

# A Haunted Mansion?

by Wendy Milner

**To the tourist Woodchester Mansion may look as though it is haunted, but is it? And is it even really a mansion?**

If there is any house in the Cotswolds which looks as if it should be haunted, this is it. Woodchester Mansion is a large Gothic revivalist house built in 1858, although it was never completed and never properly lived in. The mystery surrounding this fact has given rise to speculation ever since. Is it haunted? Was there a murder or dreadful accident there? Why did workmen down their tools, never to come back and finish what they had started? These are questions most frequently asked by the visitor to this strange house, questions which seemingly cannot be answered. This report is an attempt to answer at least one of those questions: does it have ghosts?

Woodchester Mansion is sited in a largely untouched and hidden valley and the walk to it from the busy Stroud-to-Dursley road is a very pleasurable one. After passing through the tall Georgian gates off the main road, the track descends into the valley. The trees here become taller, forming a canopy above your head and bathing you in green shadows. As you descend further still, the trees begin to give way to open sky, and a sense of timelessness sweeps over you; if you are alone, here is where you start to feel it.

Further down, the trees thin on one side to reveal some fields to your right as the spectacle before you suddenly becomes apparent. Woodchester Mansion stands alone, looking deserted even when people are around. The dark, glassless windows reflect no light, lending an aspect of abandonment to its character even before you know its history. It is all at once intriguing, but with the faintly



*[pic. Wendy Milner]*

menacing gloom which tends to emanate from the Gothic structure. This place has been used variously as a film set, cattle shed, sanctuary to four species of bat including the rare and protected Greater Horseshoe Bat. American soldiers stored their ordnance in the cellars here in 1944, and it has even had a visit from a former emissary to the Pope, for which the drawing room was the only room to be finished in 1886. It is now the focus of a renovation programme which will attempt to take it back to the condition it was in when construction was

abandoned, but it will for all intents and purposes remain a Victorian building site.

## **A Brief History of the Park**

Although the present structure is Victorian, it seems much older. The former house on this site was a Georgian Mansion known as Spring Park, built by the previous owner, Lord Ducie, in the 18th and early 19th centuries. It is rumoured that, upon succession to the title, the young Lord Ducie, described as a young rake, seated his young lady at the place of honour at the table. However, when he

went to take his own place, he found it occupied by the ghost of his dead father and consequently fled the estate (1). Whatever the reason for sale, the four thousand-acre estate was sold at auction on 29 June 1843. The existing house was eventually completely demolished to make way for the obsession of William Leigh, a wealthy merchant from Cheshire who planned a grand scheme after his conversion to Catholicism in 1844. The former house was said not to be to his taste, so he set about employing Augustus Pugin, known for his design of Westminster Palace, to draw up plans for his new residence. However, after disagreements with Pugin and his expensive plans, the house design was finalised by Benjamin Bucknall, a brilliant young local architect who was strongly influenced by Eugene Viollett-le-Duc. Viollett-le-Duc was responsible for the restoration of a number of cathedrals, most notably the Notre Dame de Paris. Bucknall sought his advice on glazing the Mansion chapel, and French glaziers were brought in for that purpose. It was not long afterwards that progress on the grand house slowed down considerably. Leigh himself lived at the Cottage, a large house in itself with sixteen bedrooms, which sits perched on the hill above the Mansion. This was enlarged by Bucknall many times during Leigh's residence there, so why did he need another, larger house down in the valley?

It is obvious to even the least informed that the Mansion was meant for a monastic lifestyle. The chapel itself is the tallest in any large house in Britain, and it was rumoured that Leigh meant the house to be a refuge for Pope Pius IX, at a time when the Vatican was under threat. Many people have questioned this, as the house would not have been large enough to cater for the Pope and his entourage. Leigh was not to realise his dream, however, and he died in 1873 at the Cottage, evidently on the verge of bankruptcy after having funded various other Bucknall-designed projects in the area. This, and the fact that the stonemasons were probably involved in

the aforementioned projects, is usually given as the reason behind the abandonment (2). It doesn't seem quite right, though, that the workers would just leave their hard-earned tools lying around if they were never coming back. The mystery of this fact may have given rise to the many local legends surrounding the Mansion and its wooded estate. (I was told recently of a phone call between a member of the Ghost Club and a psychic lady in Australia who had apparently no prior knowledge of Woodchester Mansion but who seemed to think that the workers abandoned the building because there were 7 deaths during construction, one of which was a murder. This information is available in a book about the house, however, and could well have been disseminated on the World Wide Web).

