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Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Gandy, RJ (2020) Brides Bridges and Spacemen. Fortean Times (FT389). ISSN 0308-5899

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Brides, Bridges and Spacemen - Article for Fortean Times – Rob Gandy

Real-life experiences from Cheshire and Staffordshire

Updated November 2019

In my article *Strange Stories from Southport* [FT370:42-45] I highlighted how, following my *Old Man of Halsall Moss* [FT328:32-39] presentation in Birkdale, several people told me of their own weird experiences, which I included in said article. However, one tale was excluded because it was not local to West Lancashire and required more research because it seemed so fantastic. This was the second experience described to me by Miss W, who also gave the details of Case J (*The Drunken Farmer*). I am now at a point where I cannot take things any further, and so I set out her story below, together with other 'real-life' experiences collected during the course of my investigations in the Cheshire-Staffordshire borders.

The Bride on the Bridge

Miss W of Formby, Merseyside, was in a car being driven back from Alton Towers in North Staffordshire, after a day visiting the amusement park. There were two cars, a boy and a girl in each, with Miss W being the passenger in the front car. It was late one summer evening – Miss W recalls that it was getting on for 9.00pm on either the 13th or 14th of August in (probably) 2008. Her friend, Chris, had decided to drive through the back roads, rather than use the main trunk roads, to avoid major road works. The weather was clear, although there may have been some drizzle in the air.

They had been travelling about 20 to 30 minutes and were driving up a narrow two-way road when they approached a bridge. The bridge had waist-high brick walls either side, and was little more than a single-car's width over a canal or small river. They then saw a lady in a wedding dress standing on the right-hand side of the bridge; but as they were carefully driving past her, the lady fell over the bridge. Miss W said to Chris that he must have hit her, but Chris insisted that he had not. They stopped and got out and looked over the bridge, down what appeared to be a 12 to 15 foot drop. There was nothing to see - no sign of the lady or anything. They called out but got no response. Just silence.

Their friends in the other car had been right behind them. However, because they were travelling in an unfamiliar area they had been concentrating on the road. Given the speed with which events unfolded, they both knew that they had seen something, but were uncertain as to exactly what. They stopped the car and joined Miss W and Chris who described what had happened. They all tried to call for the police and an ambulance on their mobiles, only to find that there was no signal. They decided that Miss W and Chris should drive on to find somewhere where they could find a telephone, or get a signal, while the friends stayed by the bridge to wait and see if they could find the lady. After about 3 minutes Miss W and Chris came across a rather isolated, moderately-sized public house – Miss W thinks that it could have accommodated about 50 people. The pub car park was not very large (most cars were parked on the road). Beyond the pub were a number of houses. Miss W and Chris stopped and entered.

They asked for a telephone and described how the lady had been on the bridge and had then fallen over the wall. They were greeted by a deathly silence. The landlady then explained that what they

had seen was the ghost of a woman called 'Sarah' who had fallen off the bridge and drowned on her wedding day 25 years previously. She had been wearing her wedding dress. The phantom had been witnessed every year on the anniversary. Miss W and Chris were naturally shocked. In the circumstances, accepting what they had been told, they decided not to call the police or ambulance. They returned to their friends before setting off on the remainder of their journey to Merseyside.

This is a very intriguing story, particularly as many aspects potentially sound folkloric: an anniversary ghost, appearing every year for 25 years; the ghost is that of a bride; and, a remote pub where everyone is familiar with the ghost. There are some parallels with the famous Blue Bell Hill ghost, in Kent, where a bride-to-be was killed in a car crash on the eve of her wedding day. I have pressed Miss W about the various details, and she is wholly sincere about her experience. Indeed, during our various correspondences, Miss W met her friend Lucy from the second car, who she said corroborated the story. Therefore, it appears to be a genuine, first-hand multi-witness experience. Unfortunately, Miss W cannot remember sufficient details to enable identification of the bridge and pub, e.g. were they driving on roads leading north or south of Stoke-on-Trent. She recalls there were no traffic lights on the bridge and no other bridges were nearby, such as over a railway.

