



DEAD OF NIGHT MAGAZINE



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With All Paranormal Phenomena!!!

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DEAD OF NIGHT MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

'After Dark In The Playing Fields'

*'I Don't Want To Talk About It...All Your Stupid
Hopes And Dreams,
Get Your Feet Back On the Ground, Son,
It's Exams That Count, Not Football Teams...'
'AT THE EDGE' - STIFF LITTLE FINGERS*

I was twelve going on thirteen the first time somebody presumed to ask me the question that has haunted me. Like the most persistent of restless spirits, ever since; 'Why does the simple game of football mean so much to you?'

Two whole decades have since slipped by with a relatively unobtrusive ease, and yet, sometimes when I close my eyes and dwell upon the moment, I can still recall the sights, sounds and even the *smells*, as though it had occurred only yesterday.

And with good reason.

It was May 26th, 1977.

The morning after Liverpool FC had won the European Cup for the very first time in Rome's Olympic Stadium, having beaten the German's, Borussia Moenchengladbach 3:1.

I hadn't slept a wink since Emlyn Hughes, then club captain, had raised the giant trophy aloft - the Italian night sky lit up with the reflected glare of the floodlights and a thousand camera flashes - and I'd gotten to school a full thirty minutes before the bell for registration. I was kicking a brand new, bright orange 'Wembley Trophy' against the walls of the bike-shed in an all-but deserted playground. The sky was a clear, dreamy blue. The air still and breathless. But despite the fact that the temperature had already climbed into the high sixties, I refused to discard the thick, woollen scarf my Dad had given me after 'The Reds' quarter-final second leg against Saint Etienne. There was nothing particularly remarkable about it. Nothing to distinguish it from the countless numbers of similarly designed scarves, (two thin white lines stretching horizontally along a sea of vibrant red) you could pick up outside outside Anfield on match days or at the football souvenir-dominated market stalls that line the centre of Church Street.

And yet, it was one of my most treasured possessions, its acquisition seeming to magically coincide with Liverpool's march towards European glory (not to mention winning our own domestic Title and reaching the FA Cup Final), and as such it had soon assumed an almost talismanic quality. Displaying the kind of irrational logic exclusive to obsessive gamblers and football fanatics, I found I could never stand on the Kop, or else listen to the match commentary on the radio without wearing that particular scarf. Failure to do so would, I was certain, result in defeat for my team.

And so there I was, on that impossibly bright, sunny morning, as late spring gave way to early summer, the scarf around my neck, the ball at my feet, and a head filled with rose-scented fantasies as I set about re-enacting Terry Mac's superb opening strike - complete with Barry Davies; 'That's nice...That's McDermott...AND THAT'S A GOAL!!!' TV commentary. I'd actually begun to wheel away in delight, ready to acknowledge the acclaim of my imagined teammates when I suddenly felt an almighty shove from behind that left me sprawling in an undignified heap on the concrete floor of the playground.

I cracked my head a good one and I tasted grit and the flattened remains of an 'Anglo's Penny Bubble Gum.'

My intended (oh-so-witty) response; 'Who the hell do you think you are, Bertie Vogts?' died on my lips the second I'd dusted my self down and had turned to confront my assailant. I came face to face (actually face to kneecap would be more accurate) with Robby Robinson... 'Robbo The Godfather' to his friends.... 'Robbo The Neanderthal' to the other 97 per cent of the inmates, oops, I mean pupils at my school.

It will surely come as little surprise to learn that the latter nickname was by far the more accurate. Not that you'd have ever gotten anyone (teachers included) to have voiced that opinion within a thousand miles of Robbo's earshot.

Not unless you fancied having a free nose-job without anaesthetic, taking a crash-course in bodily contortionism, or embarking upon a solo exploration of the dark, mysterious depths of the boys toilet bowls *headfirst*, that is. Robbo, at the time of this decidedly unwelcome encounter, was a fifth-former, two years above me.

How best to describe him?

Let's see...you've seen Robert De Niro in the re-make of 'CAPE FEAR'? Well, this was his 15-year-old look-alike. The only difference...Robbo didn't have to *act* crazy and mean. He was just *born* that way.

'I see the fuckwits are out in force this mornin,' he said as he looked me up and down, an expression of disgust, as though he'd stumbled upon something unspeakably nasty that had crawled out from beneath a rock, clouding his features. 'Why are yer wearin' that piece red an' white turd? Won a game 'ave yer?'

The tone of his voice, his whole demeanour, told me I was in big trouble and if my head hadn't have been spinning like Regan MacNeil's in 'THE EXORCIST' I would have given it toes right there and then.

As it was, I could only stand there, rocking slowly from side to side like a ship caught in the swell of turbulent seas. And you can be sure that this gormless, dumbstruck response didn't do anything to improve Robbo's temper.

'I asked yer a question, yer little prick,' he said, thrusting his face towards mine, so close I could see the array of yellow-headed acne and adolescent bum-fluff running wild across his chin.

I opened my mouth, frantically searching for a reply, but nothing came out, and I saw a sudden flash of malice spark deep within those sullen-as-old-quarry-water eyes. I instinctively moved to back away, but before I was even aware it was happening, he'd snatched the scarf from around my neck and whisked it away into his blazer pocket.

And then he grinned as he spoke in a half-whisper; 'I'm gonna fuckin' burn this piece of red an' white shite as soon as I get home tonight. What do yer think about that, knb'ead?'

Still grinning to himself, as though he'd cracked the world's greatest practical joke, he sauntered off towards the schoolyard entrance where a group of his fellow cronies had begun congregating. Upon reaching them, he pointed back in my direction and half-withdrew the scarf. Their shared laughter carried on the moveless air, and with a

heavy heart, I scooped up the football and trudged toward the school building. I was anxious lest I should meet up with my circle of friends. I craved their company but not their inevitable questions as to the whereabouts of my 'lucky scarf,' on today, of all days...

I paused momentarily upon reaching the entrance, glancing back over my shoulder at the gradually filling playground. I was struck by the impression that something had indefinably changed...

The sun still shone brightly in that flawless blue sky, but to me it seemed as though a cloud of blowflies had suddenly obscured the warmth of its rays...

II

The first lesson that morning was Double History where, to paraphrase the poet Randall Jarrett, we learned about bombers named after girls that pulverised the cities we learned about in Geography.

To be perfectly honest though, I didn't hear a word the teacher, Mr Tunley, a gawky-looking individual afflicted with terminal bad breath, had to say.

I was far too busy being all but overwhelmed by a flood of emotions, though one in particular overrode all; a deep-rooted sense of shame. Part of it came from my failure to even *attempt* to stand up to Robbo. My dad had taught me...no strike that, *instilled* in me, the strict admonishment that I should never allow myself to be intimidated by anyone. He was, and as far as I know, always *will* be, a staunch supporter of that timeless, number one classic;

*'All Bullies Are Essentially Cowards.
If You Just Stand Up To Them, They'll Either
Back Down Or At Least Think Twice About
Picking On You Again!!!'*

I'd had this eulogy running round and round my head every since my first year at primary school (I sometimes saw, in my mind's eye, Moses coming down from the mountain, his white robes billowing in the wind like the sails of some great clipper ship, in his hands, the two tablets of stone, engraved with this *Eleventh* Commandment:

*'THOU SHALT NOT CRAPPETH ONE'S
SACK-CLOTH WHEN FACED WITH A
HOMICIDAL MANIAC!!!'*

Unfortunately, I knew from bitter experience that such well-meant fatherly advice, usually imparted during a family game of *'Monopoly,'* when you're seated by the fireside on a rainswept Sunday afternoon, and all the world seems at peace, makes perfect sense. It's right up there with other similar pearls of wisdom like 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away' and 'Always clean behind yer lugholes or yer'll find cabbages will start growing there.'

Oh yeah.

Perfect sense.

But that doesn't make them any less mythological in practice.

I'd seen plenty of people stand up to 'Mr Evolutionary Throwback,' and never in a single instance did they remain standing for very long. One punch from either of those large, calloused hands with the obligatory 'Love' and 'Hate' tattooed across the knuckles, was usually enough to ensure they took a first class, one-way ticket to Palookaville.

Nevertheless, the fact that I hadn't put up even a token gesture of defiance, left me feeling bad.

What was even worse was knowing that I could bid a less-than-fond adieu to something that had been given to me by my father. Something that I'd regarded as a talisman. Something that I'd intended wearing with pride at the team's triumphant Homecoming later that evening. I stated at the outset that my recollections of this day remain vividly imprinted upon my mind, and so they do, but I'm damned if I can pinpoint the precise instant that my thoughts began to travel a less darker route. All I can say for sure is that sometime during those interminable ninety minutes, when Mr Tunley's voice had faded to an almost coma-inducing monotone, the twin-born feelings of loss and regret slowly began to fade, to be replaced by a cold, calculating anger. Almost before I was aware I was doing it, I'd set about pondering a way that I could maybe get even.

After all, I told myself, none of those eleven heroes (*'their raiment all red'*) from last night would have stood by and allowed such an injustice to go unpunished.

That may sound corny as hell now, but you have to remember that we're talking here about the days when money and an all-consuming greed hadn't yet devoured the game completely (although they were plainly set about racing down that road just as quickly as possible, and never mind the speed limit).

To an impressionable twelve-year-old, on the brink of becoming a teenager, the player's of Liverpool FC were truly comic book super-heroes made flesh. (I was never able to imagine any of them swearing, or smoking, or doing anything physically mundane like taking a crap or sticking their fingers up their nose in search of a real snot-gobbler to - after careful inspection - flick at the ceiling).

And whilst I struggled vainly for some kind of workable plan of action, I pictured myself being chaired around the schoolyard, like Joey Jones at the final whistle in Rome, milking the acclaim for having bettered the detestable bully, his humiliation total.

Not that I ever truly believed for one second that I could ever hope to win a stand-up fight with Robbo. That way led only to the operating theatre at Walton Hospital, where through a pair of pain-glazed eyes, you'd get to watch as a group of nurses and doctors stare right back at you, their faces as solemn as pall-bearers at a funeral, shaking their heads and mumbling;

'Oh God, this looks so veeeerrrryyy bad,'

and one young nurse loses her nerve and runs out of the room screaming over and over;

'Why the hell has he got three mouth's, why the hell has he got three mouth's, why the hell has he got three mouth's, and where the hell is his nose!!!'

Nope.

That way wouldn't do at all.

I had to think of something *slightly* more subtle...and, as is often the way with such dilemmas, it was just as my mind was beginning to wander, and I found myself recalling, for no particular reason a wildlife programme I'd seen on TV a few nights earlier, that the idea came to me in a sudden flash of inspiration.

The documentary had been about fish. Archer fish to be precise. A remarkable creature that caught its prey in a particularly unusual way...

For the first time since before Robbo had sent me flying in the midst of a childishly innocent reverie, I afforded myself the tiniest genuine smile...

III

Five minutes before First Break, I put up my hand to asked to be excused. 'I need to go to the toilet, sir. I think I'm gonna be sick.'

Placing my hand over my mouth, and heaving my shoulders for added authenticity, I raced for the door before Mr Tunley had even granted permission

The boys' toilets were situated on the ground floor, near to the huge double doors that opened on to the playground. I had to run down several flights of stairs to be sure I'd be there in time for the ringing of the bell announcing the fifteen minute break. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't more than a little scared. Actually, I felt a lot like a lemming charging headlong towards the cliffs of oblivion. But I was filled with a wild sort of exhilaration, too. And, because it's easier to be braver when you're pretending to be somebody else, I was at once Jason of the Argonauts, prepared to battle the Hydra for possession of the Golden Fleece...

Professor Van Helsing, hot on the trail of Count Dracula...
Davey Crockett, prepared to defend the walls of the Alamo....

Leutenant Chard, facing the Zulu's at Rorke's Drift...

King Kong, snarling at the bi-planes from atop the Empire State Building...

And whilst part of me knew that Robbo was very likely to kick four shades of holy hell out of me, still in a perverse sort of way, I was looking forwards to the encounter, and the chance to strike a blow for the good guys.

Certainly the omens appeared favourable, because when I finally pushed open the swing-back door and stepped into the toilets, I was amazed to find them deserted. Ordinarily, there would be at least four or five boys stood in the darkest corner grabbing a sly smoke or else poring over a crumpled copy of 'Playboy' or 'Mayfair.'

The air was filled with a pungent combination of pine disinfectant, stale cigarette smoke and human sweat, but thankful that I was alone, I made my way over to the row of cracked, porcelain sinks, and splashed cold water onto my face. I was pretty thirsty after legging it down the three flights from Mr Tunley's Class, but I didn't quite dare take a gulp, though I was sorely tempted. My reluctance was based upon something a friend of mine, Ian Crossley, had once told me whilst sitting in his bedroom reading the latest 'Marvel' comics, one sleety Sunday afternoon.

Apparently, his dad worked for North West Water, as a maintenance man, and his job frequently entailed his going down into the sewers to clear the blocked drains or repair a burst water pipe. *'I asked me dad one day, what was the worst thing he'd ever seen down there, and he went dead quiet which isn't like him at all. I badgered him for ages, but all he did was mumble about the pipes that supplied the water to your school. He said one time he'd seen four pairs of glowing eyes peering out at him as he made his rounds, and he'd thought at first they were rats, but when he raised the flashlight in their direction, he caught a quick glimpse of a shiny black body supported by countless legs scuttling away into the deeper darkness. He wasn't sure what the hell it was, but he never reported it to his superiors. Not even after he found the remains of a half-eaten tabby cat at the entrance to the same pipe...'*

I'm not saying I believed Ian's dad's story anymore than I believed that Johnny Rotten would sing lead vocals on the next ABBA single, but just the same, I wasn't too keen to take a chance.

Besides, no sooner was I wiping my face dry on a wad of paper towels, than the shrill ringing of the bell had me pushing the door ajar, wide enough so that I could see the length of the corridor along which, a seething mass of noiseful adolescence began making its way to the exits.

Amazingly, my luck continued to hold. Still, nobody attempted to enter the toilet and potentially blow my cover. And even better. When 'Troglodyte Robbo' and his band of not-so-merry-men finally hove into view, the crowd had thinned considerably. At least I didn't have to worry

about fighting my way through a throng thereby losing the one advantage I had over my enemy. The element of surprise.

I waited until Robbo was just a few feet from the exit, mentally calculating the number of steps he would take before stepping over the threshold.

What happened next took place in a matter of seconds, a couple of minutes tops, but on the occasions I've since lain awake replaying the incident over and over in my head it seems to have occurred in on those elgic, slow motion replays beloved of the 'expert's' on 'Match Of The Day.'

I dodge back into the toilets and thrust my head under the drinking water tap. I gulp a mouthful of (maybe) super-arachnid-contaminated water, and I don't swallow. I hold it in my cake-hole till my facial cheeks feel like they're about to burst. I gargle a silent prayer and catch a brief glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, and I look like I'm afflicted with a terminal case of mumps or else I'm auditioning for a the part of Don Corleone in 'THE GODFATHER'

I step back through the door, and see Robbo standing framed in the exit, facing away from me, and a voice pipes up in my mind:

'Let the rumpus begin!!!'

I walk up behind him, my pace quickened partly by an eagerness to get this over with, and partly because I can't keep the water in my mouth much longer, and suddenly I'm so close I can reach out and touch him...I can see the flakes of dandruff on the collar of his blazer. The shine of the Brylcreem he uses to spike up his hair. The holes were he'd self-pierced his ear...

And the Liverpool FC scarf stuffed carelessly into his right-hand pocket.

I can hardly dare believe my good fortune and I know that I'll never get another chance like this...I tap him on the shoulder and he whirls around to confront me. Recognition dawns and his lips curl with the beginnings of a cruel smile. He starts to speak but; 'What do you want, yer litt.le pri...' is as far as he gets. I choose that moment to squirt the water from my mouth, and it shoots out in a veritable geyser smack into the middle of Robbo's astonished face. The sheer power of its release fills me with a grim satisfaction, and I remember once more the Archer Fish, and how it captures flying insects, by spitting at its prey...

Robbo's face turns livid with fury, his eyes bulge in a spit-and-water flecked rage...But before he can react, quick as a flash I whisk the scarf from his pocket, and filled with the clarity of absolute triumph, I turn and race back down the corridor toward the staff room, and blessed sanctuary. And as I run, I hear my adversary roar louder than an angry buffalo with piles, and though it may herald imminent disaster, at that moment it sounds like the sweetest music to my ears....

IV

I managed to escape Robbo's clutches for the remainder of that day. And, as it turned out, for a good while after.

I knew he would get me in the end, however. If this was a made-up story, the kind with an ending that belongs in a rightful sane world, where all of the good guys win all of the time, I could tell you that this incident marked the beginning of the end of his reign of terror. That I'd bested him in front of his mates. Humbled him to the point where he could no longer command a degree of respect, even amongst his most loyal and trusted henchmen.

But of course, in *real* life, things very rarely work out so well. More's the pity.

As it was, I was sent home early from school that Thursday mid-morning. I played up on the fact that I felt ill (and it was certainly true that my stomach was a little off. As

though it were being squeezed by an immesely powerful hand). Mr Arden, the deputy headmaster, granted me sick leave, and although I cast furtive glances over my shoulder all the way home, I didn't once catch sight of Robbo.

My mum was concerned that I really was sickening for something, but I assured her it was probably just a summer cold, and that I'd been sent home merely as a precaution. Besides, there was no way on God's earth that I was going to miss seeing 'The Mighty Red's' parade the European Cup around the City Centre.

It turned out to be a truly magical night, and it almost (only *almost*, like) made up for the disappointment of not being able to make it to Rome for the game itself.

The highlight for me?

Being able to wave *that* scarf, my heart near bursting with pride as the team passed by on an open-topped, double-decker bus...

A thought leapt into my mind at that moment...Something I'd read somewhere, or heard spoken in a film...

'It's always possible to tell the worth of a thing by its enemies.'

I think it's fair to say, I knew the true meaning of those words that glorious evening in late-May...In a City lost in celebration.

V

I had originally intended to end this somewhat lengthy Editorial round about this point, but I realise there are those out there who will doubtless fail to sleep easy in their beds if they don't find out how and when I received my comeuppance, courtesy of one Mr Roberto Robinson, Esq. Never wanting to be blamed as the root cause for mass insomnia amongst our readership, I will gladly oblige. It didn't happen the next day.

I fully expected it to, of course. I'd tried to mentally prepare myself and take it on the chin, so to speak (although, to tell the truth, I was rather less prepared to take it on any other, infinitely more sensitive parts of my anatomy).

But when I arrived back at school, I was greeted by Stevie Gee, the former Assistant Editor of this humble publication, who told me the unbelievable news that Robbo had gotten himself into a serious fight outside 'The Farmer's Arms' pub, and was in Walton Hospital suffering from severe head injuries.

I didn't learn the full details of what had happened for the best part of a fortnight, by which time, he was off the critical list and was expected to make a full recovery, though he'd be absent from school for the last few weeks before he was due to leave for good anyway.

It appeared that Robbo had been drinking heavily ever since he'd arrived home that fateful evening. He might only have been fifteen years of age, but it was well-known that he had a lot of older mates living in the Ferry, any of whom would have been more than glad to grab him a few cans of export-strength lager or a litre bottle of cider from the nearest off-licence. Anyway, according to Philip Hurley, a sometimes- friend of mine, who had been walking up to the chippy at the top end of the town, Robbo was rocking like a big ship, standing outside the pub, accidentally or deliberately (you never could tell with Mr Neanderthal) knocking in to people as they walked by, muttering obscenities, and generally making a nuisance of himself.

Sometime after nightfall, Robbo got into an argument with a Liverpool fan who'd just returned from the homecoming. Exactly what happened isn't clear, but it seems that there was a fight that started off fair and square, but wound up, as they often do around these parts, with someone, not necessarily the unnamed Liverpool fan (although that may

just be me being biased on behalf of a fellow supporter), clobbering Robbo over the head with a snooker cue on at least three separate occasions. The way I heard tell, the sound of those cracks to the skull carried on the breeze, and the noise was like a thousand eggshells being trodden underfoot...

He was found unconscious, lying face down in a pool of his own blood and vomit.

And as I say, he never came back to school again

I didn't see him until a year or so later, and I'd had to do a double-take, he was barely recognisable. He looked to have put on a couple of stone - he'd bloated, not to put too fine a point on it, and he had dark purple bangs under his eyes that made him look like a junkie too long without a fix.

I'd be lying if I said I felt any great degree of sympathy for him, but I guess no one deserves what he got. Local folklore has it that he had so many metal plates inserted in his skull to repair the damage, his was scared to go out without a baseball cap in case it rained and he suffered from a rust attack.

It was another six months before he actually had the opportunity to bushwack me, however. I'd been walking back from the same chippy Phil Hurley had been headed to the night of the Homecoming, and I was carrying my mum's and dad's portions of egg-fried rice and a pocketful of loose change.

I had to pass under the darkened subway as part of my journey, a prospect that always instilled in me a sense of dread...A feeling that something may be lying in wait in the midst of that all-pervasive gloom. Maybe something that had crawled out from the underground water pipes. Something that fed on people's pets, and maybe even larger prey. Something hideous equipped with *'four pairs of glowing eyes and a shiny black body supported by countless legs'*

These fears had proved entirely groundless, of course. Nothing was ever waiting. The subway was always empty. Except on this occasion. Something most certainly was waiting, an ebon silhouette that pushed itself from the slick, tiled walls, and slowly made its way towards me. It hadn't been any imaginary, chitinous horror, however. It had been Robbie Robinson. A fatter, feverish-looking version, maybe. But still the same old bully, when you got right down to it. This time he wanted my money (I wasn't wearing that famous scarf, thankfully - It had long since been awarded pride of place on my bedroom wall), but I was just as determined that he wouldn't have the cash. His speech was badly slurred, the root cause of which was gripped firmly in his hand - a plastic bottle of *'Scrumpy Jack'*

'If you don't hand it over, I'm just gonna 'ave to take it off yer,' he said, visibly unsteady on his feet.

'Then yer'll just have to take it,' I replied, hoping I sounded a good deal braver than I felt.

He pushed his face into mine, just as he'd done a year-and-a-half earlier. 'Giz yer money,' he repeated.

'No chance.'

'Last warnin' Giz it here, *now!!!*'

'No way.'

His eyes flashed momentarily with the promise of violence and pain. And then suddenly, it was gone, flickered out of existence like a faulty lightbulb. What replaced it was the mournful resignation of a man whose carried too great a burden all their lives. 'I love a lad who'll stand up for himself' he said. And he leaned forward and actually kissed me on the cheek before walking away leaving me standing there unable to believe my luck.

And people still have the nerve to ask me; 'Why does football mean so much to you?'

Lee Walker. New Ferry, Merseyside 27th August, 1998

SIGHTS AND

SHADOWS:

New Ferry In The Dark Hours: 1

*'She Said, There's Something In The Woodshed,
And I Can Hear It Breathing...
It's Such An Eerie Feeling...'
'THE DIVINE COMEDY'*

Introduction

I guess it's fair to say that the majority of people, even the most outwardly sceptical amongst us, experience something during our all-too brief time on the planet that, for a moment at least, we deem to lie beyond the pale of what passes for everyday reality.

True, we may later, with the benefit of hindsight and a chance to re-consider the validity of our 'experience' (over a whisky and soda in the company of friends, cheered by rich summer sunlight or a roaring log fire) dismiss the whatever-it-was as being either a clever hoax, sheer coincidence, the product of a vivid imagination or perhaps most likely of all, the honest misperception of the perfectly ordinary.

Comparatively few people however, though they may well be patently honest about most other things that occur in their lives, will openly admit even to this much. Perhaps because, all but buried in some superstition-riddled corner of our mind, we're scared. Frightened not so much by 'the event' itself, as the disconcerting fact that its very occurrence provided, however momentarily, a direct challenge to all that we've come to accept as being the 'normal' scheme of things. Our entire belief system, built up over a period of years - the bridge that spans the carefree days of childhood, gawky adolescence, the (sometimes) harsh-reality of adulthood and the twilight reminiscences of old age - is suddenly shattered in the time it takes to glimpse some 'strange, unearthly spacecraft' bathed in an incandescent glow, a serpentine, thirty-foot creature slowly rising to the surface 'of some dark Scottish loch,' or a long-dead, much-loved relative standing at the foot of the bed in the wee hours before dawn...

Fear of the unknown's eternal power is as prevalent today as it's ever been.

Fear of what other, 'right-thinking' people (be they golfing partners, lovers, family members or the boss at work) may think should such encounters with the 'otherworldly' be made public knowledge, is far, far greater

Little wonder then that people clam up when confronted by the 'Inexplicable'

It's an understandable reaction, and certainly, I think the above applies to my sister, Kearry, after she came face to face with something she couldn't rationally explain, back in the early 1980's.

What she saw, or thought she saw that long-ago spring evening, was every bit as real to her then as it has become vague and half-remembered now, and its very recollection and my writing of it here, reminds me of how wonderfully

uncomplicated it was to be children, secure in belief and to be afraid of the dark...

I

Ever since I can remember, my dad has kept pet rabbits in the large, do-it-yourself hutch he built at the bottom of our back garden.

It's an extremely well-fortified affair, with a solid timber frame, and strong wire-mesh fencing containing gaps so small, nothing bigger than a mouse could have squirmed its way through.

The hutch (pictured on the next page following) is actually made up of two parts; the animals main sleeping quarters, which constitutes a wooden box stacked with layers of straw, and a six-foot long 'play/exercise' area, invariably piled high with raisin-like rabbit droppings. The only way of gaining entry to the structure is to remove the couple of housebricks that lie atop the roof, pull back a covering of musty-smelling lino, and lift up the two thick planks of wood that serve as a lid.

Little wonder my mother used to joke; 'It would be easier for the Yanks to get their hostages out of Iran, than break inside that hutch!'

This virtual obsession with security may well surprise some people, but I'll wager they're the sort who've never kept pet rabbits in their back garden. The fact is, we sometimes forget, with an insensibility that borders on arrogance, that whether we live in the midst of leafy green suburbia or the neglected end of some run-down backstreet, there are still an abundance of wild predators lurking in the shadows or prowling the neighbourhood after dark.

The fox. The stoat. The weasel. The rat. Even that fat old ginger tomcat that seems to spend its entire existence curled up in a fluffy ball on next door's shed roof. Each one is more than a potential threat to a species not exactly renowned (aside from Fiver, Hazel, Bigwig and the other fictional heroes of 'WATERSHIP DOWN'), for their fighting prowess.

And so, my dad wisely ensured that they were well protected against their enemies, and never allowed their defences to slacken once. Especially when, in the early spring of 1982, (a few weeks before a Jackboot dictator saved an ailing Tory matriarch by invading those useless lumps of rock in the South Atlantic), we were all amazed to discover that the pair of Dutch Dwarf rabbits we'd acquired a few months earlier, were *not* in fact just a couple of hyper-frisky bucks...The eight tiny, skinless bundles our Kearry stumbled across whilst cleaning out the 'Sleeping Quarters,' one morning were testament to that!

My parents, not wishing to be over-run by bunnies, no matter how undeniably cute they were, immediately decided to separate the pair, and having (a, and if you will, hem) 'passed the buck' so to speak, to a close friend, they arranged to find homes for the babies just as soon as they were old enough to fend for themselves.

We were all advised by a local 'expert' not to make too much fuss of the offspring, when finally they emerged from their hay-lined nest, or else we'd likely incur the mother's jealousy, but in all honesty, I guess it's fair to say that we didn't pay a great deal of heed to that advice. They were just too irresistably cuddly to admire from the wrong side of a wire-mesh fence.

Over the course of the next six weeks, we watched in wide-eyed wonderment as the miniscule balls of fluff raced around the confines of the hutch or cavorted on the newly-mown lawn in a carefree celebration of life....

II

I've often wondered why it is that life forever seems to choose the most inconsequential moments before springing its darkest surprises upon us.

One minute things are rolling along fine and dandy and entirely on beam. The next you're lying in bed on a cold grey April morning, checking the pillow for defects, when the post-dawn tranquillity is suddenly shattered by the blood-curdling sound of your kid sister bawling her lungs out somewhere in the distance. And then you taste ice in your throat and a dreamy sort of terror floats into the dark hollows of your body, as you throw back the bedclothes and race to the window....

My eyes took a few precious seconds to adjust to the quality of light. At first, all I could make out was the tumbledown garden fence, the dark bricks of the house opposite, the top-most branches of a tree and a narrow ribbon of sky.

I finally spotted Kearry, standing directly in the centre of the path that runs down the middle of the lawn, head in hands, her screams quietning to sobs that wracked her shoulders.

I didn't hang around or stand on ceremony. Half-dressed, I charged down the stairs two or three at a time, with not the slightest clue as to what to expect, but with all sorts of grim and frightening possibilities clamouring in my mind like kids at a spoiled brat's convention.

I ran bare-footed across the dew-soaked grass to where my sister remained standing, but when I asked her what was wrong all she could do was point towards the rabbit hutch, and burst into tears once more.

I had no option but to look for myself.

And, as bad as it undeniably was, I have to admit that I couldn't help breathing an audible sigh of relief that none of my darkest fears had been realised.

One of the baby rabbits (we hadn't bothered to give them individual names. They all looked so similar in appearance it was near-impossible to tell them apart) was lying inert on atop a large mound of frozen droppings. It was quite obviously dead. The fur of its tiny, lifeless body rippled in the bone-chilling air, and I stood staring, transfixed for what seemed like the longest time as I silently pondered the question; '*How had the animal met its death?*'

And in retrospect, the very fact that I'd even paused to consider the matter, now seems to be one of the most puzzling aspects of the whole welter of absurdities that were to overtake us that spring.

I mean, how the hell could I have ever saw fit to mentally debate the issue...Even for a second?

The answer was so obvious, it almost defies belief.

The fact is, although the rabbits *body* was unmarked, with not the slightest hint of injury, and although there was very little in the way of blood, and few signs that any kind of struggle had taken place, *still* the animal's head had been crushed as flat as the proverbial pancake.

It was only later, recovering from the shock with a couple of mugs of steaming hot coffee, in company with Kearry, (both of my parents and two younger brothers had gone out for the day) that I realised I'd experienced a classic case of my brain refusing to accept that which my eyes had been telling me.

And as the cold light of reason (with a bit of help from the ingested caffeine) began clearing the fog that had descended upon my mind, I realised something else, too. I'd been asking myself the wrong question, gazing insensibly at that impossibly flat head.

I *should* have been asking not *how* the creature had met its death, but *who* or *what* had killed it and *why*???

III

I buried the pitiful remains at the edge of the barren rose garden in the misted twilight of early evening, whilst Kearry stared forlornly from the kitchen window.

It was on my mind to tell the rest of the family what had happened when they eventually arrived home long after

dark, and my sister had gone to bed, but they seemed in such high spirits I was loathe to blacken their good humour. I elected instead to tell them the following morning.

As things turned out however, I didn't need to.

Next day, there were two more dead baby rabbits...Both of them lying roughly in the same area of the hutch as the previous corpse.

Both of them huddled together as though seeking each other's body warmth.

Both with their heads flattened, in exactly the same bizarre fashion as before.

My dad took the losses especially badly. He had little doubt as to what had killed the babies. 'It was the work of a weasel,' he announced in a voice that begged no argument. 'A dirty, vicious, shithouse weasel. I should have known better. They can smell a litter a mile away.'

I guess he felt more than a fair share of guilt for having provided (no matter how much we tried to assure him to the contrary) insufficient security for them. He spent the whole of that day searching in vain for the predator's point of entry. He checked and re-checked but came in for super shaking his head. He'd been unable to find a single weak spot.

Even at this early stage, I began to harbour grave doubts concerning my dad's conviction that any kind of *animal* had been the perpetrator of these attacks. For me, there were several factors that didn't tally with an assault by a creature acting purely on instinct. Aside from the fact that there seemed to be no way in which even an animal as supple as the weasel could have gotten in to that hutch, there were the twin-born mysteries of why had it only killed a total of three out the nine (including the mother) rabbits (and in a calculating, systematic way at that. I mean, what were we dealing with here? A serial-killing weasel?).

And, how on earth had it managed to completely crush the victim's heads so that they were nothing short of paper thin?

Strangely, no one else seemed too keen to ask such awkward questions. They simply accepted my dad's explanation. And who was I to argue?

Besides, what we all agreed was of more immediate importance was to ensure that the surviving rabbits didn't suffer the same fate....

IV

Regrettably however, all of our efforts proved to be entirely in vain, and when, two days later, another victim was discovered, killed in an identical fashion to the others, my dad underwent a radical change of heart.; he began to share my suspicion that the killings were not the work of any animal, but could only be attributed to a human being, and a dangerously sick and crazy one at that.

Contingency plans were therefore drawn up within the Walker household, as we embarked upon what amounted to a round-the-clock protection scheme for the remaining rabbits.

This involved my brother Grant and I sitting at the bedroom window with the lights turned off, right through the night, armed with torches and a couple of broom-handles, all the better to ward off any psychotic individual who liked nothing better than to heartlessly slaughter other people's pets....

College had been in recess for the Easter holidays by this time, and so we were able to keep up this nightly vigil for the best part of a fortnight, but aside from one occasion when I thought I spied some shadowy form lurking in the thick bushes that line the very foot of the garden, (it was probably nothing more than a combination of tiredness and a trick of the moonlight), the 'stake-out' proved fruitless.

The only consolation was that there were no further attacks on the rabbits, and by the time the green-tinged days of the early part of the month had given way to the verdant fulfillment of its latter stages, we began to believe that whoever (or whatever) had been responsible for the killings had since moved on or else had elected to get their sick kicks some other way.

Whatever the truth of the matter, we became understandably complacent. We lowered our guard and abandoned our all-night vigils. With a confidence that was to prove to be hopelessly misplaced, we felt sure the threat to our pets had passed.

Any such notions were well and truly blown away, scattered to the four winds, less than twenty four hours later, when we awoke to find that that which had chosen, for whatever reason, to visit death upon the innocent, was back with a vengeance.

There were two baby rabbits lying in the 'Play Area,' their bodies untouched. Their *heads* flattened.

I averted my gaze from the by now familiar, but nonetheless pathetic sight, only to find myself staring unblinkingly at the concrete base of the washing line post, or more specifically, at the jagged writing that was engraved there; the barely discernible signatures of both my father, and my brother, Grant. The scrawly tribute to LFC. The crude attempt at a five-pointed star....And dominating all, the three numerical figures my dad had etched there for a joke after finishing laying the garden path, two or three years earlier...

Just three figures that went to make up a single number.

A number afforded enormous cultural significance by the '*Book Of Revelations*' and '*THE OMEN*' movie series...

666

I continued to stare, as if hypnotised, and although you may think I'm guilty of possessing an over-active imagination, I'm sure I heard the sound of far-away laughter, as fleeting and ethereal as the notes of some distant melody carried on a warm, sirocco wind..



(Above): The supposedly 'high-security' hutch, built by my father, at the bottom of our garden; the site of the slaughter of innocence

V

I remember it was around about this point that Kearry made the somewhat belated suggestion that we bring the two remaining babies into the house after dark. She argued, not unreasonably, that since all other avenues had been trod without success, this was the only way we could be *sure* they'd be safe.

