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**A Miscellany of Merseyside Mysteries**

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### Article

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## **A Miscellany of Merseyside Mysteries - Article for Fortean Times – Rob Gandy**

Readers of my *FT* articles will know that I have a particular interest in collecting and recording testimonies of genuinely weird first- and second-hand experiences that people have had. I infer that my articles and presentations mean that individuals are comfortable approaching me, knowing that they will receive a sympathetic ear; although I always ensure that I ‘test’ their stories as far as is reasonably possible for authenticity, consistency and completeness. Following my *Strange Stories From Southport* article [FT370:42-45] I received a number of stories via *FT* itself and direct communication. I was also given new stories by attendees at my occasional fundraising events. As a result I found that I had an eclectic collection of extraordinary testimonies, where the only real connection between them is that they all have some link to the Merseyside area. Therefore, I present herein a veritable Smorgasbord of the bizarre for your delectation!

### **ROB BRAY'S IT HAPPENED TO ME**

*FT* readers will have enjoyed Rob's first-hand accounts of what happened to him over the years in the Southport area [FT375: 77], which he says were prompted to write by my aforementioned article. Paul Sieveking kindly put us in touch with one another, and I was privileged to liaise with Rob to help flesh out his stories. I will not repeat them here, but it will be recalled that they involved: his being pixie-led amongst the Birkdale Dunes, adjacent to the Hillside and Royal Birkdale Golf Clubs; his car being violently rocked by unseen hands whilst parked near the Royal Birkdale Golf Club; and his coming across a circle of large dog prints with no entrance or exit points, which brought to mind the Formby black dog legend of ‘Old Trash’. They are definitely worth a repeat read!

### **PHANTOM CONCORDE**

It was mid to late August 1975, and so Len Chester (pseudonym) was 15 years of age. Together with his Mum and Dad (now deceased) he had gone on a weekend trip to Shropshire in the old ambulance that his Dad had converted into a mobile home/ caravanette. They stayed at a campsite in either Arley or Hampton Loade, and visited the Severn Valley railway where there was a locomotive that he was particularly interested in. It had recently arrived in an un-restored state and was at Bewdley Station that weekend.

They also travelled on a steam train, which got delayed for a while at Hampton Lode station. Everyone disembarked onto the sunny platform until the delay was over, including as he recalls, a carriage full of nuns! Just then a Spitfire aircraft flew past and someone remarked that there was an airshow in the vicinity.

Later that day, a fine Sunday afternoon, they left for home on Merseyside and had not travelled very far, perhaps 15-20 minutes into the journey. Len's father did not drive fast and therefore they were probably north of Bridgnorth on the A442, which was the most direct route. This is reinforced by Len's clear recollection that nearer home they passed an overbridge of the old Ellesmere branch line, which is situated on the A525 between Whitchurch and Wrexham.

They were out in the countryside when suddenly to their left, behind (at first) a low hedge, they saw the quite unmistakable shape of Concorde! What was ridiculous and remarkable about this was that

its height, speed and angle made it appear that it had only just taken off (10 - 15 feet off the ground?)! (Len remembers that the undercarriage was still deployed, but he accepts that he may be filling gaps in his memory). This was strange enough in itself, but all three of the family commented that it was just an ordinary farmers' field that it had seemingly taken off from! Len is very clear about this fact because what struck them all as being very odd was that they were not near any airfield. Len recalls that Concorde was parallel to them, also heading north, and about 100 yards away. He cannot remember if they heard any noise from it or not, which would have been expected given the close proximity; but this might just be his memory. The airplane disappeared from view behind hedges and trees as they continued up the road, and was then nowhere to be seen.

Len has tried to rationalise this event over the years. Maybe it was part of the airshow that had been suggested (although spotting a flying Spitfire does not automatically mean that it *is* part of an airshow)? But then why was it so close to the ground? Enquiries have ascertained that Concorde was not involved at the Cosford Air Show, the main large airshow in that area; indeed, advice is that there probably wasn't a Cosford show in 1975! Concorde only flew at two Cosford shows, which were in 1986 and 1987<sup>1</sup>. Maybe it was taking off from an airstrip which was in the Severn valley beyond the field? But no other airstrip can be found anywhere near there that would be capable of accommodating Concorde, which required a runway that could handle a Boeing 747 jumbo jet<sup>2</sup>. Maybe it was on a normal flight but was experiencing trouble, and had to fly very low for a period? But, if the airplane was experiencing some such trouble in its flight then it would be anticipated that it would have made the national press later. Maybe it was something else altogether? But on this point Len has no doubt in his mind: it was unmistakably a Concorde! Therefore this episode must be filed as both 'strange' and 'unsolved'.