The gothic architecture with its beastly gargoyles and resident bats has also probably helped form any ghostly conjecture along the way. Most of these stories were not recorded in detail, but one has recently surfaced which has even captured the imagination of Hollywood, that of an angel which haunts the fifth lake. Some of the other documented hauntings include a Roman centurion who patrols the gate on the south road, a ragged dwarf, a headless horseman, a floating coffin, a Black Dog which was a death portent and, most frequently, a spectral figure which has come to be regarded by some as 'The man in his night-shirt', who was unfortunately savaged by his own dogs. It's possible that this and the 'angel' were one and the same. It is also worth mentioning that a large black cat has been sighted in the vicinity.

The Mansion itself had not, until recently, been considered to be haunted. Most of the sightings seem to be confined to the area around the lakes, of which there are five further down in the valley. They have been the sites of numerous tragedies, which are rumoured to have resulted in the loss of well over 20 lives over the

years. The principal stage for these dramas seems to be the fifth lake, called Middle Pond, which also happens to be the largest. All five lakes were created when the numerous springs in the valley, and the stream that flowed from them, were dammed and ultimately stocked with fish.

After a long period of time when the Mansion was uninhabited and left to the elements to wreak their havoc on the stonework, the property came into the care of one Reg Kelly, who had set up a Field Study Centre based at the Cottage, after having run a private school there. Here he and his wife welcomed students from schools in Leicestershire intent on the study of the Greater Horseshoe Bat and the natural history of the surrounding valley. Reg Kelly single-handedly cleared the guttering and protected the house from the weather as best he could, but it was ultimately to prove too much for him, and the house was eventually bought by Stroud District Council (SDC) in 1986 after various attempts at sale fell through. SDC now lease it to the Woodchester Mansion Trust which is intent on raising funds for the renovation and repair of the structure, although the plan is not to finish the house, but to restore it to the condition it was left in when the workers downed tools for the last time in 1886.

## **Angel**

In February 2001, my attention was drawn to a letter in the local newspaper from a woman who had been walking in the park by the Middle Pond and had had an unnerving experience. She reported a strange glowing mist floating on the lake, moving quite slowly and taking the shape of a figure. She made no reference to the famous angel and she thought it might be a strange weather phenomenon. She felt frightened and looked about for company, and having none she left pretty sharpish. Unfortunately, the lady



*[pic. Wendy Milner]*

did not leave a contact number or address with the newspaper. Although it is the paper's policy not to print unaddressed letters, the Editor thought this story so interesting that she had to print it. My suspicions were aroused

when only a week later, a story of the Angel of Woodchester hit the national presses. It emerged that there was a photograph of the alleged angel in the possession of a local writer and architect. He had found documents relating to Woodchester Park in August 1999 and had not realised their significance until much later, not least because he had written a book about Woodchester Mansion himself. (According to him, the mansion has been linked with strange Victorian cults, the Freemasons and satanic worshippers.) (3). There was interest in the story from a Hollywood producer who was interested enough to want to make a film of the life of one William Doidge, a man who was by all accounts obsessed with the Angel of Mons (4). The Woodchester Park Angel was said to have appeared the night before 20 American or Canadian troops died tragically on the lake in the same spot, after having sunk a pontoon bridge. The bridge was carrying a tank and heavy artillery when it sank, and although I have no documentary evidence that 20 soldiers died there in spring 1945, I have had reliable information from a diver who used the lake some years ago that there is indeed a tank and heavy artillery down at the bottom, covered in a thick layer of silt.