Most of the family agreed, she certainly got my vote, but my dad chose that precise moment to pose a question that had, up until then, failed to occur to any of us:

'But what if its the *mother* that's killing them?'

Now, I didn't believe that to be the case for a second. And yet, at the same time, the possibility that there might be such a down-to-earth, logical explanation was more than a little appealing. Plausibly seductive.

Like a politician's promise.

Or a con man's sales technique.

And almost before I knew what was happening, I was throwing in my lot with the babble of assenting voices that suddenly filled the air in response to the suggestion.

'Yeah, that expert warned us not to make a fuss of the babies.' 'The mother must have gotten jealous and killed them all in a fit of spite.' 'That's right. That would explain why there were no signs of forced entry.' 'Why did we ignore the warnings?' 'Something's gonna have to be done.' 'We'll have to separate the babies from their mother.'

On and on it went. A ceaseless litany around the breakfast table. A latter-day Tower Of Babel. And who could honestly blame us. It felt as though we'd been offered a perfectly normal way out of a distinctly abnormal situation. And we charged headlong towards that escape route at full pelt.

We acted quickly. It was decided, rather than bring the babies inside our house each night, it would serve just as well to place some sort of dividing wall between the mother and what was left of her litter, within the main 'Sleeping Quarters.'

In the end, my dad used a thin, but sturdy strip of metal shelving from our refrigerator, and it certainly seemed to fit the bill. We could now keep a close watch on the rabbits by day, and there was no possible way the mother could make any degree of physical contact once the 'barrier' had been inserted after sundown.

Perhaps now, we thought, we could sleep a little easier in our beds, secure in the knowledge that surely nothing could harm the babies now....

VI

And just who were we trying to kid?

The following morning, there was only one baby left alive.

The other was dead.

I surely don't need to tell you the method of its death. The only notable difference was that this corpse was lying *within* the 'Sleeping Area.' And that's hardly surprising, seeing as how there was no exit for the brood after we'd inserted the dividing section of metal the previous evening. There could be no more debate.

No attempt at half-baked explanations.

There was only one baby left from a litter of eight. We had no option but to bring it inside, out of harm's way.

The general consensus was that we should place the animal in a suitable container and bring it into the kitchen that very night. My dad overruled this suggestion however, arguing instead that the confines of the woodshed situated at the top end of the garden, would do just as well.

And so it was, when sundown came - the last of the day a cold, yellowy-orange line on the western horizon - Kearry gently lifted the baby out of the hutch, and put it in her old plastic hamster cage. It was newly-lined with fresh straw and well-stocked with food and water. With due solemnity, she carried its new home up to the shed and placed it upon a table that had been cleared of its usual array of tools. After weighing down the transparent lid of the cage with a couple of those, ever-dependable housebricks, and satisfying herself that there was no way anything, human or animal, could force its way in unless it was equipped with a Do-It-Yourself burglary kit, she bolted and locked the only door.

It must have been sometime around 8:30pm (certainly, I recall it was virtually pitch-black outside), that my sister began to grow increasingly anxious about the safety of that single rabbit. We were all seated around the flickering TV screen watching one of our favourite comedy shows; 'FAWLTY TOWERS' maybe, or 'DAVE ALLEN,' when I caught sight of Kearry nervously fidgeting and wringing her hands, an expression of intense concern clouding her features. I was about to ask her if she was feeling alright, when she suddenly jumped up and announced in a shaky voice; 'I'm just going to check on the rabbit. Pass me the key please, dad.'

My father rolled his eyes, and heaved a world-weary sigh as he threw the key over to her. 'Be my guest,' he smiled, shaking his head. 'Your wasting your time though. No one's gonna break into that shed just to get at a baby rabbit. And besides, how would they know that we've even moved it in there?'

But his words were lost on her. I'm not even sure if she heard them, in truth. She was out of the door so quick.

I went back to watching the TV affecting an air of cool indifference that I didn't really feel. To be honest, I was trying my damndest to ignore the feeling of tension...the kind you get before a storm...a sense of something holding back...And for all of two minutes, I think I succeeded.

Then, for the second time in a few short weeks, the air was rent with my sister's screaming. And although I all but jumped out of my skin at the banshee-like screech, I found that I had somehow been half-expecting it.

Before any of us had a chance to run to her aid, she came charging through the kitchen doorway and into the living room as though the Hounds of Hell were at her heels, and it's my belief that she would have very likely kept right on sprinting out the front door (perhaps without pausing to actually open it) and legged it up and down the streets of New Ferry, wailing like an out-of-control fire engine...At least if my dad hadn't have grabbed her by the arms and forced her to sit down in the nearest available chair.

It took us some time to find out the gist of what had happened. Kearry is normally one of the most articulate persons I know, but she could no more string a coherent sentence together than ride backwards to Loch Ness on a unicycle with a slow puncture

What was immediately obvious however, was that there was something seriously awry within the confines of the woodshed. We fished out the flashlights, and leaving my mother to comfort Kearry, we stepped out into the dark.

A raw, out-of-season wind whipped across the garden and buffeted around the brightly-lit windows, and though it blurred our eyes with misted tears, we could clearly make out that the shed door stood wide open. I assumed Kearry had neglected to close it, so great had been her panic. With a stomach crawling with insects too crawly to be butterflies, I desperately tried to steel myself for whatever awaited us in the woodshed...

But when we shone our torchlight beams into the morass of gibbering shadows that filled the interior, we failed to find anything amiss. There was no sign of any structural damage. No sign that anything was missing. No sign of any intrusion. And, best of all, the baby rabbit was still very much alive. We watched it hopping around merrily, and shook our heads at Kearry's vivid imagination. With a mental shrug of the shoulders, I turned to head back into the house, but I was stopped by a cry of surprise from Grant, as he suddenly exclaimed; 'Hang on a minute. There is *something* missing here, look!'

I followed his gaze, and for a moment I didn't have a clue what he was talking about...And then I saw what he was referring to.

It was nothing overly dramatic.

But it was an indication that perhaps Kearry's mind hadn't been playing tricks on her, after all.

It was simply this; the two housebricks that had been placed atop the plastic cage cover were no longer there. They were both on the floor, several yards from the cage. They couldn't possibly have fallen off by themselves. So unless Kearry had upset them, whether by accident or for some unknown purpose....

After having replaced the bricks in their original position, we locked the shed door and went back inside to see if my sister had recovered her wits sufficiently to be able to tell us what had happened.

It turned out that she indeed had.

But when she'd finished telling us what she believed she'd seen, I found myself wishing to God that she stayed silent....

VII

The minute she'd stepped into the shed, she had instinctively *known* something was very wrong.

There was a thick, heavy atmosphere about the place that had nothing to do with the dank odours of old paint, sodden carpets, and rotting wood that assailed her nostrils. Nor the fact that her torch batteries were so low the light it gave off barely penetrated the pervasive gloom. It was as if she'd stepped into a dreamscape realm of waking nightmare.

For some reason, she didn't simply turn and head back into the warmth and comforting reassurance of the house, though. Instead, she remained exactly where she was, playing the thin pencil beam of watery light across the walls and groaning shelf-stacks. Heavy with the combined weight of the myriad tins of emulsion and creosote. Tool-kits and piles of dirty oil cloths. Bottles of turpentine and ancient home-brew. What she was looking for exactly, she couldn't say, either now nor then...What she did state for certain however, is that it was the curious scraping sound emanating from the direction of the table upon which the rabbit-cage was perched, that drew her attention back to the whole point of her being there in the first place. A shuffling...So soft in the dark...

Her initial thought was that the thing crouched between the two housebricks was an exceptionally large rat.

It was only when a sudden shaft of moonlight, peering through a gap in the ragged clouds, boosting the increasingly weak illumination provided by the pocket torch, that its true nature could be perceived....

She saw it was actually a two-foot high creature, crooked and bent, and draped in an all-enveloping cloak that obscured most of its features.

She could make out the contours of its face just fine though. It was the face of an aged crone or an impossibly old man. The skin resembled weather-worn leather, it was so heavily wrinkled. But its eyes, set either side of a huge, bulbous nose, warty and lined with an intricate network of black-looking veins, were bright and filled with a malignant intelligence.

It stared, favouring her with a hideous, lop-sided grin, revealing a set of teeth, jagged and decayed...And with chunks of rancid-smelling meat dangling between the gaps. But what had her running from the shed in uncontrollable fear was the sight of that which it held in one gnarled, bony hand...

A lump hammer.

Thick and powerful-looking. Its mallet darkly stained and dotted with strips of monochrome fur mixed with tiny pieces of shining white bone....

VIII

Of course, none of us seriously believed Kearry had seen any such thing.

My guess was that she had been correct in her original estimation. That she'd encountered nothing more exotic than an ordinary, everyday rat, in admittedly, rather unusual circumstances. A vivid imagination and a poor quality of light had done the rest. The rather sticky problem of how the creature had gotten into the shed was 'solved' by my supposition that it may in fact have already been hidden somewhere *inside* before the door was locked.

I think it's fair to say, we were each convinced beyond doubting of this, or some similar, logical theory.

And yet...

When it was unanimously decided it might very well be advisable to bring the rabbit indoors to ensure its

protection from 'marauding rats,' and we traipsed back outside to collect the cage, we found, to our horror, that the housebricks were back on the shed floor, the perspex lid had been pushed ajar, the exercise wheel (a remnant from the time my sister had kept a couple of pet hamsters), was gently spinning on its side, looking for all the world like some bizarre instrument of medieval torture...

And the last surviving baby rabbit was lying dead with its head crushed.

Flattened impossibly thin, as though it had been struck a single, powerful blow with a blunt, heavy object...A lump hammer, for example.

IX

We never did find out the truth of what happened to that innocent, ultimately defenceless litter.

That didn't stop the theories abounding like free-falling confetti at a wedding, however. Despite the fact that each and everyone only threw up more questions than answers.

And the most preposterous theory of all, was of course, that propounded in the wake of what my sister may or may not have seen lurking in the woodshed, one night in late April.

Such things simply don't exist this side of a horror writer's fiction or some half-heard faerie tale from far-off childhood.

Demons. Dwarves. Elves. Goblins. They've all since long been consigned to the dustbin of discredited superstition and folk-belief. If you put your ears to *that* door, you could hear the winds of madness blowing outside.



And yet...In January, 1905, at Binbrook Farm, near Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, '*something*' killed 255 chickens in a particularly horrible way. Despite a constant watch on the henhouse, whenever the interior came to be examined, four or five of the birds would be dead. And they were all killed in the same way; the skin around the neck, from the head to the breast had been pulled off, and the windpipe drawn from its place and snapped...

Neither the culprits or their sick motive were ever discovered.

And yet... During 1919, in Llanelly, Wales, 'something' entered hutches and broke the backs of a litter of rabbits.

And yet... In the late 1940's, at Alphamstone, Sussex, a family living at Sycamore Farm, bred chickens that were kept in a paddock surrounded by strong wire, buried several feet under the earth.

The doors were firmly padlocked.

But when the family were awakened by the noise of their poultry, the farmer saw a 'greyhound' moving through the chicken huts in the centre of the paddock. He raised his gun and fired, but it simply disappeared through the netting and into a nearby hedgerow. A meticulous search failed to find any point of entry. The farmer was positive the entire enclosure was both dog, fox proof, even man-proof.

And yet... In 1954, in Caracas, Venezuela, a man named Gustavo Gonzalez, swore blind he was attacked by a 'hairy dwarf' with glowing eyes. He stabbed it, but the knife had no effect.

And yet... In the Orkney Isles, off the Scottish coast, the headless corpses of over thirty seals were found on various beaches. To add to the mystery, the heads had been removed with a virtual surgical precision...

AND YET...

And yet... The truth is, I haven't got a clue as to exactly *what* happened to our brood of baby rabbits all those years ago. I only know that whatever *was* responsible for the killings, may well lie outside the 'normal' boundaries of human experience.

Aside from the actual logistics of anything breaking into the hutch in the first place, there is the added problem of motive... Or, to be more precise, the lack of one.

Only my sister, Kearry, can shed (absolutely no pun intended) any further degree of light on the matter...

Except she *can't*.

Remember what I was saying earlier about how people suddenly confronted with (for want of a better term) 'The inexplicable,' can sometimes find it very difficult to adjust and come to terms with what they've seen., heard and experienced.

So much so, that they simply clam up, rather than admit to themselves that they've just been a reluctant witness to something that definitely doesn't fit in with their belief pattern.

Well, this is just such an instance, where the above certainly seems to be more than applicable. Kearry now refuses, threatened by her own blades of belief and memory, to relate to any suggestion that she may have seen a 'goblin armed with a lump hammer,' clearly intent upon wreaking havoc upon the baby rabbit in our woodshed...

She denies all knowledge of ever having encountered anything stranger than a large, common or garden rat. And what's more, she denies it *categorically!!!*

But you'll excuse me, I'm sure, if I tell you I still remember the expression of sheer horror on my sister's face that terrible night. The genuine honesty reflected in her eyes as she described what she then believed she had seen, and that I still suffer from bad dreams in which hideous, grinning dwarves dance upon a mound of concrete inscribed with the number; 666...A blood-stained hammer in one claw-like hand...A cluster of shattered baby rabbit skulls in the other...

Lee Walker, 10th October, 1994

(This article first appeared in the now out-of-print 'DEAD OF NIGHT' Issue 2)

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Meteor Showers Blamed For Recent Spate Of UFO Sightings

Is it just me, or does there seem to have been a marked increase in the number of meteor-inspired UFO sightings of late? Come to that, does anyone else out there share my impression that there seems to be lot more accounts of all-types of what the scientists and astronomers assure us are perfectly 'natural, celestial' phenomena?

Hell, maybe it is *just* me, slipping into conspiracy cover-up mode, faster than you can say *'Lone Gunman'*

But all the same, it's kind of hard to shake the notion that *something* unusual is going on in the skies above our planet...Read the following, (necessarily) brief sample featured below and decide for yourself....

On 8th March, 1998, at approximately 6pm, a bright green fireball was spotted flying over Placerville, California. A few minutes after the initial sighting, the 'fireball' was seen over Sacramento, the state capital. Motorists were so amazed by the sight that they stopped their cars and alighted for a closer look.

Press reports stated that; *'Traffic on Interstate (Highway 80) between Davies and Dixon slowed to a halt as motorists stopped to watch the object. Many drivers swamped the California Highway Patrol with phone calls, but the control tower at Sacramento Airport insisted that no planes were reported as being missing.'*

In Monterey, 125 miles south of San Francisco, the same, or a very similar green fireball was sighted hovering over the bay.

A coastguard spokesman said that; *'It was just getting dark and everybody was facing this direction just as the sun was going down. It was the king of all meteor showers.'*

A meteor shower that takes time out to *hover*.

Now there's a thing!!!

9th March, 1998. Northern California, USA. *'San Jose Mercury News'*

*** On Sunday, March 15th, this year, a group of meteoroids called the Virginids were held to be responsible for a veritable flood of UFO reports from right across Southern England.

Police and coastguards were inundated with calls from worried witnesses, as a stunning series of flashes and smoke trails criss-crossed the dark skies and the sound of rumbling explosions reverberated for miles.

Many mistook the meteors for being everything from distress flares from a ship in dire straits, to genuine UFO's, but the teams of 'experts' were soon rushing to the rescue with their sackful of explanations marked; *'Mundane And Rational'*

They pointed out that the Virginids reach the Earth every Spring, and that the celestial display would be visible for weeks. The sightings had been particularly dramatic due the fact that there'd been a full moon and crystal-clear skies.

The Brixham Coastguard in South Devon claimed that it had taken up to 30 calls reporting red distress flares in an area from Exmouth to beyond Plymouth.

'It was obviously quite a severe meteorite shower,' one of those ubiquitous, eternally faceless spokesmen was quoted as saying. *'We actually saw one over our own Coastguard station. There was a bright flash of white light with a bang and some smoke. It was like a very big very high firework.'* Meteorologist Dr Richard Porter, who hails from Kingsbridge, South Devon, told how he saw a trail of light across the sky.

'It was like a rocket which broke up into five or six pieces and disappeared, but there was a smoke cloud that remained for ten minutes. I also heard bangs and rumblings for two or three minutes.'

'I believe it was a meteor a foot or so across at about 18 to 30 miles up in the sky. This is comparatively low in our atmosphere, and the lowest I have seen....' And here he adds, maybe just a tad tellingly; *'It may have been a piece of space debris, and not a true meteorite.'*

21st March, 1998. Southern England. *'DAILYMAIL'*

*** And just a week or so later, in the early hours of Friday, March 27, a remarkably similar mysterious explosion made up of a bluish white light, and accompanied by a roaring sound, illuminated the heavens west of the Islands of Hawaii. At approximately 2:20am, this 'explosion' was seen by dozens of witnesses at Waimea, Waiialua and Kawaaloa Beach, as well as on Hawaii itself.

According to local press reports, a pilot for 'Aloha Airlines,' saw not just the explosion, but a bright object, whilst he was flying. A reporter stated that the witness was *obviously very excited and moved by the experience. He said the object came within two miles of his cargo plane and lit up the entire sky. 'He said further that it created an increase in temperature that was felt by everyone in the cabin.'*

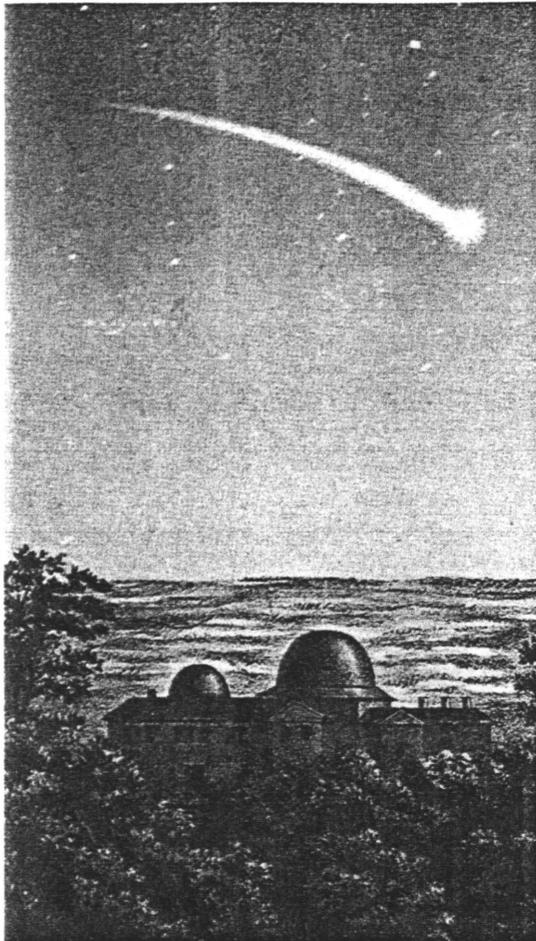
Back on terra firma, another witness, Lana Kirkwood, was sitting in her living room, unable to sleep, reading a book when suddenly, *'the whole sky lit up - a big flash of white light that lasted about three seconds,'* and was quickly followed by a huge rumbling, like a thunderbolt; *'but there was no storm.'*

The earth-shaking roar lasted for an estimated four to five seconds, and during that fleeting/ endless period, Mrs Kirkwood felt sure that the source must be either *'an earthquake or a volcano about to explode.'*

The Hawaiian police said that the light, which was seen in all districts of the island, made the night sky as bright as day.

The U.S. Coastguard were quick to dismiss the phenomenon as being nothing more than a 'big meteor.' It added that it had 'determined the source of the light after an investigation.'

29th March, 1998. Hawaiian Islands. 'WEST HAWAII TODAY'



*** And then there was the case of a retired insurance manager named David Lee, who's house was shook to its foundations by a deafening crash as his roof tiles were shattered, by a 4lb lump of rock which bounced onto his garden path.

'I can only assume it's a meteorite,' David, aged 57, later said as he clutched the mysterious object in his hand, whilst he stood in the garden of his semi-detached home in Brighton's Sussex neighbour, Hove.

'It's coloured black and looks like a piece of tarmac but it's much harder than that. It's left quite an indentation in my roof. I called the police to tell them because I didn't know if it was necessary to register or record instances like this.'

Mr Lee further stated that he and his wife were about to retire to the bedroom a little after midnight when he heard the impact.

'I thought, "God, what's happened?" I was in the living room so I looked straight out of the window but there was no one around.

'I looked around outside to see if anyone was lurking in the garden but there wasn't. I thought someone was chucking things at the house.

'When I went out it was lying on the pathway. I thought, "hang on a minute, it must be a meteorite."

'I don't think anyone could have thrown something that heavy on to the top of the house and caused the tiles to break.'

Retired policeman John Clarke, a representative of the UFO organisation 'Quest International,' was quoted as saying; 'Meteorites are usually small particles.

'It's rather unusual for something of this size to come down - they usually burn up in the atmosphere.

'But there is always the possibility that it could be man-made rubbish - there are about 30,000 objects in space and they've all got to come down sometime.'

4th May, 1998. Hove, Near Brighton. 'DAILY EXPRESS'

*** On the night of Thursday, 11th June, there was another deluge of 'meteorite' reports humming down the wires from the coastline of Britain, though this time, the sightings were not just confined to the southern half of the country, but were witnessed as far north as my home county of Merseyside.

The eyewitness testimony was markedly similar to that of the 'Virginid sightings' of three months earlier, and on this occasion video evidence was obtained and subsequently screened on national TV. I happened to be taking a break from my job at Roberts Moore Nicholas Jones Solicitors in New Ferry, the afternoon following the sightings, and tuning into the ITV lunchtime bulletin was amazed to see footage of what appeared to be a huge glowing sphere shot in broad daylight, hovering above some farmer's field. I wasn't sure that they hell it was, but it sure looked absolutely nothing like a meteor, even to my untrained eyes. The sequence was over almost before I had chance to register what I was seeing, and thought I waited patiently, through several subsequent news broadcasts, video tape at the ready, I never caught sight of it again.

Later that evening, during 'NEWS AT TEN,' they *did* show some footage of a far -less spectacular aerial display of what were quite clearly meteorites or some other sort of space debris, streaking across a pitch-dark sky.

They looked absolutely nothing like the object featured earlier....

I don't want to sound like an incurable paranoiac with a headfull of conspiracy theories, but just the same, I can't help wondering if the pictures of that massive, surreal-looking ovoid, weren't hurriedly withdrawn from syndicate circulation by some 'higher authority' who, fuming fit to bust over their having been screened at all, had burned the ears of the director responsible....

Sound far - fetched?

Sure it does...

It's all nought but wild speculation with not a hint of substance, and should be dismissed out of hand as being entirely baseless and not a little ridiculous...just like the stories of little phone bugs infesting the offices of the DNC in '72, swapping weapons for hostages on some hostile Middle Eastern border, the countless, nameless victims of a phantom combat 'syndrome,' shipping arms to remote, third world countries run by tin pot dictators and an 'over-friendly' hug on the White House Lawn....

'And the Dear Sweet Bird Of Truth, just flew for pastures new'

***Finally, for this issue at least, as recently as 10th July, hundreds of bemused witnesses were once more jamming emergency switchboards as yet another 'meteor shower' traversed the increasingly congested heavens.

The majority of the reports of flares, explosions, and weird, darting lights were made shortly after 11pm, and seemed to have endured for over an hour. The pilot of a high-flying aircraft stated that he had spotted what appeared to be a huge explosion over the Isle Of Man.

While the lights could be seen all the way from Scotland to Cornwall, the largest number of calls came in from the North-West of England.

Liverpool coastguard Jerry Barker said their three-strong staff fended off phone calls for more than an hour.

And amidst the gamut of the almost reassuringly familiar, here was something new....Many reported lights taking on

Liverpool coastguard Jerry Barker said their three-strong staff fended off phone calls for more than an hour.

And amidst the gamut of the almost reassuringly familiar, here was something new....Many reported lights seemingly taking on the appearance of recognizable letters and numbers...A bemused Mr Barker was quoted as saying that; *'We had all kinds of reports, even that there was a letter Z in the sky.'*

No aircraft was missing or overdue. But it appears it was most probably a meteor shower.

'It appears to have been pretty spectacular because we had calls from as far away as South-West Scotland, the Isle Of Man and the whole of the North-West.'

Another airline pilot who later landed at a Midlands airport, reported seeing a large meteorite entering the atmosphere when he was flying to Britain from France.

He too said that it's trail on occasion seemed to form into a shape resembling letters....

11th July, 1998. North-West Of England. 'LIVERPOOL ECHO'

Against The Darker Threat Of Night: Black Helicopters Whirl Into View...

Sightings of these disconcertingly sinister aircraft, sometimes appearing singularly, more often materialising in the aftermath of a 'more-traditional-type' of UFO encounter, were making the news again earlier this year.

On March 24th, at 7:30pm, Peter Gann was approaching the last mini-roundabout on Strathaven county road in East Kilbride, Scotland, when he saw; *'a chopper that was visibly black and hovering over the fields and factories on the area. It had the shape of a - don't laugh - 'Airwolf' chopper on TV and was either dark grey or black in colour.'* Two months prior to this sighting, a man hailing from Greenhills, reported that he too had seen *'a large black helicopter, that was only a hundred yards away from my window. I could see the rotor blades quite clearly. It was big. It was black. And it did have unusual lighting.'*

Meanwhile, across the water in the USA, on 2nd February, a UFO was said to have been stalked by a mysterious, unmarked chopper over a farm in Iowa.

At about 10pm, Susan Landers, 50, her daughter Melissa Edgewick, 27, and son Michael, 20, were at the family farm near Sioux City, when Melissa *'heard the sound of jets but did not see them. I then heard a high-pitched hum, but again I could not locate the source of the noise.'*

'Next, a dark-coloured helicopter came over the house at less than 50ft altitude.'

She later told representatives from MUFON, (Mutual UFO Network) that the craft had a very large motor and was entirely devoid of markings.

When the aircraft was directly overhead she could feel the house vibrate and, standing on the balcony, she could clearly see *'two white lights - one at each end and a red light in the middle. Since I was aware of the green light requirement on aircraft, I specifically looked for just such a light. But there was none on the 'copter.'*

After the chopper left, all three of us watched through a pair of binoculars, a bright orange ball move from the east to the south-west and then to the north-west of our residence. At one point, the ball stopped, then moved back once more to the south-west.'

On Friday, 13th March, various witnesses on Bringle Ferry Road saw a black chopper hovering over the area where local resident Thomas Moon spotted a triangular UFO on the night of 30th January.

Various Sources, but mostly courtesy of George Filler at 'Majorstar' @aol.com

Cattle Mutilations In Canada

Although I'm in full agreement with Kevin McClure (the highly-respected researcher and Editor of the consistently excellent 'ABDUCTION WATCH,') when he says that he considers animal mutilation cases to be quite simply the most tasteless form of 'Paranormal phenomena,' I feel somewhat duty-bound to include reports, such as the following, if only for the sake of completeness...

A cow was found dead and mutilated in February of this year at the farm of George Giersch near Dawson Creek, British Columbia, Canada.

Giersch discovered the animal lying in a pool of blood with its tongue missing, half its face stripped to the bone and a deep slash across its chest. Giersch was quoted as saying; *'An incision to the cow's jaw was too precise to be caused by a predator.'*

There were no trace of any tracks left in the surrounding snow, and Giersch left the carcass exactly where it was for several days.

'No animal came near until the fifth day, when birds began to land on it. And that in itself is a trifle odd.. There's a large coyote community here.'

Local press reports stated that Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Alberta officials concluded that the cow died a natural death and then simply became food for predators, and of course, there is isn't the slightest hint of any UFO involvement. I've only included this account here at all because I was stumped as to where else I *could* include it.

15th March, 1998. British Columbia, Canada. 'THE OTTOWASUN'

American Survey Reveals Mass Acceptance Of ET Life

Most American citizens readily accept that there is intelligent life on other planets, (although they don't say too much about the possibility of it existing on our *own*) and some even believe that this ET-life, whatever form it may take, is likely to be vastly superior to we puny humans.

The result of a study by the Marist Institute For Public Opinion, was made public late last year, and for Paul Horowitz, a professor of physics at Harvard, it comes as no surprise; *'The public loves this stuff. They always have.'* Paul directs a project that operates a 250 million-channel receiver listening for signals from space.

Brian Welch, a spokesman for NASA, was equally blasé about the findings; *'It could be the American people are taking two and two and coming up with four.'*

What apparently pleased the space community was the response to the question; *'Do you think there is intelligent life on other planets?'*

Sixty per cent of those asked replied in the affirmative.

Marist researchers then asked those who said yes if they thought life on other planets is *'more, less or about as intelligent as human life on Earth.'*

On that question more than 47 per cent of respondents said that they thought extraterrestrial life was more intelligent, 13 per cent said less intelligent and 40 per cent said it was about the same.

By a margin of 86 to 14, people said they thought galactic neighbours are friendly rather than hostile.

Despite this positive view of the possibility of life on other planets, the survey found Americans to be curiously divided on spending for the space program. 47 per cent said that the US government was spending too much, 43 per cent said that the funding was just about right, and 10 per cent said it was too low.

The telephone survey was conducted between October 5th-7th, and Marist questioned 935 adults by phone. The results had a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points. Broken down by age, people from 18 through to sixty years of age were strongly supportive of the idea of life on other planets. But people older than sixty rejected the idea by a margin of 67 to 33. *'The subject has moved a lot in just the last couple of years,'* said Louis Friedman, executive director of the Planetary Society, whose 100,000 members are strong advocates of continuing research into the possibility of life in outer space.

16th December, 1997. USA. *'THE BOSTON GLOBE'*

Earth Vs The Flying Triangles?

One of the most dramatic UFO cases we've come across, assuming even *half* of the details are true, is undoubtedly that said to have occurred on the evening of March 24th, 1997, over the Peak District of Sheffield.

The basis of the story surrounding the incident concerns a dogfight between six Tornado jets and a triangular UFO that resulted in one of the interceptors being downed and forced to crash land in a reservoir.

The military authorities, were of course, quick to deny that any such thing had happened, and despite the plethora of civilian eyewitness testimony (including a reference by *'NORTHERN UFO NEWS'* Editor Jenny Randles, that she'd seen a large amount of air traffic in the skies that night) concerning a couple of sonic booms/explosions and the sighting of a mysterious triangular-shaped craft, the official explanation; namely that a fireball had collided with a small airplane, was quietly accepted by just about all and sundry.

That was until early April this year, when a combination of intrepid investigation by Dave Clarke of BUFORA, local MP Helen Jackson and newspaper; *'THE SHEFFIELD STAR'*, forced the RAF to concede that there was certainly more to this case than they were earlier prepared to admit...

Following revelations in the press that the RAF had conducted a low-altitude training exercise that night and had indeed taken part in what amounted to a massive air-and-ground search for a purported missing aircraft, Mrs Jackson submitted a list of potentially embarrassing questions about the incident to the MoD.

On 7th April, John Spellar, Under-Secretary of Defence, sent Mrs Jackson this response to her diligent enquiries; *'It is not possible 12 months after the date in question to state precisely where military activities were being carried out. Records kept show only that aircraft were tasked to carry out low-flying over the Peak District between 2030 and 2107 on the evening in question. No low-level flying is permitted over the Sheffield urban area or any other major conurbation.'*

As the equally diligent Ms Randles points out, the UFO sightings would have been about 20 minutes after this. What has also emerged is the fact that instruments at the University of Edinburgh recorded two mysterious sonic booms in the Sheffield area.

The May/June 1997 issue of *'UFOMAGAZINE'* states that witnesses of the UFO described the object as being a huge

triangular-shaped craft *'that passed directly overhead at 300 feet at 9:30pm. The craft had pinkish-coloured lights around its curved edges and a blinking blue light on the underside and lit up the street bright as day.'*

The object emitted a noise that droned *'like an electric substation.'*

Jenny says that, according to the reports she's received, three minutes after the UFO flew over, two military jets very audibly followed its path. Closely followed by two more.

Since 24th March, rumours have circulated, mostly on the Internet, that an air-battle took place between the UFO and the Tornado's resulting in one of the jet's suffering the fate previously alluded to. The UFO then fled into the nether regions of space.

Following the exchange of letters between Under-Secretary of State Spellar and Mrs Jackson, Dave Clarke interviewed Alan Pattison of the MoD's 'UFO Desk' and his deputy, Squadron-Leader Tom Manning of the RAH.

The two men apparently confirmed *'the planes involved in the incident were two Tornado GRI Strike aircraft which were operating from the base at RAF Marham on a pre-booked and pre-planned low-level training exercise over the Peak District. These Tornado's were the type used on bombing missions in the Gulf War, and are not fighters that would be scrambled for an intercept.'*

'They also admitted that other Tornados and indeed Jaguar fighters from other NATO bases took part in the night-time sortie, which included night-time flying at a minimum 250 feet altitude over the mountains west of Sheffield.'

UFO researcher Max Burns has claimed that the triangular mystery object was tracked on radar at 9:55pm, that night by the Royal Signals Unit at the RAF Lynton-Upon-Ouse base, near York.

Clarke was quoted as saying; *'The MoD/RAF's current position is that the two sonic booms recorded at 21:32 and 22:06 by Edinburgh that night remain unexplained. They claim the low-flying exercise was over fifty minutes before these sonic events were recorded and say that they have no record of them at the time of the exercise.'*

Pattison and Manning have gone on record as saying; *'We did not chase a UFO, and there has been no cover-up. We responded to a request by the police to help search for a crashed aircraft and sent a helicopter from RAF Leconfield. We don't know what caused the sonic events, and the whole thing is a mystery to us, too'*

Clarke was also able to reveal that the air-and-ground search involved 200 police, fire and military reserve personnel, who covered an area of 40 square miles around Bolsterstone, South Yorkshire. The helicopter from RAF Leconfield was a Westland Sea King HAS Mk 6, which assisted the West Yorkshire police chopper in the search.

Peak District, Sheffield, South Yorkshire. Various Sources.

Brief Ufological Snippets

*** A various selection of traditional disc-shaped UFO's were said to have overflown Fortaleza, the largest city in Brazil's Ceara state, on at least three separate occasions last February.

Witnesses described a *'white object in the form of two inverted trapezoids with rounded edges and two blue lights,' 'a very big, spherical object,'* and a *'luminous white point that later became an object of discoidal form.'*

At least some of the UFO's were captured by TV video cameras, although we've yet to the footage.

17th February, 1998. Ceara State, Brazil. *'JOURNAL DO POVO'*

*** A glowing UFO was sighted in the skies over Bermuda on 7th March, this year.

The vast majority of the accounts came from the south side of the island, in Warwick, Smith's, Devonshire and Paget. One witness described the object as *'ared light travelling east.'*

Dozens of other witnesses elected to call the police to report mysterious lights hovering over the island between 7:45 and 8pm, local time. The local press included the account of one Jean Plath, who stated; *'I was walking down Middle Road when I saw a huge object, as big as a stadium arena light. At first it looked like a helicopter with a searchlight. I couldn't say how high up it was, but it wasn't that high. It was really white and had a shaft of light coming down.*

'Then it just evaporated. It turned into two hazy lights and took off into the air. Then something even stranger happened; I looked across the street and there was this sort of pink haze everywhere, like a mist.'

