



Beds that go bump in the night

ALAN MURDIE goes in search of the world's most haunted items of furniture

Recently staff at a branch of the not-for-profit organisation Habitat for Humanity in the USA faced an unusual problem. One of their thrift stores, based at Rowan County, North Carolina, received a donation of heavy wooden furniture, donated with the aim of helping families worldwide create better homes for themselves. The problem with this particular donation, a chest of drawers and a canopy bed, was the donor telling them the pieces were haunted. The owner revealed that from the time of purchase, some years before, he and his wife had suffered "continuous nightmares" at their home. Additionally, after installing the furniture items, "the dogs wouldn't quit barking" and finally, on the seventh night in their home, he reported having "a lot of trouble waking his wife up."

Such statements would hardly be sufficient for concluding that a ghost must be on the loose, but these admissions placed the charitably inclined staff at Habitat for Humanity Rowan County Restore in an ethical dilemma. In media interviews Store Operations Director Elizabeth Brady stated that in 13 years, "this is the very first donation I'm aware of that's had that claim. We don't say we believe in ghosts or don't, but I have trouble selling this to someone not disclosing that. I would want to know as a customer."

As their business pursues the humanitarian goal of raising money for those in need, they were obliged to accept this donation for subsequent re-sale at the best price possible. But at the same time, as a Christian-orientated organisation, if the tall-boy and bed really were haunted, they didn't want to expose potential purchasers to spiritual hazards. Selling goods that might trigger ghostly manifestations would hardly be consistent with their goal of making a positive contribution to the lives of others.

In a notoriously litigious society such as the USA, that might well be a factor to be considered, albeit as a potentially novel ground in consumer rights and product liability. Accordingly, the items were exposed for sale with a warning notice pasted on them advising prospective customers: "Please note, previous owner reports that the highboy is haunted. He reports continuous nightmares for he and his wife

LEFT: The reportedly haunted bed and chest on sale for \$1,000 at a Habitat for Humanity store in Rowan County, North Carolina.

donor of the furniture to Habitat for Humanity, there is no way of ultimately proving what caused the nightmares or his dog to bark. To imply some psychometric influence whereby individual objects carry psychic impressions has appeal as a hypothesis, but thorough experiments with haunted objects have yet to be carried out. Unless better attested reports are obtained or specimens made available for testing, all will remain in the realm of speculation as to whether the reported phenomena originate purely within the mind of witnesses or attach more generally to the premises in which the items are

situated.

Touching an antique or genuinely historic object can often convey a vivid mental image and stimulate the imagination, but in this case the items date only from the 1950s, a comparatively recent vintage among occasional specimens of haunted furniture which have been publicised since the end of World War II.

Such haunted furniture stories are curiously appropriate for our modern age. At one time, supernatural horrors and terrors lurked in dark woods and forests. Now, with so many of our primæval forests felled and our urban population disconnected from woodlands, ghost stories emerge from the mass-produced final products of the sawmill and industrialised carpentry.

Haunted items of furniture represent a cult of supernatural relics, geared for consumer culture, providing intriguing stories for mass media dominated by advertising. The idea that furniture can be haunted rests upon the still popular belief that not only houses but also particular objects can become possessed or imbued by spirits or psychic forces. Chairs, especially rocking chairs and beds, feature particularly in such accounts.

In 2009, claims of a haunted chair provided for the President of Ghana prompted the appointment of a parliamentary committee to investigate (see *A Brief Guide to the Supernatural* (2012) by Leo Ruickbie; www.modernghana.com/

news/200463/parliament-investigates-haunted-chair-saga.html.

In 2015 the *Daily Mail* cited a number of examples of what it branded "The world's most haunted pieces of furniture" (25 April 2015), including a "conjure chest", a "cursed portrait" and a "chair of death" with a summary of their alleged grim histories. Appearing on their list were the notorious 'Crying Boy' picture "spotted at scene of house fires" [FT46:22-23, 47:36, 69:17, 234:32-38]; "haunted bunk beds of Wisconsin [that] terrorised a whole family in 1987" and a claim that four people died after sitting upon a 'cursed' 200-year-old wooden seat from Philadelphia.

A sprinkling of such stories can be found in the psychic newspapers over many years, e.g. "Dead owner haunts couple who buy her chest of drawers" (*Psychic News*, 30 Dec 1972). Local papers, adept at magnifying the significance of parochial dramas and tales, also enjoy them. In 2013 the *Warrington Guardian* recalled how "the old cottage of Firth Place on Froghall Lane was home to an old lady named Jenny Lightfoot, who spent her days rocking to and fro in her rocking chair... After her death, the rocking chair was sold to a pawn broker for half-a-crown, but was quickly given away after passers-by noticed the chair rocking silently on its own... For generations, the rocking chair has been passed from home to home with many afraid of the consequences should they throw the chair away." (*Warrington Guardian*, 31 Oct 2013).