It was ironic that the timing of all this publicity coincided with the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK, and the whole park, as with much of rural Britain, was off limits to all visitors.

On 7 September 2001, an American TV production company called Triage Entertainment Inc. of Los Angeles took over the Mansion for a month. As part of their research for a programme called *The Scariest Places on Earth*, an all night vigil and investigation was arranged, which included two members of the Ghost Club of Great Britain, a small production team and two staff members of the Woodchester Mansion Trust. Their interest was primarily in the house itself for filming purposes although I, at least, did not consider the house itself to be haunted, although they were witness to an extraordinary event that night.

## **Noisy Vigil**

According to the reports of two members of that company, the noises began at around midnight with a soft tapping sound coming from the top of a 8m Victorian ladder which was left when builders abandoned the house. This was only the beginning of a whole barrage of noise, which centered on the inner wall of the south range corridor. At around 2.30am the group was in the drawing room when they noticed a tapping sound coming from the wall to the right of the fireplace. It was described as a basically metallic sound like a hammer hitting stone, which intensified in pitch and volume over around 15 minutes, until it became so loud that people had covered their ears with their hands! Upon investigation, the noise was assumed to be coming from the south range corridor on the first floor, but as 'AL' shone his torch from the top step of the Grand Stair around the corner, the noise stopped abruptly. By this time the beat of the hammering had quickened to the speed of a

pneumatic drill. Feeling rather shaken, the group descended the stairs to the drawing room to discuss what had happened.

At around 4am, the noise started again, so seven of the group made their way upstairs to the first-floor corridor. As they were ascending the Grand Stair, which was restored in 1999, an almighty crack sounded above the heads of the people who were leading, followed by rumbling sounds, which gave them the impression of falling masonry. This split the group in two as they leapt out of the way of whatever it was they thought was coming down on top of them. AL reported his conviction that he saw black shapes falling and a piece of yellow-white stone bounce near to his foot at the bottom of the stairs. After checking everyone was OK, they went to look at the fallen masonry, of which they could find no trace, but all were convinced that the vaulted ceiling had been falling down around them. As the tapping noise was continuing, the whole party decided to check out the corridor above where they were sure the noise was emanating from. Finally, while they were standing spread out along the walls of the corridor, a noise described variously as a jet engine or train seemed to move up between them, which was overtaken by a sound described as something very heavy being dragged along the floor towards the back of the house, where it stopped. While this was going on, the group all felt a vibration in the walls and floor of the building. These were the main events of the night, although the Ghost Club members had left 'trigger' objects in the form of 2p coins about the building, one of which was placed in the mansion kitchen under the old clock which is being restored at present. This was reported missing by 2am. However, it has since turned up in another part of the Mansion.

As a result of this experience there has been a revival of interest in the Mansion's paranormal activities and subsequently three more vigils have taken place to date. On the first of these, again with the

Ghost Club on 10 November 2001, there was no activity whatsoever, and the group left just after 2.30am. The caretaker was not present on this occasion, and no 'psychics' were present.

## **ASSAP Vigil**

ASSAP's investigation took place on the night of 19 January 2002. Present were 16 members of ASSAP and Parasearch, including two guests from Cotswold Paranormal Investigations.

A camera was set up in the first floor south range corridor, which seemed to be the seat of all the noise on 7 September 2001. Later, while conducting a guided tour of the house, I noticed that the old



*[pic. Wendy Milner]*

clock pendulum was swinging by at least five centimetres, whereas it was not before when observed two minutes earlier. It was decided that there should be someone present in the kitchen at all times during the vigil. The clock is currently being restored by a volunteer who is an horologist and it is generally not wound. The Triage production team had the clock rigged and various parts have since gone missing. It is entirely possible that a person who knows the house well could have done the same,

for between the hours of 10.00pm and 1.00am the clock hands moved from their position of 10.10 to 12.10, and then finally 5.25, as shown in the photograph. They were never seen to move as it always occurred during a break in the vigil. We decided to set up a camera in the kitchen, which seemed to put a stop to it, although the tape shows the pendulum moving slightly. This could be due to the movement of air around the Mansion, or vibrations from underground.