I pursued several different approaches in my follow-up investigation. I contacted **FT's** Alan Murdie to ask if the Ghost Club¹ had anything of relevance in its records. Alan was his usual helpful self providing good comments and advice, but unfortunately nothing was found. I also liaised with fellow *Weird Weekend North* presenter Mike Walters, who lives in the Stoke-on-Trent area [FT355:24]. Mike has a good knowledge of all strange phenomena in the area and excellent contacts. He put the word out throughout his network seeking related information, but also drew a blank. Nevertheless, he provided details of some other stories below.

I tried identifying potential locations on Google Map, and then moving to its Street View, but failed to identify any bridges where the locations and descriptions fitted the details provided; it is unlikely I covered all possibilities. I then used my tried and tested method of asking local newspapers to include a short article outlining the experience in question and inviting readers to get in touch with me if they had related information to offer. I would like to thank the *Cheadle Post & Times*, the *Congleton Chronicle*, the *Leek Post & Times*, the *Stoke Sentinel*, and the *Uttoxeter Post & Times*, for their agreeing to do this. This exercise yielded one experience relating to a ghostly bride (see below). It should be noted that no newspaper could trace an article from its back-issue records from the early 1980s (where they existed) which covered a bride called 'Sarah' who drowned by falling off a bridge on her wedding day. I feel certain such an occurrence would have definitely appeared in the local press (if not the national)!

The Bride on The Heath

I only received one response to my call for information through local newspapers. This was from Mr G, who is now retired and was born and bred in the Sandbach area of Cheshire. He remembers the story that his grandmother told him, when he was young in the 1940s, about a local church that is haunted by the ghost of a bride. The story goes that there is a white apparition that has been seen crossing the road from the opposite side to the church, through the lych gate and into the churchyard. This is supposed to be the ghost of a bride who died just before her wedding day, who was then buried in her wedding dress in the church's graveyard.

He says that the story is well known around The Heath. He thinks his grandmother was born in the 1880s, and she told the story as having been both well-known and around for a long time, which suggests that it could possibly pre-date World War I. The church is St John the Evangelist Church at Sandbach Heath, which is sometimes referred to simply as 'The Heath'. The church was designed by George Gilbert Scott, and is situated in a comparatively isolated position on Church Lane, which runs south off the Congleton Road (A534), just east of junction 17 of the M6. A little way to the north of the church, before the A534, there is a valley with a small bridge over a brook that is a tributary of the River Wheelock.

Mr G has never seen the apparition himself, but recalls that during the 1980s he was attending an educational course, as part of his work on the railways. He was approached by a colleague – he can only remember his nickname, which was 'Garth' – who picked him out because he knew Mr G was very familiar with The Heath. Garth told him that he and his wife had been walking in the area around The Heath with a group of friends the previous weekend. It was at dusk when they were walking up the lane on which St John the Evangelist Church stands; the weather was dry. Garth and his wife had dropped back some distance from the main group, and their friends had all gone past the church entrance. It was at this point that the two of them saw a person-shaped white mist cross the road in front of them and go through the lych gate. This terrified them and they quickly caught up with the main group. Garth had sought Mr G's confirmation about the reputed haunting because of his being local to the area. Neither Garth nor his wife knew of it before the event took place and so there can be no question of prior suggestion.

I contacted St John the Evangelist Church and spoke to the current warden, who was born locally and has lived in the area all his life, some 60 years. He was aware of the story of a ghost of someone in a white gown but neither he nor anyone else that he knows has ever actually seen anything; and he has spent a great deal of time over the years, in the day and at night, undertaking tasks and duties in the church and churchyard. He considers it simply an old tale passed down over time. I asked about whether there might be a woman who was buried in her wedding dress, but he was not aware of any evidence that such an event had occurred; the only option would be to go through the Diocese records in Chester. I did not feel that I could justifiably ask anyone to do this, particularly as any records were unlikely to note the apparel of the deceased, who of course would arrive at church in a closed coffin. I therefore thanked the warden for his time and advice, and drew a line under this avenue of research.

