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Revisiting The Old Man of Halsall Moss

Rob Gandy

Article for Fortean Times – Full Version

Introduction

Like many forteans I have an interest in urban legends which was prompted by reading Jan Harold Brunvand's book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*¹. Many of the friend-of-a-friend (foaf) tales are seen as realistic stories concerning recent events (or alleged events) with an ironic or supernatural twist¹. Such yarns are greatly amusing and perfect fodder for an evening's chatter over a drink in a hostelry. It was during one such session with work colleagues in the late 1980s that, much to my surprise, one of them described his own personal experience of a vanishing hitchhiker whilst travelling across Halsall Moss between Southport and Ormskirk, in West Lancashire. This presented a somewhat unique opportunity to record a first-hand event, and so I wrote up the details which were published in the Winter 1990 issue of Fortean Times [FT56: 52-53]². In summary what happened was as follows:

Bill (pseudonym) was driving his Mini along Gregory's Lane at speed in the direction of Ormskirk. It was 11.30pm on a Friday night in February or March 1965. The weather was clear, but it was pitch dark. As he neared the bridge over the disused railway he looked in the car mirror and saw the figure of a large elderly man, probably in his seventies, sitting in the back seat of the car. Bill looked long and hard enough to know his eyes were not playing tricks. There was a grey/ white scarf around the man's neck in the style of a cravat, and Bill got the impression that he was wearing a flat cap. Bill was frightened and brought the car to a halt. Getting out of the car he reached for the starting-handle to defend himself, but when he looked the man had vanished! Realising that there was no way that the man could have got out of the Mini Bill became more scared, jumped back in the car and drove off at speed.

Bill was certain that it was not a trick of the light or an hallucination, and this was affirmed six or seven years later when by chance he met a man at a social event who described having had virtually the same experience at exactly the same place. He too had seen an elderly man, of similar appearance, in the rear seat of his car who had then simply vanished.

In late 2014, I was reading the FT article again when I realised that it was coming up to the 50th anniversary of Bill's experience, and so I thought that it would be interesting to find out if there had been any repetition of such events during the intervening period. In the circumstances I contacted the *Champion Newspapers*³ who provide free newspapers across the Sefton/ West Lancashire area and sought their assistance in seeking out related experiences from their readers. They were very helpful and published a piece in the Southport and Ormskirk & West Lancashire issues for 21st January 2015, under the heading of "Doc's appeal to unravel mystery of ghostly hitchhiker"⁴. I specifically invited first-hand and, at the very most, second-hand reports, and deliberately did not reveal details about the figure observed by Bill so as not to inadvertently influence responses.

This article provides details of the responses received and looks at whether there are any patterns.

Halsall Moss

Halsall Moss is an area of very fertile farmland, reclaimed by drainage, which occupies much of the western part of the parish of Halsall, the name of the village originating from “rising ground near the edge of the great bog or mire”⁵. The flatness of the area is attested to by the fact that it was at Halsall that the first sod was cut at the commencement ceremony for the Leeds-Liverpool Canal in 1770⁶.

As is seen from the map, Halsall Moss is central to the locations of the events described in the responses. It is part of a large area of West Lancashire, which stretches from the hills between Halsall and Ormskirk in the East, to the coastal towns of Southport, Ainsdale and Formby in the West. To the North is the Southport – Wigan railway line, running through Bescar and Burscough, and to the South the courses of the River Alt and Maghull Brook.

Responses

I was pleased to receive six first-hand reports that related to vanishing hitchhiker phenomena, or similar, plus two other stories that had a degree of strangeness. In all cases the wording of the reports has been agreed with the respondent, except the two highlighted with an asterisk, where the respondents said that they would trust me to collate their story accurately. All respondents have been treated as anonymous.

I have decided not to try and prioritise the reports in any order, and simply start in the North and move South. Cases A – F are the first-hand reports, with the other two shown as cases G & H.

Case A White Van Man

My mother and I had a very strange incident happen to us both when travelling back to Liverpool following an overnight stay at my sister’s home in Southport, during the Summer of 2005. My mother sadly passed away last Christmas. I am a Nursing Sister at a major Merseyside Hospital, and due to me being on duty the next morning I had to get up with Mum at 5.00am, in order to be on time for my early shift at 7.00am that Sunday morning.

I was driving my car along the main A570 trunk road towards Ormskirk, on the long straight stretch outside Southport and well before the bridge across the Leeds-Liverpool canal at Scarisbrick. My speed was about 30 miles per hour. Although it will have been around 5:50am, it was light and the weather was so fine and warm that I had the driver’s car window down. There was no other traffic on the road.