At 12.04am the bell in the clock tower rang once, very clearly. This happened when the team had assembled in the drawing room for a break, as is usually the case! I was immediately suspicious as it happened during a time when people were making noise. There was a good search for the culprit but none could be found. There was an awful lot of noise at the time from the Park's cattle, which were obviously unnerved by something. In fact they were noisy for most of the night, as can be heard on the various recordings taken. At the point when the bell rang, they seemed very agitated. It was not discovered what had caused this agitation in the herd and it was even suggested that the black cat was abroad! The bell is static with an external sprung hammer so the wind or a large bird could not have moved it. According to the horologist, it could only have been rung by someone with some nerve and a hammer. (Or by paranormal means?) None of the members of the vigil had access to the clock tower. It is difficult to get to, having two large iron grilles to unlock, the keys to which are held by the 'bat man' - the Mansion's bat expert. A set of keys is given to the caretaker during the winter months when the bats hibernate at other locations. The grilles are there to keep people out and the bats protected. Were the grilles opened that night? They are heavy and move with a sliding mechanism, so any noise they made would have been recorded on the equipment. The record sheets suggest a loud bang and footsteps that could just feasibly account for someone entering by the grille

between 11.16 and 11.49pm. However, it has not been established who this might have been, although the caretaker had a friend to stay that night who left quite noisily in his car at about 1.00am. Another interesting occurrence was that three of the women involved in the vigil that night felt their hair being tugged, all in different areas of the house. All three had long dark hair and found it slightly unnerving.

## **The Ghost Club**

A week later on 26 January 2002, the Ghost Club descended on the Mansion yet again with the largest group of volunteers they have ever seen, 32 people. The Parasearch team again set up an infrared camera at the top of the first-floor south range corridor and one also



*[pic. Wendy Milner]*

in the kitchen directed on the clock. After arriving at the house at 10pm, the teams were being organised. One had already taken their place in the upstairs corridor, the rest of the group awaiting instructions in the drawing room. It wasn't long before a loud bang was heard, which sounded as if it came from around the Grand Stair in the corridor outside the drawing room. I immediately went upstairs to ask the first team if they had made the noise, as I thought some equipment had fallen over, but they seemed to think it came from

downstairs. At this time nothing could be found which could have been responsible for the noise, and it was noted to have occurred at 10.57pm. The three team leaders, 'LR', 'BS' and 'RS' were with me in the drawing room by 11.18pm where we were discussing generally how to deal with such a large group, when there came from the room next door, the Library, a loud bang very similar to the one which had occurred almost 20 minutes before. Upon investigation, it was found that there was a piece of worked stone (approx. 10x5x5cm) on the floor in the south-west corner of the room. (See picture). After searching the wall above to ascertain where it had come from, another very similar piece was found in the putlog hole (a hole to take scaffolding which was never filled in) directly 2.5 metres above it. This piece fitted the fallen stone perfectly, it was a recent break and not worn, so it was assumed that it had fractured in half and fallen off, although there was no sign of lime putty or anything which could have been used to connect the two halves of stone. It wasn't until another piece was found in the corridor outside in exactly the same circumstances that we literally put two and two together and came up with ... something rather odd. How had two ashlar bricks got themselves up into put-log holes in the first place, only for them both to break and fall out within twenty minutes of each other? The stones were roughly the same size, both worked and of a type not used in the building apart from for training purposes. Assuming the second stone found in the corridor was the source of the first crashing noise, I think it wasn't noticed before due to the general amount of rubble strewn about the house anyway. Both stones fell onto wooden flooring, the second stone seeming not to have bounced, hence the loud bang being described by 'RL' as a door slamming. This effect could not be reproduced. The first stone, however, fell with a clatter and it could be seen that it fell on a corner where it was chipped and the floor slightly dented. An interview with the caretaker immediately afterwards revealed nothing. He seemed as perplexed as we were.