The sightings were later dismissed as being attributable to a missile test - the launch of two D-25 missiles from the Trident submarine *USS West Virginia*.

9th March, 1998. Bermuda. *'THE ROYAL GAZETTE'*

*** A couple of anomalous objects that hovered over the city of Leeds, here in the UK, were reportedly captured on video by a local resident named George Hickinson.

The actual sighting was said to have occurred on 2nd February, 1998, and as George related both on the BBC's *LOOK NORTH* (the programme apparently also screened the footage, which sadly, I missed - Rueful Ed), and in the pages of *'THE DAILY TELEGRAPH'*, the details of the incident...

'At about 5:35pm, I noticed a pair of bright white lights that were stationary in the west, while positioning together at 10 and 4 o' clock respectively. My initial thought was a banking plane with a light on each wing, and I watched them until three or four minutes later, when I decided that it was very strange that the lights appeared at the same altitude as my first observation.

I went to get my video camcorder and shot footage of the two lights until 5:40pm, when they disappeared towards York.'
2nd February, 1998. Leeds, Yorkshire. *'DAILY TELEGRAPH'*

*** The much 'saucer-haunted' state of Florida, USA, experienced yet another sighting of *'a large UFO, shaped like a letter L, ie, a broad V or boomerang shape, with bright white lights,'* flying over the small town of Narcoosee.

A somewhat unusual feature of this case was the assertion by an anchorman for Channel 9, an ABC affiliated TV station, that *'many people witnessed the UFO seen in the shape of an L, and one lady lost eleven chickens to unknown causes - they just died on the spot - as the UFO flew over her house.'*

Source: *'CHANNEL 9 NEWS,'* Florida, USA.

UFO's Rumoured To Be The Cause Of Argentinian City Blackout



In a bizarre echo of the famous 'Great Northeastern Blackout' of 1965, that left over 30 million Americans without electrical power during the evening rush hour, and widely rumoured to have been the direct result of UFO interference, comes the following account from Bariloche, in southern Argentina.

According to eyewitness reports, up to four UFO's were sighted immediately prior to not one, but two city-wide blackouts. Bariloche is a popular ski resort high up in the Andes, and is approximately 650 miles southwest of Buenos Aires. The initial electrical blackout occurred at 7:45pm on Sunday, April 12th, and lasted through to 10:11pm. A spokesman for the Cooperative Electricidade Bariloche (CEB) said the origin of the blackout that darkened a great part of the city was unknown, and remained very much a mystery at the time of going to press.

CBE linesman traced the source of the power shutdown to transmission lines leading to the Cipresales transformer substation. Power was briefly restored for four minutes. But at 10:15pm, Bariloche's lights went out again, and the city remained without power until 1:30am, 13th April.

Reports in the local press stated that; *'Gustavo and Beatriz Riveros saw strange lights hovering above a hill called Cerro Carbon in the eastern section of the city. Beatriz saw two lights "fuse together" over the Lions (a land feature on the hillside), just as the lights went out. Other witnesses reported strange illuminations over Lago Nahuel Huapi.'*

In the barrio San Francisco, a woman saw "a ball of red light" descending in a zig-zag pattern toward the large pedestrian stairway at Tiscornia.'

An anomalous, luminous disc was also seen at the intersection of Calle Fernando Beschete and Calle La Paz. In the barrio, Nicholas Lavalle, saw four luminous UFO's hovering overhead. Another witness to these objects described them as; *'a large spacecraft with three smaller ones that attached themselves to the larger one again and again.'*

Andrea Capararo told the Argentine News Agency 'TOLAM' that she and her sister Natalia and Carolina, had also seen the objects. *'At 11:30pm, we observed in the sky a kind of large plate with twinkling red, yellow, green and blue lights, and another object a little bit longer with just red and yellow lights.'*

'The luminous objects seemed permanently supported in the air for several minutes, then moved away toward the lake. The main saucer resembled a tomato bigger than an airplane, and was flying toward Cerro Carbon, east of the barrio.'

The newspaper went on to report that *'various inhabitants of the upper highland region of the city, told radio and TV reporters that they had first seen a formation of stars moving across the sky with twinkling, multi-coloured lights of the same combination as mentioned in Natalia's account. This was between 10:30 and 11:45pm on Sunday.'*

'The moving lights appeared to be attached to an elongated form and another form resembling a small bottle. The union of the two objects produced a "great star," like a great electrical discharge, and the lights of the city went out.'

14th April, 1998. Bariloche, Argentina. 'DIARIO POPULAR'

** Not to be outdone, Argentina's greatest rivals, Brazil, boasted the following report from the country's western Minas State on 13th March, this year.

Mauro Batista, 42, was driving a passenger bus on Brazil's Highway BR622 when he spotted a unusual light hovering in the sky.

'The strange object was flying at a distance of 1.2 miles from my vehicle,' Batista later told local reporters. 'And it had a very strong light at the back. It was as big as one half of a soccer ball.'

When he first sighted the object, Batista said; *'I was crossing the railroad bridge over the Rede Ferroviária, which is 15 kilometres (9 miles) away from Araxá, and followed us for about an hour and 45 minutes.'*

Whilst Batista drove the bus, his five passengers crowded the windows and kept the UFO in view. They later claimed it had an oblique shape and a strong light at its back.

13th March, 1998. Western Minas Gerais State, Brazil. 'O ESTADO DE MINAS'

*** Meanwhile, outside the small town of Rho, in Northern Italy, on the early morning of 8th March, 1998, a farmer reported sighting a UFO that was a *'white object in the form of an upside-down pear that hovered over a field of grain. I called for my wife and we both watched the object for over an hour.'*

Midway through the encounter, the couple reported that a hatch slid open, and an occupant emerged. *'The alien was a being about 60 to 80 centimetres high with two huge black eyes.'*

The occupant floated in the air close to the object for about ten minutes. It then re-entered the UFO, and the object suddenly rose vertically as it illuminated itself.'

8th March, 1998. Rho, Northern Italy. 'IL RESTO DEL CARLINO'

'Mystery Craft' Sighted Over The North Sea

According to reports published in the tabloid press, the RAF managed to track a UFO *'as big as a battleship'* flying over the British coastline at some undisclosed time and date (the account we have on file neglects to mention these important facts, being far more concerned with publicising the sensational details of the case).

The mysterious 'craft' was said to have been tracked flying at 17,000 mph over the North Sea. It then suddenly accelerated to 24,000 mph and vanished from sight across the dark waters of the Atlantic.

The Dutch Alforce was also said to have tracked the UFO, but the two F-16 fighters that were hastily scrambled to intercept the object were unable to keep pace with it.

RAF officials were said to have been completely baffled by the object, initially spotted by the Ministry Of Defence long-range listening station at the infamous (at least in ufological circles - See 'DON # 3 P: 39-40), Fylingdales moor in North Yorkshire.

'It was definitely under control, judging by the various manoeuvres executed,' an unnamed source was quoted as saying. *'It appeared to be triangular and was around the size of a battleship - about 900ft long.'*

Radar records of the UFO were, if this almost-too-good-to-be-true account is given even the merest ounce of credence, due to be presented to various scientists and military 'experts' from around the world, who were apparently intent upon examining how to exploit space for military purposes at a conference to be held at RAF College, Cranwell, Lincolnshire the June just gone by.

As not a single member of our humble publication was ever going to be invited to that conference, I can't tell you what, if anything, of import was said.

It has been rumoured however, that there are in existence other tapes of the same, or a similar UFO - all thought to have been made during the last two years. These tapes are currently being withheld because they reveal too much information about the radar base's scanning ability.

David Darbyshire, the *'DAILY MAIL'S'* Science Correspondent, at least showed a degree of healthy scepticism when he considered that the original 'craft' sighted over the mainland was likely to be some sort of top secret experimental aircraft, if it had any basis in reality whatsoever.

Another unnamed spokesman, this one purported to be from the highly-respected *'FORTEAN TIMES,'* was asked for their opinion on the 'revelations' and stated that;

'the vast majority of strange objects seen in the sky have a more down-to-earth explanation. But most UFO investigators would be very interested in seeing these tapes.'

The account concluded with its declaration that the latest theory doing the rounds amongst ufologists is the one that goes along the lines that the military monster is setting about deliberately releasing stories about UFO's as a smokescreen, and that what witnesses are really seeing are those experimental aircraft beloved of the 'Skunks Works' / 'Black Budget' spotters.

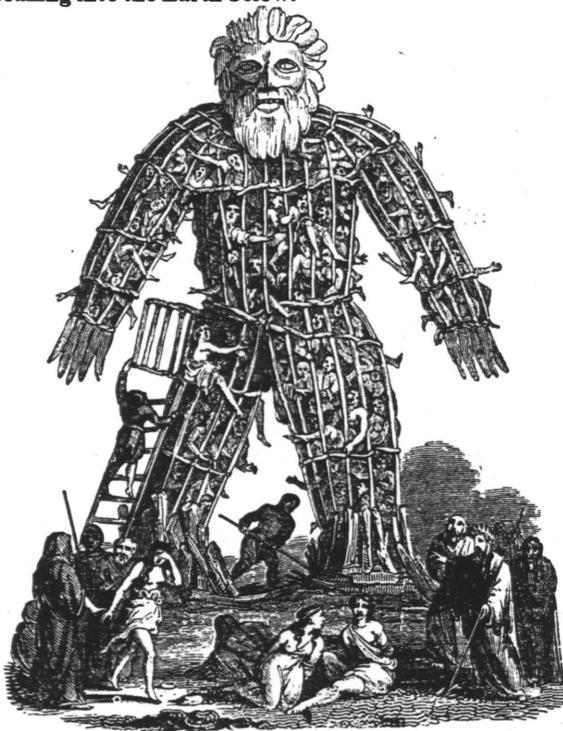
We leave it to you, the Reader to make up your own mind regarding this case

27th April, 1998. Coastline of Britain. 'DAILYMAIL'

MAKING SACRIFICES

Since the earliest times, individuals have dedicated the lives of others to God. Some dedicate their *own* lives in God's service, as monks or missionaries, but others less nobly offer the life of a hapless fellow creature on an altar. Gratitude for the gift of life is tempered with the thought of its withdrawal. God, whether seen as 'a Man On High' or as 'Mother Earth Below,' is believed to be pleased at the ritual return of one small life (perhaps of a bird), symbolising human gratitude for the Fount Of Life itself.

Seeds germinate in the earth, but could not do so without rain and sunshine. Some people who sacrifice animals believe, along with Old Testament Jews, that the smoke of a burnt offering rises to God On High. Many Africans, all of whom believe in 'God On High,' prefer to think of their sacrifices being received with pleasure in the form of blood soaking into the Earth below.



Animal and bird sacrifices to God are occasionally made in Britain, even today, usually by people with an African or Indian background. In Moslem countries, a sheep is killed, cooked and eaten by the men of each household at the Festival Of Id. This is not supposed to happen in England, at least not outside of a slaughterhouse.

My Indian neighbour, a Mr Anver, a hardworking, somewhat tubby man, who pours his earnings into the National Lottery, once greeted me with an unctuous smile and said; 'Happy day for me this day!' It is Id, and I go to my uncle at Willesden to kill a sheep!

Surprised, I congratulated him, and he went on his way chuckling. By 'Uncle' he meant 'male acquaintance.' The word 'cousin' has a similarly elastic use in English India. Presumably, sheep have their throats cut in the bedsits of Willesden. After all, Shetland Ponies have dwelt with Irish tinkers in council flats at White City.

Returned holidaymakers from Egypt have told me of their dismay at seeing, from the window of a skyscraper hotel, sheep being killed on a score of flat rooftops below. English white people have no need though, to feel superior to such

sacrifices. *Our* God is science, and how many millions of animals do we sacrifice yearly to our Moloch?

The sacrifice of Jesus, however, has more or less ended blood sacrifices to God in the West.

African religions, in the New World, could not survive the chaos of slavery, but did not entirely vanish. Some merged with Roman Catholicism, itself a melting pot of Christian and pre-Christian religion among peasant heirs to Greek and Roman traditions. The Negro double-religions of New Orleans, Haiti and Brazil are popularly known as Voodoo. Nearly all 'Voodoo' services in the New World are preceded by the killing of a goat, a dove or a fowl. Among English-speaking West Indians, the word 'Voodoo' is derogatory, and denotes 'Witchcraft.' Members of Haitian-style meeting houses in Jamaica therefore *never* refer to themselves as 'Voodoo-ists'

There was, until recently, a 'Voodoo' meeting house in North East London, run and attended by a few French-patois-speaking Haitians. White doves huddled together in a parrot cage by the church entrance, as if conscious of their fate. In Haiti alone is the word 'Voodoo' (or "Voudon") used unselfconsciously by the worshippers of European-African 'double-religion' Gods.

My use of the words 'double-religion' can be understood if you examine the holy statues for sale in a shop run by the North London church. Everywhere are figures of St. Expedite, the Roman Catholic saint in charge of getting things done quickly. A delayed giro or divorce can be speeded up through prayer to this Saint.

In Voodoo, every white Saint is an aspect of an African God, though not an exact West African equivalent. Expedite stands in for Gede, a God Of The Dead, who dwells in the 'Bush Of Ghosts,' or 'Deadland.' Voodoo worshippers are thus able to worship African Gods in an orthodox Roman Catholic Church, unknown to the white priest.

The converse is also true, and the white thrill-seeker for 'Voodoo' is often disconcerted to hear a Negro priest in a 'Voodoo-ish' church address the congregation as Christians, and urge them to pray for 'deliverance from Voodoo.'

Excited by the throb of drums and the killing of a fowl, the white Voodoo-seeker often confuses the double-God worship and its strange imagery, with evil 'Black Magic,' a completely different subject. Evil spells are no part of a Voodoo service, but are sometimes performed in private houses with the aid of a 'Witchdoctor' or 'Obeah Man' quite unconnected to 'Voodoo.'

In England, the advertising pages of 'THE VOICE' - *The Premier Black Newspaper* contain a few disguised adverts for Obeah Men. One I saw read 'Mr Obe Mahn, man of wisdom, grants requests.' (Incidentally, St. Expedite-Gede is also known as Baron Samedi, a fine gentleman in a top hat, who frequents graveyards).

There are comparatively few Brazillians in England, unless smart young men in London whom I think are Arabs are really Brazillians. I am sometimes surprised to see an 'Arab' wearing a crucifix or crossing himself, and I realise that he must be a South American. Mind you, the people we now call 'Arabs' would have been called 'Turks' in the days of the old Ottoman Empire.

Brazillian young men I have met in England grow furious if asked about rhumba music or Portuguese colonial architecture.

Everyone in Brazil listens to proper rock music and lives in modern skyscrapers! they say.

One Brazillian tradition which they most certainly do *not* mock however, is Macumba, a form of 'Voodoo' or half-African, half-Catholic religion. Macumba now seems fashionable and popular in many parts of Brazil, attracting

devotees of all races, not just Negroes. The Roman Catholic element in Macumba seems small. Fowls are killed to appease Gods, not Saints; a black God receives gifts of gin and a 'Children's God' demands gifts of sweets. My informants said that the 'Children's God' "possessed him" in shaking fits.

'Where I live, by the sea, the men and women dress up really smart and go down to the beach carrying jewellery and expensive gifts. We throw our valuables into the sea, as presents to the Water Queen, Tuan Juanita. Juanita is beautiful but cruel. She takes handsome young men, they drown and become her consorts. If she takes your gifts, you will be blessed, but if the sea washes them back, she has rejected you! Bad luck will then come to you for sure.'

In English-speaking West Africa, Tuan Juanita is called 'Mammy Water,' and has her own priests and priestesses. As far as I know, Macumba and Mammy Waterism are not practised in England, at least not in an organised fashion.



There are however, churches of Voodoo-ish overtones attended by British West Indians. Trinidadians and Jamaicans met in England for the first time, since each Caribbean island felt linked to its 'motherland,' not to its neighbour. Revival Zion Churches of Jamaica have merged with the Spiritual Baptist or 'Shouter' Churches of Trinidad to create many odd hybrids. Such churches present a spectrum of worship, though united by a style of music sometimes known as 'Yoruba Drumming,' and by the wearing of white or scarlet robes. At one end of the spectrum, these churches differ only superficially from Pentecostal fellowships where worshippers, black or white, dance and speak in tongues.

But at the other end of the spectrum, white robe church services grow closer to Haitian Voodoo ceremonies.

A bishop of one of these churches was deported from London to his native Guyana, when local people found that he sacrificed a chicken before each Sunday service. As with most deportees, he soon came back and opened his church again in a different building.

In search of this building, known to initiates as *'The Temple'*, I roamed through Shoreditch in the haunting dusk of a spring evening. Years before, in the '50's, my father had worked in this part of London, which then consisted of decayed but still beautiful Georgian squares, some with bandstands. Considered as 'slums' by both tenants and council housing officers, these chairs once formed a chain

of Georgiana stretching from Islington to the City. They have now all been broken up and replaced by tower blocks or university buildings. As I searched in vain for the Temple, I could trace the outlines of bygone squares in the haphazard links of tarmac playgrounds, still derelict sites covered in weeds and haphazard tower blocks with tiny shops or old pubs at their feet. Finally, I gave up, and strolled over to see the bright lights of a funfair held on a normally dismal wasteland.

Suddenly I noticed West Indian women in white robes and beadshawls rather furtively entering one of the few decrepit old buildings still standing. A sign outside declared the place to be a Temple. If this were not confirmation enough, I found an empty chicken coop full of feathers in a hallway decorated with murals of flags and scrolls with strange inscriptions. Evidently, I had missed the opening ceremony. Drums pattered behind a doorway, so I gave a timid knock.

Two women agreed with me expressions of great surprise and curiosity and sat me in an ante-room while they went to fetch the preacher. I could glimpse bright flags and candles through a gap in the curtains which separated me from the church proper. Normally white visitors to Negro churches are welcomed effusively and led straight to a seat of honour. Nevertheless, it was interesting enough in the ante-room, where I sat on a bench below shelves laden with candlesticks and Coptic crosses, the kind with a loop on top.

To my intense surprise, I saw the figures of well-known Hindu Gods in array among the candles and bottles of Holy Oil and Water. There was Ganesh, the elephant-headed God, sitting complacently between blue, doe-eyed Krishna and dancing Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth. I had heard that Indian Gods were sometimes involved in ostensibly Christian 'white robe' churches, but I had never seen them before in such a setting. These Gods became known to Negro worshippers in Trinidad, where thousands of Indians live side by side with black people. When slavery ended on that island, indentured labourers arrived from the East to take over the back-breaking work of cutting sugar cane. Just as I had been informed, the Indian Gods had to stay in the ante-room to enjoy their votive candles, so that if any Christian purist should object to their presence, the Bishop could claim their room as a 'seperate Temple.'

A big, jolly man, in white robes like everyone else, the Assistant Bishop soon appeared to find out what I wanted. When he heard me reel off the names of former members, learned from a Jamaican friend, he gave a glad cry, shook my hand, welcomed me effusively and led me straight to a seat of honour. The congregation smiled at me and I began to look around and feel at home.

All the drumming I had heard came from one battered old pair of red conga drums played by a determined headshawled woman with a deadpan expression. I had not missed very much of the service, which opened with hymns and prayers to *'the four Arch Angels.'* A door led to the 'Mourning Room,' a place of fasting, dancing and secret initiation. Members slipped in and out at times.

A song was raised, an eerie African solo wall, apparently wordless, punctuated with a chorus from one and all, *'No man can hbrder me!'*

This was followed by the mesmerising lilt of a calypso hymn, *'If I should die - on my pilgrim journey.'*

Then the Assistant Bishop loudly rang a headbell, mounted a magistrate-court-like pulpit that stood on its own some way from the main altar, and made an announcement.

'Brethren, when you are in mourning, everyone says; "I see a man!" What kind of man? There are many Angel and Archangel, also spirits of fire and spirits of water! You

must look and see what man it is, and tell the Church! If a man is on a donkey, you must lead the donkey!

So saying, he raised a small gold bugle to his lips, and tooted three times. A song followed, in which everybody joined;

*'The train is on the mainline,
The train is on the main!
With love in my heart,
I never will depart.
The train is on the mainline,
The train is on the main!'*

Mystified by this song, by my strange surroundings and by much of the service that followed, I looked around. I was in a cloister-like room, brightly whitewashed with arches around the wall, rather like a grotto. Decorations and candles on shelves and in niches everywhere reminded me of the shell grotto of Guernsey. Posts linked by chains marked the boundary of the altar, and in the centre of these stood a large, brightly polished ship's steering wheel, upright and ready for use. A metal anchor lay chained to a post nearby. Presumably, in the case of a second Biblical Flood, the Bishop would take the helm. Just now he was away in New York, and the bugle-playing Assistant Bishop was running the church.

Candelabras, with all candles burning, stood in ranks upon the altar table with its heavy draperies. Among the candles reposed glasses of water, vases of flowers, bottles of olive oil and glasses of brown, wine-like liquid that burned on low, night-like wicks. Large mirrors behind the candles reflected the scene. Arches and candles seemed to stretch away into a mirror of infinity. Olive oil is used for healing purposes in most West Indian churches. An old Pentecostal lady once told me I could use such oil at home as a cure, dabbed on the forehead, *'as long as you does pray over the oil first and consecrate it to God.'*

In one wall-niche, a candle glowed strangely inside a square-cut glass vase of green and purple. A painting of the Virgin Mary, of ethereal beauty, stood framed on a window ledge. Above it, a silver model of a crescent moon hung suspended. Halfway up a whitewashed column, a realistic model of a corn cob with a bite taken from the middle had been fixed, a human mask growing from the top of the cob.

Some folklorists liken the slain and risen Christ to John Barleycorn, a Corn God figure. Perhaps the Gospel-story does carry Corn-God overtones, but it would be an unusual Corn God that could preach the Sermon On The Mount.

Meanwhile, in the Temple, great excitement had broken out among a group of robed and headscarved women, led by a forceful lady called 'Mother Meek'. Her robe was edged in blue, with a picture of an anchor on the back, exactly like the anchor chained to a post near the altar.

'Messenger in the camp! Messenger in the camp!' she shouted urgently, rolling up her eyes in panic. Everyone grew agitated by the news. Someone became possessed and ran up and down rapidly talking in tongues and lurching into other people. Led by Mother Meek, the more self (as opposed to spirit) possessed hurriedly moved the chairs, bottles and candles to allow free passage to an invisible Being.

'Cut a path! Cut a path!' roared Mother Meek and the Assistant Bishop. A pathway between chairs was quickly made that led from the altar to the exit, and it appeared that a spirit was being ushered outside. After a few minutes, the crisis seemed to be over. Triumphant, the Assistant Bishop played the bugle. Chairs were returned to their places.

'Congratulations to Mother Meek for her speedy action, cutting a path so nice!' the Assistant Bishop beamed.

Mother Meek looked modest. In the hierarchy of such churches, I have found, a Mother is an important office. Great offence might be caused by calling a Mother 'Sister.' Ordinary church members, without titles, are Sisters or Brothers. Mother Meek would have received her new name along with her ornamented robe at a Robing Ceremony. At such ceremonies, titles are conferred on church members, the names of the appointments earlier *'pointed'* to the Bishop by Angels in the sanctity of the Mourning Room.

(I have seen a misspelled notice outside a Temple-like church that read "Robbing Ceremony Today." However, once inside, I found a *Robing Ceremony* in full swing, an imposing Mother holding a lit candelabra aloft for an hour without faltering, as members washed one another's feet in basins of warm water with marigold petals floating on top. That session produced one Watchman, two Peacemakers and one Missionary, all big stout women in white bandanas).

'Mother Meek is a Peacemaker,' the Assistant Bishop now announced. *'She hears your secrets, tucks them up in her apron and says nothing.'*

As if patrolling the Temple to keep out Evil Spirits, the Assistant Bishop took a metal rod from his belt and held it over his shoulder like a sentry rifle, occasionally pointing it here and there as if about to let fire at the Agents Of Satan. When a nervous woman was pushed forward for 'healing,' this rod came in handy, as the Assistant Bishop stroked her with it, and then with a doubled-up cape. Finally, Mother Meek gave the frightened woman a half cup of yellow liquid and said *'Drink!'*

Now and then, a shepherd's crook would be banged three times on the floor, followed by three blasts from a bugle and the ringing of a handbell.

'Sprinkle Holy Water! Ring the bell!' the Assistant Bishop demanded loudly, and a flustered young Sister rushed to oblige. However, she rang the bell only *once*. A few people tittered, and the Bishop looked amused in a kindly way.

'Well, well, well, we live and learn,' he remarked. *'You should always ring three times.'*

He took the handbell and rang it for her. I wondered how much of the Temple ritual was performed for its own sake and how much of it had a meaning known only to the Robed and Ready. Like the Romans before them, these 'Templers' added new Gods and ceremonies to their ritual as fast as they could find them.

A wheel, with brightly coloured flags fixed around its wide rim, hung suspended from the ceiling. The conga player struck up a rapid clip - clop beat and members began to dance and sing, rather jerkily. Whenever anyone came near the wheel, he or she spun it around energetically, making the flags wave.

'Roll, Jordan, Roll,' the people sang, a well-known spiritual, followed by a haunting, mournful song; **'WOUNDED HAND.'**

*'When His wounded hand touched mine,
When His wounded hand touched mine,
Jesus set me free,
To all eternity,
When His wounded hand touched mine.'*

A woman screamed, flailed her arms around, knocked over a chair and collapsed. Mother Meek, now in great humour, propped her up in a chair. One dancer carried a vase of flowers on her head, supported by one hand. Then a forceful-looking woman mounted the altar and began to preach. To my surprise, I noticed a fierce-looking Cockney man sitting on a bench near the entrance, as if not yet a full member. He looked like a lean, elderly embittered East End crook, and I wondered what he was doing there. Meanwhile, the sermon boomed out in a strong-opinionated Jamaican accent.

'Household of Faith, never let me hear you say a bad word about Judas! If people call you Judas, be happy! Judas was a kind old soul. All the disciples are in every one of you, controlling a part of your body! Yes, every piece o' your body is under the control of a disciple, maybe Peter, maybe James, maybe Judas. If you can learn which disciple controls which part, then you know which disciple you must pray to when you get a pain. The right disciple will hear your prayer and stop the pain right there on spot! Yes!'

'Now brethren, I am a person what never cook! I never cook! Why should I, when so many other people cook, and I can visit them and eat their food! Once I was at a Sister's house on a Good Friday and I asked for chicken.

"Chicken?" the people say. "You want eat chicken on a Friday? You must eat fish!" I don't like fish me, I like chicken, and I say so! "Chicken?" the people say, as if I is crazy. But the "eat fish" idea is an old custom that some people does have. Does anyone know how it started?

"Yes!" shouted the Cockney from his bench. "When the Romans under Diocletius persecuted Christians, and Christians had to hide in catacombs, they used to make a sign of a fish, scratched on a wall, to let the other believers know where to find them."

'Quite right! Quite right! Definitely! We shall now close in prayer.'

The service ended with a call from the Assistant Bishop for everyone to join hands in a great circle. This was not easily accomplished - in fact it was not accomplished at all, since each member also had to lay a reverent hand on the heart, dwelling place of the spirit. So the circle became somewhat fragmented.

Outside, the night air was riven by the shouts of revellers at the fair. I felt nervous walking in search of a bus stop, but luckily the Assistant Bishop offered me a seat in 'the church van.'

With several Robed Mothers, I squashed into the back of a battered van, the driver's scruffy dog poking his wet nose into our ears. Pleased to see us, the dog wagged its tail, happy that its lone vigil of van-guarding was over. Our chauffeur was none other than the Cockney, whose ribald humour in no way disconcerted the church members.

Safely delivered to a railway station, with many 'goodbyes,' I pondered on the strangeness of a church or Temple whose service had apparently begun with the death of a chicken and had ended on a sermon in which the rival merits of chicken and fish had been discussed.

Pentecostal West Indians associate such churches with 'Black Magic,' but I believe their fears to be groundless. Over-ritualistic the Temple may have been, but the only one harmed had been the chicken.

Roy Kerridge. London. 1998

STRANGE DAYS IN THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

The Animals Strike Back: Killer Crocs, Rampaging Apes, The Rail Rats And Ring-Swallowing Swans

An angler was foolish enough to dive into river to free a trapped fishing line, and was promptly devoured by an 18ft crocodile.

Denis Chacon, aged 24, was killed in the Tivives, on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, whilst on a fishing expedition

with friends. A spokesman for the Costa Rican Red Cross, was reported as saying; *'People tried to help him, but every time they got close the crocodile went mad and they had to run for their lives.'*

It wasn't exactly the first time a person had met their death at the hands (or rather the jaws) of a hungry reptile...In April, last year, an Israeli tourist was also killed by a crocodile on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast.

4th May, 1998. The Tivives, Costa Rica 'DAILY MAIL'

*** In Ito, Japan, a pack of wild apes have been terrorizing the seaside resort, attacking 30 people and sending eight of them to hospital suffering from bites inflicted by the animals.

The victims, mostly women, were attacked from behind, often in their own homes, by apes who bit them on the ankles, calves and backs. One woman, 62, was bitten as she vacuumed her living room; another was jumped on the street and pushed to the ground.

'I have lived for 77 years,' one elderly victim was moved to comment. 'And this is the first time that I've ever been attacked by an ape.'

Town officials have absolutely no idea why the usually peaceful apes came down from their normal habitat high in the mountains. They can only speculate that the extraordinarily harsh winter has made it very hard for them to find food, forcing them down into the town to seek sustenance amongst the refuse of humans.

But of course, that doesn't explain the aggressive attitude adopted by the apes, or why 28 of the 30 victims have been women between the ages of 40 and 80. At least five apes, each standing as high as 3 feet, have been spotted tangled in people's laundry and breaking into homes and going for the ceremonial fruit on the Buddhist altars many people have.

The town, south of Tokyo, has decided it's high time they fought back. At one school, an 'ape patrol' had taken to guarding the building with long sticks to swat away any simians that come near the children.

Loudspeakers, which normally warn the townspeople in the event of earthquakes, were instead broadcasting this message (that sounds for all the world like the trailer for some cheap and nasty - though nonetheless wonderful - '50's horror film; 'KONGA', for example); *'Apes are on the loose. If you go out, lock your door. Be cautious. Do not give them food.'*

The apes have shown a remarkable aptitude for opening doors and entering people's homes.

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Fukuyo Inaba, who was unlucky enough to be vacuuming when an ape sneaked up and bit her on the ankle. She felt the pain and saw what she thought was a dog running out of the door.

She pulled the sliding door shut and returned to work only to be confronted again. This time, she saw the attacker was an ape and that it had managed to pull the sliding door open again. When she shouted and began banging on a chair, the animal retreated.

15th February, 1998. Ito, Japan. 'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** In a tale that sounds almost apocryphal in its make-up, Helen Tanner not surprisingly assumed that she'd lost her solitaire diamond ring for ever after she'd been kind-heartedly feeding the birds at a nature reserve.

Amazingly however, it was recovered completely unharmed stuck splat in the middle of a piece of bread regurgitated by a swan nicknamed Psycho, because he's renowned for pecking at anything and everything that comes within his reach.

The gleaming ring was spotted by Rachel Danson, 15, as she took her turn to feed the swans together with her

she was worried about his coughing. It was a chance in a million that the ring would fly out in front of us. The sawn must have taken it when Helen fed him.'

Helen herself, was quick to add that; 'I'd given up hope of ever finding it.'

12th January, 1998. Preston, Lancashire. 'DAILY SLUR'

*** Mice that gnawed through a traffic light cables have been discovered to have been the cause for a series of crashes and rush-hour chaos at a busy junction of the M5 to South Gloucestershire.

8th March, 1998. Gloucestershire. 'DAILY MAIL'

*** And a pack of rats were blamed as being the culprits for the latest in a long line of train delays on the less-than-reliable 'Merseyrail' service.

The rodents were said to have gnawed their way right through a section of signalling cable that runs alongside the track of the City Centre Loop Line.

Ah well, I guess it makes a change from the pretty pathetic leaves on the track or the wrong kind of snow...but only just!!!

28th April, 1998. Liverpool. 'LIVERPOOLECHO'

Invasion Of The Starlings, The March Of The Beetles And The Swans That Fell to Earth

The skies above the village of Stamford on the banks of the River Derwent, were turned black by immense clouds of starlings last March.

The residents were forced to endure an aerial bombardment of bird droppings each time the unusually vast flocks went to roost, and their ears were assaulted by the collective beating of their wings, a sound that was said to resemble an enormous, whirring fan belt. The frequency and sheer velocity of the droppings was enough to send people running for cover and even a trip to the local newsagent's to get the paper had become a task fraught with hidden risks and dangers, and all too often it would result in a mad dash rush for cover.

Even the Battle of Stamford Bridge Memorial Stone (and no, this monument doesn't commemorate the days of the mid-to-late '70's, when Chelsea's infamous footy mobs ran amok at just about every home game, as the Editor knows all-too well from personal, bitter experience), recently revamped at a cost of £12,000, did not escape the attacks and was coated with the dirty-white droppings of the wheeling flock.

Local residents were so fed with the nuisance that they considered setting up speakers to play alarm calls of terrified starlings in the hope that would scare them away.

One woman, a veteran of such attacks, elected to write to the parish council saying that she believed the only solution was to send a bunch of exterminators in armed with shotguns. Other locals were not so convinced by this drastic method of control, not least because the worst of the mess was near to an old people's home, where the sound of gunfire would have been very distressing.

Most of the roosting took place in cypress trees, 40ft high., in gardens near the river bank, where the foot-path and the kissing-gates are inches deep in droppings.

The trees could not simply be felled however, because most were in the village conservation area and had preservation orders on them.

Vic Naylor, a parish councillor for over 40 years, was unable to record a bombardment quite like it; 'It's like a nightmare from a Hitchcock film. The accumulation of droppings will cause a health hazard before long.'

However, the British Trust For Ornithology defended the birds, saying that the starling has a boisterous charm and is known as 'the Teddy Boy of the bird world.'

Overall, starting numbers have declined in Britain through changes in agriculture, though there are still millions. Flocks reach such large numbers as a protective measure against predators.

David Lindo, spokesman for the trust, said flock sizes grew after other starlings from Scandinavia joined in. He said playing tapes of starling alarms might have limited effects because the birds merely got used to them.

'Birds realise they are fakes after a while and then simply fly back,' he said.

18th March, 1998. Stamford, England. SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

*** The residents of Devizes, Wiltshire, on the other hand, have had to contend with overweight swans falling from the skies....

In the space of a single weekend last January, no fewer than five of the giant birds were sent plummeting to the ground after a series of what can only be termed, abortive take-offs. The birds have gorged themselves on so much food, that their obesity has rendered them incapable of flight.

Wildlife rescue workers were run off their feet in attempting to deal with the aftermath of spectacular crash-landings around the town.

One swan reportedly stalled while trying to climb away from the lake and landed on the roof of a funeral directors' premises. Another smacked into the middle of a busy road narrowly missing speeding traffic.

