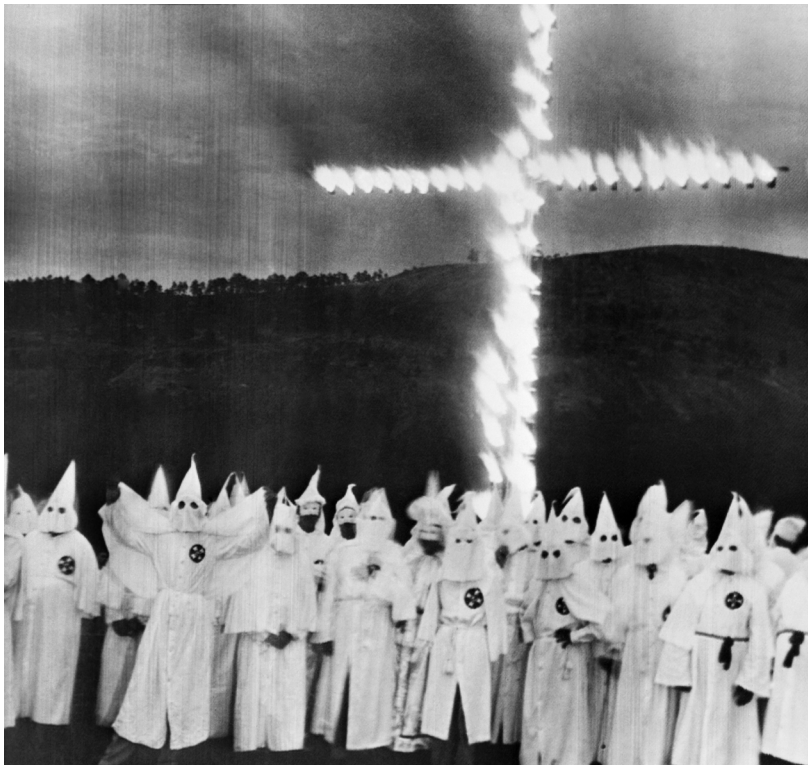
THE AINTREE SPECTRES

There have been sightings of hooded, torch-brandishing figures in a field in Merseyside going back to World War II. But who or what are these Klan-like apparitions? Robed occultists? Scouse Klansmen? A secret Evangelical society? **ROB GANDY** investigates the strange case of the Aintree Spectres...

Following my *Strange Stories from Southport* article (**FT370:42-45**) I was contacted by Glen Preston (pseudonym) in September 2018 about some bizarre and frightening events that had taken place over a number of years just outside the village of Aintree, in the Merseyside borough of Sefton. The village is adjacent to –and gives its name to – the racecourse which annually hosts the famous Grand National. [1] If you travel north up Bull Bridge Lane and cross the River Alt at Bull Bridge on to Spencer's Lane, you will see a field immediately to the east (before Spencer's lane crosses the M57 motorway). This was the location of the following strange events, which were witnessed by members of Glen's family and others. [2]



AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: Witnesses describe hooded and robed figures carrying flaming torches, bringing to mind the Ku Klux Klan in the US – but this was in Aintree, not Alabama...

THE FIGURES IN THE FIELD

Having missed the last bus one early Autumn night in either 1967 or 1968, Glen's older brother Jeff (pseudonym), then in his late teens, was walking over Bull Bridge heading for the family home on Spencer's Lane. It was 11-11.30pm and the night was clear. This was in the days before the M57 motorway had been built (the local stretch only opened in 1972) and there was no street lighting to dispel the total darkness. It was at this point that Jeff noticed lights to his right, about 150 yards away in the field. What he saw was a group of roughly nine men carrying bright, burning torches and walking along the bank of the River Alt, heading away from him, southeast towards Fazakerley. They were wearing greyish robes with pointed hoods, similar in shape to those worn by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and marching two or three abreast in line, like soldiers. Understandably, Jeff was frightened and ran to his home to get his father out of bed. They went to the upstairs back bedroom window and could still see the torch-lit procession over the fields. Jeff was very scared, mainly because he did not know who or what the procession was, and decided to sleep on his parents' bedroom floor.