It will have been noted that there is a bridge near the church, and one inevitable question is whether this might be the one where Miss W and her friends had their experience. I strongly believe that this is not the case: the location is undoubtedly more than 20 to 30 minutes from Alton Towers; the bridge is over a brook which is not 12 foot below; the road goes down to, rather than up to, the bridge; and whilst the Chimney House Hotel² is nearby, it no way fits Miss W's description of the public house. The fact the location is between a quarter and a half mile from Junction 17 of the M6 motorway is also significant: the direction of the roads and lanes mean this is not a route that Miss W and her friends would have been likely to travel; the proximity of the motorway makes it unlikely there was a mobile phone black spot; and Miss W does not recall a motorway being close. Therefore, although Mr G's story is fascinating in itself, it does not refer to the same phenomenon and location as Miss W's experience.

Confetti Jogger

Around 6:30am one day in early November 2017, Alison Graham, aged 44, of Whitehill in Staffordshire, was travelling from Thorncliffe towards the Mermaid Inn on the Staffordshire Moorlands. There was fog, so thick she could only see a few yards ahead. Therefore she drove cautiously at less than 20mph. As she passed the lay-by before the Mermaid, a jogger suddenly came out of nowhere, on the same side of the road, running away from her. She described him as 'very tall, slim and wearing dark clothes with reflective material to the bottom of his top and on the back of his running shoes'. She hit the brakes hard and gripped the steering wheel tightly, as the car inevitably slid towards him. Then, on the point of impact, 'He disintegrated. Like confetti'; it was as if he had turned into small pieces of paper right before her eyes. But then he was gone, leaving Alison 'shocked, amazed and terrified all in equal quantities.' She stopped the car and checked the road behind her, but found nothing; just the thick fog³.

A response to the article from Dawn Myatt told of her similar experience driving alone on the M6 one night from Stafford towards Stoke-on-Trent. It was around 9.30pm and still light, with little traffic. Suddenly she saw a man in the middle of the motorway, wearing a demon jacket, jeans and check shirt, with collar-length wavy dark blonde hair, like someone from the early 1970s. He started to walk just before she hit him but she felt nothing. She pulled over but there was no-one there. Nita Reynolds added that 'there is a stretch of the M6 that's well known for haunting' and described this as being around Junction 17!³

Spaceman on a Motorbike

As mentioned above, it was during my discussions with Mike Walters that he alerted me to a motorbike story told to him by a friend, also called Mike. Unfortunately, it was too late for inclusion in my *Uneasy Riders* article about road ghosts on motorbikes [FT358:42-47].

It was during the 1950s or 1960s that Mike's father was roughly halfway up the very steep part of Keele Road (known locally as Keele Bank), just outside Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire. It was mid to late evening and was dark, with that stretch of the road being unlit. His father was on foot and doing some poaching, and was therefore trying to be as discreet as possible. Just then he heard a strange mechanical roaring sound coming from down the hill, from the Newcastle direction, and saw a motorbike approaching him, much quicker than he would have expected. He was struck by the number of lights, which were much brighter than motorbike lights of that time. Mike's father was very scared but continued to stare at what he described as a Spaceman on a very strange streamlined motorbike; indeed, he wasn't 100% sure it *was* a motorbike until it went past. Even then he questioned himself because it was so different to contemporary motorbikes. He described the rider as wearing a sort of one-piece suit, and a massive streamlined helmet, with mirrored visor, which he later said resembled a space helmet design. The 'Spaceman' glanced in his direction but did not stop; the motorbike just roared passed on its way up the bank. Once it was out of sight Mike's father decided it was time to return home. He later told Mike what he had seen, and the story became well-known throughout the family. Whenever his father got the chance he would tell his strange tale to any family member who would listen.

Many years later, probably around the Millennium, Mike was riding up Keele Bank on his modern motorbike when he found himself approaching the spot where his father told him he'd seen the

'Spaceman'. As he passed the spot he got an uncontrollable urge to look to the side of the road; as if half-expecting to see his father, who had long since passed away. He was disappointed, but unsurprised, to see the roadside was empty. However, he then realised that it was mid to late evening and he was dressed in an outfit which was exactly the same as his father had described all those years before. In addition, his motorbike was a big powerful modern machine, with bright lights, and a distinct roaring sound. As he looked down at his one-piece bike leathers he remembered he was also wearing a mirrored visor helmet. A powerful feeling swept over him that evening, one that he could not shake. He said 'What if what my father saw on that night all those years ago was me as I am now?' To this day Mike believes that this might have been the case: somehow, in the 1950/1960s, his father had seen his own middle-aged son go past him on his powerful motorbike – perhaps a ghost from the future!