A couple more had shoppers diving for cover as they plummeted into a Safeway's supermarket car park. 'It's just like the Blitz,' claimed one worried citizen. 'We've had birds coming down left, right and centre.'

But if the townspeople want to know who it is they should be levelling the blame at they need look no further than themselves. They are the ones, after all, who have supplied the swans that congregate on Crammer Lake, with all kinds of fattening foodstuffs.

'The swans are like jumbo jets,' states Sue Boyes Korris, co-founder of the Wiltshire Wildlife Hospital which was on-call 24 hours a day at the prospect of further 'Swan Falls.' 'They are okay once they get to a certain height, but getting there is the problem.'

'They manage to take off, but then they simply run out of steam and they are coming down around the town. They need a long runway because of the extra weight they pile on, but that takes them over shops and town centre car parks, Safeways's is right under their flight path. Although anything up to 30 swans visit the lake the main problem is the six permanent residents. During the Winter, all they do is eat. They are so fat you can guarantee they will crash-land when they try to take off. Their wing muscles don't get enough exercise and they just cannot fly properly.'

24th January, 1998. Devizes, Wiltshire. 'DAILY MAIL'

*** Meanwhile, in Nairobi, Kenya, a washerwoman hides her mottled face, a band leader nurses an ugly patch of blisters on his neck, and a small boy scratches his cheek raw. The Nairobi Fly got them.

The lurid orange-and-black beetle has captivated Kenyans. It's making appearances on TV and in newspapers. Victims compare wounds and remedies.

It doesn't sting or bite, but when its ant-like body is crushed, potent toxins spill onto the skin causing itching, a burning sensation and swelling. 'Oh, it hurts. It's so itchy,' complained Douglas Kamau, aged three, whose cheek was patched with scabs.

When the poison is smeared into the eye, the eye itself becomes swollen, red and oozy. Temporary blindness can ever occur.

The beetles - *Paederus crebrinipunctatus* and *Paederus sabaeus*, are always present in Kenya and much of the rest

of the world. But this year, the population has exploded in the East African nation because of unusually heavy rains brought by the El Nino weather phenomenon.

Previous outbreaks have been reported in every continent except North America.

The beetles breed in wet, rotting leaves and soil. Rainfall 500 per cent above normal that began last October, has greatly lengthened the breeding season.

Like most insects, the beetles are attracted by bright lights. When the lights are turned off, the beetles drop down - and occasionally hit a person who naturally takes a swat at the tickling intruder.

In death, the bug retaliates, releasing pederin, one of the most powerful animal toxins, which it produces to keep from being eaten. Then, 12 to 14 hours later, the skin flushes red and victims complain of symptoms from tickling to severe burning. In another day or two, pinhead-sized blisters erupt, filled with a yellowish fluid. As the blisters burst raw, red skin is exposed.

A week or two, the damaged skin peels off and begins to heal. Secondary infections can occur, especially if the victim scratches the irritated skin.

27th January, 1998. Nairobi, Kenya. 'ST LOUIS-POST DISPATCH'

*** An unidentified fish was believed to have attacked an eight-year-old boy in Hollywood, Florida, last December.

Local beaches were closed down after Samuel Lusnier suffered a gash stretching from his left knee to his ankle whilst he was swimming in a life-vest in 4-foot-deep water.

George Burgess, a shark expert, said that some people might assume a shark was to blame, 'but there are other things conceivably that could have inflicted the wound; barracuda, bluefish, moray eels.'

27th December, 1997. Hollywood, Florida. 'ST-LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

CATS WITH AN ATTITUDE

A couple of postmen have been prevented from delivering the daily post at separate addresses by angry cats intent upon jealously guarding their territory.

In the first instance, a Burmese cat called Rummy, 'owned' by 40-year-old Kathy Simmonds, was held to be responsible for putting the frighteners on the local postman, which has resulted in a note from the Royal Mail stating that they were 'unable to deliver - Threatened by cat'

All letters and parcels have since been left at Kathy's next-door neighbour's, although Kathy herself remains astonished at the accusations levelled at her 'little angel.'

'My son David, aged 2, chases him all over the house, and there is never a problem.

'Rummy is a territorial cat and he will spit at people but he has never attacked anyone. The person who delivers the local paper just walks right past him. Maybe he doesn't like Royal Mail uniforms. When I received the note from the Royal Mail, I couldn't believe what I was reading. I couldn't help having a chuckle. Rummy's not like some of those huge tom cats you see. His jaws aren't even big enough to fit around a postal worker's ankle.

A spokesman for the Royal Mail however, said it had acted to protect the safety of the post woman.

'The cat was clawing her when she was putting the mail through the letter-box which made it very difficult to deliver the mail. Our first priority has to be the safety of our postpeople.'

9th April, 1998. Bognor Regis, West Sussex. 'DAILY EXPRESS'

*** And earlier in the year, a postman was forced to take a similar course of action when he was the victim of an unprovoked attack by a black and white cat called Snoopy. The first time he encountered the animal, it hung onto his trouser leg with its claws as he raced down the street like the Devil was at his heels. On another occasion, Snoopy ambushed him from behind a fir tree.

And once, as in the previous case, he found the cat was waiting when he pushed his hand through the letter-box and received a painful scratch that drew blood on his hand.

The postman in question, Colin Summerfield, decided enough was enough and refused point blank to deliver to the house whilst the cat was around. With the full backing of his bosses, he took the mail to the neighbour's address in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

Also as in the previous case, the Royal Mail sent a letter, via next door of course, to Snoopy's owner, 51-year-old grandmother Pamela Perham. It said that she would have to keep her pet under control if she wanted mail delivering to her home again.

Like Mrs Simmonds, Pamela is baffled by her 14-year-old pet's antagonism towards the postman, although she remains sympathetic to his plight.

'I once saw Snoopy stalk across the lawn and hide in waiting in my front garden as the postman - who is about 5ft 4ins - strolled up the drive. Then she pounced. I can't understand it. She is just a family cat who has never done anything before. Perhaps she doesn't like it because the mail blocks up her cat-flap.'

Daughter-in-law Liz Perham, 27, was also a witness to the attacks.

'One day I saw him running across the grass shouting; "Get off, Get off." He was scared of the cat. I don't think it's pathetic. I think she really hurts him.'

A Royal Mail spokesman was wheeled out again to voice his opinion that 'our postman has been hurt quite badly. There is no reason why anybody should be attacked daily just because they are delivering mail.

'A cat can do just as much damage as a dog. They have teeth as well.'

31st January, 1998. High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. 'DAILY MAIL'

*** And finally, the terror of Jack The Moggie, was said to have been stalking the winding roads of a quiet Lancashire village earlier this year.

The cat had been responsible for a number of attacks upon unsuspecting residents, forcing the police to get involved. They visited the 'owners' and suggested that it might be a good idea to keep Jack indoors as much as possible, though of course, that's easier said than done where cats are concerned.

Numbered amongst Jack's victims in the village of Tockholes near Blackburn, is Stephen Treadwell. The 41-year-old father-of-two was outside his home when the cat appeared snarling and hissing at that which he considered to be his 'prey.'

Stephen immediately dashed inside his house and slammed the door shut before Jack had a chance to sink his claws into his thigh.

There have been complaints of at least two other 'Jack Attacks' in the village as well as several on regulars at a nearby pub; The Victoria.

Irene Carter, the chef, said that they were thinking of putting up a sign saying 'Beware Of The Cat.'

'He's better than any guard dog,' she was quoted as saying. But Jack's 'owners' Pat and Geoff Cook, insist that their five-year-old cat is innocent. Pet-shop owner Pat, 50, was moved to comment; 'The police came round and suggested I tie Jack up on a length of washing line. But he's a friendly cat. He's never even scratched me.'

They're out to get him. Well, over my dead body.

'I'm not having some toffee-nosed townies getting the better of Jack and me. He's innocent.'

8th February, 1998. Tockholes, near Blackburn 'SUNDAY PEOPLE'

*** A woman aged 91 was forced to flee from her home when it was set alight by, of all the creature's on this increasingly insane planet, a tortoise.

The pet, called Tony, managed to crawl under an electric fire in a bid to keep warm. Somehow or other, the fire toppled over and started a blaze in Alice Viney's living room.

Luckily, she was rescued by her daughter Jean, and Tony, thought to be about 50 years old, was saved from the resultant inferno by a fireman.

Alice, who hails from Portsmouth, was moved to comment; *'He's a little rogue. We were very lucky. He always goes for warmth. When I sit in the chair he sits by my feet just like a cat.'*

'He gets into trouble now and then. He once fell off a balcony and survived.'

25th March, 1998. Portsmouth, Hampshire. 'DAILY MAIL'

*** And a group of American hillbillies, straight out of *'DELIVERANCE'*, are believed to have died after they feasted upon a yummy scrummy diet of squirrel brains.

Five patients who developed deadly Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in Western Kentucky, were said by local doctors to have had a history of cooking the (alleged, being a confirmed vegetarian, I really wouldn't know - Ed) delicacy.

The three men and two women, aged from 56 to 78, scrambled the brains with eggs or added them to stews.

CJD or Mad Cow Disease, is already known to affect cattle and cats, but this is the first time it has been found in squirrels.

A research team at Kentucky University also discovered a link between stewed squirrel and Parkinson's Disease.

The leader, Dr Joseph Berger, warned; *'More studies are needed, but our advice in the meantime must be; think twice before scrambling your rodent.'*

28th August, 1997. Kentucky, USA. 'LIVERPOOLECHO'

ANIMALS TO THE RESCUE

And here, once more, we provide proof that not *all* animals are engaged upon a revolt (perfectly understandable though that would be) against all of mankind....

Consider if you will the case of one Richard Stone, 58, who managed to get himself stuck under his van, and then had the vehicle roll over him in a deserted lane, pinning his leg beneath a wheel.

Richard's anguished cries for help went unheeded, but at a caravan park 100 yards away, a parrot called Sonny was listening in his aviary.

Suddenly park workers Richard Herd, 37, and Jeremy Burstow, 24, heard the bird squawking: *'Help, Help.'*

Richard said; *'At first we thought someone was winding Sonny up. But as soon as we got to him he stopped making a noise. In the distance we could hear a man's voice shouting, so we rushed out to see what was going on.'*

Meanwhile, Mr Stone lay helpless under the Sherpa van which had trundled back on top of him as he tried to push it through his allotment gate near Cheddar, Somerset.

'I thought I was going to be stuck there all night long,' he said. *'No one seemed to hear me.'*

Finally however, Richard Herd and Jeremy arrived on the scene, and very nearly managed to run over the prone man. Fortunately, thanks to the ground being soft, he escaped with nothing more serious than a bruised ankle.

Richard, eternally grateful to the Macaw, later bought him a big bunch of grapes and was moved to say; *'Sonny was great. What would I have done without him?'*

The bird's owner, caravan park manager Che Moore, 23, said; *'He's quite shy and usually mimics people only when they have gone.'*

Bristol Zoo curator Duncan Bolton said; *'If a parrot hears a call it will try to answer. It treated the cries for help as another parrot calling and duly responded.'*

19th February, 1998. Cheddar, Somerset. 'SUNDAY MANC'

*** Edwina Carroll was asleep in bed one night when a neighbour set fire the flat upstairs. She owes her life to her German Dachshund named Mitzie, who woke her.

'On the night of the fire I was in a deep sleep because I'd taken some painkillers for my bad back.'

'Mitzie had been sleeping on the bed with me but in the middle of the night she woke up and went out into the living room. At about 1:30 am, she came back into my room and jumped onto the bed. I was so comatose that I was oblivious to her.'

'But then she started flopping her ears around so that they were slapping against my cheek. I could feel the slap but I was still half asleep. I responded by trying to pull Mitzie against me for a cuddle.'

'But instead of curling up next to me, as she usually does, she pulled away and jumped on top of me. She began frantically licking my face and barking.'

'I opened my eyes and said; "Whatever is the matter, Mitzie?" I knew something was wrong because it wasn't her normal bark. There seemed to be a note of panic in it. Mitzie then leaped off the bed and started scuttling back and forth between the living room and the bedroom. Now fully awake, I went into the living room and looked out of the window. There was a man outside in the garden and I thought it was a burglar trying to break in.'

'But then this stranger shouted to me that there was a fire, flames and smoke were billowing from the flat upstairs and to get out as quickly as I could.'

'It was then that I noticed the smoke pouring into the flat from under the front door, so I just gathered Mitzie in my arms and ran into the street.'

'Both Mitzie and I suffered from the effects of breathing smoke, and the police told me that if I'd been in the flat much longer, I would never have got out alive.'

'It's quite simple; if it hadn't been for Mitzie, I wouldn't be here today. I owe her my life.'

*** Edna Henry, 81, was terrified that she would die when she collapsed on her bed. She was alone in the house and powerless to call for help. But Edna, from Dartford, Kent, was saved after her devoted cat Ben raised the alarm....

'Just after I had returned home one Friday afternoon, I went upstairs to change into something cool.'

'It was quite hot that day. I had a throat complaint and I wasn't feeling myself. Suddenly, I collapsed and found that I was paralysed from the throat down.'

'I couldn't move a muscle or make a sound. I was terrified because I was alone in the house and nobody would have an inkling that I was in trouble.'

'I'd collapsed at 2:30pm. Soon afterwards I heard a wailing sound. At first I thought it was a child, but then I realised it was my cat, Ben.'

He'd seen me lying on the bed and went outside the house, sat down and started miaowing at the top of his voice.

'Ben's the sort of cat who prefers to stay indoors. If he goes out, he's soon back in the warm. But this time he stayed out all night. He didn't stop screeching for a minute - the poor thing must have been hoarse by the end of it.

'I was lying on the bed the whole time listening to him. I learned afterwards that he woke up nearly all the neighbours.

Finally, at 7am the next day, one neighbour got so annoyed that she came round to see what was going on. When she saw poor Ben sitting there shivering, she realised something was wrong and went across the road to find another neighbour who has a spare key to my house.

Minutes later I heard the key turning in the lock and to my relief, they come upstairs and found me. I stayed in hospital for several weeks. My illness mystified the doctors, and I was paralysed for several days. I eventually recovered though, and I was allowed home.

'While I was in hospital I told one of the nurses how Ben had saved me and she was amazed. She told me I should enter him in a competition for bravery and I did...He won a year's supply of catfood for his loyalty.

'He's an astute and intelligent cat. He definitely sensed something was wrong that day and did everything he could to help me. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here today.'

*** Georgina Swainbank-Hill was out riding her horse Troy, when a canal bank suddenly gave way. The 29-year-old mother of two was in very real danger of drowning until she was rescued by her beloved horse. Georgie takes up the story...



'My mother Gloria and I had been out riding for about six miles when the weather turned. Out of the blue it went from bright sunshine to halstones.

I'd had this idea to ride along the canal bank to visit a friend, but we'd only gone a hundred yards when the bank suddenly gave way and Troy slipped. A split second later we were tumbling into the canal. My mother told me that I whacked my head on the canal bank on the other side. It must have been lined with corrugated iron because my riding hat split.

'I was semi-conscious and floating face down with my head underwater. I'm not a strong swimmer and I didn't stand a chance. The water was icy-cold and pitch black. I thought I was going to die.

'The horse my mother was riding started rearing up. My mother managed to get control of him and galloped upstream to where a man was on board a barge. He ran over and the pair of them watched Troy rescue me.

Troy, who was up to his neck in water, put his head under the surface beneath me. I felt something under my stomach, but didn't think for a minute it was Troy. The next thing I knew, I was being lifted out of the water onto the bank.

'Any horse person will tell you that horses simply don't put their heads underwater for the pleasure of it. It's totally out of character.

What was even more remarkable however, was the calm way in which Troy dealt with the situation - 99.9 per cent of horses would thrash about in panic if they fell into the canal.

'If Troy had done that, I would have been kicked to death. As it was, according to my mother, he stood stock-still and made only the slightest movement with his head, scouring the water for any sign of me. Once he spotted me he sprang into action.

'My mother says he had that anguished look of a child who has lost his mother and is desperately trying to find her.

'As I got onto the canal bank an ambulance arrived and I was given first aid. It was a very lucky escape. Troy was lucky, too. He scraped his inner thigh and his right eye.

'I owe my life to Troy. I've only had him a few years, but he'll stay with me until the day he dies.

(ALL ABOVE REPORTS: 28th January, 1998. 'DAILY MAIL')

*** Risking all nine of her lives, Dolores, a 1-year-old Abyssinian cat, alerted Kyle Leibach that his apartment was on fire by jumping on his head and scratching his face. The apartment was gutted.

The former stray inhaled smoke during the fire and was revived by firefighters. She suffered from a lung infection for weeks afterward. Dolores later was awarded a bravery certificate from the American Humane Association. Leibach was quoted as saying;

'I will always be thankful to her because she saved my life. I get her whatever the most expensive cat food is at the store.'

23rd August, 1998. Pittsburgh, USA. 'ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** When dog owner Ronnie Lawless, 43, plunged down an embankment and was forced to lie in agony with a badly twisted back, Barney was quick to spring back home to raise the alarm by barking loud and long....Ronnie's partner, Ann Downey, immediately realised something was drastically wrong and followed Barney back to the isolated spot in Prenton, Birkenhead on Merseyside.

Ann later said; *'Barney did the full LASSIE bit, stopping every so often so that I could catch up.'*

14th January, 1998. Prenton, Birkenhead, Merseyside. 'LIVERPOOL ECHO'

*** A dog called Ben made three trips into a burning house to save a trio of young children trapped inside....

Tragically however, the courageous German Shepherd was killed when he was run over by, of all things, a fire engine racing to the scene.

10th November, 1997. Stockholm, Sweden. 'DAILY MANC'

*** And perhaps the saddest story of all concerns a mongrel named Lupo, who has had a roadside tent erected for him....He refuses to budge an inch from the very spot

where his 'owner' was killed in a car crash over ten years ago.

27th July, 1997. Rome, Italy. 'DAILY EXPRESS'

An (ahem) Spot Of Trouble With The Old Dog'n' Bone

A pair of dogs not quite so much in their 'owners' good books includes one that goes by the highly - appropriate name of Bimbo...She somehow managed to answer the phone at Unni Anderson's home in Oslo, and sparked a 999 alert which resulted in the sending of an ambulance, the police and the fire brigade....

The caller thought that the incoherent grunts were emanating from Anderson.

12th October, 1997. Oslo, Finland. 'DAILY SLUR'

*** Meanwhile, closer to home in London, a baffled woman who lost a mobile phone dialled the number and heard it clearly ringing inside her boyfriend's dog...

Rachel Murray, 27, had left the phone under her Christmas tree as a gift for the said boyfriend, but Tony Dangerfield's bloodhound, Charlie, had crept into the room and wolfed down the mobile phone leaving behind nothing but a pile of torn paper.

After a fruitless search for the phone, Murray obtained the number from the telephone company, dialled and heard muffled ringing from sleeping Charlie's stomach.

'At first I thought Charlie was lying on the phone - then I realised where it was,' she said. The dog was rushed to a vet's, who advised Murray and Dangerfield to let nature take its course.

Twenty four hours later, the phone duly emerged, still in working order, if a little smelly....

3rd January, 1998. London. 'THE SCUM'

IDEFINABLE WEIRDNESS

Thunder From The Stars

A mysterious boom, that sounded for all the world like an explosion rending the skies above the Ozarks, USA, last December (1997), was reported from Rogersville, Missouri.

On 17th December, a huge aerial 'booming' jolted the town, and according to news accounts on KYTV, the blast 'rattled windows and blew open storm doors,' in the small community of approximately 995 people.

The TV report also made mention of a USAF spokesman, who was dutifully wheeled out to deny that the mysterious blast was a sonic boom caused by low-flying, supersonic jet interceptors.

Meanwhile, just two months later, the focus of attention turned to Mobile, Alabama, USA, where there were said to have been similar aerial boomings heard by many of the residents of that county on the night of 5th February, 1998.

The local police station was flooded with calls, and most of the complaints seemed to emanate from the region around Theodore, Alabama, on Highway 59, about 10 miles south of Mobile.

According to the sherrif's department, a deputy at the substation in the area literally 'saw the walls shake when a boom sounded. No one was injured and no major damage was reported.'

Meteorologists at the National Weather Service had no explanation for the noises. The U.S. Geological Survey's Earthquake Centre in Boulder, Colorado, said that the

sound was caused by any natural earthquake, or at least that nothing had been recorded on their seismic instruments.

A spokesman for the USAF, said that the sonic booms may have been caused by their fighters 'travelling from Texas to Florida, and that under certain weather conditions' such a boom may well be carried long distances over water.

However, as researchers have been quick to point out, Mobile is located at the head of Mobile Bay, approximately 170 miles south of Montgomery, the state capital, and the Bay is thirty miles long. That sure is a long way for a sonic boom to travel from the Gulf of Mexico.

7th February, 1998. Mobile, Alabama, USA. 'USA TODAY'

THE MAN WITH THREE TONGUES

A chinese farmer with three tongues had to undergo surgery to rectify the abnormality, last March.

Xiang Shihua, 32, from the south-western Sichuan province, can now for the first time in ages eat and speak normally. He was born with just the one tongue, but a second smaller one appeared when he was five, followed quickly by a third.

The longest tongue was 14 inches long, while the other two were 9 inches and 3.6 inches and of varying widths and thicknesses.

9th March, 1998. Sichuan Province, China. 'LIVERPOOL ECHO'

THE KILLER NOISE

Whales and dolphins are apparently being driven to death by noise, according to a report in 'NATURE' magazine.

The cacophony caused by a combination of ships, military sonar, oil drilling and exploration is drowning out their own, built-in sonar system they use for communication and finding food.

Military tests may have been the cause of twelve whales beaching themselves on the west coast of Greece in 1996.

5th August, 1998. Greece. 'DAILY MAIL'

Unidentified 'Gloop' Falls On Pennsylvania Home

On Sunday afternoon, January 18th, 1998, hundreds of gallons of a weird brown, wax-like substance were said to have fallen on the home of the Snell family in Paradise Township, not far from York, Pennsylvania.

'A mysterious brown substance fell from the sky...It splattered the house, the roof, the windows, the barn, the stone driveway.

'Police can't figure out what it is. Neither can anyone else. It's the colour of mud but it's not grainy. An insurance adjuster has ordered tests on the substance.'

Rose Snell discovered the strange liquid when she returned home at 7:30pm.

'It's mystifying,' Snell kept saying as she walked around the house. She said she noticed the brown splash on her door as she entered the house.

'Great,' she thought. 'I bet those boys are having a mud battle.'

Her eighteen-year-old son, Marc, had been hanging out with several friends of his during the day. She was prepared to have a few words with him when he walked in the door.

But his comment took her by surprise. 'What's going on here?' Marc asked.

Marc said he returned home about 6pm. He, too, noticed the strange brown splashes on the door.

Marc also found similar brown splashes on his car. He tried to wash them his windshield with cleaning fluid. They were hard to remove.

He said; 'Mom, it's like paste or wax on there.'

The Snells called the Northern York County Regional Police, who duly dispatched a cruiser to the premises. When the trooper switched on his heavy-duty flashlight, that's when he realised there were brown splashes covering everything on her property.

'It appears as though it came from the sky,' Northern Regional Police Lt. Mark Bentzel said.

21st January, 1998. Paradise Township, Pennsylvania, USA. 'PENNSYLVANIA DAILY RECORD.'

The Feathered Dinosaurs

Two newly-discovered Dinosaurs, which might well be early ancestors of birds, developed feathers for warmth, rather than flight, scientists are now speculating.

The well-preserved fossil-skeleton of the chicken-sized biped Dinosaur Sinosauroptryx, which lived about 140 million years ago, was recently found in Liaoning, north-eastern China.

They had pointed heads, long tails, and three-fingered hands dominated by a large, clawed first finger which may have been used to kill prey. One of the creatures also contained the remains of its last meal - a lizard - and a pair of unlaidd eggs.

But scientists, led by Pei-Ji Chen, said that the most interesting discovery was the quill-like 'integumentary structures' covering both specimens.

The vertical fibres ran from the base of the head and along the back and tail. They were thought to be the remains of feathers, or feather-like structures, but were clearly not designed for flight.

The density, distribution and relatively short lengths of the structures suggested that they were not used for display purposes either.

But it is possible the 'feathers' were used for insulation, helping the Dinosaur to stop losing body heat. This would suggest that they were warm-blooded.

The researchers said; 'There are no structures showing the fundamental morphological features of modern day bird feathers, but they could be previously unidentified protofeathers which are not as complex as either down feathers or even the hair-like figures of secondarily flightless birds.'

The evidence from Sinosauroptryx indicated that feathers evolved from simpler, branched structures that appeared in non-flying Dinosaurs, possibly as a means of insulation.

8th January, 1998. Liaoning, North-Eastern China. 'LIVERPOOL ECHO'

The Mysterious Killer Farm Disease

A strange disease has, according to the less-than-reliable Sunday press, led to the deaths of nearly 200 farm animals in a case which is said to have completely baffled scientists. Farmers Andy Doris Sheehy have been witness to cows, horses and sheep dying from the unidentified illness on their land in Limerick, Ireland.

The couple's daughter Leianne, was quoted as saying; 'It can't be blamed on our management.

'We've farmed the land in the Seventies and Eighties with no problems, but now the losses are colossal.

'It's a very rare disease - so new, that no one knows a lot about it.' The illness produces sores on the animals' skin, body and gut, affecting the immune system.

Doris said; 'Death here has become a way of life. I can walk around the land now and if something is going to die you can pick it out.'

Environmental Protection Agency spokesman Paul Toner said; 'We are testing but have so far found no signs of pollution.'

18th January, 1998. Limerick, Ireland. 'SUNDAY PEOPLE'

The Creeping Flesh

A bacteria that in some forms eats the flesh of humans has reportedly killed at least 18 people in the state of Texas, according to local health officials.

Prior to that, doctors were quick to point out that there had been no other cases in the wake of an outbreak of the godawful disease in St. Jerome, Quebec, Canada, that killed one victim and left another seriously ill.

Hospital officials claimed it was merely a coincidence that two of a hospitals maternity patients fell prey to the fast-spreading disease.

They did admit however, that doctors have been seeing more cases of the disease in recent years, and 'experts' believe that it is part of a cycle.

Witness the Texas cases included below....



They said that 89 cases of group A streptococcus have been reported in the state since last December 1st, most around Houston and Austin. One of the victims was a 5-year-old boy from Houston. Usually, the bacteria kills seven people a year in the state, officials said. The bacteria is the same that causes strep throat and is treatable with antibiotics if caught in time. The cause of the outbreak was not known, but doctors and nurses statewide have since been alerted. So, that's okay then.

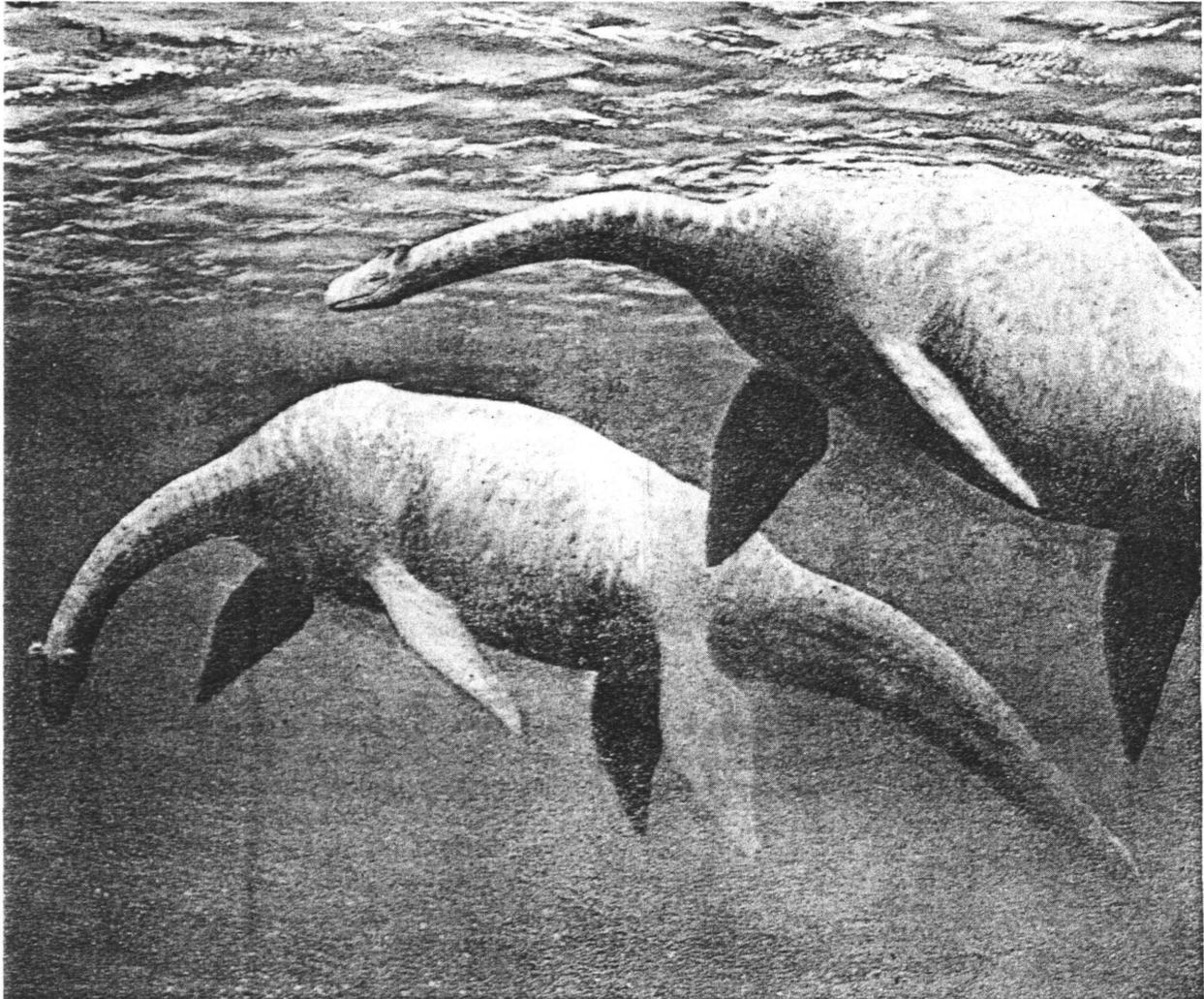
5th March, 1998. Houston/Austin, Texas. 'USA TODAY.'

Dark Visions

To The Ends Of The Earth: Loch Ness Special Channel Four: Screened: 27th April, 1998.

This year's entry into the growing stream of documentary's featuring Scotland's most elusive celebrity, was every bit as fascinating as its countless predecessors, despite the fact that it had little new to say on the evidence for or against the existence of an unknown creature lurking in the peat-stained depths of Loch Ness. For this reviewer at least however, the duration of its running time helped satisfy the need for magic in an increasingly dull world.

The program opens with a mixture of the familiar (the once-authentic-then discredited-now-considered-genuine...*maybe* 'Surgeon's Photograph,' Tim Dinsdale's cine film, several snippets of eye-witness accounts) and the breathtakingly awe-inspiring (the mist-shrouded mountains, the dappled shade of summer woods, the sunlight glittering on the water's surface)...



A minute or so in, and we're introduced to the latest scientific team who've arrived at the Loch, equipped with a combination of high-tech equipment and even higher hopes. Under the leadership of Robert Rines (a former member of the Academy Of Applied Science, whose underwater photographs of 1972 and 1975 are the subject of intense controversy amongst believers and sceptics alike), we see the team arriving at Urquhart Bay - the deepest part of the Loch, and the site of the ruined castle - a silent sentinel, brooding over all.

Rob, resplendent in a baseball cap, ray-bans and an all-weather jacket, is we are told, '*a man of many accomplishments...A respected lawyer, and the founder of a law school. He was trained in science and engineering, and helped in the development of both radar and sonar. But his true passion is a pursuit that few scientists take seriously: the hunt for the Loch Ness Monster.*'

Now seated before a large bay window overlooking Temple Pier, Rob waxes lyrical on the benefits of keeping an open mind: '*You don't have ideas if you don't have adventure. If you don't have an open mind you'll never make a discovery. I think there's a misconception that science has to be something rigid, something sponsored by NASA, or the government, or millions of dollars. You know, a scientist is a scientist, I don't care where you put him!*'

Back on the surface of the Loch itself, we meet up with Charles Wyckoff, Rob's long-time partner in the search. He's a 'photographic innovator' with over 60 patents to his name, and is held in the highest regard, capturing as he did, the first pictures of an atomic bomb explosion and the Apollo Moon landings. Initially, Charles was a confirmed sceptic; '*At first I said it was a myth, then I became an agnostic, and pretty soon, I said; "Gee, you know, there's more to it than that."*'

guess there's something down there, and I got really intrigued. And the more instrumentation I cooked up, the more intrigued I became.'

Over a clever montage of eyewitness testimony (featuring, amongst others, Father Gregory, Alex Campbell and the ubiquitous Tim Dinsdale) and various sketches of what the creature is said to look like, Rob uses his skills as a lawyer to assess the veracity of the accounts related to him personally; *'I just got the strange feeling that everyone wasn't a liar. Everyone wasn't a fool. That there was something there.'*

This hunch, intuition, call it what you will, was crystallised into hard fact when, together with his wife, Carol, he underwent an experience that would haunt him for the rest of his life. In the Summer of 1972, the couple were walking in the fields below Borium Farm, on the opposite side of the bay from Temple Pier, when they looked down at the huge expanse of slate-grey water and saw *'a big greyish hump. It went out against the wind currents into the mouth of Urquhart Bay, it turned around and came back right in front of us and... (here he utters a noise that can only be described as a 'schwunnpp')... it sank.'*

The sighting of an unknown something was enough to inspire Rob to drum up a team of 'experts' intent upon tracking down the object of mystery.

Using sonar and underwater photography, the team were successful in capturing a definite image on film reflected in the harsh glare of a submerged strobe light. Rob takes up the story...

'Early on that morning about one o' clock, (1:45 am on August 8th, 1972, according to Peter Davies's report to the now sadly defunct Loch Ness Investigation Bureau), we began to see the salmon jumping all over Urquhart Bay. The rivers were dry, so they couldn't go up to spawn. We could see it on the sonar too...fish moving. And then this BIIIGGG target came in on the sonar' (we are shown the actual print-out of a series of pin-prick like objects - the salmon, followed by a much more substantial indistinct image). 'And we were praying it was just the right distance that the Edgerton camera could pick up something... We were lucky.'

The narrator tells us that for thousands of frames there was nothing to see save for a void of pitch-black water, but all of a sudden, there appeared three frames depicting a barely discernible object. The pictures each underwent computer enhancement at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and were later displayed for both 'expert' and public consumption. The now famous, and oft-reproduced 'Flipper Photograph' is given another airing. Rob is convinced that this evidence is pretty much incontrovertible as proof of the existence of 'Nessie.'

'We got at least three frames, corroborated by similar images on the sonar target. That was a thrill.'

