

LIFE IN A HAUNTED HOUSE



Richard Barr ponders
ghostly goings on at his
north Norfolk home

H haunted houses are very much in the news at the moment with the box office success of the movie

The Woman in Black, Susan Hill's story of a young solicitor who has to spend a night in a spooky property on a remote island, with Daniel Radcliffe in his first post Harry Potter role.

It was built more than 400 years ago during the reign of Elizabeth I. It stands, gaunt and permanent near the Norfolk coast. If there were not so many trees in the way it would be visible from the North Sea. Rumour has it that in years gone by it was on the pilgrim route down to Bromholm Priory in our village and that one of Norfolk's lesser known massacres took place just outside the house in the aptly named Bloodslat Lane.

The house was bought to provide necessary accommodation for the family (one of whom is disabled). It is surrounded by trees that whistle and

creak in the wind. More owls live here than in an average Harry Potter film - and they specialise in making their spine chilling cries after dark.

Over the years there have been a variety of carers living in, and many of them felt the presence of spirits.

It was not perhaps entirely surprising. In the eighteenth century two people were murdered here. The house has been modified so many times since it was built that its walls no doubt would tell many secrets if only they could talk.

Pause for a moment here. I do not believe in ghosts. I have never seen a ghost and I cannot conceive of any mechanism which would enable spirits from past lives to come back to show themselves to us in the present.

But I am also a coward, and if ever I am confronted by a spectral creature (with or without his decapitated head in his hand and a ball and chain attached to his leg), I would not dispute his existence.

But others with far more powerful intellects than mine do believe. Dr Thomas Stuttaford, for instance, former MP and Times columnist, a man whom most would regard as

having his feet firmly on the ground, reported that his Norfolk house was haunted – as a matter of fact in much the same way as the manifestations in this house.

One of the first spectral manifestations came when my stepson (then aged seven) reported that he saw a man coming down the stairs into his room. There were no stairs but a builder working in the attic later found that there had indeed once been a flight going down to his room.

One day my wife was in the house with a friend. Suddenly she heard the sound of laughter upstairs and the rush of children's feet. Thinking the children had come home early from school she went up to investigate. There was no one there and no one else in the house.

Then on another occasion one of the carers that the children could not stand looked out of her window. She saw a ghostly white horse ridden by a figure who appeared to be wearing a pale veil.

She was seriously spooked by the experience and walked out the following day, to the delight of the children who had covered the horse

in a lot of flour and had hidden in the bushes making wailing noises.

There have been many instances of a figure seen walking between the house and an old barn. The tale was once told by a woman in the village who, as a young girl had worked as a maid in the house and had been terrified by the 'Green Lady'.

Once the figure appeared to be sweeping up leaves at 1 am. It was initially thought by the others to have been me, but I was able to reassure the rest of the family that I never sweep leaves and certainly would not do so in the middle of the night.

On another occasion, a young police officer was visiting. He rushed out to intercept an intruder he saw walking across to the barn – but he found no one there.

My own experience was chilling. When I was working in London, I had returned late and hurled down my briefcase. It was a large case and I used it as a mobile office. It also housed emergency supplies – assorted paper clips, some rust penetrating oil, half a packet of throat lozenges, a packet of drinking chocolate purloined from a hotel – in other words the kinds

of thing that every stressed out worker needs.

I remember that night the house had been full of creaks. The following morning I found that a wavy trail of what looked like mud led away from my briefcase. Along the trail there was a littering of paperclips and chewed bits of paper. One or two important documents had their corners missing.

Digging deeper we discovered the remnants of the pack of chocolate powder. My ghost, it turned out was nothing more scary than a hungry mouse.

Even my scepticism has had to be tempered sometimes. Things disappear with relentless frequency in this house. Like Dr Stuttford we ask out loud for the ghost to return them. I feel foolish every time, but the scary thing is that as often as not the missing item reappears exactly where it should be.

It is said that you always feel a chill in a haunted house. You certainly feel a chill in every room in this house, but that may be as much due to the ill-fitting windows and snow on the ground as it is to the influence of spirits from the other side.