Emily

I submitted an original version of this article, based on the above cases, to *Fortean Times* in October 2017, and gave a presentation about road ghosts to Mike Walter's Newcastle-under-Lyme -based *Mysteries* group in March 2019. Members of the group had made great effort to identify where Miss W's experience had taken place, both by visiting potential locations north of Stoke-on-Trent and checking google-based sources. Frustratingly they had drawn a complete blank. The following month I gave a presentation at *Weird Weekend North 2019* [FT381:22-23] which included the above cases. Much to my surprise I was approached by people from the audience who said that they knew someone who had also seen a 'ghost bride' in Staffordshire, but to the south of Stoke-on-Trent; an area not closely investigated by the *Mysteries* group. They agreed to put this person in touch with me. Naturally, I asked David Sutton to put my article 'on hold' as I hoped that this might be a second and confirmatory case of the same phantom, which would help specify the location involved and thereby lead to further enquiries.

I was eventually contacted by Karen (pseudonym) who told me that it was not her who had the experience in question, but her friend Steve (pseudonym). She spoke to Steve who described the incident as follows:

*It was the afternoon of Sunday 29th July 2012 and I had been to the Great Haywood village shop. I was walking through the woods with my dog Tilly; we had passed St Stephen's church and were heading towards the canal where the narrow boats are moored. As we passed underneath the railway bridge, that's just before the iron bridge that goes over the Trent and Mersey canal, I caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye. I turned around to see who it was, thinking it was someone else out walking their dog, but no one was there. Indeed, there was no-one around at all. Nevertheless, it felt like someone **was** there in front of me, and that I was being watched. I have had many experiences like this before, where I sensed a presence. So, using my mobile phone, I decided to take a photograph of the area by the wall of the railway bridge where I sensed someone to be. It was only when I returned home and looked at the photo that I was shocked to clearly see the image of a young woman in front of the wall. She was looking directly at me, and I considered that she looked startled, even though the image was quite transparent. She appeared to be wearing a veil around her head and carrying a small posy of flowers. (I checked and where a 'posy' is situated on the image there was nothing in the actual wall that could have been mistaken for one). I thought*

she looked around 23 years old, although she could be younger. I named her 'Emily' as that is the name that came to me when I saw her.

I showed the photo to my friend Karen, who lives locally, hoping that she might shed some light as to who this woman might be. She speculated there could be a link to a young woman who was the victim of a fatal road traffic accident that happened in Great Haywood at the Mill Pond in 1905, where a car had come off the road into the pond.

Interestingly, Tilly did not react at the time of the incident, as some dogs can do where there is something 'paranormal' going on. By contrast, my older dog Bess, when she was alive, often went 'nuts' whenever we walked by the railway bridge and in the woods close by. Once, she just refused to pass by a particular spot in the woods and barked and growled at something that I couldn't see; I ended up having to climb the embankment and walk across the top to the other side!

Karen later shared Steve's photo with a local Facebook group. One response was from an elderly gentleman who has lived in the village all his life. He said that he recognised this young woman and has often seen her crossing over the nearby Essex Bridge towards Shugborough Hall in the evenings when he was out walking his dog. She has passed him and then simply vanished.

The reference to the road traffic accident relates to Mrs Challenor, the wife of the Town Clerk of Hanley, and her niece, who were being driven across the bridge at Great Haywood Mill when their car plunged into the mill pond. The chauffeur and Mrs Challenor survived, but Mrs Challenor's niece could not be found. The pond was dragged and divers from the Manchester Ship Canal were brought in, but without success. Eventually the mill pond was pumped dry, but the body was only recovered downstream three weeks later. After the accident the road was straightened and a new bridge was built⁴.