The possibility that someone could have pushed them out was disregarded, as they would certainly have been heard tiptoeing on the wooden floor when it was quiet. The whole event was so weird that some people had a problem believing that it had actually happened, and insisted that the noise they heard was a door slamming.

The guests of the Ghost Club who claim psychic abilities have sensed the spirits of various people throughout the Mansion, which they assume are attached to the former building, the Georgian Spring Park, or even further back. One is described as a distressed young blonde woman possibly called Elizabeth, purported to have been spotted in an upstairs window by two different people on arrival at the Mansion, although that particular window has no floor below it! Another is of a young child, but the details are less clear. One of the rumours that have arisen through the years on the subject of the Mansion's abandonment suggests that a stonemason may have been murdered there, but this did not seem to have been picked up. The story of the Mansion is readily available for study, so the results of this psychic survey seemed intriguing. The search for an Elizabeth connected to the Park's history has been unsuccessful so far. Two psychics unknown to each other have both sensed Roman soldiers marching through the grounds of the house. It is recorded that there was Roman occupation in the area, and indeed there was a report from long ago of the ghost of a Roman centurion who patrolled the road at the south end of the estate.

The caretaker recently had an experience he couldn't account for, when he was woken by his dog at around 2.30am on Tuesday 22 January 2002. On rising to check the house, he found that all the lights were on in the Mansion. Thinking that there may be an unwelcome intruder, of which there have been many in the past, he ran through the house to try and catch whoever it may be but all the

doors were securely locked. He went outside through his flat window so he could see inside easily and check the area, to no avail. This had never happened before in the six years he had been employed by the WMT as caretaker. It seems the dog had responded to the sound of the main relay switch in the north range corridor, which makes a 'clunk' sound when switched on. Also, in May this year, the 'bat man' tried to gain access to the bat loft through the hatch in the ceiling but had great difficulty getting in because the camera equipment was actually sitting on top of it. He was, to say the least, perplexed by this, and could find nobody responsible.

A recently unearthed news report from the Gloucestershire Echo dated 28 November 1998 states that a team of volunteers from The Prince's Trust endeavoured to spend a night in the Mansion for the CLIC charity. They reported to the Echo that a glass beaker had been removed from its original place in a room upstairs. The spokesperson had known that one of the upstairs rooms had a resident poltergeist, but this is the first time I had heard a reference of this sort. Certainly, the WMT volunteers have never reported anything anomalous over the years, and it seemed strange to me that the house should 'put on a show' when a team of investigators were there.

## **Conclusions?**

The first and most obvious conclusion was that the events of 7 September 2002 were a hoax put up by the production team of *Scariest Places* for the purpose of entertainment. However, none of the footage taken that night was used in the final production. Whether it was ever intended to be remains a mystery, and as yet I am still waiting to hear what happened to the footage from a contact in Los Angeles where the production company was based.

(The Disney Corporation has since bought them out.) The fact that the Mansion seemed suddenly haunted suited the purposes of those involved very well, although a few things cannot be properly explained. If they did it, how? There was no evidence of a local earthquake on the night in question, nor low-flying Hercules transport planes to or from nearby Fairford. On the other occasions, someone who knew the house well could possibly have rung the bell, but the bricks falling out of the wall...? I can't imagine how it happened. It has the air of mischief about it, which I find intriguing. If anyone can attempt to explain it scientifically I would love to hear from him or her. My thoughts are that a small team should visit for a follow up investigation in the near future without much prior notice, to try to eliminate any prank pulling, but this may prove difficult to do in terms of its location. On the whole, I would dearly like to believe that Woodchester Mansion is haunted, but I have yet to be convinced.

Woodchester Mansion is open to visitors for guided tours every weekend through the summer months. The National Trust owned park is open all year round.

More details can be found at [www.woodchestermansion.org.uk](http://www.woodchestermansion.org.uk)

## References

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