Suddenly, what seemed to come from nowhere was a white van which drove alongside my car as if it was about to overtake me. I looked over towards the car and could clearly see that it was being driven by a man, who just smiled at us. He was around 40 years of age and was clean shaven. The van appeared to overtake my car but then seemed to vanish into thin air. Strangely there had been no sound from the van.

I remember my Mum being in complete shock as though she was the only one to notice what had happened. She asked “Who was that!?” Yet within two minutes, the same white

van drove up at the side of me again and we saw exactly the same man driving. Then the van vanished completely.

I pulled the car over to the side of the road to take on board what had occurred. My Mum was in complete shock and neither of us could make any sense of what had just happened. There were no turn-offs from the road, and the area is quite flat, so there was no way that the van could have simply turned off the road without us seeing it.

Everybody I know will know about this incident as I could not get it off my mind for a long time, and my Mum constantly talked about it too.

Case B The Man In The Woollen Winter Coat

In September or October 2004, Mrs B of Southport was returning home from work at around 9.30pm in the evening. She was driving alone along the main A570 trunk road from Ormskirk. It was Winter and so it was dark.

As she approached the Blue Elephant restaurant, she had a feeling that there was someone in the car with her. Just beyond the restaurant, as she came up to the bridge across the Leeds–Liverpool Canal, adjacent to Scarisbrick Marina, she turned her head to the left and saw a man sat in the front passenger seat next to her. She did not know who he was, but described him as wearing a man’s woollen Winter coat and a hat. She did not see his face.

The bridge is on a bend, and so Mrs B necessarily returned her attention to the road, but when she turned back the man had gone.

Mrs B says that she was not frightened by the sighting, and it was only the next day that she really thought about how strange the event had been.

Case C Alan’s Story*

In the late 1990s Alan was a taxi driver, and early one Sunday morning around 3.00am to 3.30am in June or July he was driving west along Gregory’s Lane from Halsall towards Birkdale. He was tired and had just passed the bad bend in the road, heading towards the bridge over the disused railway line.

All of a sudden and right in front of him he saw “an oldish guy wearing a cap”. He appeared to be wearing a farmer’s-type jacket. Alan slammed on the brakes but the man had been so near that Alan was certain that he had run him over. He stopped his car immediately and got out shaking like a leaf. But when he looked at where the car had been, and under the car, there was nothing there! The man had simply disappeared.

Alan wondered if he might have run over an animal or somehow mistaken what he had seen. But there was no evidence of him having hit anything else. To this day Alan knows that he had a genuine experience, but is unable to find an explanation.

Case D Shadow Across The Windscreen

Ms W of Ainsdale was travelling alone back from work from Ormskirk at around 5.30pm on a fairly unpleasant night in November 2013; it was particularly windy, rainy and very dark. She had just passed the houses in Gregory's Lane, into the national speed limit zone and followed the turn in the road that bends quite sharply to the right, past the left turn into The Runnel, and with the Halsall Riding & Livery Centre directly in front of her beyond the field.

Ms W describes what happened at that point as follows: "When you're sat stationary in traffic and a pedestrian crosses the road immediately behind your car, they cast a shadow right across your back windscreen. That was the sensation I experienced, but at the time I was travelling at 40 miles per hour so it was safe to say there was nobody walking behind the car! For a split second, the shadow encompassed the whole car and then it passed".

She felt slightly unnerved, but as it was such a vile night she put it down to the shadows cast by the telegraph poles, the lights from the barn on the corner, tiredness etc. As nothing happened on her journey the next night, Ms W was able to forget about the event, until it happened again for a second time in September 2014, and a third time in October 2014. Both subsequent events were around the same time of day, between 5.15pm and 5.35pm depending on traffic, because Ms W was travelling back from work. They also both happened on the same stretch of road, and again she was alone. Ms W does not particularly recall the weather on either occasion, which suggests to her that it was fairly calm out, although obviously dusk.

Ms W thinks of herself as an open-minded sceptic, and has given considerable thought to potential explanations. However, the fact that the experience has only happened three times and does not happen every evening causes her to rule out normal shadows, and the effects of trees, telegraph poles, and suchlike. She does not find what happened particularly scary: as she says, she would much rather have a shadow move across the car than be pursued by an aggressive road user!