What to make of all this? Well, it is clear that the descriptions of the place, 'bride' and experience are quite different to those of Miss W and her Formby friends. Steve sensed someone *under* a bridge whereas the 'bride' seen by Miss W was *on top* of one; one bridge relates to a railway and the other involves a watercourse; one location is effectively by a large village whilst the other is out in the country; and Great Haywood, being 6 miles east of Stafford and 18 miles south of Stoke-on-Trent, would represent a not impossible but highly unlikely route for the Formby party to be travelling home from Alton Towers, even if they were a bit lost. Inevitably some will question Steve's photograph. I am no expert in photography and will accept that the image looks a bit like a two-dimensional superimposition of one photograph on to another. But, as most critics will be skeptics who do not believe in ghosts, the question must be asked as exactly what a photograph of a genuine ghost must look like if they don't exist anyway? I adopt the fortean stance of keeping an open mind and simply present the evidence for others to debate. However, I must stress that I believe in both Steve's and Karen's sincerity; neither has sought publicity or gain from the photograph, and I only stumbled across it through a chain of events and contacts. The fact that the elderly gentleman (a) recognised the woman from the photograph, and (b) indicated that he has regularly seen her on Essex Bridge simply adds grist to the mill. Of course, even if it is believed that the image *is* that of a ghost there can be no certainty as to the person involved. Maybe it is Mrs Challenor's niece (given the location is about 650 yards downstream from the mill pond), or a servant from Shugborough

Hall, or even a jilted bride. Sadly we will never know, but 'Emily' is a nice name for her, whoever or whatever she is.

Conclusions

I don't think that we will ever get to the bottom of what happened to Miss W and her friends that evening unless we can identify the specific location. It could be that they mistook a mist (or similar) for being a bride on the bridge, given that mists can form around watercourses in certain conditions. What may appear solid from a distance can then become more dispersed as you approach, potentially leading to the conclusion that 'it' has disappeared. Also they were travelling in a general westerly direction at or around sunset, and so it could be that light from the setting sun may have played tricks with whatever was near to the bridge, such as trees or bushes, which might then have combined with any mist that was present. The friends then rationalised the disappearance of the optical phenomena as being the bride falling over the side. But what of the reaction and response from the people in the pub? I believe that there are three possibilities: they were telling the truth (but then why wasn't the story of 'Sarah's' demise well known in the local, if not national press?); they were familiar with a local (atmospheric/weather) phenomenon relating to the bridge which had developed into a ghost story that they liked to tell to passing travellers; or they were simply 'having a laugh'. The landlady would not have had to ask the *League of Gentlemen's* question 'Are you local?'⁵ when two panicking Merseyside youngsters arrived with what appeared to be an outlandish tale. Why not humour them with a story made up on the spot? None of the regulars would contradict her. Of course, this is pure speculation on my part, deliberately adopting a sceptical stance, and building hypothesis upon hypothesis upon hypothesis in a fortean house of cards. All that I can say is that Miss W and her friends sincerely believed they had their experience, which is reinforced by their subsequent actions to seek help.

The existence of the photograph of 'Emily' and the claim that this spirit, or whatever it might be, has been seen regularly on Essex Bridge over many years makes the Great Haywood case particularly intriguing. Other photographs have been taken close to where the event took place with orbs being spotted; although orbs are usually dismissed as photographic artefacts. What can definitely be stated is that this is a completely different case to that witnessed by Miss W and her friends. Which begs the question of whether there is some connection between 'brides' and bridges, particularly in Cheshire and Staffordshire!? We will never know the answer, but these 'brides' can be added to the panoply of White ladies and haunted bridges so well described by Alan Murdie [FT358:18-20].

These first-hand and second-hand stories are good examples of forteana from this part of England, and illustrate how the pursuance of one investigation can generate other interesting tales, even if the investigation itself is less than fruitful. Of course, there may be folkloric elements in such tales, which is why it is so important to get as near to the source(s) as possible. But I am left with the comforting thought that serendipity can be a key factor in fortean research!

4,504 words

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Alan Murdie and Mike Walters for their time, efforts and advice.

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Photos from Great Haywood



Emily



Location of entrance to passage under railway bridge

Photos relating to St John the Evangelist Church and Keele Bank (taken by Rob Gandy)

The bridge on Church Lane, with St John the Evangelist Church in background



The Lych Gate



Two views of Keele Road/ Keele Bank – possible locations where event took place

The second one with the gate might be the most likely.

Photos kindly provided by Mike Walters