They were wearing greyish robes with pointed hoods and marching in line

There was a sequel to this strange sighting. Glen recalls that their parents (now deceased) were driving home from Fazakerley around 9.30-10pm one October or November night in the early 1970s after their father had collected their mother from bingo. They crossed Bull Bridge and saw, in the same field to their right, a dozen or so men holding burning torches and wearing robes, some with pointed hoods. They were standing in a circle, as if involved in some sort of magical gathering. The parents did not stop for a closer look, but saw the group clearly through the car windows. It was fully dark at this time and Glen's father later said that it would have been impossible for the group not to have been seen by the many dozens of people who used the road. Despite this, his enquiries over the next few days as to whether or not anyone else had seen the group were met with blank looks. He had quite expected it to be the talk of the village and was perplexed by the fact that seemingly no one else had seen it. He later wondered if perhaps it had been some sort of Hallowe'en event, but seemed to think that the date would have been either too early or too late for this.

Sometime later, quite by chance and unprompted by Glen, the father of one of his friends (a security guard at the BICC works in Melling), told him of seeing the same, or a similar, strange gathering while travelling that stretch of road on his moped during the early hours of the morning.

Of course, perhaps all the witnesses had seen was a group of people with lighted

LEFT: Looking from the Bull Bridge over the River Alt; the field is clearly visible to the left of the picture, the roofs of nearby houses to the right.

torches and robes messing about in a field. However, in the late 1980s, Glen's father was chatting to an old friend of his over a drink at the Horse & Jockey pub in Melling. His friend had long since emigrated to Canada, but was back in the country revisiting family and friends. The conversation turned to the subject of the supernatural, and so Glen's father started to relate his sighting of the group with torches and robes. Before he had got very far, his old friend interjected, saying that he knew exactly what he was going to say. He went on to relate that he had seen *exactly* the same sight when cycling back from a dance late one night, but he had observed the event from the Leeds-Liverpool Canal on the other side of the field. Significantly, the time when he had seen the torch-bearing group had occurred during the early stages of World War II when strict blackout procedures were in force – which was well over 40 years earlier.

MAPPING THE MYSTERY

Naturally I was keen to establish whether there were other witnesses to these types of events, and my friends at the *Champion* newspaper [3] included a piece in the Aintree & Melling issue of 14 November 2018, which drew some responses. A number of people highlighted the fact that the field was the site of a fatal air crash on Grand National Day in 1964, in which the prominent journalist and broadcaster Nancy Spain, and Joan Werner Laurie, Editor of *'She'* magazine, were killed. [4]

There was one account, from a Mrs H, which was very similar to those mentioned above. Her testimony was as follows:

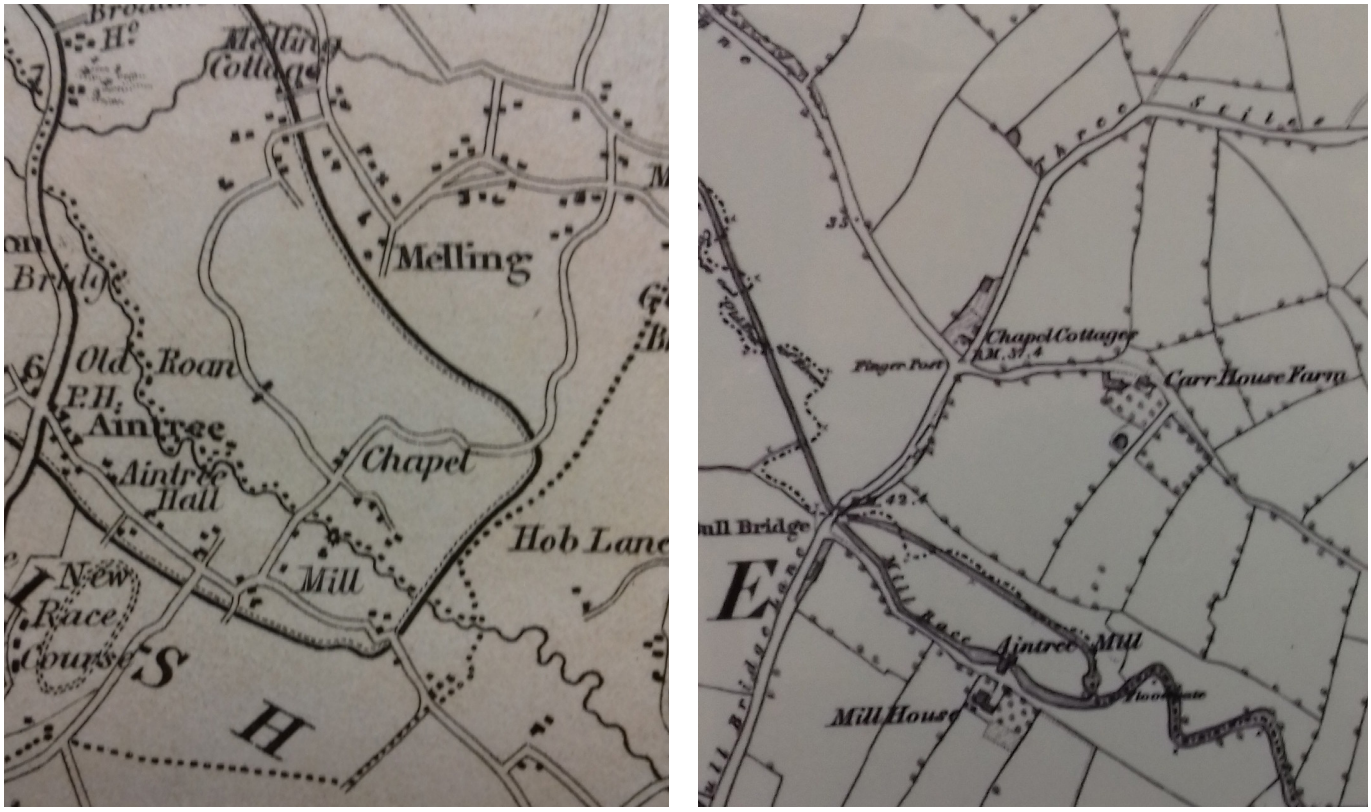
It was about 7pm one evening around Christmas 40 or so years ago, which would place it in the mid to late 1970s. I was in our car with my husband and young daughter travelling back to our home in Melling, having been to see my mother-in-law in the Fazakerley area. It was very dark and it was misty.

We crossed Bull Bridge on to Spencer's Lane when immediately to our left, and close to the road, we saw a group of people all dressed in light outfits that looked like those worn by the Ku Klux Klan! There were around half a dozen of them (although it might have been as few as four or as many as eight – it was difficult to judge in the circumstances and given that we passed them at a normal driving speed of around 30mph). Their appearance was very scary, and a bit spooky, and they looked as though they were getting ready to do something. My immediate reaction was 'What are they up to!?' None of them appeared to be carrying anything, and there were definitely no lights or torches. Naturally, we did not stop to investigate, as we were very, very frightened.

I am a lifelong resident of Melling and was in my 30s at the time. I have seen nothing like what we saw that night, before or since. My husband (now deceased) and I never forgot this experience, and talked about it on many occasions, although we never heard of anyone else having the same or a similar encounter.

These accounts describing what appears to be the same phenomenon taking place in the same location over a long period of time is definitely strange. Several of the witnesses naturally inferred a paranormal source, but what is striking is how long Jeff Preston saw the spectres for on the night in question; for Jeff to run home the best part of 700m (2,300ft) and wake his father and for them to then see the procession would have taken many minutes. Paranormal events usually tend to be quite transient and short in duration. The fact that the spectres all behaved like people dressed up – rather than performing fantastical feats or fading from sight in a ghostly way – suggests a flesh-and-blood explanation. But given that the field is so large and open, and also close to a busy road and housing, any group of people undertaking the activities described would surely have expected to be readily observed and challenged, not least by the police and/or the farmer whose field it was. If it were some clandestine or magical group, then how did the participants get there, as in none of the events described was there reference to a series of cars parked at the side of the road by the field? If any group was undertaking some magical ritual, then there must be something particular and special about the field for them to (a) keep returning and (b) place themselves at such risk of observation.

I therefore decided to investigate whether there had been something significant about the field in the past, and went to the Liverpool Central Library to study the available maps relating to the area. Historically, the core of Aintree was a small linear settlement to the east of the centre of the current township on School Lane, heading north-eastwards up Bull Bridge Lane – i.e. towards and close to the field in



ABOVE: Two maps showing the area around the field. On the left is the Hennett map of 1830, on the right the Ordnance Survey map of 1847-1849.

question.[5] The length of the field along the River Alt is approximately 700m (2,300ft), with its width ranging from 200m (660ft) at its narrowest (i.e. to Brewery Lane) to 360m (1,180ft) at its widest.