The problem with so many of these stories is that they are so obviously synthetic, like many of the items themselves. Rarely do such tales rise much above the level of 'The Nurse's Return' recounted in Elliot O'Donnell's collection of spine-chillers, *The Midnight Hearse And Other Ghosts* (1965). Briefly told, the story avers that a certain unnamed army general and his wife were once haunted by increasingly disturbing visions of a faceless nurse in a grey uniform. Consulting a doctor knowledgeable of psychical research, he diagnosed the cause as their innocent purchase of an antique writing desk with an unfortunate history. The desk belonged to a nurse who had committed suicide after accusations of mistreating mental patients. When the couple disposed of the desk the haunting ceased. No details are provided other than it supposedly occurred in Fleetwood, Lancashire, "a few summers ago", but since it draws upon a collection of O'Donnell's writings composed over 60 years, it could have dated back as far as the Edwardian era, though in all likelihood it never occurred at all.

Similarly, two generations have been misled by the tales spun about the most famous piece of haunted furniture

LEFT: The 'Busby Stoop', Britain's most famous piece of haunted furniture. BELOW: Yorkshire's Thirsk Museum, where the chair now resides.

Before his execution, Busby was permitted one last drink in his favourite chair in the inn. After swallowing his last drop of ale, he pronounced a curse over the chair as he left for the final drop from the scaffold, declaring all who sat in it thereafter were doomed to suffer and die.

In the years afterwards, the chair was said to have claimed up to 60 victims. In the mid-1970s landlord Anthony Earnshaw told four stories of reckless individuals known to him who mocked the curse and died very soon after occupying the seat. The first two were an army sergeant and a teenage bricklayer, after which the chair was locked away. This failed to prevent two more deaths. A personal friend of Earnshaw aged 42 died unexpectedly after sitting in it, as did a fellow member of his local Masonic lodge, both men having recklessly chosen to disregard all warnings and snatch an opportunity to sit on it when Earnshaw showed it to them. Fearful of more fatalities, in 1978 Earnshaw presented the chair to Thirsk Museum on the proviso that it should be hung from the ceiling so no one could sit on it again (*Morning Advertiser*, January 1987). As the Museum confirms, "The Busby Stoop chair has not been sat on since".

When museum experts carried out an examination in 2016, they concluded it was actually manufactured after the 1840s, at least 138 years too late for Thomas Busby ever to have sat, quaffed or cursed in it, if dating was accurate (*Northern Echo*, 2 Jan 2018).

This was not surprising. Ian Wilson, author of *In Search of Ghosts* (1995), observed its reputation was "in tatters" after needing to make only one telephone call locally to the current landlord of the Busby Stoop pub, establishing that the story was wholly unknown prior to World War II. Furthermore, none of the names of the alleged victims were available or could be checked in local records.

The problem was having so seemingly solid a witness as the Yorkshire landlord endorse the story with a claimed first-hand association. Another example of what seems like another invented joke sustained for years was the tale of a haunted rocking chair contained in a second volume of a memoir, *Further Particulars* (1987) by CH Rolph (1901-1994), recalling his varied life as a City of London police officer turned author and criminal justice reformer. Rolph set down the story in all seriousness, and never otherwise concerned himself with paranormal matters (despite working on penal reform campaigns with Arthur

in Great Britain in the last 75 years, a cursed pub chair known as the 'Busby Stoop' in Yorkshire. This malicious seat received national coverage in a 1970s broadcast of the BBC TV news and current affairs programme *Nationwide*, known for its sometimes-irreverent approach to news reporting (it also publicised the cursed bottles in a pub in Alnwick, Northumberland). The chair is now displayed in Thirsk Museum in Yorkshire.

In 1702 Thomas Busby was found guilty of the murder of his father-in-law and forger, and sentenced to be hanged and gibbeted outside the Busby Stoop Inn where he was a regular drinker, and which still stands today south of Thornton-le-Moor at the crossroads between the A61 and A167.



GHOSTWATCH

Koestler, whose 1983 bequest founded the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at Edinburgh University). Thus, it constituted his one and only ghost story, which he believed to be true. He originally received it in 1919 from a Maida Vale clerk named Bert Trotman, who described encountering a haunted rocking chair when trying to solve the mystery of an abandoned hotel at Bramford, Suffolk, in the late 19th or early 20th century.