Excited by the prospect of imminent success in solving the mystery once and for all, Rines returned to the Loch in the years following the 'Flipper' pictures and obtained several more sonar contacts as well as those other much-discussed, much-debated underwater pictures of a 'gargoyle-like head and neck' snapped in 1975.

These photographs were instrumental in winning the conversion of the highly-repsected naturalist Sir Peter Scott...

A contemporary interview with Sir Peter is shown to outline the reasons for voicing his belief in the reality of the 'monster': *'What I'm saying is that there is a body of evidence which I am prepared to accept, which can not be explained in terms of known phenomena.'*

Such comments make for sensational headlines in various newspapers (*'THE DAILY MAIL'* is shown here, but the producers could have picked any tabloid of the day), and

packed press conferences are staged to assimilate the growing body of evidence. A young-looking Rob Rines addresses one such conference for *'NATURE' MAGAZINE* with the assertion that *'our sole objective is to get the zoological community all over the world, as well as other scientists, to analyse what we have produced. And indeed, to debate what these things may be, and to get sufficiently interested that scientists dare to come to Loch Ness.'*

The chances of that happening, were however, about as likely a prospect as Alex Ferguson remaining charitable in defeat.

The plea for the subject to be taken a tad more seriously wasn't helped any when the sceptics pointed out that the 'Flipper Photo' had been further computer-enhanced to produce a much clearer image of a dorsal-like fin, perhaps to tie-in neatly with Sir Peter Scott's assertion that the 'monster' could well be a surviving prehistoric reptile - the Plesiosaur.

Not surprisingly perhaps, zoologists at the Natural History Museum were not exactly enthusiastic in their appraisal of the evidence. One of these 'experts' is shown standing in the shadow of a full-size skeleton of just such a creature, and has this to say; *'It seems to me that we are being invited to accept that in a relatively small body of water, in what is, from a zoological viewpoint, one of the best explored countries in the world, we have a population of large predatory reptiles which could be warm-blooded, and which might even be cannibals with snorkels... Now this I find very difficult to take.'*

John Lamshead, a Marine Biologist, also resident at the Museum, attempts to explain the aura of scepticism that prevailed at the time... Looking very smug in his three-piece suit, and the total antithesis of the distinguished, grey-haired professor we've just seen earlier, he remembers; *'We fought shy, a little bit of the Loch. One of my predecessors at the Museum was actually sacked from his job for going up on the Loch. And probably, the 'monster' here has had a very bad effect on science in that many scientists had a nervous twitch when the Loch was mentioned. For reasons you'll quite understand, it could be the kiss of death to your career.'*

Bob Rines, on the other hand, hits the proverbial nail smack on the head when he chirps in to say; *'I think they (the 'experts') got frightened. Those that make a living from this - the zoologists - are not ready to believe on the basis of one picture. That something that should have been dead 65 million years ago, is still existing, in some form, at Loch Ness, Scotland.'*

Haunting Pan pipes echo gently on the soundtrack as we gaze in wonder at an aerial shot of the Castle. The music sounding for all the world like a lament - a bemoaning of the fact that science resolutely turned its face away from the mystery, and overriding all, the immutable knowledge that this will likely be the Rines teams' final shot at solving the enigma.

We catch up with them on a beautiful summer's day of the type all too-rare in that ever-changeable corner of the world...

A series of computer graphics help to get across to the novice some idea of the size of the task that faces the group. Even assuming that most of our readers will be more than familiar with the oft-quoted statistics regarding the geography of the Loch, the sheer dimensions involved nevertheless make for impressive reading. The Loch is 24 miles long, a mile or so wide and is over 800ft deep in places (only Loch Morar, itself the home of a reputed 'monster', is thought to be any deeper) The largest expanse of water in Britain, its banks fall away, precipice-like a few feet from the shore... And this vast, natural chasm - a legacy of the last Ice Age - could hold the entire population

of the Earth three times over, and still leave room for an entity born out of the misted realm of legend...

Not that Rines and Wychoff are entirely alone in their monumental assignment. Our two heroes have assembled a host of 'experts' armed to the teeth with all the latest technology, not unlike the other scientific teams before them, (most recently the 'DISCOVERY' expedition of a couple of years back). Aboard a chartered boat quite literally humming with equipment, we are introduced to oceanographer John Fish (an apt name for one interested in all things marine, wouldn't you say) and marine biologist Arnie Carr. Dressed in identical bright red outfits that would have looked more at home on the set of some cheap 1960's science fiction TV series, ('LOST IN SPACE' say) they welcome each other with hardy handshakes.

From a position high above Urquhart Bay, the team erect a relay station for their so-called 'Global Positioning System'. The narrator tells us that this will be a key tool in 'Rines' new, more intensive search strategy.'

Rob unveils his plan to sweep the Loch with sonar in a manner not a million miles removed from 1987's 'Deepscan,' but this time, the GPS will pinpoint the exact location of any anomalous object picked up by the sensitive machinery...A second team, following close by, will then attempt to capture the whatever-it-is on film.

The difficulties in taking underwater pictures at Loch Ness are well-nigh notorious. The peat that slides down endlessly from the surrounding mountains makes it impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. Charlie explains how he intends to overcome this dilemma with typical optimism; 'it's like driving down the road at night in a fog. Your headlights create this fog and you can't see the road. Now, if we could separate the headlights off to the side, you'd have a better chance you'd see the road. So, I'm doing the same thing here. I'm separating the light source from the camera.'

The photographic team attempt to do precisely this by assembling a rig containing a low-light video camera and a car headlight mounted on an aluminium frame left over from an earlier expedition in the 'monster-hunting' hey day of the 1970's. Despite looking as though it were nothing more than the collected junk from somebody's attic clear-out, Charlie is adamant that it will work.

And then, just when you were thinking that the makers of a Loch Ness documentary were going to get clean away without making reference to the omnipotent Adrian Shine, up pops old beard face himself, to regale us with yet more cracker-barrel wisdom and tales of how the once 'soon-to-be-vindicated witnesses' are all really seeing nothing more than 'their Nessie's.'

Undeterred (just) we mentally shrug our shoulders and try to keep the grimace of distaste from off our faces....

Rob greets him cheerily enough, doubtless unaware of Shine's gradual conversion from open-minded naturalist to hard-nosed sceptic. Even the hideously patronising reference to Rob's refusal to give up and admit defeat is waved away by an almost boyish enthusiasm. Or perhaps, he's just a mite too polite to acknowledge the disingenuous tones.

But if Rob chose to ignore his former fellow-researcher's change of attitude on the banks of the Loch, wait till he gets home and watches this video...

Amidst the usual clips of him descending into the murky depths aboard his self-created submersible, Mr Shine relates how, over a 20-year period, he came to refute the existence of the Loch Ness Monster.

He is also less than complimentary about our good friend Bob Rines.

'In Bob Rines, you have an enthusiastic scientist, an engineer, perhaps. And at the same time, a lawyer. In the

law you need an instant answer. We don't actually mind if the law gets things right so long as the process is seen to be fair (oh no? try telling that to the victims of the countless miscarriages of justice highlighted these last few years - not least Jack Straw's disgraceful refusal to open a fresh inquiry into the awful tragedy at Hillsborough in 1989...How's that for fair? - Ed), an advocate is not obliged to produce the negative side of any contention. An advocate is obliged to promote purely, one side of a case. Bob Rines is undoubtedly, extremely enthusiastic. He certainly uses a good deal of imagination. But then, without people with imagination, nothing happens anyway.'

The team only have five days to scour the Loch, and so, despite Shine's obvious lack of enthusiasm (or maybe in some way, because of it) the members get cracking. Our narrator reminds us that over the last ten years or so, there have been numerous accounts of sonar contacts with apparently animate objects some 15ft in length. The aforementioned 'Operation Deepscan' gets a notable mention, but before we can pause to draw breath and consider the 'revelation' that there were some substantial, unidentified targets tracked by the flotillas sonar, here comes the resident sceptic to (a, and if you will, hem) 'scotch' the readings with a kind of desperate logic...

'Three contacts we still can't explain, but that does not mean we never will explain them.'

'Project Urquhart's' 1994 expedition is also referred to as the 'first scientific study to examine the ecology of the Loch. Monsters were not on the agenda.'

Nevertheless, the highly-trained 'experts' who had taken part in the Natural History Museum-sponsored investigation, also tracked large moving underwater targets that simply had no business being there. Bjorn Larsen from 'Simrad,' is shown expressing his views not long after the sonar readings had been made and subsequently recorded; 'It's hard to say exactly what it was. It was recorded for at least, seven, eight, nine minutes. But it's very difficult to say exactly what it was.'

The Natural History spokesman, the dapper Mr Lamshead, is then wheeled on again to cheerfully inform us that yes, 'They did find all sorts of interesting sonar targets, including moving targets. (and here he audibly swallows a click in his throat) We've no idea what they were...'

Such a candid admission that they don't have all the answers is a trifle heartwarming, and you almost half-expect Adrian Shine to pop up somewhere in the background to remind us all that: *that does not mean that we never will explain them!!!* There seems to be good reason then for the present-day Rines' team to remain optimistic, but they have reckoned without the infamous 'Loch Ness Hoodoo' or 'Hex' (terms coined by early Nessie-hunters like Ted Holliday and Tim Dinsdale in response to a series of incredible near-misses and unaccountable mishaps with the camera when it came to filming the entity - The editor knows from a personal conversation with Steve Feitham, that Dinsdale in particular, considered these freakish incidents to be almost supernatural in nature) which strikes with an impeccable sense of timing...No sooner has Charlie Wychoff's film been spoiled by moisture seeping in and ruining the camera, than the sonar picks up a large, animated object....

Arnie, who you'll remember is the sonar 'expert,' rushes forward to the scanning device and decrees that the object, whatever it may be, is only 20-odd metres below the surface. He also claims in hushed, almost reverential tones, that he hasn't seen anything quite like it before during his tenure at Loch Ness.

But this time, it's our faithful narrator who offers a timely word of caution. The Loch's excessively steep sides can

quite often result in sound waves bouncing off them willy nilly, and as such it is well-known for generating false or misleading sonar signals. The identity of this particular target however, will never be known. The 'Tow-Fish,' the secondary tracker trailing beneath the main boat, was floating too near the Loch bed and failed to pick up on the object, which was a lot nearer the surface.

Despite the frustrating ambiguity of such incidents, one thing is for certain.

Even the sceptics aboard the boat, including Arnie Carr, are beginning to believe that there may be something to the legend after all.

'I think there's a phenomenon here, or something that is really interesting. Something that I would like to get an answer to. We had a target today. It didn't look like a thermal to me. It looked more biological. But I don't know what it was.'

With morale and optimism running on a fairly equal level, the Rines' team are left to their own devices for a while, whilst we the viewers are fed a potted history of sightings dating back to 1933, and the opening of the tourist-friendly A82 Road. The MacKay's (2nd May, 1933) sighting is duly recounted, along with the original 'INVERNESS COURIER' news clipping with its 'What Was It?' headline reverberating across the globe in ever-expanding ripples...

We see the usual old clips of the LNIB (now sadly defunct), the less-than reliable Frank Searle photo's (an ex-paratrooper who made a living - and some would say a killing - out of the phenomenon, and who will be the subject of a forthcoming 'DON' article, Constant Reader), the Hugh Gray picture of what may be a Golden Labrador carrying a stick in its mouth, and the major culprits that can lead to misperception of the perfectly ordinary.... Boat wakes, standing waves, floating debris...

Alistair Boyd then puts in an appearance to continue his debunking of the once-classic 'Surgeon's Photograph'

'I was suspicious of a hoax actually, to begin with, because I'd always felt that firstly, the water texture in the photo, indicates to me that we're looking at a small object, probably no more than a foot high, and that these were ripples rather than waves.'

The story of the subsequent 'confession' by Christian Spurling that Kenneth Wilson had in fact been part of a plot to hoax 'THE DAILY MAIL' by planting a model dinosaur head and neck onto a child's toy submarine is now almost an established part of 'Nessie' folklore.

It should also have dealt a potential death blow to the whole 'monster legend.'

Doubts about the hoax story however, (not least the fact that everyone seems to have very conveniently forgotten about the second picture snapped by Wilson, which appears to show the 'monster' diving beneath the waves) have recently surfaced. And it's here that the film-maker's truly come into their own with a fascinating attempt by both sceptic and believer to try and re-create the 'Surgeon's Photograph' to prove it either a fake or a genuine picture of an unknown aquatic animal...

Richard Smith, an American journalist, is one of those who believe that the hoax story is itself, a fallacy. *'My research has shown that the circumstances, as best we know, surrounding the Wilson Photo are consistent with Wilson's story. I'm willing to get out on a limb, as it were, and do this investigation. I think it's certainly worth doing no matter what the outcome.'*

And so, armed with a couple of plastic 'necks' (in reality, little more than a pair of green-coloured tubes, one 1ft high, the other 4ft high) he heads out to Invermoriston, near to where the original photograph was shot, after we are shown the full-sized version of Wilson's picture. This is useful to Smith in several ways, but most important is its

application as a reference guide as to the exact location. The ripples surrounding the central object, be it living animal or plastic model, are also of especial importance to Smith; *'The circular disturbances are very interesting because they have been used to calculate the angle at which the picture was taken.'*

Computer analysis has since shown that the camera was likely pointing at an angle of 19 degrees down from the horizon. With the help of a surveyor and a professional photographer, Smith sets out to recreate the enigmatic picture at the site where it was snapped, 64 years ago.

The experiment is soon completed utilising both 'models' and, satisfied with the results, the team retire to Bob's temporary HQ to consider the results, which are, frustratingly, inconclusive. The four-foot 'model' certainly appears to be a tad more convincing than the smaller one, and for Smith at least, the doubts that have arisen are enough to give cause to suspect the authenticity of the hoax story; *'When you put together the basic elements, the type of camera Wilson claimed to have used, the position where he believed he was, and a target about the size he reported, you come up with the photograph which he claimed to have taken. This is certainly, although not proof, some very compelling evidence that the original testimony of Lt Col R. Kenneth Wilson, was genuine.'*

Not to be outdone, Alistair Boyd and Adrian Shine team-up to obtain their own photograph, the advantage swinging the way of the sceptic's straight away, not least because they are in possession of a far more convincing one-foot model. The resultant images captured on film are, this reviewer regrets to say, almost identical to the original, thereby dealing a near-mortal blow to Smith's assertions... Not that Richard gives up without a fight. He argues on screen with Boyd over the absence of ripple patterns in his picture, and whilst Alastair claims that they were actually present, the point is certainly a valid one.

And even here, despite the intense research and experimentation being carried out, I am tempted to scream at the top of my lungs at the TV screen **THAT'S ALL VERY WELL, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SECOND WILSON PHOTOGRAPH, SHOWING WHAT APPEARS TO BE THE CREATURE SUBMERGING BENEATH THE SURFACE????'**

To be fair to Mr Boyd however, he is actually not quite the hard-nosed sceptic our initial impression might lead us to believe. Far from it in fact. He has a sighting of his own to recount before the cameras...

'I know that the thing I saw was not a log, or an otter, or a wave, or anything like that. It was a large animal. It came heaving out of the water. Something like a whale. I mean, the part that was actually on the surface, when it stopped rolling through, was at least 20 feet long. It was totally extraordinary. It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen in my life, and if I could afford to spend the rest of my life up here looking for another glimpse of it, I would.'

With the honesty in Alistair's wonder-struck expression reflecting back from the screen, we return once more to Rines' investigation's. We've now reached Day Three, and so far, there hasn't been anything to get too excited about. Rob and Charles decide to go for a night run aboard the boat in Urquhart Bay. After several hours of routine searching without result, the team suddenly encounter a series of very large targets that appear on the sonar print-out. Arnie Carr is particularly impressed by an image that he estimates to be in excess of 16ft long. They hurriedly turn the boat around in an attempt to search the same area again, anxious to discover whether the object will still be there (in which case, it is likely to be something entirely mundane, like submerged debris) or whether it has moved on.

Arnie is plainly excited when they determine that the object is not stationary. Whatever it might have been it has since moved on by the time the boat returns to the exact location. 'Gentlemen, we may have just seen Nessie,' Arnie announces to the crew in typically American fashion. 'It was a dense, discreet target, and we did a quick reciprocal to come back over that target and we couldn't see it with the sonar. It was gone. It's moving.'

The following day, encouraged by this tantalising success, the team elect to use a much more sensitive underwater camera. It becomes absolutely imperative that they obtain hard photographic evidence of the target they have tracked the night before. The definition afforded by this camera, is such that the team can clearly see the Loch floor in high resolution.

Before the results (if any) of the underwater search are revealed however, the program features several more eyewitness accounts and an extremely brief overview of other lake monsters (including the creatures said to inhabit Lake Vorota in Russia and Lake Champlain in Canada). American Roy Mackal (cryptozoologist, molecular biologist and author of 'THE MONSTERS OF LOCH NESS') then puts in an appearance, meeting up with Rob's team on the shores of the Loch. A former member of the LNIB in the mid-60's to early 70's, he explains to the program-makers his reasons for travelling to Scotland in the first place; 'I came because I was curious, and all we had basically, were a few still photographs, some of which have since turned out to be frauds. But the eyewitness observations, whilst the least valid evidence, nevertheless, in some cases were very compelling.'

The still-popular plesiosaur theory is then allowed to rear its head once more, bolstered by the fact that the witnesses' descriptions have remained fairly constant in the years since 1933 (although curiously, pre-'33 sightings have sometimes featured distinctly un-plesiosaur-type creatures - entities that have more in common with the legends of Kelpies and other deep-water demons). Prehistoric relics of the world's oceans are touted as examples that not all the dinosaurs have become extinct; the Mega-Mouthed Shark, (re-discovered as recently as 1976) and the Coelacanth are just two of specimens featured here.

Cryptozoologist Richard Greenwell, is interviewed as to his views on the subject; 'The Coelacanth is a very remarkable fish because it's a form that was thought extinct for 60-80 million years, and all of a sudden it's found alive in 1938. It proves that if it can happen once, it can happen again.'

And then suddenly, we're back to the geological history of the Great Glen, of which Loch Ness forms only a part. Colin Ballantyne, a local geologist gives us a detailed overview of the creation of the Loch, which in the interests of maintaining our readers alertness, we'll skip over. The plesiosaur theory however, isn't helped any by the narrator reminding us that these dinosaurs were cold-blooded reptiles and, assuming they entered the Loch from the sea via the River Ness, they would have had to have quickly (evolutionarily speaking) adapted to the near-freezing waters.

Roy Mackal again; 'After carefully considering all of the evidence, most importantly, sonar contacts which give some idea of how these animals move, and how fast they can swim, this convinced me that we had to have an aquatic mammal.'

Roy plumps for a thought-to-be-extinct prehistoric whale, equipped with the oft-reported serpentine neck.

Re-enter our resident sceptic; Adrian Shine and his fish biologist mate, Alan Butterworth. They are currently engaged in a project aimed at establishing the Loch's ecology (nice work if you can get it, eh). 'Loch Ness is a

huge body of water. More water than in the whole of England and Wales put together, but it's very unproductive. There are very few chemical nutrients. The fertilisers to start the food chain off. And the little microscopic plants have got another problem as well. There's very little light penetration.'

He uses a disc connected to a string to show us how poor the light actually is. It disappears from view at just four metres down. And because the plant life is comparatively scant, there are equally few plankton. And it follows that the number of fish living in the Loch is rather less than one would imagine when you consider the sheer size of the body of water we're talking about here.

There are however, plentiful salmon (one of which leapt from the water just off Invermoriston shoreline early one August morning, and very nearly gave this reviewer a heart attack in the process) which migrate every year through the Loch on their way to spawn. Alan, predictably, dismisses this potential food supply as being far too small to sustain a group of large predators. At the most, he reckons, there will be up to 15 tons of salmon passing through the Loch. And that, one suspects, is nowhere near enough.

And so we come, at last, to Adrian's pet theory as to the identity of 'Nessie'. And very prosaic it is too. He is of the opinion that the creature may well be a sturgeon. 'I think it's possible, that the tradition itself was started by Baltic Sturgeon making the occasional entrance to the Loch, not finding mates, and then going away again.'

Eels too, are forwarded as potential candidates, but the witnesses remain adamant that they are not seeing anything so readily identifiable...

Ian Cameron, the former police officer, is interviewed before a roaring log fire in some crofter's cottage, where he asserts that the thing that he witnessed bore no resemblance to anything other than the back of a large elephant. He watched the creature for over an hour along with seven other people, and the aftermath of the sighting was such that Ian states; 'I wouldn't go out in a small boat on Loch Ness if you gave me the whole earldom of the north.'

Day Five of Rines' expedition: The search once more, focuses on Urquhart Bay. Another target is located late in the morning and the camera crew frantically tries to pick up live video pictures of the image, but despite their best efforts, they are ultimately doomed to failure. Nothing shows up on the screen save for a small shoal of ordinary fish. Charles is frustrated, as he comes to realise that the equipment they have brought with them is nowhere near sufficient to take the job on, but Rob remains defiant that his latest (and probably last) search has not been a complete failure; 'We were certainly not arrogant enough to think that we could cover every single spot and look in there, and find a target. What we did was the most probable things, in our judgement. And if we can intrigue, and I think we have intrigued, this new generation, to carry on, if there's enough excitement here about what we're doing, we will have accomplished a lot.'

The program ends with another whistle-stop montage of eyewitness accounts and Adrian Shine (though he remains convinced of the sincerity of most of these witnesses) explaining away the sightings as misperceptions of boat wakes or standing waves.

The last word though, is left, appropriately enough, to Ian Cameron; 'In no way am I even attempting to convert anybody to the religion of the object in Loch Ness.'

But I saw it.

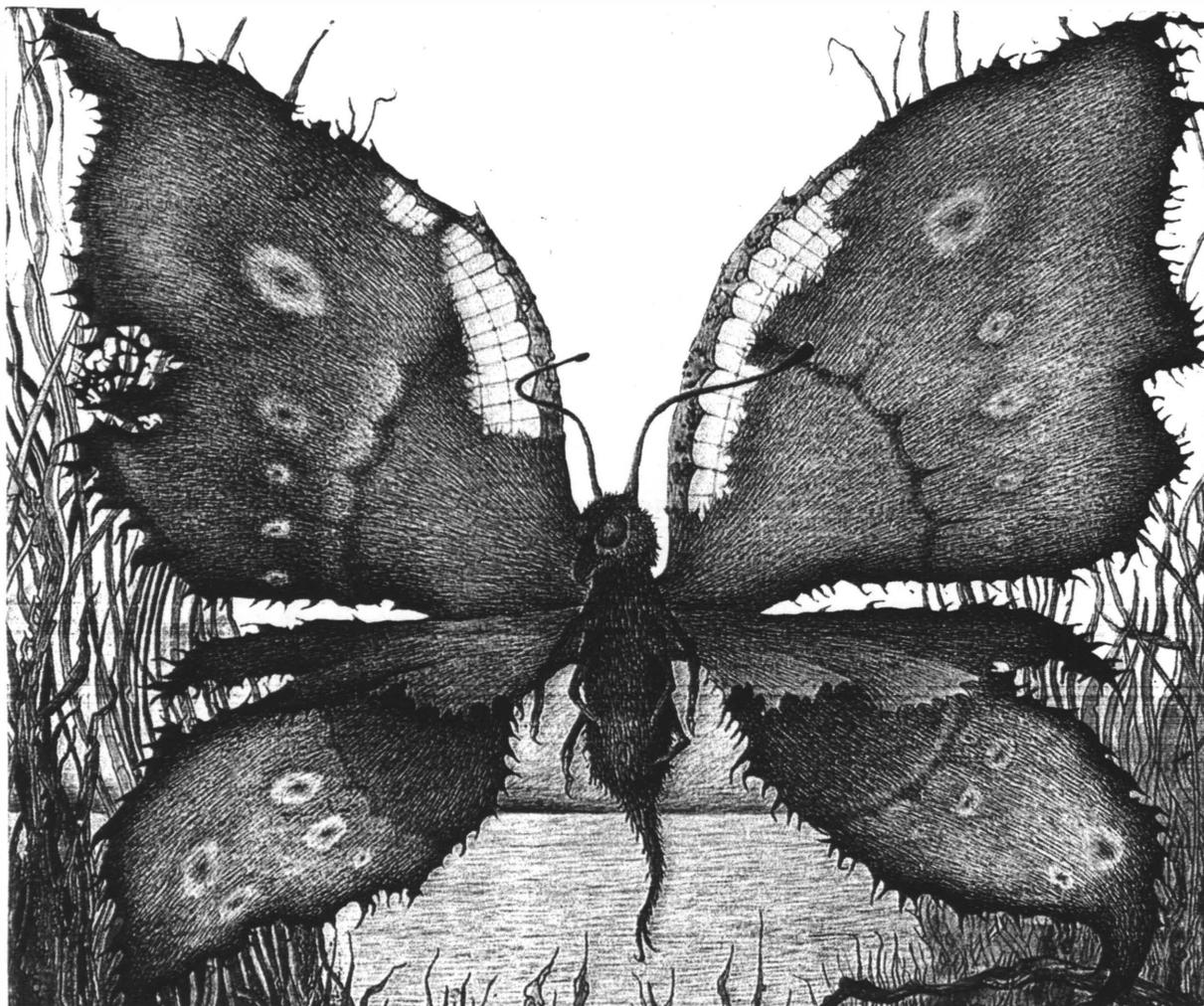
And nothing can take that away....

Lee Walker.

Weird Winged Creatures

In the first of an occasional series, Constant Reader, we'll be embarking upon a (mostly) retrospective overview of the type of anomalous entity that, by its very definition, is afforded the least degree of credence, even in cryptozoological circles. Perhaps the most open-minded of scientists might *grudgingly* concede (at the point of a gun or the threat of being forced to watch endless re-runs of that Paraguay V Bulgaria Group D match at France 98) the possibility that there exist large, undiscovered creatures in the depths of the oceans, the midst of the primeval rainforest, or the white wastes at the roof of the world...Such locations are considered to be so suitably remote, the *possibility* that they may conceal surviving giant sea monsters, surviving dinosaurs or hairy wildmen is at the very least, conceivable.

Just...



The very idea of a feathered serpent with a wing span the size of a Piper airplane, a headless entity with glowing red eyes in the centre of its chest, a 'bat-woman' suffused by an unearthly glow...or that which we've chosen to start with here, an unidentified composite animal, a latter-day 'Chimera,' if you will, flying across the skies above some of the most densely populated regions of the planet, and only being sighted by a select few...

'Awww, c'mon', say the stoic purveyors of the Sane And Rational; 'such things can surely only exist in the half-remembered legends of the ancients, the Grimoires of the Middle Ages, or the dark imaginings of horror-fiction writers..'

'You can forget the fact that in 1947, farmers in the area around Ramore, Ontario, Canada, reported sighting a giant black bird with a huge, cruelly hooked beak and yellow eyes 'the size of silver dollars' that plagued their livestock...

Disregard the 18th June, 1953 story of the group of people who say they saw a *figure of a man with wings like a bat swaying on the branch of an old pecan tree* in Houston, Texas...

Ignore the accounts of several witnesses in November, 1966, when at Point Pleasant, West Virginia, they encountered a winged, seven foot tall creature with glowing red eyes that followed their car at 100 mph...

And drive from your mind the two young girls from Hartingen, Texas, who in early 1976, claim to have seen a "five-foot tall bird with a gorilla's face and a sharp beak, six inches long," that left three-toed tracks that the girl's parents were clearly able to see etched into the ground.

There is no indistinguishable grey area between myth and reality...

Such things simply cannot be...

Can they???

The Jersey Devil

The Jersey Pine Barrens: the very name conjures up images of an indescribably lonely place, far from any flow of history, where the air is hot and sickly with the smell of dying grass and wilting plants, and where the soft creak of summer crickets belies a midnight darkness that lurks beneath the boughs...

Little wonder that these 'Barrens,' stretching two thousand square miles across Southeastern New Jersey, have long been regarded as being the haunt of the 'Wendigo,' the dark spirit of the forest which can drive a man insane should they set eyes upon its nightmarish form. The Lenni Lenape Indians who inhabited the region long before the coming of the first white man, were instinctively aware of its presence. They kept to the clearings and well-worn paths that criss-crossed the woods and gathered together after sundown in the long-held belief that the flickering flames of the communal campfire would keep the evil at bay.

The first white settlers didn't arrive until after 1609, when Henry Hudson set about exploring the area, and despite initial (ahem) reservations about the suitability of the land to support any kind of crops, with the discovery of bog iron at the height of the American War Of Independence, the Barrens became, for a time at least, what researcher Anthony Perticaro calls 'a mecca of industry.'

It's new-found prominence didn't last long, however. A higher grade of iron, suddenly in great demand as ammunition supplies for the war began to dwindle, was found elsewhere and the area had to find another source of income, the most obvious of which was growing all around them: the abundance of trees, mostly oak, cedars and pine. As Mr Perticaro points out; 'These trees supported the wood cutting, glass making, and paper-milling professions. Once again though, this new economic foray did not prove profitable for very long. When the wood industry collapsed, "The Piney's," the derogatory nickname for the Pine Barren's residents, were thrown into poverty.'

Due perhaps to the somewhat limited commercial potential of the area, the Barrens have remained rich in many and varied species of wildlife. Left largely undisturbed, deer, foxes, bear, different types of birds, all have flourished in the (relatively) welcome absence of man....

And perhaps something else has made its home there too. Something impossibly ancient.

Something that did not belong this side of a Lovecraftian nightmare.

Something that, if seen in its true form, would send a man gibbering into the very mouth of madness.

Something....

THE JERSEY DEVIL

II

Come to think of it, the incarnation it chose to manifest itself in, most notably in 1909, and the years since, was enough to give anyone a sizeable dose of the scream

meamies.... Consider if you will, a creature with the head of a horse, a pair of bat-like wings, a cruel set of claws and a four foot long, serpentine body.

It may sound far too fantastical to bear even the most cursory of consideration, yet such was the description forwarded by a multitude of witnesses, beginning in the January of 1909.

Before we delve into the minutiae of the sighting accounts however, I should perhaps point out that the Barrens have at least another couple of legends that have endured with the passing of time. One such story concerns a ghostly creature known as The White Stag. This essentially benign entity was said to have intentionally detoured an out-of-control stagecoach away from the banks of a river and imminent disaster, and has been known to appear before the lost and friendless in their hour of greatest need.

Another Barrens folktale features James Still, known to the locals as 'The Black Doctor.'

The story goes that back in the 19th century, James was consumed with a burning ambition to become a doctor of some renown. The only problem was that he was black, and the irrational racial intolerance of the times meant that there was no way society would ever accept such a thing.

James refused to relinquish his avowed intent however, and he retreated into the depths of the Barrens to study his medical textbooks, and to learn all that he could from the resident Indians regarding herbal remedies and other, natural cure-alls.

His fame never spread beyond the tree-lined borders of the Barrens themselves, but anyone who got into trouble within their environs could always (assuming they put aside their petty prejudices to one side) turn to him for help.

But to return to the story of the entity with which we are predominantly concerned; the origins of the Jersey Devil are as cloaked in obscurity as the very depths of the Pine Barrens themselves.

As we have seen earlier, the native Indians have long believed the woods to be the domain of some ethereal, shape-shifting creature, but as so often happens, with the arrival of the white man, a comparatively new set of legends have sprung up in an ultimately vain attempt to explain the unexplainable.

The most enduring of these concerns a Mrs Leeds, a poverty-stricken mother who had twelve children to bring up and found that she was pregnant yet again. In sheer despair at the prospect of the birth of another sibling she was alleged to have shouted out; 'I don't want anymore children! Let it be a Devil!'

And sure enough, when the baby was born, it was scarcely human, and like the mutant child in Larry Cohen's minor masterpiece (in terms of a B-movie horror flick, that is) 'IT'S ALIVE,' it ripped its way from the distraught mother's womb, immediately scuttled up the chimney, and made its way out into the surrounding woods.

It was rumoured to have eked out a feral existence feeding on small animals and, in some cases, human children that had wandered out into the forest unaccompanied. For this reason the entity was sometimes referred to as 'The Leeds Devil'

Other variations on the same theme state that the creature had been malformed at birth because Mrs Leeds had thoughtlessly incurred the wrath of a local clergyman, or else had insulted a passing gypsy. Other stories had it that she was a well-known Witch and had offended God as a direct result of her sorcery. Yet another holds that the child's father was a British soldier at the height of the War of Independence, and that therefore God had visited a curse upon the baby as it was born out of an act of treason. Whichever version you choose to accept, (if indeed, you accept any of them) local lore maintains that the entire area was exorcised in 1740.

For some undisclosed reason however, that holy ceremony could only succeed in banishing the Demon for a hundred years, and it was duly said to have returned on the anniversary of the exorcism (doubtless rubbing its hands with Devilish glee) in 1840, when it manifested as 'a phantom livestock killer.'

The first documented sightings began to filter through the eternal treadmill of rumour soon after. The details were predictably sketchy and therefore can be considered less than reliable. Nevertheless, the fact that such reports exist at all, provides a degree of substance to the overall legend, much as the well-known story of St Columba's encounter with 'a certain water monster' in Loch Ness, adds a smidgeon of historical credence to the modern-day accounts of 'Nessie.'

The Jersey Devil was reportedly sighted in the years 1859, 1873, and 1880, and in one such instance it was claimed that Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's far less-infamous brother, had confronted the creature whilst engaged in a spot of hunting in the Barrens.

In the harsh winter of 1894-95, a set of mysterious 'unidentifiable' footprints were discovered criss-crossing the thick, virgin snow. Disconcertingly similar tracks were to be discovered on several occasions in the years following, most notably in 1908, when 'marks like the hooves of a pony, leading up to wire fences and continuing on the other side' were found on various beaches across the county.

As was the case with the so-called 'Devil's Footprints,' that appeared overnight on February 8th, 1855 across South Devon, England, no satisfactory explanation was ever forthcoming as to their origin.

The earliest sighting committed to paper, was made in 1899 by one of the local Philadelphia journals. These account featured a respected businessman named George Saarosy, who's sleep was shattered one night by the sound of loud, high-pitched yelps coming from his backyard. Alarmed, he raced to his bedroom window and caught, a brief glimpse of the Jersey Devil flying past his house, its hideous features illuminated in the bony moonlight. No details were given as to its exact description. And perhaps, considering the horrors to come, that is something of a God-given mercy....

III

The Winter of 1909, especially the week of 16th-23rd January, became known throughout the region as 'the time of the Jersey Devil'

Stories of the creature were duly featured in the pages of the local press (including the now defunct 'PHILADELPHIA RECORD') and later, the national newspapers, bringing it to the attention of the public at large, the nightmare image of the 'demon,' burning itself indelibly into their collective consciousness.

The virtual flood of accounts, in common with many similar outbreaks of mass-reported phenomena (the Mad Gasser Of Mattoon, the Phantom Hair Thieves and Spring Heeled Jack scares, to name but three) had begun with the merest trickle....