The maps went back as far as 1786, and in all of them the field is simply farmland. The Hennett map (1830) shows a mill on the River Alt and marks a chapel on the far left of the crossroads, approximately 200m (660ft) from Bull Bridge. By comparing different maps, it can be deduced that the chapel must have been built between 1818 and 1830, which means that it is not 'historic'. In 1847/49, Carr House Farm is in the middle of the field, and 'Chapel Cottages' are seen where the chapel was recorded previously. A Facebook community enquiry by Glen Preston established that it was a Methodist chapel, and that where it was situated was always known locally as 'Methodist Brow'. He was told that some of the original foundation stones are clearly visible from Spencer's Lane. Looking at current maps, it appears that the works building near to the motorway is on the site of Carr House Farm, and the road to it follows the original farm road.

I also spoke to a local farmer who told me that although he does not farm the field in question, he knows it is good farming land. He understands that the field was part of Lord Sefton's estate, which was sold off in (he thought) the 1950s or 1960s. It was originally intended for building houses, but as it is on a flood plain it is unlikely that building will ever take place. In the circumstances, the land has come under several tenant farmers.

They congregate at specific times of year at four locations

It can be concluded that there has never been anything 'special' historically about the field, such as its having been the site of a mediæval monastery or something else that might in itself attract a magical or religious group. I took the opportunity to ask the farmer if he or anyone he knows had witnessed any 'spectres'. He responded by saying that his family had been in the area since 1933, and he has been around for over 60 years, and so he knows a lot of people. He has never seen anything, or known anyone who has seen anything (although he has heard rumours at times). Via an intermediary, I also contacted the current owners of Mill Farm, which overlooks the field from across the River Alt. The inhabitants have lived there for 30 years and have never seen or heard anything, which suggests that nothing similar has occurred since the late 1980s.

COULD IT BE MAGIC?

In light of the hooded, Klan-like apparel reported by witnesses and the suspicion that some sort of magical group might be involved, I asked my Weird Weekend North colleague Steve Jones, a practising Pagan, if he was aware of any such group in the area. He wasn't, but agreed to post the question on his Facebook account and that of other pagan groups. This resulted in the following testimony from Mark, one of his pagan friends:

While at university in Liverpool during the mid 1980s I was interested in spiritual things and was 'looking' for a form of Christianity I could feel comfortable with. I dabbled with a number of opportunities, including being 'Born Again' around 1985/86. However, I had reservations because it did not feel right, and I was not persuaded by a Billy Graham revival meeting at Anfield in Liverpool in 1984. Nevertheless, I allowed a girl I fancied to talk me into going to a 'meeting' of evangelicals in a sports hall out in, as I recall, Kirkby.

The evangelical group appeared to have been well-established for some time, reflected in the fact that it had hired the sports hall for the evening. There were lots of people there; mostly people in their 20s and 30s, although some were older. I went twice, but each occasion caused me deep disquiet; it was 'full on' stuff! I remember people speaking in tongues, and reciting long Bible passages from memory in trance-like stares – everything in fact except the wrestling of snakes! As a 'newbie' and outsider I found that I could see no main focus.

Nevertheless, it was clear that there was a secretive inner circle, whose members definitely led things. What stood out for me was the treatment of a former member, who had

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ABOVE: Police examine the wreckage of the Piper Apache that crashed in the field in 1964 killing five people, including Nancy Spain and Joan Werner Laurie.

apparently gone to the 'dark side'. I remember people being instructed not to interact with him in any way and to go to the other side of the street to ignore him, as he was 'controlled by the Devil'.

I found it scary when talking to people that some identified themselves as social workers, lawyers, teachers, and similar; with almost all saying that they were not from the area but had been 'called there' by God. These people absolutely believed in the physicality of evil and the Devil. I never went back after the second visit.

I asked Mark if he thought that dressing up in KKK-type clothes and parading around a field at night with burning torches might be the sort of thing that such a 'secretive inner circle' might get up to, away from the main group. His response was that, given the level of weirdness he had witnessed, he thought that this could well be the case. It should be noted that the main Sports Centre in Kirkby is no more than three miles from the field in question – less than a 10-minute drive.