Case E The Man In The Gabardine Coat

Mrs H is a professional lady who has worked in the high reaches of the NHS, who got in touch saying that the article in *The Champion* had struck a chord with her. Prior to the event described below Mrs H told how on two occasions she had been driving along St Helens Road (A570) from the M58 towards Edge Hill College (now University) when she had seen a purple/ lilac wisp fluttering across the road. This happened in the same place both times, where there were open fields either side of the road. She felt that the fleeting apparition was of a lady. On relating these experiences to her husband he said that she must have seen a ghost.

On one dark Winter's night in the 1990s, Mrs H had been to college in Wigan and was dropping down to Halsall from Clieves Hill. It was late evening and she was travelling on her own along Narrow Lane. At the blind junction with Halsall Lane she stopped to check if the road was clear. As she bent forward to look, over her left shoulder she saw that someone was in the back seat of her car. The figure was misty, but was clearly a large man who

appeared to be in his 60s. He was wearing a grey/ beige gabardine coat, with a light, yellow/ beige scarf around his neck tied like a cravat. Mrs H did not see what he had on his head, but he appeared perfectly normal and peaceful, and showed no expression.

Mrs H was not frightened, and admits that her immediate reaction was one of "I've got a ghost in the back of my car. If I can get back home quickly then I can show my husband!" She accelerated away towards home, but when she got there the figure had gone. Although the time involved was very limited Mrs H vividly remembers the event and the details.

Case F Popping Down For A Pint

A professional woman from West Lancashire got in touch with the following story:

This event happened in 1998. I am unsure which month, but it was an autumn or wintery day, going dark early. I had visited my sick friend in Formby and was returning across the Moss towards Aughton. The road I took was the B5195 along Formby Lane past Great Altcar and Farmer Ted's Farm Park.

It was a dark, early evening and the mist which came in patches across the Moss made visibility poor but not impossible. I drove slower than usual, as the road bends and twists at right angles and left angles and you can come to these bends unexpectedly. At one of the right angles – well before Farmer Ted's, as I slowed to take the corner I had the distinct impression that a man had got into the back seat of my car and sat directly behind me. Part of me knew it was impossible yet I could sense that if I looked into the rear mirror I would see him. But I did not dare to look or turn round and look at him. I was terrified. I'd not experienced anything like it before and, even though I am not religious at all, I kept saying the Lord's Prayer over and over again out loud as if it would protect me from the feeling of him being there, or even protect me from him. He felt real.

As I drove, I eventually felt that he would not hurt me and I was a little less terrified. I slowed down at Downholland Cross (where the Scarisbrick Arms is) ready to turn left then right at the cross roads. As I slowed to a near stop, the man got out of my car, and I felt an enormous sense of relief. I caught a glimpse of him: he seemed to be of mature age, not an old and not a young man, but agile and strong enough. He had on what I could only describe as a leather skirt or apron.

I should highlight that the car door did not physically open or close when the man got in, or when he got out. He just arrived when I slowed down at the corner, and similarly he just left when I slowed down at the cross roads.

As I turned at the crossroads, into Broad Lane, I felt almost an amusement at what had happened. It was as if I had been used to give a hitch-hiker a lift to the local hostelry; but the hitch-hiker was not of this century, he had belonged to another time. I have tried to make sense of the experience. Perhaps the slowing down and the mist activated an old memory of someone getting into my car at another time, but I could not recall any such experience before. The explanation that I felt most comfortable with was that I had picked up a presence of a man from centuries before – even Roman, as he had that leather apron thing

on - who wanted to get to the hostelry. I understand that the Moss was used after many battles of different sorts, to throw bodies into it.

Case G Strange Fire

Mrs B of Birkdale told of how around 2000 she was a passenger in a car travelling west along Carr Moss Lane towards Birkdale and Southport. This road runs parallel to Gregory's Lane, but at some distance. She was accompanied by a female and male friend, the latter who was driving. It was around 10.00pm and it was dark, so it was not Summer.

Suddenly the car went off the road and went down into a ditch. Fortunately no-one was injured and they all got out of the car. About six metres away from the crash they saw a fire burning brightly on the edge of the road, which appeared to be freshly made. Mrs B said that they were "in the middle of nowhere", with the flat open expanse of the Moss either side. She said that the weird thing was that there was absolutely no-one around, and it was nowhere near any houses, or similar. So who would have recently made up a fire by the side of the road in such a remote spot, and for why?

They left the scene and made the long walk to get help to get home.