On Saturday, 16th January, Zack Cozzens was travelling along the road that led from the town of Woodbury, New Jersey, when he encountered something he could not identify...Details of his account were published in a book co-authored by James McCloy and Ray Miller called, imaginatively enough; 'THE JERSEY DEVIL' (Wallingford, Pennsylvania, USA - The Middle Atlantic Press, 1976)

The witness was quoted as saying; 'I first heard a hissing sound. Then something white flew across the street. I saw two spots of phosphorus - the eyes of the beast...it was as fast as an auto.'

Cozzens report was given further veracity by the fact that later that same night, an entirely separate group of people claimed that they had seen something remarkably similar just over the county border in Bristol, Pennsylvania. One of these witnesses, E.W. Minster, the postmaster of the town had this to say about his own personal sighting which occurred in the early hours of January 17th:

'I awoke at about two o'clock in the morning...and finding myself unable to sleep, I arose and wet my head with cold water as a cure for insomnia (that's certainly some unusual cure for an inability to grab some sleep, but it takes all sorts, I guess - Ed)

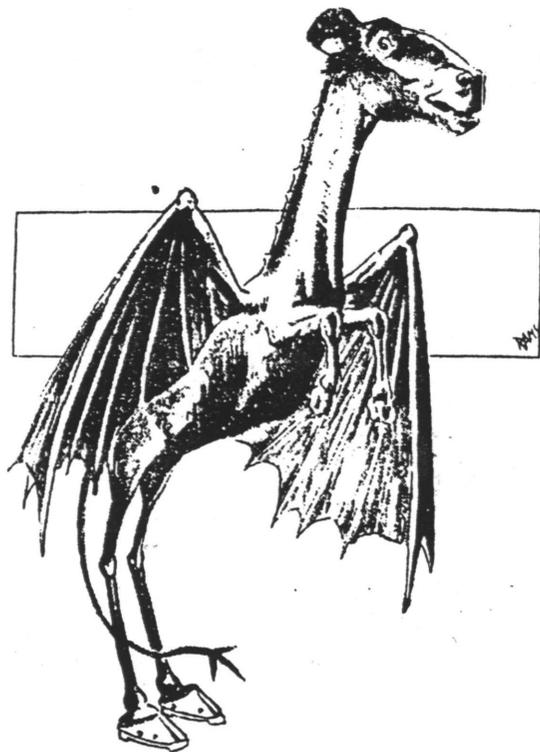
As I got up I heard an eerie, almost supernatural sound from the direction of the river...I looked out upon the Delaware and saw flying diagonally across what appeared to be a large crane, but which was emitting a glow like a fire-fly.

Its head resembled that of a ram, with curled horns, and its long thick neck was thrust forward in flight. It had long thin wings and short legs, the front legs shorter than the hind. Again, it uttered its mournful and awful call - a combination of a squawk and a whistle, the beginning very high and piercing and ending very low and hoarse.'

And just two days later, what is probably the most famous encounter with the Jersey Devil was said to have occurred in Gloucester City.

A Mr and Mrs Nelson Evans were awoken at around about two in the morning on 19th January, by the sound of something scrabbling on the roof of their garden shed. They peered out of their window, much as Zack Cozzens had done, a couple of nights earlier, and they came face to face with the now familiar composite creature, a newspaper artist's ('THE PHILADELPHIA EVENING BULLETIN') impression of which is featured below....

THE NEW JERSEY "WHAT-IS-IT." AS NELSON EVANS SAYS HE SAW IT ON HIS SHED ROOF AT 2 A. M.



The husband and wife described it thus; 'it was about three and a half feet high, with a head like a Collie dog and a face like a horse. It had a long neck, wings about two feet long, and its back legs were like those of a crane, and it had horse's hooves. It walked on its back legs and held up two short front legs with paws on them. It didn't use the front

horse's hooves. It walked on its back legs and held up two short front legs with paws on them. It didn't use the front legs at all while we were watching. My wife and I were scared, I tell you, but I managed to open the window and say, "Shoo!" and it turned around, barked at me, and flew away.'

As unlikely a combination as this may sound at first reading, a constant stream of witnesses were willing to come forward with their own accounts of a creature answering to a similar description.

Janet and Colin Bord, in their excellent '*ALIEN ANIMALS*' (Granada 1980), list several such sightings including that of a trolley conductor named Lewis Boeger, who states that at 2am, on January 21st, he saw a entity that was both 'hideous' and most closely resembled a kangaroo. That was at Haddon Heights, New Jersey. At nearby Trenton, that same early morning, William Cromley, a theatre door-keeper saw an animal(?) bearing the facial features of a German Shepherd dog, with a pair of excessively large, sparkling eyes.

The Jersey Devil was also being blamed for a spate of bizarre animal mutilations (see elsewhere in this issue for comparison with the Editor's family's own strange experience regarding this most distasteful form of Fortean phenomena), and another series of anomalous footprints right across the New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Delaware region.

'*THE PHILADELPHIA RECORD*' carried what is perhaps the single, most detailed account of the creature on record, and although the precise date of the incident is not known, we can be sure that it occurred, (if it occurred at all), *sometime* during that fantastical week; 16th-23rd January, 1909.

The main witness was Theodore D. Hackett, a telephone linesman for the Pine Barrens area;

'In an isolated spot, about five miles from Pleasantville, at a place known as Beaver Pond, Howard Campbell, one of the linemen, was detailed on a piece of work a little distance from the rest of the men on duty. After walking a little way into the woods, his attention was attracted by something coming down the path toward him. He became so frightened by the unusual appearance of the thing that he straightaway made for the nearest telegraph pole. Letting out several yells for help and losing his wits entirely by the time he reached the top of the pole, Campbell threw himself out on the mass of wires between the two poles and was lying there helpless by the time the rest of the gang, including myself, had arrived.

Seeing the "Terror" on the pole, I raised my gun and fired. One shot broke a wing and it fell to the ground, uttering hideous screams: but before anyone could collect his wits the thing was up and off with long strides and a sort of hop, dragging one wing, and then disappearing into the pine thicket. We got ropes and other tackle and helped Campbell down from his precarious position. As nearly as I can describe the terror, it had the head of a horse, the wings of a bat and a tail like a rat's, only longer.'

By this point, certain sections of the less-than-credulous populace began to voice their scepticism regarding the validity of the phenomenon. The editor of one local newspaper even went on record as stating that he believed the whole thing to be nothing more than a mixture of misperception, mass hysteria, and outright hoaxing; 'It's nothing more than the imagination of complete idiots' was just one of his choice quotes (*sounds like he might have made a pretty excellent candidate for the USAF public relations post in the wake of 1947's 'Flying Saucer' craze-Ed*)

The situation wasn't helped any by the joke offer by the Philadelphia Zoo of \$10,000 for the successful capture of

the beast, and the subsequent claim by Norman Jeffries and Jacob Hope that they had managed to do just that. All-too predictably however, the 'Discovery Of The Century' turned out to be nothing more than a Kangaroo, accosted by the two pranksters (maintaining a long-standing tradition of double-acts, the most recent proponents of which have been the notorious, not to say presumably omnipotent Crop Circle hoaxers; Doug'n'Dave), and after covering the unfortunate animal with painted stripes, they had glued a set of crudely-fashioned claws and wings glued to its body. To add to the sense of surrealist humour pervading the sham, they further claimed that the creature was not demonic in nature but rather a breed of Australian Vampire!!!

IV

What turned out to be the grossly exaggerated death of the Jersey Devil, was reported by a man who was employed at the time as a track-walker on the electric railway between Clayton and Newfield. On the night of 21st January, a mere five days after the inaugural report (in *this* sequence of sightings, at least) by the flabbergasted Zack Cozzens, William Wasso spotted the creature sniffing at the twin tracks, whilst its long, sinuous tail actually came into contact with the live rail. There was a huge explosion, the force of which succeeded in melting a 20ft section of track, and all traces of the Jersey Devil disappeared from sight. But the gap in the curtain... The ragged hole in the fabric of reality was such that the 'beast' still had access to our world. And it (whatever 'It' was) seemed determined to make the very most of the opportunity.

Just a few short hours after its supposed demise, that very afternoon in fact, a Mrs J.H. White reported that the Jersey Devil was alive and well and cavorting across the backyard of her house in Philadelphia, '*spewing flames from its mouth.*'

And as if to confirm the above, at 7pm that evening, 'The Devil' was blamed for the abduction of a pet dog at Camden, New Jersey, and was seen again the following day; Friday.

The final reported sighting of that year, so far as we know, occurred in February, when Leslie Garrison caught the briefest, tantalising glimpse of the creature as it flew over a clump of trees....

On July 2nd, 1924, a strange animal displaying all the characteristics of the Jersey Devil, was seen in the West Orange section of the county...An obviously excited police patrolman telephoned his station to inform them that '*I have just seen an animal that has a head like a deer, that runs like a rabbit and has fiery eyes.*' Confirmation of the sighting was forthcoming in the shape of Mrs Clyde Vincent, who also saw the whatever-it-was, along with her family; '*We were picnicking on the road, when an animal that had a head like a deer, ran like a rabbit and had fiery eyes, came along and jumped over us.*' An unnamed farmer from nearby Livingstone, also helped fuel the enigma when he told police that he'd seen '*the Devil*' leaping and jumping around the confines of his fields.

No trace of the 'animal' was ever found, despite a thorough search of the area by both the police and local volunteers. Another 17 years would pass however, before 'The Devil' would return to haunt the good people of the Pine Barrens proper and the surrounding area, and even then the details would be frustratingly sketchy, and therefore somewhat inconclusive.

In 1926, '*a large, speedy, feathered animal*' was sighted by an unnamed witness, whilst the following year, an anonymous cab-driver came forward to state that he had seen a similar creature. Equally sparse in their content were the brief allusions to '*a half-man, half-beast*' seen in

1928, and 'the sometime around 1930' account of a creature with *'the body of a man, the head of a cow, large bat wings and big feet, which flew up in the air, and cut off the tops of trees,'* encountered by two men from Erial, New Jersey. A short while later, a couple of girls, one of them a daughter of the Erial witnesses, saw the same, (or a strikingly similar entity) at the same place.

'An upright Devil' was spotted in 1932, as it was again in 1935, by Phillip Smith, at Woodstown, New Jersey. During both 1941 and 1948, there occurred several, isolated incidents involving the entity, whilst in 1949 'a green male monster' was sighted by various witnesses.

It was in 1951, however, that the next substantial sequence of sightings were made. Once more, the pages of the ever-vigilant 'PHILADELPHIA RECORD' were filled with stories of local people who claimed to have had encountered the creature. One case in particular concerned a ten-year-old boy, awoken during the night by the sound of something scurrying outside his bedroom window. Peering from the edge of his bedclothes, he saw a monster *'with blood dripping from its face.'*

In the wake of this and similar accounts, a familiar hysteria began to descend upon the locale. In separate incidents, Ronald James, Mrs Elmer Clegy, Mrs William Weiser, related how they had each heard an unearthly screaming emanating from the woods, although upon the occasions that the creature was actually seen, the descriptions were unusually diverse, and not at all uniform as the majority of them were back in 1909. Everything from a seven feet tall, hairy, faceless animal to a modern-day incarnation of a Neolithic cave-dweller were reportedly encountered.

The police, a lot more sceptical than they were at the turn of the century, were not in the least bit amused by the flood of reports and the rash of inevitable hoaxes (strange tracks in the snow that turned out to be the work of entirely human agencies and a stuffed bear paw attached to a stick), and they tried their damndest to placate the growing sense of fear that began to permeate the atmosphere of the Pine Barrens. There is a famous picture of a police officer from the Greenwich Township Police Department, accompanied by what looks to be an archetypal 1950's B-movie-type government agent, nailing a white poster to the trunk of a pine tree...

'THE JERSEY DEVIL IS A HOAX'

...it says confidently, although whether or not they're trying to convince the populace of that 'fact', or *themselves* is open to interpretation.

As the number of reports continued to grow, so the locals elected to take matters into their own hands. They formed themselves into bands of 'Devil-hunting' vigilantes, and armed to the teeth with an assortment of rifles and shotguns, they began roaming the woods in search of the beast.

Not surprisingly, the boys in blue were less than delighted with this highly dangerous prospect either, and they had no option but to set about arresting a number of 'the Devil-hunters' before they had a chance to disappear into the Barrens, and wind up taking pot shots at the first thing that moved...including, likely as not, each other.

Paranormal researcher, Anthony Pertecaro takes up the story of the aftermath of 1951; *'After that year, the reports would die down. Random animal mutilations and strange cries in the night would continue to be reported infrequently during the next decade. In 1966, Steven Silkotch blamed the death of his entire shed of poultry livestock on the Devil. What makes this story amazing is the fact that the shed had also contained two large German Shepherd's, animals very capable of defending themselves against most attackers, animal or human. Both Shepherds were torn to shreds.* (See the Editor's own article elsewhere

in this issue for a similarly mystifying state of affairs regarding the strange mutilations of his family's pet rabbits)

This account however, would be the last encounter with the Devil acknowledged by the police and the press. From now on, both would completely ignore any reports of the creature.

The memory of the Jersey Devil did not fade away. Local inhabitants help keep the memory alive. One area of the Barrens is nicknamed 'Leeds Point' and is reputed to be the actual birthplace of the Devil. Dozens of spots across New Jersey are rumoured to be its final resting place. Its cause of death varying by hundreds of different reasons.

"Oh, people still talk about it," says long-time Pine Barrens resident Joe Springer. "I met an ambulance driver who was riding around one night when he heard all these screams in the woods. This was back in 1974. He tore out of there like a madman and swears it was the Jersey Devil to this day."

Reports continue to hum down the wires as the years go by, although they are frequently consigned to the less-than reliable pages of 'THE NATIONAL ENQUIRER' or 'THE WEEKLY WORLD NEWS'

The more conservative sections of the press, along with those in authority no longer lend any credence to an entity they class right alongside Bigfoot, Ogopogo, and those pesky, abduction-loving Grey's.

The world of the sane and rational finds it all too easy to apportion the blame for the continued sightings, the blood-curdling screaming from the dark heart of the forest, even the spate of baffling livestock deprivations upon local, perfectly terrestrial wildlife. As I believe we stated at the outset, the Barrens are home to a wide variety of large predators; the Coyote, the Bobcat, the Fox...All of which are known to emit fearful cries in the still of the night, all of which, glimpsed, half-seen, lurking in the tangled undergrowth, could be mistaken for something otherworldly, all of which are quite capable of slaughtering livestock, should they ever be afforded the opportunity.

And, as our friend Mr Pertecaro reminds us, aside from the ubiquitous hoaxers, there has also been at least one example of a genuine case of mistaken identity...

"My grandmother knew the Jersey Devil," says Philadelphia resident John Margovich. "She knew a guy named George Bishop who was from Bensalem, Pennsylvania. In the Fifties, he went a little crazy and moved out to the Pine Barrens to be alone. You know, a 'Walden' type thing. He was all scraggly and such from hanging out in the woods. I mean, really scruffy, with a long beard and such. He would freak people out when they saw him walking in the woods. George used to love hearing about people seeing him and swearing they'd seen the Jersey Devil"

Such stories are undeniably amusing and may well be considered to be the death knell for the phenomenon. But reading back over the smattering of reports featured in this article, even the most blinkered of sceptics would be hard-pressed to dismiss the possibility that *something* decidedly unnatural was (and maybe still is) roaming the quiet lanes and backwoods of the Pine Barrens (*Barrens*). Now there's a misnomer if ever there was one. A place as lush with vegetation, as filled with an almost dizzying number of trees you feel should be called anything *other* than the Barrens...It's almost like that long-standing joke about the tallest person in the class or the work site being christened with the nickname 'Tiny').

Whatever the truth of the matter, the legend at least, endures (an incarnation of the creature featured in the Season One episode of 'THE X-FILES'), and to the people of the Pine Barrens, perhaps it always will.

Lee Walker. Merseyside July 1998

The Ghosts That Haunt You With Their Sorrows



The Haunting Of Peterhouse College

Newspaper accounts right across the country related how various members of staff at Peterhouse, Cambridge's oldest college, (it was built in 1284) have experienced what the tabloids refer to as 'ghostly phenomena,' in the run up to Christmas, last year.

We're only getting round to reporting on it now, Constant Reader, because it somehow slipped through the net last time out and so here, for the sake of completeness, are the basic details:

The principle witnesses to the aforementioned phenomena seem to have been a couple of butlers who, in the words of one Andrew Murison, the current bursar; *'were clearing up in the Combination Room after dinner, when both became aware of a figure coming out of the panelling and moving diagonally across the room to the William Morris fireplace. As soon as they began to focus on it, it disappeared into the fireplace. They both looked at each other and knew they had seen exactly the same thing.'*

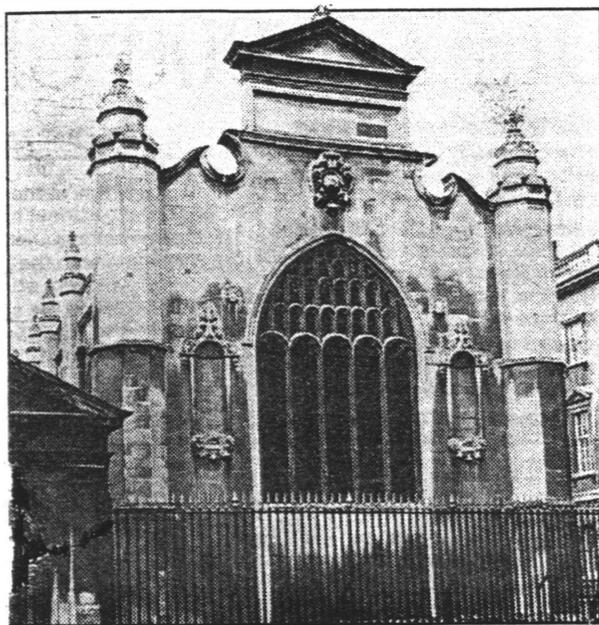
No date is given for the butler's sighting of the resident phantom, but Andrew himself claims to have felt an otherworldly presence a few months later...He once more takes up the story;

'It was about 1:45pm and I had gone into the room (one assumes the very same Combination Room), to get some fruit, a banana and an apple, which I knew was on the table. I thought "My God, it's cold in here" and thought maybe the central heating wasn't working. I was perhaps 15 yards from the door when all the water pipes started knocking.

'There was definitely something there and I just picked up a banana and took to my heels.'

In the wake of these less-than-inexplicable accounts, it was reported that the dean of the college, Graham Ward, felt so

strongly about the possibility of the building being haunted that he decided to call in a local priest to assist in exorcising the 'spirit.'



(Above): The grand entrance to Peterhouse College, rumoured to be the domain of a phantom that emerges from the fireplace in the building's Combination Room. It certainly looks the part, anyway

In fact, it bears a more than passing resemblance to the entrance to the newly-opened church in John Carpenter's under-rated horror movie, 'PRINCE OF DARKNESS' (1987).

His plan hit an insurmountable snag however, when it was revealed that such a ceremony can only be carried out when all 44 fellows of the college and the staff are present at the same time.

Exactly why that should be (although one suspects the answer may lie in the roots of college tradition and etiquette) was not made clear in any of the reports we came across.

The reporters were more concerned with naming possible candidates for the identity of the ghost...The favourites seem to be either Frances Dawes, a former bursar who elected to hang himself from a length of good, sturdy bell rope way back in 1787 (apparently because he had presided over the election of a particularly calamitous new master), or else another former bursar whose only claim to the role seems to be that he was the great uncle of George Washington...

19th December, 1997. Peterhouse College, Cambridge. DAILY MAIL/DAILY EXPRESS etc

Ghostly Tales From Unlikely Sources

The continued success of programmes like the *'THE X-FILES,'* sure have a lot to answer for it seems. It's recently been our good fortune to stumble across a real goldmine of information buried deep in a publication you'd least expect to carry articles relating to the paranormal.

'SHOUT' magazine, as entertaining as any other publications of its type undoubtedly is, could hardly ever be called a bastion of strange phenomena reporting, but nevertheless, the following accounts make for fascinating

reading, and we include them here (in our own words, of course) for your own perusal...

First up we have the story of Leanne, a 14-year-old schoolgirl, who decided it might be a jolly good wheeze to follow her cousin's lead and mess around with one of those dreaded ouija boards....

She takes up the story of what transpired with an initial sense of youthful, wide-eyed innocence, and winds up relating a cheerless tale that would have given Edgar Allen Poe a dose of the screamin meemies....

'My cousin, Trisha, is a year older than me. She's into astrology and stuff, and wears black all the time. I've always thought she was a bit weird, but after what happened last year (one assumes this was 1996-Ed), I believe she has some sort of psychic gift.

'She went to America on holiday with her mum, and when we went round to see them after they got back, Trisha showed me what she'd bought; a ouija board. She announced that she was going to have a spooky night at her house, and told me I was to come. I wasn't really into it, though I was curious to see if the board would work. Trisha said that it would be her and her two mates, and that it would be better if there were four.

'It was a Saturday night. My auntie Anne was at the bingo, so Trisha had the house to herself. Her friends were already there when I arrived, and the house was almost totally dark. Trisha set the board up and it looked pretty impressive, all dark wood and fancy letters. Trisha asked the board if there were any spirits present who wanted to speak with us. The glass moved and spelled out "YES". I felt a bit nervous and shaky.

'She asked the board if any spirits wanted to pass a message on to one of us. Again, the glass spelled out "YES." Then, it went on to spell my name...I pulled my hand from the glass and snapped at Trisha to stop scaring me. She looked all offended, though, and swore she hadn't moved the glass. The other two girls shook their heads too, and Trisha thumped my hand back on the glass and asked what the message was.

Again, the glass moved slowly round the letters, spelling out two words; "CRASH" and "DEAD." I screamed and pulled my hand away, and even Trisha looked scared. One of her friends said that it must mean I was going to have an accident, and I started crying and told her to stop it. Trisha thought we should try to get a more detailed message, but I refused to go near the board again. I went to get a drink from the kitchen, and when I came back, the three of them were at it again. The glass was moving faster and faster and kept spelling out three words: "LEANNE, CRASH" and "DEAD." It was horrible.

'I screamed at Trisha to put the board away. I wanted to go home, but I was scared to walk by myself. Trisha told me to calm down and said that we'd walk down the road together. As she was tidying up the room, she told me to write a note to her mum, explaining where she'd gone. This is when the scariest thing happened. I picked up a pencil and went to write on a notepad. Something seemed to take hold of my hand, and instead of writing to my auntie Anne, the pencil scrawled a message in strange handwriting. It said, "BE CAREFUL, LEANNE," and I got such a fright, I threw the pencil away. I don't know what had made my hand move, but it wasn't anything to do with me. I was crying, telling Trisha it was all her fault, but she looked just as scared as me. Her two friends were terrified as well. We ran out of the house back down to my street.

'This happened a few months ago, but I'm still scared, wondering what's going to happen to me. I avoid going in cars and buses as much as I can, and I take ages crossing the road. Sometimes I tell myself that it was just her,

playing a joke on me, but then I remember the funny handwriting.

'I keep having nightmares about my death. I wake up, crying and sweating, terrified that one day, it's going to be real. Trisha still has the ouija board. In fact, I'm sure she's used it again since that night. I wonder if she's had any more messages - perhaps the spirits have told her the date I'm going to die.

'It sounds stupid, but that night has changed my life forever. I'm scared to leave my house and I wake up every day, expecting to die. I hate Trisha for making me play with the ouija board. It can wreck your life. I wish I'd never even set eyes on it...'

Next up is the equally perplexing story of a girl named Sarah who hails from Newquay...

She maintains that Lucy, a friend of hers, had begun writing to a penpal in Australia, and that upon reflection, she seemed to bear more than a passing resemblance to a friend Sarah had had when she'd been a good deal younger called Carrie.

'Carrie and her family had moved when she was eight and we'd lost touch. However, a couple of years ago I was shocked to hear that Carrie had been killed in a road accident (she hadn't been forewarned of her death at the conclusion of a ouija board session like Leanne, Trisha, and the gang had she, we wonder?).

It soon turned out that the Australian penpal even had the exact same hobbies, the same type of pets, just about the same everything.

'Then one day I got the shock of my life. Lucy and I were sitting in a cafe and Lucy showed me a photo of her Australian penpal. I just couldn't believe it when I saw her, she was the spitting image of Carrie.

'Lucy and I were so shocked and we just can't explain it.'

*** Katriona from Inverness, Scotland, tells of how her grandparents live 'in this really old house and it's haunted.' She says that very often in the dead of night, the couple are awoken by the sound of footsteps in the downstairs rooms, even though they are the only ones present in the house at the time.

'The most scary thing though,' maintains Katriona, is that years ago there was a fire in the kitchen and the room was gutted. When my grandparents moved in though, they noticed that on the outside of the house about the kitchen door there's a funny shape in the stonework. It looks like a face that's screaming with its mouth open. I try to go in through the front door whenever I can because it's really scary.'

*** Judy from Newcastle may have experienced a case of Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) after she'd made a compilation tape of her favourite songs.

She played it on her personal stereo before going on holiday to an old cottage in Cornwall. But when she was sunbathing in the cottage garden and was playing the tape again, she was startled to hear the sound of 'a horrible screaming and really scary laughing.'

She immediately switched off the machine, but when she got up the nerve to play it back once more, the tape was perfectly normal.

She assumed, not unreasonably, that she'd imagined the whole thing. A few days later however, the weird noises were back to haunt her, only this time, the sounds appeared on the other side of the tape.

'I told my mum, but she didn't want to hear it and said that there must be something wrong with the tape and I should just throw it away.

'I've still got it, though. I didn't want to throw it away, but I'm too scared to play it. Sometimes at night I can't sleep for thinking about it.'

'I've still got it, though. I didn't want to throw it away, but I'm too scared to play it. Sometimes at night I can't sleep for thinking about it.'

GHOSTS AND DEVILS OVER MERSEYSIDE

More News On The Frankby Phantom

As featured in our last issue, the so-called 'Frankby Phantom,' has been reportedly haunting this ancient locale in a form that has been variously described as 'a being, six or seven feet tall that looked like the Abominable Snowman,' 'a lady in crinoline carrying a goldfish bowl' and a 'white, floating figure.'

The furore has died down somewhat in recent weeks, but not long after #15 went to press, the following snippet appeared in the pages of the paper which first alerted the populace of Merseyside to the entity; *'THE WIRRAL NEWS'*

Ken Wilkinson, an ex-resident of the county, who has long since left these shores for the United States, contacted the paper to tell them of an encounter he experienced way back in the 1960's. He takes up the story thus; *'Myself and a friend were driving on Montgomery Hill towards the Farmers Arms, when we saw a man in a white coat. He was floating off the ground, and we saw him glide down the road for about 20 to 30 feet.'*

'It was the strangest thing we'd ever seen in our lives. It freaked us out.' (Spoken like a true current resident of Los Angeles, Ken - Ed)

The reported sighting occurred at some time around 10pm in the Autumn of 1964. The spirit, if such it was, appeared to be entirely life-like, with no hint of transparency. In fact, if the entity hadn't have been seen to be *floating* above the ground, they might well have assumed there to have been nothing out of the ordinary about the incident

12th March, 1998. Frankby, Merseyside. 'WIRRAL NEWS'

West Kirby Weirdness

Now that the flood of news about Frankby has eased to a mere trickle, the latest area of Wirral to become associated with ghostly encounters...

Jo Wood, used to live together with her family in Island Court, West Kirby. There was an empty plot of land next just next door, and almost from the moment they moved in, Jo's family had been acutely aware that there was something indefinably *wrong* with the neglected mixture of churned earth and weed-infested ground...It was almost as if the very soil itself had been blighted.

Eternally poisoned.

Rendered *sour*.

They had long since managed to learn to live with such a depressing vista 'greeting' them each time they looked out of their upstairs windows, however...Right up to that exceptionally warm evening in the high Summer of 1997, when Jo's nine-year-old daughter ran into her bedroom looking for all the world as though she'd peeked through a gap in Hell's back door.

Jo was shocked into wakefulness when she was informed that her daughter had spotted a strange man standing in the centre of the plot '*wearing funny clothes*.' Apparently, as the girl had gazed down at the figure, it had pointed up at her in a distinctly baneful fashion. It had then pointed

down to the cursed ground at its feet. He then promptly vanished without a trace.

Any initial degree of scepticism on Jo's part was somewhat diluted when she asked her for a description of the silent, ominously pointing figure. The girl sat down and produced a remarkably detailed picture of what appeared to be a cavalier, replete with a jet black hat, feather, pantaloons and shiny (leather?) boots. What made the picture even more extraordinary was the fact that the nine-year-old had never studied that period of history at school and there was therefore no obvious point of reference for her to have focused upon as an inspiration.

Jo was later quoted as saying; *'I tried to laugh it off and calm her down but she will never go into that room in the dark again and I will never stare out of that window for too long.'*

*** Also included as part of the same article, was the following brief account of a man by the name of Gary Sherratt, another resident of West Kirby, who encountered, of all things, a haunted roundabout...

One day in the dead heart of Winter, 1997, Gary was riding his bicycle to work along Saughall Massie Lane from West Kirby at around about 5am with the cold breath of February carressing his cheeks.

The journey was uneventful until he reached the roundabout at Three Lanes End. Then, all of a sudden his ears were assailed by a high pitched wail '*unlike anything he had ever heard before*.'

At the same time as the discordant cry hung on the blade-sharp air the front light on his bike began to unaccountably fade and he became cognizant of a '*strong presence all around him*.'

Gary later told reporters; *'I started moving faster and faster. I panicked and put on my brakes but as soon as I released them I started to speed up, again against my will.'*

'This continued as I passed the roundabout.'

'I was very shaken and confused but the further away from the roundabout I got the warmer I became and my front light started to shine brightly again. I was once again in control of my push bike. After that my bike light regularly faded as I passed the same spot, although I never felt the presence again. I believe the building work to construct the roundabout might have triggered off some psychic phenomenon.'

4th March, 1998. West Kirby, Merseyside. 'THE WIRRAL NEWS'

The Invisible Clothes Ripper

Talk about finding accounts of apparently paranormal goings on in the most unlikely of places (as I believe we were a little earlier), my sister, Kearry, came across this frustratingly brief sojourn into the otherworldly half-buried in the '*Personal Problem*' page of the '*MAIL ON SUNDAY*.' The writer, Karen Hughes, who hails from Liverpool, was seeking advice (in vain it seems, 'cos there was no reply forthcoming at the conclusion of the letter) about what she should do concerning '*unexplainable events that have taken place in my house*.'

Amongst the reported phenomena said to have occurred were a series of inexplicable scratches and dents that suddenly began to appear on Karen's boyfriend's collection of antique furniture. Understandably, if a trifle uncharitably, her partner blamed Karen for the damage, refusing point blank to believe there was anything remotely supernatural about the scratches.

The allegations that she was to blame created an air of increasing tension between the couple which resulted in them succumbing to the inevitable...They decided to up sticks and move house.

If they thought that their problems were over though, they were soon to have their hopes cruelly dashed;

'My eldest son from my former marriage discovered that his clothes were being torn while they hung in his cupboards. And now, for the past six weeks, the activity has been at its highest. We have been visited by three mediums from the Spiritualist Church, two priests and a Methodist Minister...'

None of them seem to have done any good, and at the time of writing, she appeared to be at her wit's end.

If there are any further developments we'll keep you informed.

10th May, 1998. Liverpool 'MAIL ON SUNDAY'

The Return Of Spring-Heeled Jack?

The above heading may, at first glance, seem to be a mite imprudent. Presumptuous even. Especially when you consider that the only link between the famous sightings of the mysterious, black-caped entity that have long-since passed into the shady realm Merseyside folklore and the possibility that *'the grinning, fire-breathing, leaping one'* has chosen to return 90-odd years later, is an item contained in the reader's letters page of *'THE LIVERPOOL ECHO.'*



And yet, even the most cursory glance at the account related here, is enough to conjure up nightmare images of 'Jack,' stalking the backstreets and 'jiggers' on foggy, Liverpool nights....

I guess you'd better decide for yourself;

The letter, written by one Cheryl McDonald from the Dingle, was printed in response to an earlier sighting of a 'ghostly caped figure' previously sighted near the ruins of St Andrew's Church on Rodney Street on the outskirts of Liverpool City Centre.

'My boyfriend and I also saw some very strange things there last Summer,' she reports. *'At 11:35pm, we were walking down Rodney Street when we saw a figure whizz across the road in front of us. It was a blurred shadow of something in a cloak and didn't make a sound. It seemed to vanish in the graveyard.'*

About a fortnight later, my boyfriend and I were again walking past the same church, when we heard voices coming from the cemetery. The entrance to the

pyramid-shaped sepulchre was open. I know this to be impossible, because I have seen the door of the tomb in the daytime and it is sealed with a thick marble slab. But my boyfriend and I clearly saw it open that Summer night. Since then, neither of us will even walk up Rodney Street after dark.'

6th May, 1998. Rodney Street, Liverpool. 'LIVERPOOL ECHO.'

*** A few days later, in the same newspaper, local author and 'ghost-hunter' Tom Slemen, was voicing the alternative opinion that the apparition was in fact the restless spirit of James Mackenzie, a poker fanatic who was so obsessed with the card game that he asked to be buried in a pyramid-shaped tomb....That way he could be interred in an upright position holding a winning hand for all eternity. His final wishes were carried out, and the curious tomb (remarked upon by Cheryl and her boyfriend) stands to this day in the centre of St Andrew's Churchyard...And sometimes, in the ungodly hours before dawn, when the good people of the world are tucked up safely in their beds floating on a lake of half-remembered dreams, the door to a tomb that can never be opened, that has been sealed shut forever, stands ajar regardless and an impossibly white face peers out from the stygian darkness within...

Waiting.

Simply waiting....

GHOSTS AND DEVILS OVER ELSEWHERE The Legend Of (Not-So-Sleepy) Hollow Lane

Another story that featured widely in the tabloid press was the alleged haunting of an 18th century cottage situated in a beautiful corner of the English countryside...

It was the old, old story, familiar to anyone with even the slightest interest in the paranormal, (and just about every horror film-maker since the silent, flickering motion pictures of George Melies); An unsuspecting couple purchase the 'house of their dreams' (a fairy-tale cottage) at a ridiculously low, knock-down price (£44,000 in this case) in an area renowned for its scenic splendour and blissful isolation (the Derbyshire Dales).

And pretty soon after they move in, the self-satisfied smiles of those that assume they have been blessed with a slice of good fortune are turned to the screams of the eternally damned....

In this particular case, the couple in question; Andrew and Josie Smith, managed to endure *'four years of Hell'* after purchasing their new house from the previous owners, who it emerges, they are now planning to sue for failing to tell them that the house was haunted.

Mr and Mrs Smith and their three children; Lindsay, 12, Stephen, 5, and Daniel, one, reportedly ran the gamut of unaccountable *'evil smells'* and the *'apparitions of a young boy and a girl.'*

The cottage was said to have been exorcised on at least five separate occasions by a local minister who, it was reported, claimed he had never encountered such evil in all his time as a servant of God.