### **THE GOOD REVEREND HAYES**

In the 1970s, St Thomas's church in Melling used to have an elderly vicar called Reverend Hayes, who was probably aged in his 80s. He was readily recognised by his hats and cassocks. Reverend Hayes was having problems with the petrol mower used for maintaining the church grounds and the father of Jeff and Glen Preston (pseudonyms) was asked to check it over and repair it. Unfortunately their father was a little lax in dealing with the mower and was then admitted to hospital.

On his discharge, their father found himself walking up the long footpath between Rock Lane and Waddicar Lane, known locally as 'The Pads', towards St Thomas's. The footpath is about 700 yards long with a clear view, and it was at this point that he saw Reverend Hayes walking towards him, wearing his distinctive attire. Feeling embarrassed that he had not sorted out the mower the father dipped his head down, so as to appear not to have seen the reverend. But when he looked up the reverend was nowhere in sight, and there were no turn-offs for him to have left the path by! The father was completely flummoxed by this turn of events. But he was more confused when he got home and was told that the reverend had died three weeks previously while the father was in hospital.....

### **GATEHOUSE GHOST**

Mrs Jones (pseudonym) of Southport regularly travelled by bus between Liverpool and Southport. Back in the late Spring of 2010 Mrs Jones, a very sprightly 70-year old, was on her way home to Southport and upstairs on a double-decker. She had collected her grandchildren from school and

delivered them safely to their mother, and therefore caught the bus home around 4.00 – 4.10pm. It was about 15 to 20 minutes into the journey, and the weather was good, when the bus was on the long stretch of road (the A565) through Ince Woods passing the gatehouse of what is now a care home. She looked in through the upstairs window of the gatehouse and clearly saw the white figure of an old woman, who appeared to be sat at a spinning wheel or loom! The bus was travelling at what she considers to be about 35 mph, but she is certain of what she saw. This was reinforced by the fact that a few weeks later she saw the same vision, again whilst passing on the bus. In fact Mrs Jones has seen this apparition about four times in total. Mrs Jones accepts that prior to the first sighting she had heard schoolchildren on the bus asking each other if they had seen ‘the ghost’, and that this was probably what encouraged her to look into the gatehouse. She dismisses the possibility of suggestion and that it was an optical illusion because she has frequently passed the gatehouse around the same time, and an optical illusion would almost certainly be regularly repeated. This was not the case and she recalls the clarity of the image of the old woman. She added that the lady wore a white hat and she could also see a white pinafore covering her chest, (perhaps as a maid may have worn).

### **YET ANOTHER BOLD STREET TIME SLIP!**

John Moonan of Wirral tells a story about a fellow Music Technology student at Liverpool Community College from back in October 2005, when they were both 22 years of age. That morning, while John and colleagues were waiting in class, Paul arrived for the lesson looking quite shaken. He explained that around 8.30am he had been about to cross Ranelagh Street/ Hanover Street, at the top of Church Street, ready to walk up Bold Street. It was cold and raining, and he was looking down at the pavement as he had no umbrella or hood. It was then that he heard the sound of a horse and cart. He looked up to see a very old horse and cart crossing his path and carrying passengers dressed in Victorian-style dress; the surroundings were also different, and consistent with that era. His immediate reaction was to presume that he had stumbled into a filming location, and so hurried a little bit further up Bold Street, again looking at the ground because of the weather. When he reached the steps on the left, he paused briefly and turned back to look if he could see anyone filming. But everything appeared normal again and there was no sign of the horse and cart or period clothing and surroundings. There was certainly no film crew. Everything was as normal.

Paul’s very shaken demeanour was such that another fellow student decided to search for similar stories. This resulted in him finding other accounts of similar ‘time-slip’ sightings on Bold Street, of which there are many examples. Readers interested in finding out more about such instances should refer to: **FT126:9**, <http://www.parascience.org.uk/PDFs/Time%20Slips.pdf>, and <https://exemplore.com/paranormal/The-Liverpool-Time-Slips-The-True-Story-Of-Mysterious-Occurences-In-Bold-Street>.

