost of a train driver who was killed on the line early in the 20th century. Trains were heard to move in the carriage sheds late at night. A grey figure with blurred features was seen near No. 4 siding, at the same spot where a hot water boiler had exploded, killing staff. This siding was said to be noticeably colder than the others.



Addiscombe railway station

Sightings quoted in *Railway Ghosts and Phantoms* include a figure dressed in grey, seen walking down the track towards a railway worker. The figure, whose face was blurred, vanished suddenly. Mick Johns of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Preservation Society worked on the line for years. He reported that he and his colleagues witnessed many strange things: doors would open of their own accord and trains stopped and started by themselves. However, a man writing to the *Croydon Advertiser* pointed out that his father-in-law worked at Addiscombe Station for 29 years and never once mentioned the ghost.

According to the *Croydon Advertiser*,

Railtrack refused ghosthunter Barry Milvern (or Mildon in some accounts) access to the railway station site in 1998. He wanted to search for the 'ghostly presence said to haunt the area'. He had read about the ghost in the newspapers and said that Railtrack had nothing to lose. His aim was to find the ghost and 'stop it making a nuisance of itself'. Railtrack rather sniffily said it did not want to get involved in 'his kind of activity or hobby, or whatever he calls it'.

Possible plans for the site included housing, a linear park or a preserved railway. The *Croydon Advertiser* also spoke to Mick Johns, who claimed it was a bad idea to build on the haunted site, as the ghost might transfer to the housing. The local councillor, Sean Fitzsimmons, reportedly wanted the park scheme to succeed. He said that

having a ghost was 'a price worth paying' as his ward had virtually no open space. He suggested the ghost would rather haunt the park than the 'run-down, damp and dingy carriage shed'. He also suggested the ghost might enjoy stretching its legs, or they could include a small building for it to move in. Mr Johns was quoted as saying that the councillor was being facetious and should read a few books so that he would understand more about a 'very serious issue'.

Mick Johns welcomed Mr Milvern's involvement. He wanted the ghost to be tracked down and made to stay where it was. He hoped they might be able to communicate with it and reassure it that it would not be 'hounded out of its

natural environment'. He warned that the ghost could get very mischievous if the station land was turned into a park. Councillor Fitzsimmons was dismissive of all plans for the site except for housing, saying the rail enthusiasts' plans were 'as real as the existence of the ghost'. Since then the story has gone as quiet as the ghost.

DIGGER HARRY, BEARE'S WOOD

Digger Harry and his wife lived in a cottage in the woods, now off Courtwood Lane in Addington. Harry did not want to be separated from his wife when she died, so he buried her there and told no one. When her absence was noticed, the local constabulary was called out. He kept silent, so they believed he had killed her. After six months in prison, Harry was released because of old age. He returned to the cottage but had forgotten where the grave was. He died without ever finding it again. Digger Harry's ghost is reported to walk through the woods with a shovel over his shoulder. The ghost was seen by a group of scouts in 1932.

ST VALERY, BEULAH HILL

Legend has it that this large Victorian house was named after a Derby winner in the 1870s, but sources say that no horse of that name actually existed. An appeal for information by the *Croydon Guardian* in 1998 brought in a flood of memories about the house. One story came from Pilar Howard, who reported that she lived on the middle floor in 1985-88. By then the house had been subdivided into flats. Ms Howard was aware of the ghost of a young woman, often seeing her about the place: 'Once there was a fire in my kitchen and she woke me up!' There's no further information about whether the ghost

was seen in other flats or precisely how the ghost went about waking her up.

CATERHAM COURT

A 'Ghost Walk' referred to in an 1892 novel is believed to be pure fiction, but one Mrs Sole making a cup of tea one night reportedly saw a Grey Lady in a silk dress pass silently through.

As a boy, author Jeffry Spence was sitting on a mahogany staircase one night when it was nearly dark. It was quiet and there was no wind. He heard 'the sound of a door being quietly, but firmly, closed'. The whole house seemed to shake. He was not afraid, but felt it was a signal that he should leave. He went out through the kitchen at the back: 'For some reason, one never went round the front of the house and through the yews after sunset. There was something about the door that led from the dining-room on to the verandah; although it was not locked, it could never be opened'.

OLD POTTIE, GRECIAN VILLA

Grecian Villa in Upper Norwood was built around 1839. This large mansion on Beulah Hill was bought in 1903 by the Brotherhood of the Christian Schools and now goes under the name of St Joseph's College. The villa is haunted by Old Pottie (Daniel Philpot), who looked at his reflection in a mirror over the mantelpiece before hanging himself from the balcony by throwing himself over the balustrade. His reflection has been seen in the mirror. He is reportedly doomed to haunt the mansion until it falls down or is demolished, but he has not been reported since 1964. He allegedly told one of the monks in 1928 that he would get no rest until all traces of his crime disappeared. Philpot was a stablehand

at the old villa who hanged himself in 1846 because of gambling debts.