At the height of these ultimately ineffective ceremonies, water was said to have seeped from the walls (makes a

a change from the oozing slime across the pond in Amityville), and on one occasion, two of the families pet budgies were found to have died in mysterious circumstances, pressed up against the walls of their wire cage.

The couple were, at the time of going to press, so incensed by the failure of the previous occupants; a pair of sisters named Susan Melbourne and Sandra Mellors, to warn them that the house was haunted.

The tabloids made much of the fact that if the Smiths win their case, it would be the first time since the dark, superstition-riddled days of the Middle Ages that the Supernatural has been given a degree of credence in English law.



The Smiths maintain that the two reticent sisters neglected to make mention of the ghostly residents (always assuming that they were *aware* there was anything worth warning the family about in the first place, of course - Cynical Ed), and that as they lived 25 miles away, they couldn't possibly have been privy to the local reputation of the house. Andrew, (a bemused father caught in the grip of supernatural forces beyond his comprehension, or grabbing himself a shot at his 15 minutes of fame, decide for yourself), was quoted as saying that the *'the strain on our family has been unbelievable. We have been close to breakdown manytimes, mentally and maritaly.*

'I was a cynic about haunted houses before I lived here, but not anymore. Sometimes the ghosts can be in a good mood and tickle your feet in your bed.

'Then other times they lose their temper. They can throw objects around, and one has tried to throttle Josie twice.

'Our five-year-old son, Stephen, has been confronted by an apparition in his bedroom.

'Sometimes the atmosphere goes so thick you can lean over into it and not fall over. You can feel it go right through you. You feel a "whoosh," your hair stands up on end and there's a really foul smell which makes you feel like throwing up.'

The more sardonic amongst us might very well view as just a tad suspicious the fact that the family initially elected to withhold a total of £3,000 of the sale price for repairs to the house, but later refused to hand over the cash on the pretext that their lives had been rendered unendurable.

Not surprisingly, the two sisters instigated county court proceedings December last, in a bid to recover the money.

Equally predictable was the response from the Smith's...They promptly filed a counter-claim, stating that

they had not been forewarned of the cottage's *'paranormal activity.'*

Their case has been given some much-needed validation by several purported witnesses to the phenomena, including the aforementioned Peter Mockford, Vicar of Blurton, but despite their best efforts, the couple have been unsuccessful in their attempts to find a new buyer for their 'accursed' property.

Numerous candidates as to the identity of the ghosts were being bandied about by all and sundry, although the favourites seemed to be the disembodied souls of soldiers executed at the height of Bonny Prince Charlie's failed rebellion in 1745, or else a humble milkmaid named Ellen, rumoured to have been the victim of sexual abuse, and who took her own life by hanging herself in the house.

In an attempt to add a further modicum of validity to the couple's claim, Martin Stote, a reporter for the *'THE DAILY SLUR'* described what he himself experienced when visiting the house; *'The click was quite loud. Loud enough to make me glance towards the staircase door.*

'Then the door opened. Not a foot, or even two feet. But about three feet.

'I expected on the members of the bustling TV crews to appear, or mum Josie Smith, holding baby Daniel in her arms.

'But was there nobody there? Not a soul. Then the door shut firmly. Click

'I glanced quickly around the little cottage.

'Click. I glanced back at the door. It was opening again. As wide as before. And it slammed shut. There was still no one there.'

We'll leave the last word on the controversy though, to one of the much-maligned sisters; Susan Melbourne; *'The pair are talking utter nonsense. I lived there for twenty years and I never saw any ghosts. This is their way of getting out of paying.'*

5th March, 1998. Various Sources.

*** The above case reminds us of countless similar accounts we have on file, even a brief overview of which would fill a magazine ten times the size of this humble publication.

The incident related below, which occurred a couple of years ago, (though the original clipping was only handed to the Editor whilst the current issue was being put together) will doubtless suffice as an example.

A Scottish couple, Leah Livingstone, 19, and her boyfriend Mark, were reportedly driven from their home by otherworldly entities in Kirkcaldy, Fife.

Leah takes up the story; *'The flat was really nice and Mark and I spent a lot of money fixing it up. I was so happy to be staying with him and having a flat of my own, but within two weeks I got the feeling that something wasn't right*

'We began to hear noises - bells ringing - not the telephone or the door-bell, but loud hand bells. At first we thought that it must be coming from next door, but it always seemed to loud for that. We didn't even have any bells in the flat and we tried really hard to ignore it, hoping it would just go away.

'Then we heard something rolling around in our bedside cabinet. It sounded like a glass marble going backwards and forwards - but there was never anything there when we looked.

'Once again we tried not to think about it too much, but then things started actually disappearing from the flat. Everything from money, teabags and even nail clippers. They all just vanished and we never found them again.'

In the wake of such disconcerting events, Leah was beginning to hover on the edge of blind panic, and she grew ever more convinced that some lurking, unseen presence

was watching her, especially whenever she was left alone in the flat.

And in common with our heroes from the last story, she discovered, much to her chagrin, that the previous owner had undergone an eerily similar experience before passing on the keys to Leah. At least this person wasn't coy about coming forwards (long after he'd vacated the premises, at least) and admitting that there had been a whole slew of unaccountable experiences whilst he had resided there.

'I didn't think the flat could be haunted though, Leah was later quoted as saying. 'It was too new and pretty.'

Leah's parents were equally sceptical when they came to visit the flat in a bid to quell their daughter's all-too-obvious fears.... They didn't remain so smugly close-minded for very long, however.

'At half past three in the morning we were wakened up by our ghetto blaster switching itself on. The music was blaring out and Mark jumped up to turn it off, but even though he succeeded in switching it off, unplugged it at the mains and checked that there were no batteries in it, it wouldn't stop no matter what we did. The music turned itself off and we eventually got back to sleep. I got wakened up a little while later by the sound of something running past the bed. I turned to waken Mark, but found that I couldn't move - it was physically impossible!

Mark awoke of his own volition and was confronted with two nightmarish horrors; he was unable to get Leah to move no matter what he tried, she was as stiff as the proverbial corpse. And there was a white figure hovering at the edge of the bed. Galvanised by a sheer and utter terror, he managed at last to shake Leah back into what passed for reality, and grabbing their belongings, they ran for the door.

The couple had had more than enough, and elected to stay with Leah's newly-convinced parents whilst they beseeched the council to re-house them. Unfortunately, they were derided by the authorities and tired of banging her head against a brick wall, she contacted the local newspapers with her story....

The insanely popular 'GMTV' programme, got wind of the couple's ordeal and they, in their infinite wisdom, sent out a spiritualist, Helen Walters, to spend a night at the godforsaken flat to test the validity of the haunting.

Almost from the moment that Helen set foot in the flat, she became aware of 'an eerie presence' and the following day, she was able to confirm with absolute certainty that there were at least five different spirits drifting around the four walls of the flat, all dating from Victorian times. One of these discarnate entities, apparently peeved at her being there, actually attacked her by pressing down hard on her head.

Leah was not satisfied with relying solely on Helen's efforts however, and sought a second opinion. This second spiritualist, who also spent a whole night at the flat, was able to provide a greater degree of detail as to the identity of the ghosts said to reside there. The psychic claimed that the major spirits at play here were two sisters who had previously lived in a large house which had stood on the very same patch of land as the current flat, and that their brother had tragically died in the house.

One of these hypothetical sisters had spinal meningitis which resulted in her dragging her feet across the (then) bare floorboards, thereby adding credence to Leah's assertions that she had often heard the sound of an inexplicable dragging around various parts of the flat.

Despite the gathering of this independent 'evidence' the (ahem) kind, understanding men from the council remained unmoved. Leah had no option but to move in permanently with her parents. Mark was not quite so willing to give up without a fight however. He'd just spent over a thousand

pounds acquiring the damned property, after all. He contacted the second spiritualist once more, and asked her to perform an exorcism on the flat....

The ceremony was apparently successful; she claims she persuaded the spirits it was high time they moved on to the next world (wherever *that* might be) and accept the fact that they were dead. Following the banishment of the restless departed, Mark was able to move back in full time - minus Leah, though. The couple are no longer together, and Leah freely admits that she has a real fear of being left alone anytime, anywhere. She does however, insist that one good thing may have come from her nightmarish experiences;

'I know now not to be scared of dying. I know there's life after death, and hopefully there's somewhere better for me to go.'

23rd May, 1997. Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland. 'BELLA MAGAZINE'

THE MISSOURI SPOOKLIGHTS

The famous 'Spooklights,' that I first read about in an old edition of *'THE UNEXPLAINED'* magazine in the early 1980's (an article by Frank Smyth, if my memory serves me correctly), have been making the news again in the state of Missouri, USA.

The focus this time has been centered upon the town of Hornet, where, on certain nights it is said, mysterious lights can rise slowly out of nowhere to illuminate whole stretches of rolling farmland and the deserted fields that lie within the county. On other, pitch-dark nights, it might very well materialise along East Highway 50 from Oklahoma, dancing across the tarmac and gravel of the roads that double as the state line.

Alternatively, if the wilder reports are to be believed, the lights can run straight towards a hapless witness, only to vanish at the last possible second, to reappear a second later, as it sneaks up from behind to levitate around your shoulders.

'It's a kind of a legend around here, and it's been forever that people have gone out to look for it,' says Suzanne J. Wilson, a local writer. *'I've only seen it in the distance... But I have at least seen it.'*

Noel Grisham, who lives a mile or so off the appropriately-named Spooklight Road, is equally of the opinion that he has sighted the mystery light, too. But he is a tad more sceptical as to its origins; *'It could be a flashlight for all I know. But when the weather's nice and you're sitting out in the yard at night, you'll get five or ten people a week pulling up hollering at you. They'll holler; "Is this where Spooklight is? We want to see Spooklight."*

'So it doesn't really matter whether the folks around here believe. Whatever it is, it's their Spooklight (sounds to me like Noel's been at the ol' Adrian Shine pills-Ed), the one that entranced their grandparents, long before the tourists. And they're proud of it.'

'I don't really know what it is and I hope they never find out. It would spoil the mystery,' chirps in Joe Smith, the president of the splendidly named Bank of Quapaw, just across the state line in Oklahoma.

John W. Northrip, a physics and astronomy professor, claims to have already solved the enigma however. He investigated the phenomenon along with a team of students. They claimed to have discovered that rising heat from surrounding hills was carrying light from a nearby highway and making it hover.

30th October, 1998. Missouri, USA. 'FORT WAYNE NEWS SENTINEL'

The Exorcist:

25 Year's Of Fear And Loathing



It seems hard to believe that a quarter of a century has passed by with such unobtrusive ease since I sat before a black and white TV screen, wide-eyed and not a little terrified, as a deep, stentorian voice announced that '*Somewhere between science and superstition, there is another world. A world of darkness.*'

On the screen, a woman's face is lit by the flickering glow of a candle as she peers around an otherwise pitch black attic. Suddenly, the flame flares dramatically as it hits an air pocket causing the woman to utter a startled scream.

And then the flame is extinguished. Leaving only an ominously waiting darkness.

It lasts but a millisecond, but the effect is intensely frightening just the same and you're struck with the notion that the scene is nothing more than a tantaliser. The merest hint of the horrors yet to come...

The caught-breath silence is shattered by the competing sounds of a young girl screaming for her mother over and over again with a sense of hopeless desperation, and a series of frenetic banging noises issuing from a child's bedroom. It sounds for all the world like a bad night in bedlam.

Or else the nether regions of Hell...

The woman from the attic, now confirmed as the mother in question, charges headlong up the stairs, and just before she wrenches open the bedroom door to confront, God only knows what, there's the briefest glimpse of the legs of a bed shaking violently as if lifted by countless pairs of invisible hands....

The girl's screams take on a low, guttural quality that has more in common with some wild feral animal than anything remotely human...

The mother stands framed in the doorway, framed in a sick, unnatural glow as the camera zooms in to show her face transformed into a mask of fear and revulsion....

We don't get to see the source of the horror and we don't need to.

The screen goes blank save for two words.

They say simply this:

'THE EXORCIST'

25 years...

God, has it really been that long?

I guess it must be because confirmation was forthcoming in the shape of a BBC 2 programme to honour the 25th anniversary smack in the middle of the World Cup (13th June), and pretty compulsive viewing it made too. The film

was released on Boxing Day, 1973, and almost immediately (thanks in no small part to an ingenious publicity campaign) sparked a near-hysterical reaction amongst the movie-going public, and certain members of the clergy. I can remember clearly, despite the fact that I was only nine years old, reading stories in the press about how people who had seen the film had either fainted, thrown up, or had fled the cinema screaming. Of how nuns and priests had formed picket lines outside the picture houses, even here on Merseyside, trying desperately to persuade the would-be viewers from watching *'The abomination unto God'* And of how certain individuals, some of whom had only read the original novel (by William Peter Blatty) or had scanned a series of newspaper reviews of the film, had themselves become 'possessed by the Devil.' and had consequently taken their own lives to be rid of the 'darkness that had invaded their very souls'.

And of course, despite the cynicism of the more rational and less-credulous amongst us, there's no denying that the film derives at least *some* of its power from the fact that the events in the movie did not have their roots entirely based in a work of pure fiction.

As Mark Kermode, the programme's narrator and long-time fan of *'THE EXORCIST'*, is quick to remind us, Blatty had dreamed up the idea for his best-selling novel after hearing the story of a real-life exorcism that had taken place in the suburb of Mount Ranier, Washington, USA, (two years after Kenneth Arnold's now legendary UFO sighting), in 1949.

The brief facts of the matter are these; At the home of a 13-year-old by the name of Douglass Deen, a series of unexplained scratching noises began issuing from the walls. Naturally enough, (and as in the fictional story) the occupants suspected that rats or micesort were responsible. But after they'd called out the pest exterminators, and were informed that they could find not a single trace of any rodent infestation, they were forced to think again. Then it became disconcertingly clear that the sounds only occurred whenever Douglass was in the vicinity. Almost before the family had chance to consider this however, their house fell prey to a full-blown sequence of poltergeist activity; dishes were reported to have sailed through the air unaided, fruit was hurled against the walls, a picture was seen to quite literally *float* across a room, hang motionless in mid-air, and then calmly sail back to its original position. Not long after this defiance of all known laws of conventional science, Douglass's bed began shaking violently with him in it.

Once it had emerged that the trouble had started not long after their son had been messing around with a ouija board (and we all know how dangerous *they* can be, don't we Readers? See elsewhere in this very issue for more on the subject) the family decided it was high time they called upon their local minister, the Reverend M. Winston, to seek his advice.

On February 17th, the minister agreed to spend the night at Douglass's bedside to view for himself what, if anything, occurred. Not long after the boy had climbed beneath the covers, the bed began its by now, familiar shaking routine, and the scratching noises in the walls were back, just for good measure. The good Reverend suggested that Douglass attempt to sleep in a nearby armchair, but the moment the boy sat in it, the chair slid over towards the far wall, slowly tilting before throwing Douglass unceremoniously to the floor. Not to be outdone, Winston made up a temporary bed on the floor, but the second Douglass lay down, the bed began sliding across the floor.

The Reverend was also witness to a series of bizarre welts, actual lettering (including the words *'HELL'* and *'SPITE'*) and even a vision of a face appearing spontaneously upon the boys' body, and at a complete loss to explain what was

happening, he suggested Douglass be taken to two of the nearby Jesuit hospitals; St Louis University and Georgetown.

The resident medical doctors and psychiatrists were unsuccessful in diagnosing Douglass's ailment, and finally, with no other course of action open to them, the family stepped into a virtual time machine and went back 200-odd years to an era where superstition was rife.

As that baleful voice in the movie's trailer would later intone, they sought out; *'Their ONE hope. Their ONLY hope. The Exorcist'*

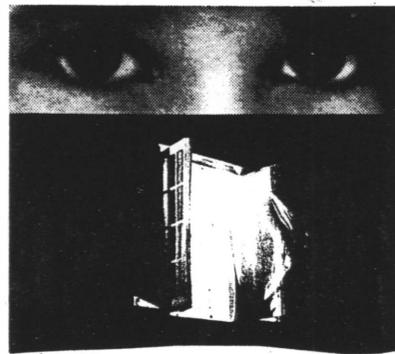
A Jesuit priest agreed to perform the ceremony. He reportedly fasted for two and a half months on a diet of bread and water, and was forced to repeat the ritual on thirty separate occasions.

Fears 'follow Exorcist film'

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY'S

THE EXORCIST

Directed by WILLIAM FRIEDKIN



Inquest ordered on 'Exorcist' boy Blame 'Exorcist' In W. German Suicide;

The presiding 'Demon' reacted in a predictable manner. Douglass was forced to rent the air blue with a mixture of obscenity and blasphemy. He went into fits of the most violent convulsions and spoke in a shrieking voice that bore little resemblance to his own. Even more amazing was the assertion that he sometimes responded to the service of exorcism by speaking fluent Latin - a language which it was claimed, he had never consciously studied.

It was only in the wake of the thirtieth exorcism that the phenomena ceased, and the boy was, so far as is known, freed from 'demonic possession.'

Blatty, had been a junior at Georgetown University at the time of the alleged incident, and was attending a class when he overheard fellow students discussing *'an exorcism that was taking place nearby.'*

Many years later, the story of Douglass Deen came back to haunt the author, who had since made a living scripting movies in the comedy genre. Intrigued by the idea of writing a novel based around the bare 'facts' of the Mount Ranier case, Blatty went to see a Jesuit priest who had taught him in high school, named Father Thomas

Birmingham.

The good father, who subsequently appeared in the film, playing himself, and was also the movie's Technical Advisor, was only too glad to offer his assistance and the benefit of his experience; *'I said, I'll work with you then, on one condition; That you take it seriously. I don't want another "ROSEMARY'S BABY." I want something that will really confront the awesome power of the Evil in God's world. So we worked for a month before he wrote the first page.'*

The novel of course, was to prove to be phenomenally successful, and it seemed perfectly natural that the author's next step would be to set about transferring the powerful narrative and unsettling imagery of the written word onto celluloid film.

And, despite the initial reluctance of most major film companies to even consider touching it with the proverbial barge pole, Warner Brothers, somewhat grudgingly, agreed to take on the project. Having secured the film rights, Blatty's next job was to find a suitable director. He decided upon William Friedkin, having been more than impressed with his handling of *'THE FRENCH CONNECTION.'*

And the rest, as they say, is history. Or rather, more accurately, it has become a heady cocktail of myth, half-truth and dark rumour....

Almost from the start, the subject matter caused a fair degree of consternation amongst the cast and crew.

Jason Miller (*Father Damien Karras*), nicely summed up the superstitious dread that surrounds the subject of the Devil and all his works, (with apologies to Dennis Wheatley) even in the midst of the so-called Age Of Enlightenment;

'When I was filming, I would go to this little restaurant which was in the Jesuit quarters, sit there and study my lines. I was in there one day, and this very, very old priest handed me this little medal of the Blessed Virgin, and he said; "Do you know why I'm giving you this?"

I said; "Why?"

He said "I'm going to tell you something about Intervention. Did you ever hear of the concept of Intervention?"

I said; "No"

He said "It's a nasty concept... Comes out of the 15th century, if you do anything on the Devil.. Anything at all on the Devil, to reveal Him as the Trickster that He is, He will seek retribution against you. Or He will even try to stop what you're trying to do. To unmask Him."

And he said; "This medal will protect you. You be very careful. Take care of yourself."

The old priest's ominous warnings appear to have been well founded if you believe even half the stories that have since sprung up concerning the production of the movie.

Terence Donnelly, the Assistant Director, is quoted as saying that; *'of course, on any fifteen month schedule, as we had, you certainly expect that the laws of probability would presume that certain things would happen but, in my 32 years of making films, I've never had a set burn down...'* *'We did on 'THE EXORCIST.'*

The cause of this devastating conflagration which occurred on a Sunday, of all days, and when no one was actually on the set, destroying the 'the MacNeil house' at the Ceco 54th Street Studios, is certainly something of a mystery. The fire shut down production for about six weeks.

Bill Malley, the production designer, remains perplexed to this day;

'They couldn't find an electrical problem, they couldn't find an arsonist, they couldn't find a substantial reason that fire had occurred.'

And then of course, there were the widely-reported, *'unusually high number of deaths'* involved in the making of the movie....

The actual total seems to vary depending on who it is you afford the greatest level of credence, but Ellen Burstyn (Chris MacNeil. Regan's mother), claims that *'were nine deaths associated with the film. An enormous number. Some very directly, like the actor Jack MacGowan (Burke Denning) who gets killed in the film.* (He of course plays the English movie director who winds up with his head turned all the way round, 360 degrees, at the bottom of that infamous flight of steps leading up to Regan/Pazuzu's bedroom)...

'He completed filming... And died.' (Exactly how Jack died is not immediately apparent from any of the sources that I have to hand. Perhaps someone out there would care to enlighten me - Incurably Inquisitive Ed).

Blatty, understandably keen to help promote the success of the film, in one way or another, was quick to voice his belief that otherworldly forces were plaguing the set.

'It is impossible to put all these things down to coincidence - if anyone wanted proof that evil forces do exist, I think the strange and inexplicable events that occurred during filming would be enough to convince them.'

Also included in Ellen's 'Roll Call Of The Deceased' were Max Von Sydow's brother, who died in Sweden, the Assistant Cameraman's wife's baby, born during the shoot, died before filming wrapped up. The man who refrigerated the set passed away, as did a young, black nightwatchman and Linda Blair's grandfather.

There were a series *near* fatalities, too...

Jason Miller's son Jordan was struck by a speeding motorbike during a trip to the local beach, causing him to spend a brief spell in intensive care, a gaffer's fingers (or was it toes?) were self-amputated on set, and Ellen Burstyn ricked her back (although the latter may have had something to do with the fact that Friedkin insisted upon realism in his movies, and during one scene, had requested that one his assistants bodily push the unfortunate actress to the floor with as much force as possible).

Perhaps the most bizarre claim however, was the report that Blatty's secretary, Noni, had been mysteriously taken ill, whilst her roommate had been gone completely insane and had to be carted off to a lunatic asylum in a straitjacket...

Fortunately for all concerned, the voice of sanity was soon provided by the aforementioned Max Von Sydow (Father Merrin), who points out that if you only have a two to three week shooting schedule, the chances are there will be nothing untoward involved, but that if you have a production that lasts for a year, or eighteen months, as was the case here, then it's almost inevitable that a lot of incidents are going to happen, including accidents, technical hitches, and even deaths.

Friedkin, of course, was only too happy to play up the rumours of a 'Satanic curse' surrounding the film. In later years he would assert that the finished movie contained *'amazing double images'* which showed up on the shots of Linda Blair.

'There are strange images and visions that showed up on the film that were never planned,' he told the appropriately-named Benjamin Fort in an interview that took place in 1973.

'There are double exposures in the little girl's face at the end of one reel that are unbelievable!'

At one stage, during production, he even called upon Father Birmingham to 'Exorcise' the film set. Not surprisingly, the priest declined.

"I said no, Billy. I don't want to increase anxiety or anything like that."

Following the general release of the film, the world's press were fed stories of how Linda had herself been driven crazy by the psychological impact of her starring role in *'THE EXORCIST'* despite her appearing at countless interviews looking perfectly healthy.

Friedkin also attempted to suggest that Linda had consented to appear in *every* scene, including that extremely disturbing crucifix masturbation shot. The fact is though, there was a stand-in for several of the more controversial scenes (including the one referred to above), named Eileen Dietz.

Whatever the doubtful merits of the director's motivations in seeking to publicise the movie, the fact is that when the film was finally released on Boxing Day, 1973, it generated what Mark Kermode has called *'a tidal wave of audience hysteria, the likes of which hadn't been seen since the opening of the 1931 Frankenstein, from which patrons ran screaming, causing cinema managers to lay on smelling salts and ambulance crews for the adversely affected.'*

Not too many weeks had passed before the film's reputation, became such that stories began to circulate that just viewing the film could be hazardous to your health. Some of the tales took on an almost modern urban folklore-ish sense of unreality, (incidentally, the finished print of the film, at that stage over 200 hours of un-edited footage, had to be submitted to the highly appropriate address; 666, 5th Avenue - how's that for synchronicity?) There were reports of people fainting, vomiting, heart attacks, and at least one miscarriage.

In Berkeley, an unnamed man sustained superficial injuries after he literally threw himself at the screen in an ultimately doomed attempt to *'get at the Demon.'*

In the wake of that account, *'THE TORONTO MEDICAL POST'*, featured an article that stated that four women had been confined to psychiatric care after seeing the movie. *'There is no way you can sit through that film without receiving some lasting negative or disturbing effects,'* Dr Louis Schlan, a Chicago psychiatrist was quoted as saying. Even more worrying were the worldwide accounts of a number of cases of criminal and suicidal behaviour the blame for which was levelled at the undeniably powerful influence of *'THE EXORCIST.'*

In the former West Germany, the death of 19-year-old Rainer Hertrampf, who shot himself with an automatic rifle some undisclosed time after seeing the film, led to the usual calls for it to be banned.

Back here in England, an inquest concerning the death of 16-year-old John Power, who had somehow managed to sneak past the assembled nuns, ticket collectors, and ushers, to see the film - strictly X-rated, you'll remember, found that the fatal epileptic fit he suffered was entirely unconnected with the movie.

Nevertheless, his death did nothing to allay the fears of an increasingly credulous public, and in October 1974, *'THE EXORCIST'* was cited as being responsible for the murder of nine-year-old Sandra Simpson by teenager Nicholas Bell who told a York Crown Court; *'It wasn't really me that did it. There was something inside me. Ever since I saw that film 'THE EXORCIST,' I felt something take possession of me. It has been inside me ever since.'*

Some of the other alleged supernatural/subliminal phenomena connected with the movie include a ghostly face appearing in a cloud of Max Von Sydow's condensed breath (caused by the below zero temperatures induced by the refrigeration of the Regan bedroom set), as he sits by the possessed girl's bed. This supposed 'face' was said to have been *'consciously invisible'* to the film's viewers. Likewise another subliminal scene, when Jason Miller prays in a local church, a skull-shaped shadow was said to have appeared on the white wall behind him. Neither of

these images are discernible on the video copy that I have in my (ahem)possession.

Rumours that Warner Brother's may have withdrawn all copies of the video print and recut the film, removing the subliminal clips in case they should happen to run into legal difficulties, are rife, but as Mark Kermode points out, perhaps the most likely explanation for their absence is that they didn't exist in the first place.

That the film retains a fearsome reputation, even today (despite the purported numbing of the senses in the wake of a plethora of so-called 'video nasties') is perhaps best illustrated by the blank refusal of a female friend of mine to even *consider* borrowing my copy of the film, even though she'd viewed the anniversary programme and found it to be nothing short of fascinating.

When I asked her why she didn't want to see the movie in its entirety, she looked at me as though I'd put forward the suggestion that she strip naked and walk widdershins around St Andrews Churchyard on the wrong side of midnight in a Pazuzu mask, shouting 'Your mother sucks cocks in hell' over and over until the grey light of dawn... I didn't repeat my offer.

The incidents of supposed paranormal phenomena continued, albeit on a much-smaller, less publicised scale, with the release in 1990, of the 'proper' sequel (if we conveniently skip over the abysmal *'EXORCIST II - THE HERETIC'*) *'EXORCIST III-LEGION.'*

In an interview just prior to the film's premiere, William Peter Blatty, alluded to his experiments with Electronic Voice Phenomena or EVP.

This highly-subjective process is said to involve leaving a tape recorder in a closed room, preferably sealed against all outside noise and stimuli, but with the recording volume switched on full. Alternatively, you can do pretty much the same thing, except you remain in the room to ask any passing disembodied entity whatever questions may happen to take your fancy.

Whichever method is used, (and many researchers, including Mike McKeown of the now-sadly defunct *'GHOSTWATCH'*, worried about the inherent dangers of messing around with 'outside forces,' would strongly advise against using either), the idea is to rewind the tape at the end of the session and listen to what, if anything, is recorded there....

Blatty, apparently heedless of the advice to leave well alone, experimented with his own recording equipment and had this to say in a magazine interview we have on file; *'At the risk of sounding like a wacko, I'll tell you now that it is an authentic phenomenon, these taped voices. I don't know what they are. I don't know how they get on the tape.'*

'But they're there. All those voice messages in the novel 'LEGION,' were tapes that I had made at Magno Sound Studio in New York City, which was so loud that I sent it to Columbia University for analysis. Back it came with the result that it could not possibly be a human voice: the graph was perfectly even; with a human voice that's not so - it's irregular.'

The Interviewer (Steve Biodrowski, for all you completists out there), then states that what he found particularly interesting was that some of the voices' messages changed if the tape speed was changed. Was that based on one of your tapes?

Blatty: *'Yes. The answer was "Lacey," which was not responsive to my question; "Is there a God?"'*

'Played at twice the speed it became "Hope it."

'And the sampling at Magno Sound was not clearly intelligible until I played it at twice the speed I recorded it. One night, two people came to my house to ask for a demonstration. On the playback - I had asked to hear the names of the two people - I heard one of the names. I

altered the speed, and that same piece of information became the other person's name - and the names were totally different. Don't ask me how - whether there are two different frequencies riding on top of each other, and changing the pitch by changing the speed allows one frequency to become audible while the other is not - I don't know. My friends were utterly stunned.

'I'll tell you this, though. Based on my own experiments, if these are the dead, they don't know any more now than when they were alive. No supernatural powers or anything else - they're just on a different frequency.'

'Jung talked about that, the other side being a higher frequency, because they are invisible to us, like a spinning propeller. In fact, one of the things I heard on the tape was a voice saying; "We have two souls," and much later, in my readings on Carl Jung, I came across a slim volume of his research on animistic beliefs among the Sennoi tribe in Africa, and one of their beliefs is that we have two souls.

Interesting phenomenon, but I've stopped it. It takes too much intense concentration. I can't do it for more than twenty minutes at a time. And you learn nothing. "Hello, my name is John. I'm fine. How are you?"

'You're not going to get any great illumination.

'There may be philosophers on the other side but, curiously, if you ask significant and important questions, or broadly philosophical ones, you get either very cryptic answers or none at all. Evasive'

And maybe, when you get right down to where the cheese binds, it's that very evasiveness, that child-like stubborn refusal to provide us with anything more profound than the type of small-talk you pass with a stranger, sharing the park bench during your afternoon lunch break, that feeds our darkest fears. Is there an afterlife? Does the human soul survive biological death? And if so, what awaits us on 'the other side?'

Unbridled joy at the end of heart's longing?

A permanent half-light, where nothing is certain but uncertainty?

A nocturnal land of dark shadows and darker dreams?

'THE EXORCIST' may not have provided all (or indeed any) of the answers.

But it sure helped drum up a whole new set of questions, including the one that frightens me most;

Is there someone inside you???

Lee Walker. New Ferry, Merseyside.
June, 1998.

The 'Real-Life' Exorcist Speaks Out

And wouldn't you just know it. several months or so after I'd finished writing the piece on the 'haunting' of that damned house in Derbyshire, along comes an interview with the very same Reverend Mockford, who attempted to exorcise Lowes Cottage. The March 7th edition of 'THE DAILY EXPRESS' somehow contrived to slip through the net until it was rescued by one of our regular 'clipsters' (step forward - Thomas 'smell my cheeseplan!' Brown), and so, even though it may be hopelessly out of sequence, we include it here regardless...The good Reverend begins his spiel by asserting that which you may think is patently obvious from the outset;

'I believe in ghosts and the paranormal. Some people find it hard to understand that a scientist should believe in such apparitions, but to me there is no contradiction. Indeed, it is

my scientific training, as much as my theological, that has led me to conclude that such things exist.

I am a minister of the Church of England, but I am also a 'Ghostbuster.' As such I have been involved in what are commonly called exorcisms during my nine years in a parish in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire.

I am a hard-headed and rational man, but nearly every fortnight I am called in to resolve hauntings or paranormal disturbances. In my work I come across all sorts of ghosts, most of which are not remotely frightening.

Hauntings can be broadly divided into three categories. First, there are psychic phenomena. They include bookcases being rearranged, pictures being pulled off walls, ornaments being thrown about rooms without apparent cause. Scientists call the inexplicable movement of solid objects psychokinesis - carried out by what are popularly known as Poltergeists. These incidents are invariably linked to the presence of strong, repressed emotions in the house.

The second kind of haunting is the truly paranormal. It may be a lady walking downstairs in a gown; it may be Roman soldiers marching across a floor; it may be the sound of a child crying. Lots of people experience the same thing over and over again, as though a video were being repeatedly played with a particular room, doorway or staircase for its setting. Such experiences may cause fear but otherwise seem to bring little harm.



Less agreeable are cases involving disturbed spirits. People can feel attacked in their houses, they may be pulled from their beds. In one recent incident, I visited a woman whose bedclothes flew off her bed every night at 3am. After my blessing, it stopped happening.

As I walked through a doorway in one man's home, I was hit by what felt like scalding water coming straight up my trousers. As soon as I passed the threshold, the sensation ceased.

I couldn't believe it, so I called in another clergyman and exactly the same thing happened to him. It later emerged that the home-owner had recently suffered the loss of a relative. As soon as he let go of the grief, the phenomenon stopped.

These kind of events often happen in places where considerable trauma has taken place. Buildings absorb what has gone on inside them. In the way that a cathedral absorbs the prayers of those that worship in it and requires the feeling of being a holy place, so other buildings feel uncomfortable because of sad or evil events that happened within their walls.

Every diocese has a specialist team that deals with hauntings, but I am often called to deal with the more problematic ones.

As a scientist, I look for the clearest, simplest explanation that fits the facts and, in many cases, the most rational explanation is the paranormal one. If there is a terrible smell in a certain room, you look for a physical cause. But if the drains have been checked, or there is no dead rat under the floorboards - and you can find no physical cause - then a paranormal explanation becomes a legitimate hypothesis.

Science requires a genuinely open mind. The essence of that open mind was thus described by Sherlock Holmes: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Paranormal activity is also enhanced if people indulge in practices that encourage it. Ouija Boards, Tarot readings...these are things that can lead to great unhappiness and I regard them as being extremely dangerous. Consulting mediums to see into the future is expressly forbidden in the Holy Bible.

But a haunting in your house is nothing to get unduly alarmed about. Prayer does work and I have learned this as much through experience as through faith.

I personally deal with 20-30 cases a year and our team handles more than 100. These are not strictly exorcisms, since that word applies to people possessed by evil spirits. For buildings, we use prayer and blessings to cleanse them. And it works. In 99 per cent of cases, after a single visit people do live free from fear.

I cannot claim complete success from a first encounter, since the case at Lowes Cottage - which has attracted so much attention - has so far needed five separate sessions of blessings and prayer.

In some buildings, unhappy incidents which took place in the distant past cause other, more recent, miseries.

Trauma can build upon traumas and removing them involves going back layer by layer, from the most recent to the earliest - like peeling the skin of an onion.

Hauntings can often happen in new houses and terraced streets, as well as in ancient cottages and castles. The cases our teams have encountered range from unpleasant smells to wet walls, from visions of strange figures to recurring dreams - though to my disappointment I have yet to set eyes on a transparent lady in white.