## **GEORGES DOCK BUILDING GHOST STORY**

I came across the following story when undertaking research for *Uneasy Riders* [FT358:42-47]. It was subsequently published in *The Ghost Club Journal*<sup>3</sup>, because it did not fit with any potential FT articles that I was preparing at that time. Given that it relates to the centre of Liverpool I am repeating it here. My source was Peter Bishop, who had worked with Mersey Tunnels for 30 years up to 2013, rising from Technician to Acting Assistant Engineering Manager. It was Peter who kindly gave me details of police interactions with phantom hitchhikers in the Kingsway (Wallasey) Mersey Tunnel. He then mentioned this ghost story, which he considered to be genuine:

*There is an area in the basement of the Georges Dock Building which was nicknamed the 'bedroom passage' on account of its being where Air Raid Precaution (ARP) wardens would sleep in between their round-the-clock shifts. The 190 feet tall Georges Dock Building was one of the highest buildings in Liverpool during World War II, strategically placed near the docks, and therefore ARP wardens would climb to the top and watch for incoming German bombers.*

*Today the area bears no trace of its former use and simply hosts enclosures with computer equipment and associated work spaces and passageways. However, according to two of Peter's most trusted Mersey Tunnel staff – one a Tunnel Control Engineer and one an Inspector of Works - they each independently encountered an ARP warden when down in this area. The events were about three years apart, and in essence the stories they told were the same. They had each been walking down the corridor in the late evening, when a man came towards them. The Inspector of Works said that at first he thought that it was just one of the maintenance staff. He then noticed that the man was wearing a great coat and carrying a metal helmet, with binoculars and a torch. As they passed in the passage, the man said 'All is quiet tonight. Gerry has stayed home'. It was only at this point that the strangeness of the situation struck home, and each witness turned to see the phantom disappear through the next airlock door.*

*What is clear is that the phantom actually spoke to the two witnesses, or they both imagined that they heard someone speak. Both witnesses are down-to-earth characters, neither given to romancing - or believing in ghosts. Peter has known them for many years and provided their names. He vouched for their honesty and their believing that they had had genuine inexplicable experiences.*

## **HAUNTED RADIO STATION**

I was interviewed by broadcaster/journalist Howard Hughes for his excellent radio programme *The Unexplained*<sup>4</sup> on Talk Radio on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018. I was talking about phantom hitchhikers and road ghosts, primarily in the Halsall Moss area between Southport and Ormskirk. Much to my surprise and delight Howard said that he grew up in that area, in Formby, and always found the Moss to be quite disconcerting, particularly at night. He then mentioned, as an aside, that he used to work for the local Radio City, which is based in St John's Beacon<sup>5</sup> in the middle of Liverpool. One night he was going around the station on some errand or other when he saw before him what looked like a caretaker in a 1960s-style cloth coat and cap with heavy duty black boots. He saw him clearly and took in his appearance; but then the 'caretaker' simply vanished! Naturally disturbed by this event he went to find his colleague, who on looking at Howard's face said 'So you've seen him then?' Apparently this phantom had been seen by many people at the station, and the general theory was that it was the ghost of an old (unnamed) worker who 'checks' on the building. There

was never a feeling of malevolence. Howard thinks that probably everyone at Radio City knows of the ghost in the tower, but there is a general reluctance to speak about it.

### **FURTHER TALES OF THE OLD MAN OF HALSALL MOSS**

In *Strange Stories From Southport* [FT370:42-45] I provided details of three more phantom hitchhiker/ road ghost stories from around the Halsall Moss area, referring to them as cases I, J & K, so that they fitted with those (A to H) in the original article [FT328:32-39]. Therefore, I am delighted to provide new cases L & M below!

#### **CASE L: THE SOLID SILHOUETTE**

Mr N is a 51-year old specialist motorcycle courier who covers large areas of Merseyside and Lancashire. It was 12.30am – 12.45am one weekday night in September 2018 when he was on duty and riding through the Westhead area of Ormskirk, heading south towards Junction 1 of the M58 motorway. The weather was clear, but it was very cold, with the temperature down to about 4°C or 5°C. His route therefore took him down Lyelake Lane, which has open farmers' fields on either side. He was approaching the sharp left bend in the lane, at the junction with Latham Road (which is to the right), and therefore kept to between 20mph and 30mph. Just as he arrived at the bend he noticed a figure standing at the side of the road to his left; he was very close when he saw it because he was concentrating on the road and it hadn't been picked up in his headlights (possibly because of the nature of the bend).