Following on from Mark's story, I contacted Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network to see if they were aware of any extreme right wing/KKK-type groups that could be linked to such Christian Fundamentalists. This drew a blank, although inevitably there were one or two speculations.

THE LILY WHITE BOYS

By February 2019, I felt that I had exhausted all reasonable avenues of enquiry about this mystery, and so it was at that point that I wrote up the above and submitted it *FT*. Then, by chance, I read the *Wirral Globe* free weekly newspaper's *Haunted Wirral* article of 15 May 2019, which was written by Tom Slemen, the well-known local writer of Merseyside ghost stories. What caught my eye was a reference to attacks vandalising graves in Ford Cemetery in Bootle (just over three miles from Bull Bridge Lane) in 1974, where witnesses described "weird hooded figures in robes reminiscent of those worn by the KKK, only the hoods had bizarre exaggerated noses made from cones of fabric stitched onto them." Tom argued that these were members of an "ancient sect of druid-like warriors [known as] the Lily White Boys." He referred to further graveyard desecrations in Bootle and Birkenhead as late as 1982, where the latter incident had the Lily White Boys waving swords and chasing a couple at 1am to the girl's home on Sumner Road, which was at least a quarter of a mile away. [6]

More details about the Lily White Boys were provided on Tom's website, where he suggests that this Sun-worshipping cult is rumoured to predate Christianity and practises animal sacrifice and allegedly once went in for child sacrifice. There is an early reference to them in the ancient folk song called "Green Grow the Rushes O", with the line "Two, two, lily-white boys, clothed all in green". [7] He states that they have been seen for hundreds of years across the country, but locally they congregate at specific times of year at four locations: Wirral's Bidston Hill, a field between Waddicar and Melling, Bowring Park (on the Liverpool-Huyton border), and the Delamere Forest. Of course, the field between Waddicar and Melling is the one that I had been investigating! Tom describes one incident as follows:

One Harvest Moon night in the 1970s, Brian and Tina, a young couple travelling homewards down Bull Bridge Lane in Aintree, saw a circle of figures in green robes standing in a field around a bonfire, and one of the figures was holding what looked like a small doll-like effigy. Brian got out of his car near the River Alt to get a better look at the strange ceremony, and asked an old passer-by what was going on. 'It's the Lily White Boys burning a child,' said the oldster, gravely, and he advised Brian not to go anywhere near the group, or they would kill him too. 'You're joking,' said Brian, 'that's some Guy Fawkes thing they're burning – isn't it?' But the old man shook his head solemnly. Brian raced home and called the police, but only the charred remains of a sheep was found in the smouldering vestiges on the following day.[7]

Tom also refers to incidents in WWII; one had ARP wardens investigating a huge bonfire at Bowring Park (during a blackout) and being faced with "green-robed men and naked women dancing around the fire, (with) five of these men, wielding scythes and swords". Such references tie in timewise with the aforementioned experience of Glen and Jeff's father's friend who had emigrated to Canada. I shared Tom's stories with Jeff and Mrs H.

and asked if the descriptions fitted with the KKK figures that they had seen. Jeff said that he didn't recall the 'exaggerated noses' mentioned, but then the figures that he saw were at a distance and heading away from him; and if the colour being referred to is a light green, then it would be quite difficult to distinguish this in torchlight from the 'greyish' colour that he recalls. Similarly, for Mrs H a light green outfit could well have appeared to be white/ light-coloured when (part) illuminated by car headlights; and, travelling at 30mph, she could not recall any 'exaggerated noses'.

CULTS AND CHRISTIANS

I tried to contact Tom Slemen via the *Wirral Globe* with a view to comparing notes and sources, and specifically whether he knew if the robes were dark or light green. Unfortunately, Tom did not get back to me, and so I have not been able to take things further in this regard. Intriguingly, his stories about the Lily White Boys tie in well with the first- and second-hand testimonies I have collected in terms of both appearance and (some of the) actions of the mysterious figures in the field. His earliest references to incidents were in WWII and his last was the early 1980s – again consistent with the testimonies I collected.