A murder had supposedly been committed in the hotel, with the body of the victim found tied to a rocking chair, some 20 years before. Trotman went up to Suffolk with another man named Mayhew to spend the night at the creaking and overgrown building, lured by the promise of £100 reward if they did so. They took Mayhew's pet bulldog with them. During their vigil, their lamps failed and the dog went berserk in the dark. When the lamps were relit, the animal was found to be dead. In the middle of the room was a large Windsor rocking chair, moving of its own volition. The terrified men fled, but once outside realised they ought to go back to collect the dead dog. Summoning their courage, they returned to collect the dog and were aghast to see the chair rocking even more violently. They fled again, "Their second exit, more resolute even than the first one, took up less of their time."

Trotman told Rolph this story in 1919. Over 20 years later in 1941, Rolph met Mayhew, who confirmed it in every detail, other than "that the dog was a Boston terrier and not a bulldog". For Rolph, this left an "uneasy acknowledgement for the occult, and an uneasy and ineradicable distaste of rocking chairs".

However, the tale contains a number of improbabilities, not least in that Bramford was not some isolated hamlet but a thriving village three miles from Ipswich. In particular, the village underwent a major haunted house scare in 1887 with a poltergeist outbreak covered in the *East Anglian Daily Times* (8 Dec 1888), which attracted a lot of contemporary attention, yet the haunted hotel story seems completely absent from news records. It seems improbable that such a notoriously haunted property would have gone unmentioned, especially if a reward of £100 was offered, given the depressed level of agricultural wages at the time. Of course, it is possible that further research may turn up further details, but I am inclined to think it was a case of two friends winding up the young CH Rolph with their rocking chair ghost tale, and keeping the joke running for two decades, by which time Rolph had reached the rank of police inspector. False allegations,

wasting police time and the sharing of barmy stories with police officers to get attention is nothing new, continuing to this day as freedom of information requests regularly demonstrate.

Ian Wilson is one of handful of ghost hunters who has pursued claims of haunted furniture and relics with any degree of diligence. The idea of the dead returning to take a seat on chairs is a widespread one; in September 1999 at the Spiritualist centre at the Castle Hasdeu temple at Campina, Romania, I saw examples of 'spirit chairs' specially manufactured at the end of the 19th century for materialised spirits, provided on the basis that having travelled across the boundary between life and death they had come a long way and were in need of rest!

However, with stories of spontaneous ghost experiences, it seems the idea is that post-mortem former occupants remain tethered to their chairs like a goat to a post. After Dennis Bardens broadcast the case of a reputedly haunted chair for BBC radio on 21 December 1949, he looked into the case of another haunted chair bought at an auction by a Mrs Barbara Barnes of Barton on Humber, which came with the ghost of an old man. The silent form appeared periodically seated in it whenever it stood in her kitchen. Her daughter Barbara had also seen the ghost. Bardens found her story plausible. When he sat in the chair, he felt nothing untoward, although he admitted he might not like to spend a night in it.

Another writer who was particularly interested in chair-based hauntings was Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, providing a

chapter entirely devoted to them in his book *Phantom Footsteps* (1959). His most recent was the story of a phantom, seen in a house in Pembrokeshire at Christmas 1956 by a retired Indian Army Colonel named George Rind. MacGregor also believed ghosts could be photographed in chairs. Although a competent photographer himself, and rather proud of his reputation as such, he seems to have been prepared to suspend caution when it came to psychic photographs, to the extent of declaring: "I harbour not a vestige of doubt that the camera may record on a negative a human or other presence unseen by the actual photographer." He reproduced a fine example in his book, allegedly obtained at a property in Sunbury on Thames.

Harry Price was famously pictured in a haunted bed in a museum in Chiswick with philosopher CEM Joad. Numerically speaking, stories of haunted chairs and all other pieces of furniture are far exceeded by stories of haunted beds; statistically speaking, there is a higher chance of seeing a ghost while you are in bed than at any other time. Stories involving beds and poltergeist infestations are legion, but these tend to be short-lived and person-centred, along with accounts of people who feel bedclothes stripped from them during the night or suffer attentions from 'bedroom invaders'. Psychoanalyst and psychical researcher Nandor Fodor gave haunted bed stories a predictably Freudian interpretation in *The Haunted Mind* (1959).

I stayed in a reputedly haunted bed at the Crown Inn, Bildeston, Suffolk, in June 1997 and in a room at the Saffron Hotel, Saffron Walden, Essex, with an allegedly haunted chair in it in 2009. I witnessed nothing on either occasion.