He describes the figure as being like a solid silhouette of average height; but he couldn't tell if it was male or female. But when he looked in his rear-view mirrors to check what he had seen, there was nobody there! He immediately said to himself that 'Something's wrong here!' but he couldn't stop to further verify things, given his timetable and responsibilities. But he was very disturbed by the apparition, and its nature, and admits that he 'freaked out for the rest of the shift'. Now Mr N goes past this bend in Lyelake Lane very regularly, possibly twice a shift, so he is entirely familiar with it. He has checked and there is nothing there that could produce such a lifelike image, and he has never seen anything similar on any other journey. He considers himself to be very rational and knows that he saw something that night; but he cannot explain what he saw.

#### **CASE M: A TALKING PHANTOM HITCHHIKER**

One night in August 1983 27-year old Mr M left his home in Crosby to pick up his wife from work in Southport. He was driving alone in his Austin Allegro along the Coastal Road, which links Ainsdale to Southport. It was around 11.30pm and raining heavily, and so Mr M was concentrating on his driving. He was about 300 yards past the Pontins roundabout with Shore Road, when in his headlights to his left he spotted a man thumbing to hitch a lift, standing right on the edge of the road. Mr M pulled over and wound the passenger side window down, saying that he could drop the man off in the centre of Southport. The man was wearing a parka-type coat and was soaking wet, and wasn't carrying any bags. He had stubble on his face and dark eyes, and Mr M guessed that he was in his mid-30s. Although his behaviour was normal and calm, he had an expression that something was troubling him, which Mr M put down to him being out in such bad weather. He was quietly spoken, with a local Southport accent, and asked if he could bring his girlfriend with him into the car, to which Mr M agreed. Staying on the passenger side of the car, the man then stepped to its

rear without making a sound, although the heavy rain was making a lot of noise. Mr M then realised that the man was nowhere to be seen; and so he opened the driver's window and saw that there was nobody about. He then stepped out of the car for a couple of seconds and still could not see anybody. It took about 20 seconds for Mr M to realise that the man had completely disappeared, and that there was no sign of any girlfriend! The road at that point was edged with high sandhills and there was quite simply nowhere the man could have gone.

The whole episode took about two minutes, and Mr M felt completely befuddled and just thought it was strange that the man had just vanished. So he got back into his car and continued on his journey. When he arrived at where his wife worked he was told by both his wife and her work friends that he looked like he was in shock.

### **SPITAL PHANTOM HITCHHIKER**

When I gave my charity talk about phantom hitchhikers and road ghosts at Tranmere Rovers Football Club on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2018 I asked the question about whether anyone in the audience was familiar with the phantom hitchhiker that was supposed to haunt Poulton Road just where it leaves the Poulton Lancelyn Estate. It is said that a young female has been seen late at night and on several occasions had entered a car before disappearing. Appearances peaked in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>6</sup>. I was particularly interested because the location is a couple of hundred yards from where I live [FT358:42-47], and because my eldest son remembers the story being told when he was at senior school in the 1990s.

After the event I was approached by a married couple who were both ex-police officers. They told me that there was definitely a story about a female phantom hitchhiker in Spital. However, this was situated on the bridge across the Birkenhead to Chester railway at Spital Station; which is about one mile from the above location. They said that they had both been told about this when they started work at the local Bromborough Police Station in the 1980s. But they had never seen anything themselves, and they were not aware of anyone that had had such an experience.

Standing back for a moment it strikes me that I cannot find anyone who has actually seen this phantom, and that the location is variable (sometimes including the Dibbinsdale Bridge in Bromborough<sup>6</sup>, which is about a mile beyond the Poulton Road location). Also, it looks like every new police officer at Bromborough police station was told the story, which would undoubtedly mean that the story would then be widely disseminated amongst the local population. But this was just at the same time that Jan Harold Brunvand's classic *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*<sup>7</sup> was published, viz. 1981. The popularity of the book and the obvious consequence that it helped further disseminate the very urban legends that it describes, leads me to guess that someone at Bromborough police station either read the book, or picked up on its classic phantom hitchhiker story, and attached it to a nearby location so as to wind-up new police officers. Naturally I cannot prove that this was the case, but unless and until I get a genuine first (or second) hand testimony then this will be my suspicion.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Bar the final one, the stories that I have given above are all first- and second-hand testimonies, where the people concerned are convinced of, and puzzled by the experiences. They cover a wide spectrum of strangeness, and illustrate that fortune can present in lots of different ways even in a comparatively small geographical area such as Merseyside. Based on these stories, and others I continue to collect, maybe the county should be renamed 'Mysteryside'!?

**3,684 words**

## REFERENCES

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- 7 Jan Harold Brunvand (1981) *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* W. W. Norton & Company ISBN-10: 9780393951691