FORTE POSTHOUSE, PURLEY WAY

A hotel customer reported seeing a group of Second World War pilots (RAF, Dutch and USA air forces) sitting singing by the fire in the restaurant. The hotel's general manager dismissed these claims until workmen uncovered a disused fire in the restaurant. The hotel was used as a hospital during the war, but another part commandeered as an RAF officers' mess in view of its proximity to Croydon Airport. Other reports include ashtrays sticking to a vertical wall, and a chambermaid who quit after 'coming face-to-face with the ghost of an injured RAF flier in one of the bedrooms'. Guests have also reported hearing noises, the source of which was not able to be traced by the hotel watchman.

BEVERSTONE ROAD, THORNTON HEATH

Initially described as a poltergeist case, this turned out to be more complex. In 1938 the Fielding family was plagued by a 'spirit' that would throw brass fenders, crockery and furniture. Small objects would disappear, and gloves were peeled off people's hands. The case was investigated by Nandor Fodor, a Hungarian-born journalist who worked for newspaper magnate Lord Rothermere. The tale was published in local newspapers in 1938 and written up for the *Tomorrow* magazine by Fodor in 1957. In 1992 it was revisited in the *Croydon Advertiser*. Fodor's ultimate conclusion was that it was a case of reincarnation, not a haunting at all, and he introduced psychoanalytical methods into the case. He believed that the woman at the focus of the

disturbances had been a male murderer in a past life and her nightmares and visions were a memory of that life. The case was never brought to a satisfactory conclusion, as Fodor dropped the case amid increasing rows in the world of parapsychology. Mrs Fielding seemingly did not contact him again. The whole thing ended rather messily.

PURLEY ARMS, PURLEY

Clairsentients were called in during 1992 to 'rescue' a ghost, identified by them as George, who was said to have been killed accidentally in 1830 when a barrel crashed down a ramp and broke his back. The phenomena reportedly concerned beer pumps and the jukebox. The rescue was conducted by two clairsentients and an astrologer, and was attended by a journalist from the *Croydon Advertiser*. It was said to have been a success and the atmosphere at the back of the pub lightened. Another spirit in residence decided to remain to distil 'its protection and loving warmth over the whole pub'.

KING'S CELLARS, PARK LANE

The King's Cellars wine bar and pub in central Croydon are said to be haunted by the ghost of a girl in her early twenties, with shoulder-length hair. She always wears a knee-length white lace-up dress and black shoes with silver buckles. A jilted girl is said to have thrown herself off the roof of the Nestlé building in 1971, but I haven't seen a contemporary account of this incident. The manager was quoted in 1979 as saying he thought she was coming back to wait for her boyfriend. Staff apparently know the girl as 'the pale lady', and one member of staff got the name Bess or Beth Marlborough

from the ghost when she tried talking to it. Events have included a fire; beer taps turning on and off; food sliding off tables; bottles flying through the air; a lift working on its own; candles burning down very quickly; doors that swing open and slam; a toilet brush cover hitting someone on the head; a bag of sugar found spilled. A medium blamed the fire on a poltergeist. Someone told the manager that bones had been



Did a girl plunge to her death?

found when the fire station that was previously on the site was turned into a pub.

The pub has changed its name many times and for a long time went under the name of 'Goody's Bar or 'Goodies Bar'. It is said that Whitbread's noticed that the tills were playing up, showing huge discrepancies, and that managers don't last long. The story hasn't been repeated for the bar's more recent

incarnations, but I'll add it to the account as soon as it comes to my attention.

SELSDON PARK HOTEL

The AA Hotel Guide refers to a non-threatening ghost of woman of an indeterminate age, with grey hair and wearing a white or grey gown. Ghosts have been reported in a corridor built in the 1920s, the Phoenix Room (1976) and the Cambridge Wing (1988).

ARCHBISHOP'S PALACE

According to Bannerman, the ghost of Lady Onslow used to be seen here. She drowned in a fish pond in the grounds of the Archbishop's Palace on 25 November 1718. The drowning is mentioned in Defoe's *Tour thro' the whole of Great Britain* (various versions of the title exist), published between 1724 and 1726. The ghost has not been seen since the building became the Old Palace School.

CROYDON PARISH CHURCH

A verger assured journalist Barbara Freeman that the reported Grey Lady/Grey Nun was actually a Grey Man, interpreted as being the ghost of Archbishop Sheldon. He is said to have last appeared in order to check the repairs to his fire-damaged tomb and then was never seen again.

A wailing woman also haunts the church. She is said to be Elizabeth Finch, who married the Reverend Samuel Finch at 14. She died aged 21, after bearing five children. Her husband was present when workmen later found the bodies of three dead babies buried under the floorboards in the Mary Chapel. I have seen nothing to suggest that these were his infants.

ADDINGTON PALACE - ARCHBISHOP BENSON

Archbishop Benson, who died in 1896, reportedly walks through the corridors but has only been seen by choirboys. He was the last archbishop to live at Addington Palace and spent a great deal of his time there. However, he is not buried there. Benson was married to the sister of Henry Sidgwick, founder of the Society for Psychical Research, and one of their sons became novelist EF Benson of Mapp and Lucia fame. The archbishop also suggested to writer Henry James the general plot for James' ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw*. That's just by the way, by the way.