It can be concluded that these 'spectres' have been seen on several occasions over a period from the mid to late 1960s to the mid to late 1970s, and possibly as far back as WWII and as recently as the early 1980s. There was great consistency in where and what was witnessed, suggesting a single if infrequent phenomenon. It is understandable that (my) witnesses believed that there might be something paranormal or supernatural involved, mostly because they were so scared by what they were seeing. But the very nature of the events points to human involvement. Of course, the outfits worn were not necessarily KKK-related; pointed hats of a conical form, *capirotes*, are part of the uniforms of some Catholic brotherhoods during Easter observances and re-enactments in some areas during Holy Week in Spain. [8] With that in mind, religious robes specific to a cult, such as the *Lily White Boys*, would make a lot of sense. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to exclude the possibility that the motivation behind the activities was political and/or malevolent in some way.

The maps studied do not indicate any explicit ancient presence on the site that would be likely to attract a magical group on a recurring basis. The field might not have any special feature or power; although according to 'Captain Moonlight' "Aintree derives its name from the Anglo-Saxon 'an-treow' – meaning 'one tree' and that one tree was an ancient sprawling oak, sacred to the Druids and the Lily-White Boys cult of nature worshippers." [9] Alternatively, it might simply

PABLO BLAZQUEZ DOMINGUEZ / GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: *Capirote*-wearing penitents from the Santisimo Cristo de las Injurias brotherhood take part in a Holy Week procession in Zamora, Spain.

be that the field is large, reasonably out-of-the-way and convenient for the participants. The timing of Mark's experiences with Christian Fundamentalists is not inconsistent with the sightings, because this would only stretch dates into the mid 1980s, but it would seem that the phenomenon has ceased since the late 1980s.

But if what was witnessed *did* involve a cult called the Lily White Boys, then is it still active or has it disbanded (on Merseyside at least)? Perhaps it has simply withered on the vine as its members have grown old and died, and their children or other potential members have turned their backs on it. I have 'google-researched' as much as I can about the Lily White Boys and other than references to *Green Grow the Rushes O*, Harry Cookson's 1960 play of this name and a story of this title by William Maxwell, I have not been able to find anything wholly independent of Tom Slemen's writings. My enquiries with *FT's* Dr David Clarke about whether he was aware of the cult through his folklore network and Steve Jones through his pagan contacts also drew a blank. Perhaps the Lily White Boys are nothing more than a literary device created by Tom Slemen to provide a colourful backstory to actual local events or stories that he has picked up on. After all, I am unlikely to be the only person that witnesses have spoken to about this phenomenon. Unfortunately, I won't know for sure unless Mr Slemen gets in touch.

Irrespective of names and history, there seems to be the distinct possibility that some form of sect was involved; maybe, in the early 1980s, its members changed tack and followed an entryist route into the local Christian Fundamentalist group (for whatever reason) and *were* the "secretive inner circle" that Mark remembered. Such a potential link is pure speculation on my part, of course. However, I think that I can safely say that it is highly unlikely that a Spanish brotherhood would travel to Merseyside to practise their observances and re-enactments in the middle of a farmer's field in the middle of the night in the middle of winter.

CONCLUSIONS

Before seeing Tom Slemen's article, my best guess was that the Aintree Spectres were a small group of (local) Christian Fundamentalists who enjoyed the excitement of dressing up in KKK-type apparel and performing rituals with burning torches in the middle of the night, perhaps with some political backdrop. Pointing the finger at the Lily White Boys (or whatever they might be called) has obvious attractions; but, as highlighted above, I could find no evidential sources independent of Tom' Slemen's writings. Then, of course, there is the problem that secret sects are by definition *secret*. Therefore, assuming that the Lily White Boys actually existed, it would be virtually impossible to confirm whether or not they were involved, short of a (former) member coming forward. So unless someone who participated in such events, or knows someone who did, is prepared to make an admission – which might simply be something along the lines of "It was me and me mates having a laugh!" – I will have to adopt a fortean stance and keep an open mind on exactly what lies behind this very peculiar phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1 www.thejockeyclub.co.uk/aintree/events-tickets/grand-national/about-the-event/grand-national-event-history/

2 By coincidence, close to the bottom of Bull Bridge Lane is the Blue Anchor pub where my work colleague told me his first-hand 'real-life experience' of a phantom hitchhiker, which led to my *Old Man of Halsall Moss* research **[FT56:52-53; FT328:32-39]**.

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ROB GANDY is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University, and a regular contributor to FT. He will next be turning his attention to strangeness in Lincolnshire.