Mrs B's story does not include reference to the sighting of any apparitions, but she felt that her strange experience could be a useful contribution in response to *The Champion* article, given that she feels that Halsall Moss can have a strange atmosphere at the best of times.

Case H Possible Portent?*

Mrs C of Burscough told of how her husband was tragically killed while driving a steam roller as part of a team repairing the road on Plex Moss Lane, which crosses Halsall Moss. His colleagues said that he had been driving slowly down the road and then moved over and crashed into a ditch. It was around 1.00pm on a beautiful sunny day in May 1986.

A few years later Mrs C came across a lady who had been researching strange occurrences on the Moss who told her that she had been expecting her to be in touch at some point. The lady explained that someone had reported the sighting of an apparition walking down the middle of the road near to where her husband had been killed, just before he died. The apparition was described as a World War II airman/ pilot, wearing a pilot's jacket and flying helmet, with a white scarf around his neck. He appeared from an old-style car of that era.

The lady said that there had been many sightings of this airman/ pilot, usually just prior to deaths occurring on the Moss; his appearance arguably acting as a portent or premonition. She also told Mrs C that there were proportionately high numbers of deaths on the roads crossing the Moss, and that there had been many "ghostly sightings" and strange flashing lights.

Mrs C had no prior awareness of what the lady described, and confirmed that no-one amongst her husband's work colleagues had made any claim about anything strange happening at the time. But she thought that she should tell me this story in response to *The Champion* article.

It can be seen that the events are spread right across the area, rather than being concentrated in one or two specific places. However, Cases C & D are both on the same stretch of road as the two original cases described in **FT56**², and they are all near to the Halsall Riding & Livery Centre. The Centre is situated on Gregory's Lane, close to and just south east of the bridge over the disused railway line. Given its proximity to the sites of these four episodes a telephone call was made to the owner to see if any of the people involved with the centre had had any similar experiences, or if passers-by might have stopped there to report anything that might have happened to them. The Centre has been in business since 1983/84, but the owner confirmed that there was nothing to report in this regard. She did say that when mist came down on the Moss the centre could be completely enveloped by it, yet when you go up to the railway bridge it is clear, so that you look around on to a sea of mist.

Level of Accidents on Halsall Moss

Given some references to there being higher than average numbers of accidents on the roads crossing Halsall Moss, Danielle Thompson of *The Champion*³ made a Freedom of Information Request to Lancashire Constabulary, asking about the numbers that had taken place over time. The response focused on the road which saw four of the eight episodes (Cases C & D and the two from **FT56**²), viz. New Cut Lane and Gregory's Lane (which run into one another). It covered the period 8th May 2008 and 28th February 2015 (inclusive), which was as far back as the new information system went. These searches indicated that there had been 85 collisions/accidents, of which 56 had involved "injury" and 29 recorded "damage only"⁷.

The overall period of 6 years and 10 months suggests that there were on average around 12.5 collisions/ accidents per annum, or one a month. Given the road is an open lane, subjectively this seems a little on the high side, but of course making objective comparisons will always be very difficult because there is no data on the total volumes of traffic.

What Is Going On?

There can be no doubt that having eight first-hand accounts of Vanishing Hitchhiker phenomena (including the two original cases) in such close proximity is quite remarkable, and there is a great deal of consistency between them, albeit with variations. The following points can be drawn from the data:

- All of the events involved a single person, except Case A which had two women together.
- The cases involved six women and three men.
- In all cases the (main) witness was driving the car.
- All cases, except Case A, were at night or it was dark.
- There was a variety of weather involved.
- Only in Case A did the phenomenon appear to interact with the witnesses, i.e. he "just smiled at us".
- All apparitions were of men (as far as can be told).

In his excellent book “The Evidence For Phantom Hitch-Hikers”⁸, Michael Goss sets out the array of manifestations that have been attributed to the phenomenon. Many of these involve definitive interactions between the phantom and the witness, for example the unaccompanied driver provides a lift and engages in conversation before the hitch-hiker simply vanishes from the car or motorcycle. What is made clear is that such events happen across all countries and cultures and have occurred across the centuries. Therefore the phantom hitch-hiker is a strong folklore motif, and belongs to a broad tradition of ghost stories set on the open road⁸. However, the cases described above fit into one end of the spectral spectrum, in that they are incomprehensible, open-ended or inconclusive, i.e. they just “happened” without clues as to why. As such they are not usual in the folk tradition, and are more the staple item of psychical research, whose vast literature is replete with ghosts that do little more than appear and then vanish forever⁸. The credibility of the accounts derives from the witnesses, and having been in communication with each of them I can vouch for their total sincerity. Several are professional people. A common thread was that my piece in *The Champion*⁴ was welcomed by them as an opportunity to present their experience.