THE SANDROCK, SHIRLEY

Let this be a lesson to anyone trying to attach a name and personality to a ghost. The pub was refurbished to make it more friendly and welcoming. As part of a publicity campaign for its relaunch, the Sizzling Pub company sent out a press release mentioning a ghost and giving it the name of a former landlady.

In January 2004 the *Croydon Guardian* reported that a ghostly figure had been seen wandering through the pub. The current landlords had yet to see it and were asking people who might know something to come forward. They said that some people believed it to be a former landlady, and they named her. Admittedly, they said that sightings 'confirm' it to have been a preacher who may have delivered sermons from the nearby rock in the 19th century. But the damage had been done.

The same story, mentioning the late landlady's name, was also reported in the *Croydon Advertiser*. They also referred to a barmaid who had been so

spooked that she had moved out. She said she had never seen the ghost, but always felt someone was watching her while she was in the cellar. A previous manager had once seen a bottle that was lying on its side fly off the shelf. The barmaid admitted she was scared of everything and that people would hound her up about it.

The former landlady had only died in 1985, and her friends and family still drank in the pub. Her son spoke to the *Croydon Advertiser* in February to say he was upset that her memory was being used in that way. While he felt it was acceptable to use the name of someone who had died 200 years earlier, the pub owners' stunt was in bad taste and they should have checked out their story first. The son confirmed the pub was haunted, saying he had seen a bearded man dressed as a preacher when he was growing up in the pub. The landlord then apologized for the mix-up.

The article in the *Croydon Guardian* quoted a regular as saying he knew of two sightings of the preacher and that Colette Riley, landlady until 2000, had been 'sensitive to the supernatural'. She had woken up one night to see a preacher at the foot of her bed. This regular had told the new landlord's son about the pub's being haunted, and the boy had told him he had also seen a ghost in the form of a preacher.

Back in 1876, the Sandrock Hotel was the place where the team beating the bounds went for lunch on the second day of their tour of Croydon's boundaries. It also had a bit of a reputation as a pub where daytrippers coming down from London would drink excessively, according to the Shirley Through the Years exhibition in 1996.

In 2004 a group of five friends calling themselves the UK Paranormal Investigators (UKPI) spent the night in the cellars of the Sandrocks after reading about the haunting in the *Croydon Advertiser*. They asked the spirits there to contact them and heard a strange creak from the boxes on the wall. This happened about six times. They also filmed orbs on digital cameras, and the night-vision camera filmed a strange light floating over someone's head. The group said they had seen orbs before, but this was the first time they had investigated anything in Croydon. A hand-held tape recorder picked up a gruff ghostly voice saying 'good boy' and there was also a strange murmuring noise. The UKPI had investigated buildings and graveyards all over the country as a hobby. They liked the thrill of the supernatural and scary experiences, and described themselves as being 'in search of evidence of life after death'. They used digital cameras, digital thermometers, motion sensors and an electromagnetic field meter.

Later in 2004 the *Croydon Advertiser* reported that the Sandrocks had been put on the shortlist of the top 20 most haunted pubs in the UK after meeting a host of 'paranormal activity indicators'. Over 350 pubs were visited for the competition run by Strongbow, the cider company.

WHEAT SHEAF INN, THORNTON HEATH

We meet up with the UKPI again in Thornton Heath. The Wheatsheaf is said to be haunted by the ghost of a former landlord's daughter who was brutally murdered there and dumped in the pond. This pond was the scene of various accidents, particularly at night or when it was foggy, when horses

would pull their vehicles into the pond. In 1891 the Brighton mail coach reportedly floundered there, with some blaming the drunken driver rather than the fog.

The UKPI spent the night in the Wheatsheaf in 2004. The landlady told them about unexplained occurrences, including bottles moving on their own and a permanently cold boiler room. She said the pub was once a court where prisoners were held before being hanged on Gallows Green. The team set up tape recorders and camcorders. They went into the part of the pub that was said to have been a court room and the room next door, now the boiler room, where the prisoners used to be held. They reviewed the recording after 45 minutes and heard a faint voice saying 'hello'. The camcorder also recorded orbs, not seen with the naked eye. UKPI told the *Croydon Guardian* that these are believed to be the 'manifestation of a spirit'. In the basement they heard a shuffling sound like someone moving a cardboard box, and this was picked up by the camcorder. All five members of the team felt sick when they returned to the boiler room later. The digital camera picked up lots of orbs there. The team asked the spirit to move the orbs round the head of one of the team members, and it did this a couple of times. The landlady said she wasn't scared - she had been there for four years and there had been nothing scary.

THE TOWN HALL

In 2003 I received an email from a correspondent who recalled an incident at the town hall. In the late 1980s he had been working for Croydon Council. In the wee small hours he was involved with moving computer equipment and was working in the 'bowels' of the

building. The computer storeroom was a disused cell, positioned under what had been Fell Road Police Station. He was subsequently told that the ghost was of a man who had hanged himself in one of the cells. This is the only report of a town hall ghost that I recollect seeing, and these are all the details I have.