One potential explanation for such experiences involves psychology: when the eye receives photons of light (waves/particles) these hit the back of the retina and get transferred as electrical impulses travelling down the optic nerve. The information received is transferred and processed by a series of systems and processes which use neurotransmitters at the synapses (chemical transfer) and then electrical impulses (action potential) to the back of the brain, where it is further processed. The eye does not process everything that impinges on the retina, rather it focuses on significant angles, amount of light, objects, and colour, and the brain fills in the gaps by supposition and previous experiences/memory to make sense of what the eye and the optic system is processing. In other words we actively make sense of what we see⁹.

It is reasonable to assume that many drivers will have a greater sense of awareness and concentration as they drive across Halsall Moss in the dark, as the nature of the roads in the area, with their sharp bends and lack of lighting, and the frequent presence of mists, can make driving hazardous, if not dangerous. Consequently, drivers will take in more information from the environment than they usually do. In the circumstances, the experience of something like the presence of another person in the car may well be prompted by something in the environment - a thicker mist, a smell, a taste, a sound - i.e. more than one sense being activated causes a person to try and make sense of the extra information.

Internet Stories

For the purposes of analysis, I have deliberately ignored two related stories that appeared on an Internet Forum entitled “Haunted roads in Southport and West Lancashire” because I had no way of liaising with the people concerned and questioning the details. But for completeness, and interest, I present them below¹⁰:

- One quoted a friend “driving down Carr Moss Lane, Halsall, across the Moss about 15 years ago about 1:30am in the morning, when he said the car became very cold and he looked in his rear view mirror and saw an old man aged about 75-80 years in the back seat dressed in clothes that dated from the 1900's; when he turned to have another look the man had gone”.

- Another stated “About 7 years ago I was driving down New Cut Lane about 8pm one night and saw an old man stood in the middle of the road at the bottom of the bridge. I drove slow and went round him. When I looked in the mirror there was no one there and my son asked me what I was looking for. He didn’t see him. I had to stop the car a few minutes later as it really scared me”.

Conclusions

That Halsall Moss is a strange and atmospheric area is beyond question, and there is clearly a long history of folklore surrounding it. Yet the fact that I have come across eight first-hand testimonies relating to vanishing/ phantom hitch-hikers, or however they might best be described, in such close proximity begs questions. Is there a particular phenomenon which is generating these experiences or is the landscape conducive to people having psychological experiences for the sorts of reasons outlined above? All the episodes involved people travelling in their cars, and all apparitions were passive in relation to the witness(es), bar the smiling man in Case A. The paradox is that there is so much consistency between the accounts, yet there is also so much variation.

I am not going to try and determine the exact cause(s) for what has been witnessed because I know that the nature of these types of fortaean events is such that definitive conclusions are impossible. That the events occurred sporadically over a considerable period of time does not diminish their value. I simply present them as evidence that there is a genuine phenomenon taking place, which is separate from the longstanding record of foaf-tales as described by Jan Harold Brunvand, and others. That the foaf-tales may themselves present subconscious prompts for such experiences cannot be excluded, but why might Halsall Moss represent a specific focus?

Perhaps the observed phenomenon is more widely spread but simply under-reported? If this type of landscape somehow induces psychological reactions under certain circumstances then should there not be similar examples from the Fens in East Anglia and the Somerset Levels? Maybe there are but no-one has been able to gain and collate such data.

Initially I was not sure what sort of response I might get to the piece in *The Champion*⁴, but I can say that getting six new first-hand experiences, plus the two other examples of strangeness, was more than I could have anticipated. Unfortunately I had to exclude the foaf story I received about a “cavalier” on horseback floating across a road on the Moss, but you cannot win them all. What is certain is that next time I drive across Halsall Moss I will probably try and make sure that I keep my eyes tightly shut!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Danielle Thompson and her colleagues at *The Champion* for their help in this research, particularly the invitation for people to submit their experiences and the Freedom of Information Request. My thanks and great appreciation to the people of Sefton and West Lancashire who got in touch to share their experiences.

5,013 words excluding References

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Note for David Sutton

I will be very happy to collect and collate first-hand reports of vanishing/ phantom hitchhikers from wherever they may occur, through the good offices of Fortean Times. Maybe some suitably worded footnote to the article might be appropriate. Happy to discuss.