People do get frightened by the paranormal but there is no need. I certainly don't fear it - in fact, I feel great sympathy for the ghosts that I come across. There is a sadness about them and you can feel the frustration of spirits trying to escape. Above all, these encounters make me realise that we live in a world that is deeper and more complicated than we can ever imagine.'

7th March, 1998. 'DAILY EXPRESS'

Witchcraft And Demonology In The World Today The Witches Of Ghana

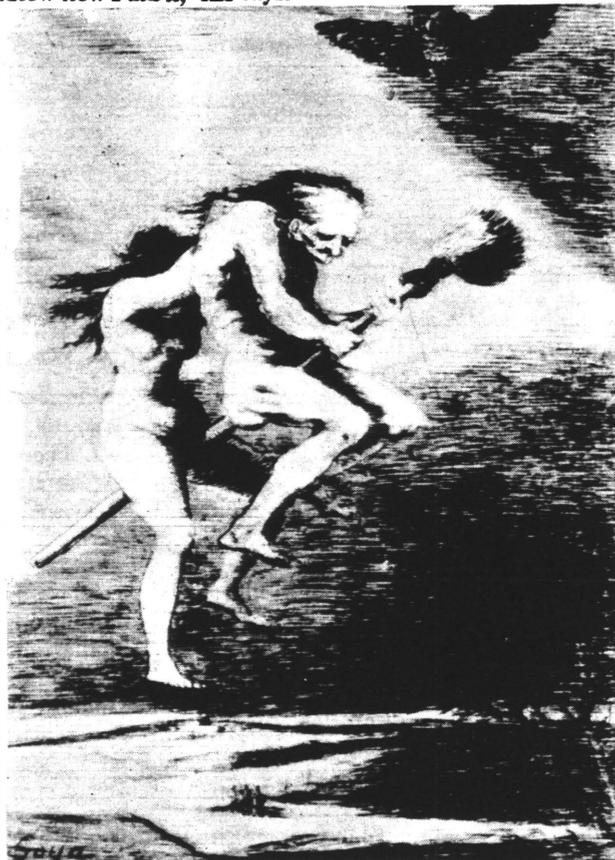
In the heart of modern-day Ghana in general, and in the region of Gambaga in particular, belief in the power of witchcraft remains highly prevalent.

The case of a young woman, accused of killing a little boy by employing a sinister form of magic, has made the headlines in the local press. In a sequence of events that are eerily familiar to anyone well-versed in the superstition-riddled history of both 16th and 17th Europe, the woman in question was attacked by her former friends

and neighbours, shunned by her own family, and was finally driven into involuntary exile, along with the one person who refused to abandon her and instead chose to remain loyal; her husband.

She sought refuge in Gambaga, the village that has recently become something of a haven for those suspected of witchcraft. The residents there are forced to live in a cluster of makeshift, mud-walled compounds situated on the edge of the town, nurturing a vain hope that they will one day be allowed to retain some last vestige of their former lives.

'I don't know what happened,' says the woman, who is known only by the name of Banga, and who now is burdened with the belief that she somehow managed to place a curse upon her nephew, first making him sick, before eventually killing him. 'Only God can tell I don't know how I did it,' she says.



In a country where cellular phones and satellite TV mix freely with age-old beliefs in the power of the supernatural, where everyone from cabinet ministers to missionaries believes in witchcraft, the 'Witch-Villages' of Northern Ghana have become the centre of a debate over how a modern government should deal with sometimes brutal traditions.

If the Witches of Gambaga live in abject poverty, forbidden from leaving their place of exile without prior permission, their ghetto is also one of the few places where they are safe.

'If I go back I would not survive,' says one woman, Hawa, who came to Gambaga a few months prior to the compiling of this report. 'The father of the baby I bewitched would hunt me down.'

Since time immemorial, the efficacy of witchcraft has been used in this part of the world to explain natural phenomena, everything from polio to impotence. In another disconcerting echo of the European witch lore of the Middle Ages, nearly all the accused are elderly women, the weakest members of African village life. On many occasions, the accuser is a jealous neighbour or another wife in a polygamous household.

*** Two teenagers were charged with planning a high school shooting as part of a Satanic killing crusade. Grant Boyette, 18, and Justin Sledge, 16, were originally charged with conspiracy to murder, but the new charges were made public after prosecutors described Boyette as the ringleader of a group called *'THE KROTH,'* which sought to destroy its enemies and practiced 'Satanic' worship.

For months, the small group of misfit teenagers allegedly plotted an elaborate plan to raid Pearl High School, in Missouri, USA., and they chose member Luke Woodham as an assassin.

Woodham, 16, was charged with stabbing his mother to death in their home on October 1st, 1997, and then calmly driving to school and gunning down two students - including a girl he'd dated - and wounding seven others. Four other teenagers were also charged with conspiracy to murder, and they each faced up to 20 years in prison, if they wound up being convicted.

The indictments claimed that Boyette and Sledge met several times with Woodham to convince him that *'murder was a viable means of accomplishing the purposes and goals of the shared belief system.'*

Investigator Greg Eklund testified in a court hearing that Woodham's former girlfriend, Christina Menefee, was targeted.

'On many, many occasions, Boyette told Luke Woodham that he should just kill her and be done with it so he won't have to see her again,' Eklund said.

Menefee, 16, was the first person Woodham shot after taking a rifle into a crowded school commons before classes on 1st October, 1997.

17th October, 1997. Missouri, USA. 'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** In Minneapolis, USA, Yer Vangm was forced to go to court clutching a bag filled with papers, hoping against hope that she would be able to perform a native ceremony that would cause the death of anyone who lied at her trial. Not surprisingly, you may feel, the presiding judge refused point blank to agree to her request, saying that she would have to go and find another venue to perform the Hmong ceremony. Equally predictably, Yer was less than ecstatic about a jury's verdict in a racial discrimination case that she brought against her former employer.

The Hmong are a mountain people who emigrated to the United States from Southeast Asia after the disastrous Vietnam war.

Vang apparently had counted on asking for divine intervention in ensuring that justice was seen to be done.

'I'm sure the Gods will understand,' said Judge Harry Crump, who decided that *'rules of decorum do not allow demonstrations within the courtroom area.'*

He also rejected Vang's motion for a new trial or a revised judgement.

Vang sued Caterair International Corp, an airline catering company where she was a food preparation worker from 1989 until 1996, for racial discrimination.

In October, 1997, a jury rejected all of Vang's claims, except one. The jurors ruled that a supervisor had assaulted her in 1996, by yelling and putting a finger in her face. She was awarded \$1,107.

After leaving the courtroom in something of a huff, Vang went straightaway to a Twin Cities cemetery and emptied her bag of papers - some of them court documents, others decorated with scalloped edges and painted red - on the grave of Yee Lee, a Hmong Shaman.

As the paper burned, she wept and chanted in her native tongue, bowed and kissed the ground. Her interpreter said she was asking God for justice - and that anyone in her

legal case who was dishonest or discriminated against her should die.

'Effective today, you will see something happen,' said Vang's interpreter, Chanhla Yang. He also added, with a due sense of exhortation and dread that the deaths would take place within three years.

14th December, 1997. Minneapolis, USA. 'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** In Gold Hill, Oregon, USA, police chief Katie Holmboe was fired for selling Mary Kay cosmetics out of her cruiser and praying on behalf of a suspect that she believed was possessed by the Devil, officials said.

She was the only paid officer in the 1,000 resident town.

28th August, 1998. Gold Hill, Oregon, USA. 'USA TODAY'

*** A Broadmoor patient fully admitted attempting to murder the infamous Yorkshire Ripper by stabbing him ten times in the eyes with a ball-point pen.

Ian Kay, aged 30, was sent to the mental hospital after he'd stabbed a Woolworth's shop manager to death in 1995. During his tenure, Kay accepted he attacked Peter Sutcliffe in his room after asking, in all pretended innocence, if he could please borrow an envelope.

Sutcliffe, 47, was blinded in his left eye (aaah, shame) during the 5 minute attack in March, 1997.

Kay informed the doctors that he set about attacking Sutcliffe *'because it was the Devil's work.'* He was further quoted as saying; *'He said God told him to kill 13 women, and I say the Devil told me to kill him because of that.'*

He was sentenced to be detained without restriction of time, although there are those who think he should have been given a medal for his actions....The families of the Ripper's victims, for a start.

28th January, 1998. Broadmoor. 'DAILYMAIL'

*** Vivian Miranda, 39, of Sayville, New York, USA, and her daughter Serena, 20, were charged with second-degree murder after they suffocated another daughter, Charity, because they believed that the 17-year-old was possessed by Demons.

20th January, 1998. Sayville, New York, USA. 'USA TODAY'

*** And a town hall cleaner by the name of Sophie Eotvos, has been (ahem) unceremoniously sacked for the heinous crime of being a self-confessed Witch.

The mayor in superstition-riddled Ripiceni, Romania, claims that Sophie, aged 65, lit a set of candles on an altar and placed a curse upon him. Seems her magic wasn't so efficacious though, that it could save her job.

8th May, 1998. Ripiceni, Romania. 'DAILYSLUR'

The Curse Of Macbeth Strikes Again

For just about the only time in my time on the planet, the so-called 'comic' Jim Davidson actually made me utter something approaching a giggle...But only because I was laughing *at* him, rather than *with* him. The racist, sexist, hurvable cockney with a hugely intelligent line in catch-phrases (and I don't think), fell victim to the well-known 'Curse Of Macbeth,' after he'd foolishly mentioned the title of what is universally referred to (especially amongst the actors and stagehands) as the Scottish Play, during a performance of 'Dick Whittington.' Within mere minutes, the pantomime at Manchester's Palace Theatre suffered a string of mishaps. First, Davidson accidentally struck his girlfriend Debbie Corrigan on the head with his sword, the nearly stabbed co-star Victor Spinetti in the eye.

Women accused of sorcery have few choices but to seek protection in a 'Witch Village.' There, the chief is believed to have the ability to drain a Witch's powers before shunting her off to live in the sorcerers ghetto, where most of the women eventually come to believe they really are Witches.

Gambaga, a collection of mud-and-thatch huts and colonial-era fieldstone buildings, is one of the three known 'Witch Villages' remaining in Ghana. During the last century, nearly every village in the region had its own Witch ghetto, but they gradually disappeared under pressure from the missionaries and the British colonial authorities. Gambaga has a population of a few thousand, about 130 of whom are supposed to be Witches. According to reporters it looks very much like any other ordinary town...Except that the Witches' camp is spotlessly neat. 'No men,' one woman explains.

The alleged Witches, most of them in their 40's and 50's, are largely uneducated and come from small, rural villages where fear of witchcraft runs deepest. Many will spend decades in the camp, living there until they die.

Most are desperately poor. While the chief offers the women protection and the eventual promise of a proper burial, he provides them with little in the way of food. Instead, they rely on charity, the sale of firewood and the food they receive from working in the chief's fields.

Ruling over Gambaga is Chief Yahaya Wume, a sometimes benevolent autocrat with a firm belief in the righteousness of the Witches ghetto.

'It's not by magic that I keep them,' he says through a translator.

'It's merely a tradition handed down from generation to generation to provide sanctuary.'

The Witches ghetto stands near the humble, thatched-roof dwelling that the chief calls his palace.

Yahaya's rule has changed little from the days when his forefathers ran Gambaga. Here, his word is law, and he is greeted with bows and hand-clapping when he walks through town with his black, wooden staff.

He becomes very angry when he talks about the accusations levelled against the Witch Villages from hundreds of miles away in Accra, the capital.

'What crime have I committed?' he demands.

'Those that actually did it - are proved to be Witches - I accept,' he says. 'But we sealed them here to prevent them from being attacked.'

Still, after existing quietly for at least 150 years, the Witch Villages have become a political issue.

Government officials, human rights activists and church groups decry them as inhumane prisons where elderly women languish unless the chief decides they no longer pose a threat and their home village will take them back. Freed Witches must also repay the chief for his protection, giving him a goat, some chickens and the equivalent of about \$10, a sizable payment for a Ghanaian villager.

'It is obnoxious and is a violation of the rights of women,' says Ama Benyiwa-Doe, Ghana's deputy minister of employment and social welfare, who wants to do away with the villages and prosecute the chiefs.

But even the harshest of the critics concede that in a country where an accusation of witchcraft can well and truly be a death sentence, the Witch Villages provide a necessary haven. The chief 'is not a cruel man,' claims the Reverend Emmanuel Arongo, the Anglican bishop for the Gambaga region and a harsh critic of the camps. 'What he's able to do, he does.'

Some activists say that instead of closing the havens, the government should improve the lives of the women by providing aid, particularly deliveries of food and clean water.

As for the women, well, some dream of the day when their accusers die off and they can return to their own villages, but for others the Witch ghettos become their real homes.

'I won't go anywhere,' says Banga. 'I don't want to go back. This is my home.'

5th January, 1998. Gambaga, Ghana, Africa
'COLUMBUS DISPATCH'

The Workers Of Dark Miracles



Proof that the Witches of Gambaga would be well-advised to remain safe in their self-created sanctuary can be provided in spades by the following account from an equally remote village in Papua, New Guinea.

Five women suspected of employing sorcery to attain their heart's desire were either hacked to death or else strangled (somebig choice!) deep in the highlands of that country.

Last reports indicated that six men had been charged with the killings at Navi village in late January, this year. Chief Inspector Buckley Iarume of the Eastern Highlands district.

Iarume was quoted as saying that the villagers in the South Pacific Ocean country believed implicitly that the women had been casting a powerful mixture of evil spells and curses, which had resulted in both people and pigs dying under mysterious circumstances.

12th February, 1998. Navi Village, Papua, New Guinea
'COLUMBUS DISPATCH'

*** Israeli right-winger Avigdor Eskin was sentenced to four months in jail for placing a death curse on the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a mere two weeks prior to his assassination.

Eskin was convicted last May for incitement to violence because he uttered the curse in front of TV cameras.

Two weeks before the November, 1995, assassination, Eskin and several, unnamed others, performed a so-called 'pulsu denura' ceremony outside Rabin's home in Tel Aviv. A 'pulsu denura' is a Jewish mystical curse which calls for someone's death.

21st July, 1997. Jerusalem, Israel 'ST. LOUIS
POST-DISPATCH'

Then a microphone packed in, and the lights went out in what appeared to be a power cut. Stage manager Anthony Bishop broke his arm after falling down a flight of stairs. He'd been carrying his young son who'd broken a leg...'*And all because of the M-word*' Davidson 'quipped' sometime later (arf, and indeed, arf'!!!!)

16th January, 1998. Palace Theatre, Manchester 'DAILY EXPRESS'

*** And finally, for this issue at least, consider this case from Greeneville, Tennessee, where six young Kentuckians, including one who claimed to be none other than Satan's daughter, pleaded guilty to murdering a couple and their six-year-old daughter. The killing took place as the family were returning from a Jehovah's Witness conference.

None of the six will face the death penalty, but were all likely to be imprisoned for life without the chance for parole for three counts of murder under the terms of their plea agreement.

Prosecutor Berkeley Bell said that the deal was supported by the relatives of Vidar and Delfina Lillelid, who were shot to death with their daughter, Tabitha, in April, 1997.

Their son, Peter, aged 2, survived a bullet through his eye and is currently living with relatives in Sweden.

The pleas, which were entered three days before the scheduled start of jury selection, were accepted by Judge James Beckner, who asked the six if they were guilty. Each answered, 'Yes.' None showed any trace of emotion.

The six are; Jason Blake Bryant, 15, Natasha Cornett, 19, Crystal Sturgill, 18, Karen Howell, 18, Dean Mulins, 20, and Joe Risner, 21.

The brief, but nonetheless shocking details of the murders are these; The Lillelids were headed home from the aforementioned conference in Johnson City on April 6th, 1997, when they stopped at a highway rest stop in northeast Tennessee. Their bodies were later found in a muddy ditch along a gravel road, several miles away. Vidar, shot six times, and Delfina, shot eight times, died with their children in their laps.

Two guns were used to shoot the family. Jason Bryant, who was aged just 14 at the time, was one of the killers. Investigators were unable to determine who else pulled the trigger.

The suspects were arrested in Arizona while driving the Lillelid's van two days after the slayings.

Cornett, the reputed ringleader, told her first lawyer that she was the daughter of Satan. Prosecutors say that two days before the killings, the group held a bizarre ritual in a Pikeville, Kentucky, motel room that included self-mutilation and bloodletting.

22nd February, 1998. Greeneville, Tennessee, USA. 'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

The Grim Reaper Is For Real

Mark Chorvinsky, Editor of the highly-acclaimed 'STRANGE MAGAZINE,' (as well as being a more than capable stage magician), has apparently collated over a hundred reports and eye-witness accounts concerning one of history's most enduring images; the personification of death as The Grim Reaper. The entity, replete with the grinning, mirthless rictus of a skull shadowed by a monk's cowl and clutching an hour glass in one hand and a lethal-looking scythe in the other, has played a large part in the widely disparate cultures of both ancient and modern-day man.

Mark's findings, which centre upon a string of sightings that have occurred over recent decades, were presented at the 'Fortean Times Unconvention,' which took place in April, 1998.

Understandably, many of the alleged witnesses have been more than a little slow in coming forward with their stories, and remain reluctant to state publicly what they have seen. Not only is there the ever-present threat of ridicule from the hordes of close-minded sceptics, but by its very nature, the incidents occur at a time of intense personal grief brought about by the loss of a loved one.



'The Angel Of Death,' has been an intrinsic part of Western folklore for thousands of years. In Occult tradition, whilst there are very many different types of representation, they can be loosely categorised into two camps; the Demon, and the Demonified projection. Of the former, we can say that Occult tradition also decrees that this personal Angel, the spirit that has helped guide us throughout the period of our lives (or has, at the very least, tried its damndest to), only becomes visible to us at the very point of death, and it can on no way assist (if that's the right word), in the actual process of our dying.

In Hebraic lore however, the second personification of the Angel Of Death, is far more dramatic and is said to appear as the Demon Lilith, a temptress intent upon inducing the human soul to 'sin with her,' even as the person is lying helpless on their deathbed. The purpose of course, is to procure the soul to suffer eternal damnation in Hell.

In the Qabbalistic tradition the Angel Of Death is called Samael, whose main aim is to 'erase the immoral imperfections absorbed by the soul of a dying man' in order that he may ascend to the Heavenly Spheres to share floorspace with the assembled ranks of Cherubim and Seraphim.

In Mohammedan lore, it is Azrael, 'the rush of the wind caused by his wings being heard when someone dies.'

In most parts of Europe however, it is the Guardian Of The Threshold that man comes to face as he draws his dying breath. This awesome-sounding entity is actually less an Angel, more a Demonification of the spiritual elements 'that remain undeveloped within the being of the dying person.'

Ahriman too, is well-known as a Death Demon within esoteric lore, but the being we are most concerned with here, has more in common with the symbol of plague and

pestilence that stalked the whole of Europe during the aptly-named Dark Ages.

The article which we have on file, mentions the fact that in the modern-day accounts at least, the Angel Of Death is a gentle and patient negotiator *'who helps people through death, or sometimes persuades them to stay alive. He even talks to witnesses and calms them.'*

He is said to glide, in the manner of a phantom, rather than walk in the conventional sense, and is clothed in a black monk's hood over the requisite skeleton face with hollow eye sockets, sometimes aflame with a blue or red fire.

'People I have interviewed are totally sincere about this,' claims Mr Chorvinsky. *'There are cases where there are multiple witnesses, where two or more people who didn't even know the person who died have seen the Grim Reaper.'*

Included in the accounts Mark has in his collection is the following from a former nurse, now aged 76, who saw the hooded figure 30-odd years ago when she was working in a Texas hospital.

She described how she saw a tall, imposing figure dressed in what appeared to be monk's robes, standing motionless by the bed of an old lady.

'His face was a skull with tiny red fires for eyes. His hands, skeletal, were patiently folded over each other inside the dark sleeves.'

'My impression was that he was very patient, waiting,' she said.

The nurse, who despite the serenity of the scene, fled the room in abject terror, later found out that the patient had been fighting off death for over a week and did in fact, pass away not long afterwards.

Then there was the case of the man from New York, who claimed the Grim Reaper warned him that his wife had taken an overdose.

He told Mark how the apparition appeared at his side in his living room one evening holding the uniform scythe. He said; *'He wore a black-hooded robe. His face was a gleaming white skull. He was just looking at me. I felt a cold chill come over me.'*

The figure then travelled through the door and vanished.

The man, filled with a dark foreboding, raced to his bathroom, where he found his wife unconscious, with an empty bottle of pills at her side. Fortunately, and thanks in no small part to the Grim Reaper, she made a full recovery later in hospital.

24th April, 1998. General 'DAILYMAIL'

Religious Phenomena Studying The Power Of Prayer

In Clearwater Beach, Florida, AIDS patients who were being prayed for, and remained blissfully unaware of the fact, were reportedly healthier a few months later than equally ill patients who received no prayers.

A study of 40 patients was commissioned by the California Pacific Medical Center, San Francisco, and one of the psychiatrists based there, Elisabeth Targ, was moved to comment; *'The results of the study are small and have to be replicated, but it's obvious that this is worth pursuing.'*

Before the study began, patients in two groups were matched to about the same age and comparably ill.

Prayer volunteers represented 10 religions and healing traditions. For an hour a day, for one week, each patient was prayed for by a volunteer who was given a photograph and first name. Everyone in the prayer group eventually received prayers from all 10 volunteers during the study. The second group of 20 wasn't prayed for.

Six months later, those prayed for had spent an average of 10 days in the hospital compared with 68 days for patients excluded from prayers. They also had less severe AIDS-related new diseases and less emotional distress.

A similar study on heart attack patients several years ago also found prayer beneficial.

'Our understanding of consciousness is incomplete...There may be even more contact between people than we might ordinarily assume,' says Targ.

But the findings remain a trifle dubious because patients excluded from the prayers in the study probably were prayed for by someone else, argues William Jarvis of the National Council Against Health Fraud.

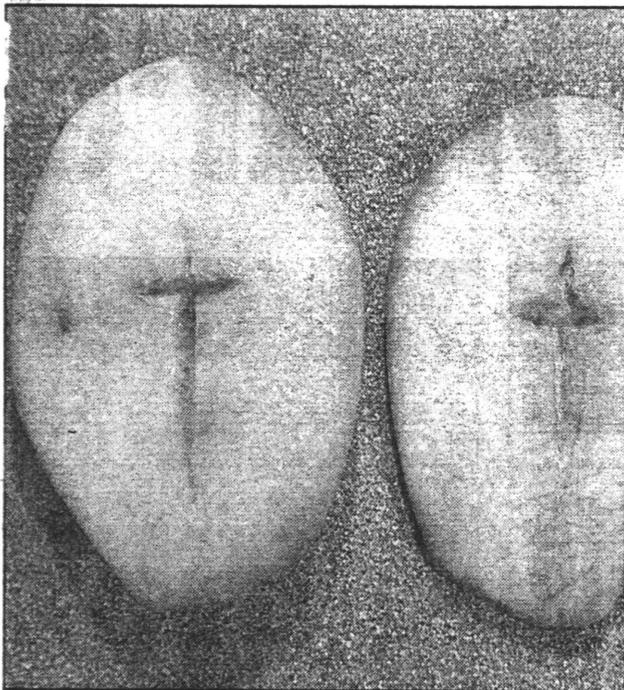
'They're not a true-control group.'

12th March, 1998. Clearwater Beach, Florida 'USA TODAY'

'The Holy Spud'

Maintaining the tradition of finding symbols of religious significance in the middle of a seemingly mundane vegetable, (witness last year's 'holy writing' discovered inside a tomato and the apparent message from Allah hidden in an aubergine), Linda Coles, 32, claims that she has found a crucifix inside a common or garden potato....

What made the 'find' even more remarkable, at least in Linda and her family's eyes, was the fact that the spud had been sliced during the height of the Easter celebrations.



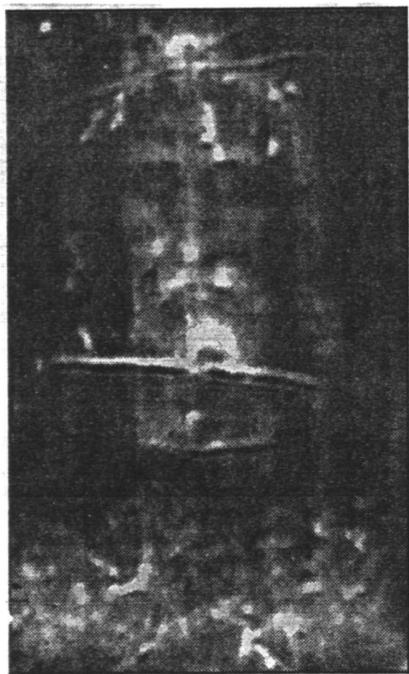
'We aren't really religious, Linda's husband Shaun, 35, was later quoted as saying. 'But I took the potato around to the nearest church and they couldn't believe it.'

'Linda was shaken because she recently lost her mother and thought this might have some hidden religious meaning. Also, our three-year-old son Joshua has been ill with amnesia and we thought he'd need a transfusion. Then the other day, he got the all-clear. 'We're hoping this is a sign that things are looking up for us.'

24th April, 1998. Hull, England. 'DAILY EXPRESS'

In The Eye Of The Beholder: Is The Turin Shroud The Genuine Article?

The arguments for the veracity or otherwise of the Turin Shroud have been raging ever since the artifact first came to light, and they certainly show no signs of abating now. Just the opposite, in fact. With the first public display of the Shroud for twenty years, a stream of claims and counter-claims flowed across the news pages of both tabloid press and World Wide Web. Last Halloween, news broke that Swiss archaeologist, Maria Grazia Sillato, had 'discovered' that there appeared to be the words '*Jesus Nazareth*,' written on the cloth shortly after the body was wrapped in it.



'This is the only document that proves the material presence of Christ 2,000 years ago,' Sillato told a press conference. *'It is the only real, concrete relic. Now its authenticity is beyond all doubt.'*

She also claimed that the Carbon-14 tests carried out on the Shroud in 1988, were wrong because the fragment tested was a corner of the cloth repaired five times since 1400.

This 'explained' why the scientists differed about the relic's age, dating it from between 1260 and 1390.

Then, in late March this year, scientists in the USA, were making claims that they had successfully isolated DNA from the Shroud. A spokesman was quoted as saying; *'What we have discovered is human blood and it is male.'*

The tests were apparently done on scraps removed from the cloth by a team at the University of Texas.

The Roman Catholic Church, notoriously jealous of guarding what it regards as quite possibly its greatest material article of faith, has been less than enthusiastic about giving the team any further samples, thereby throwing the proverbial spanner in the works with regards to establishing beyond doubt the age of the Shroud and vital questions concerning the man who's blood it contains.

'You could even know the race and from what part of Israel they were from,' claims researcher Leoncio Garza-Valdes.

The author and investigator Ian Wilson has further alleged that the Texas team, led by Dr Vincent Tryon, director for Advanced DNA Technologies, has obtained dramatic evidence that the cloth may indeed date from Biblical times. And, just like Ms Sillato, they also believe that the Carbon-14 testing was fatally flawed, but not for the reasons she has outlined. Instead, they theorise that the tests were skewed because the samples were covered with bacteria and fungi which resulted in errors.

The researchers think that the placing of the blood traces clearly indicates Jesus's involvement.

'Not many people in the First Century suffered all those lesions, the Crucifixion wounds, the Crown Of Thorns, the spear wound in the right side of the chest, the flagellations,' says Garza-Valdes.

Professor Stephen Mattingly, head of Microbiology at the University of Texas, believes the Vatican is against further tests because it does not know how to deal with the results.

But a spokesman for the Arch-diocese of New York insisted; *'The faith that the Shroud has inspired is going to transcend whatever testing proves or disproves.'*

By far the most ridiculous claim so far, however, is that Christ might very well wind up being cloned from the DNA... The recreation of the perfectly Divine?... Give me a break.

Finally, in mid-April, came further tantalising evidence of the age of the Shroud, when the faint, almost imperceptible image of a Roman coin was discovered on the cloth.

After closely studying the Shroud, the dim impression of a coin dating from the reign of Tiberius, in close proximity to the left eye on the face of the imprinted body.

The coin is said to bear the letters TIB and CAI for Tiberius Caesar and LIS: L for year, I for ten and S for six - the 16th year of Tiberius' reign, or AD 29, by modern reckoning, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea.

Turin University forensic medicine professors Pierluigi Baima - Bollone and Nello Balossino said *'It was common Hebrew practice to place coins on or near the eyes after death.'*

31st October, 1997. 'THE TORONTO STAR'/ 30th March, 1998. 'DAILY MAIL' & 'DAILY EXPRESS'/ 13th April, 1998. 'DAILY MANC.'

The End Of The Vision

A woman who claims she has received visions direct from the Virgin Mary since 1990, has announced to over 30,000 believers who attended at her farm that Her 1998 message was very likely to be the final one.

Nancy Fowler, who maintains that the BVM has often in the past, and asked her to deliver messages to the public, said that Mary's image appeared inside her home at 1:20pm, and lasted for a grand total of eight minutes.

'I understand that from Our Lady that next year will be the last of her public messages,' she said. *'My life will continue but the public messages will come to an end.'*

Somewhat frustratingly, Fowler never so much as hinted at the reasoning behind this 'Heavenly' decision. Otherwise, her half-hour speech was pretty much identical to the ones of previous years, in that she told her audience to pray and mend their ways.

Fowler's annual messages attract people from as far away as Mexico to the town of Conyers, Atlanta, USA.

Initially; Fowler delivered the messages on the 13th of every month, but in 1994, said that the Virgin Mary would appear with a public message only once a year; October 13th.

14th October, 1997. Conyers, Atlanta, USA. 'COLUMBUS DISPATCH'

NUMBERS SIDE WITH CREATIONISM

Mind-numbing mathematical equations crawl with agonising slowness across the pages of a book by Dean Overman, like indecipherable Hebrew letters in the Dead Sea Scrolls. He has claimed that they prove beyond a reasonable doubt that there is a 'creator.'

Probability theory seems to be the key, as well as new discoveries in microbiology and the laws of physics.

The 54-year-old member of Mensa, explains that only scientists can fathom why he concludes in *'A Case Accident And Self Organization,'* that the odds life evolved by random chance are infinitesimally small. *'They are smaller than the odds that a tornado swooping over a junkyard could accidentally build a 747 from debris sucked into its vortex.'*

Overman, who has studied at Harvard, Berkely and the University of Chicago, and holds degrees in law and science, is not alone in insisting that math and physics can prove what theologians ask us to take entirely on faith; that the universe that spawned life could not be a product of mere chance.

Not everyone is in agreement of course.

Paul Kurtz, chairman of the Committee For The Scientific Investigation Of Claims Of The Paranormal, states that whilst it's true that probability theory can produce accurate answers, numbers tortured hard enough will confess to just about anything.

'To claim chance could not explain the emergence of life forms by process of evolution is merely a presumption.'

Overman is at pains to point out however, (together with an increasingly impressive list of colleagues), that they do not accept the Bible's creation story at face value, but rather as a metaphor.

They've become convinced that the laws of physics and other constants of nature just seem right for life to have evolved, though not by chance. *'There is clearly a built-in order, a sign of intelligence behind it.'*

In his book *'Religion And Science,'* Ian Barbour, a retired physics professor, argues that there have been too many *'remarkable coincidences since the Big Bang 15 billion years ago for even the simplest forms of life to have evolved by accident.'*

'The statistics... imply some guide. The only conceivable explanation for life must involve the laws of nature plus the catalysts in just the right places at just the right times.'

Another author, Patrick Glynn, once an atheist, contends he saw the light when he learned of the so-called 'anthropic principle' - widely accepted by scientists - that contends the universe seems to have been intricately fine-tuned from the start.

The principle shows that infinitesimal changes in any of the scores of known universal constants would have resulted in a lifeless universe.

'In order to get life to appear in the universe billions of years after the universe began, you had to start planning very early from the first nanosecond.'

Instead of proving that chance ruled, he said, new discoveries have led scientists to uncover new layers of intricate order from the quantum level and up during the past 30-odd years, leading to the discovery of intelligent design, which is different from so-called 'creation science.'

'I believe because I believe in the laws of physics, and the laws of physics tell me that God exists,' says Frank Tepler, a one-time Baptist and Tulane University physics professor. *'I don't believe in anything without scientific evidence.'*

Michael Behe, a microbiologist from Lehigh University, contends intracellular processes underlying the foundation of even the simplest lifeforms are impossible to explain by natural selection and could not be the product of chaos.

'The basis of life is enormously complex, very resistant to gradualistic Darwinian solutions,' he said.

'No scientist can explain the complex machinery of the cell in Darwinian terms. When we see complexity in everyday life, we conclude it was designed.'

He and other scholars dismiss accusations that they had preconceived notions before embarking upon a writing career, the result of which has been a successful series of books. They deny too the claim that they have cynically used their specialities to 'prove' the unprovable.

'I did not set out to prove my own religious assumptions,' said Overman, an Episcopalian. *'Agnostics and atheists will not like my book, but the writing was not at all done with popularity in mind.'*

9th February, 1998. General **'THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH'**

Tree Said To Contain The Image Of The Virgin Mary

In Colma Cemetery, San Jose, California, a tree trunk, which apparently harbours an image of the BVM, drew more than a hundred pilgrims in just a week, each of them armed with flowers and rosary beads.

The image, formed by a pattern of tree sap, appeared on a portion of a 100-foot California pine tree about 10-12 feet off the ground in an area where a branch had been cut off.

Robert Lefebvre, general manager of the Olivet Memorial Cemetery, was quoted as saying: *'If you look at it from certain angles, you can see what appears to be a halo over the top, a cape coming down over dark hair, the face, and then the hands held in prayer at the chest.'*

'You can choose for yourself whether to believe or disbelieve.'

Visitors, both curious and devoted, have been drawn to the site, and a makeshift shrine has sprung up around the tree trunk - a collection of medallions, flowers, rosary beads, candles, garlands and a picture of Our Lady Of Guadalupe, the patron of Mexico.

21st December, 1997. San Jose, California. **'COLUMBUS DISPATCH'**

Unearthed - The 'Well Of Jesus Christ'

In Cairo, Egyptian archaeologists were announcing the discovery of a well which Jesus Christ was said to have blessed during the Holy Family's flight into Egypt.

The well was found during excavation work in the Sharqiya region of Northern Egypt's fertile delta by archaeologists from Zagazig University.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to escape retribution after Christ's birth when King Herod ordered the massacre of all boys under the age of two in the Bethlehem area.

Before entering the ancient city of Bubastis, the Holy Family were said to have retired under a tree and the Virgin Mary, carrying her son, went to ask villagers for water.

It is supposed that after the villagers refused to give her water, Mary cried, prompting Christ to wipe her tears and then trace a circle on the ground from where the water flowed.

4th October, 1997. Cairo, Egypt. **'COURIER-MAIL Australia'**

WEIRD CRIME

THE LATEST BATCH OF HOPELESS ROBBER'S AND BURGLAR'S

A couple of would-be burglars broke into a house in Buffalo, New York, intent upon stealing the copper plumbing contained in the basement. They carefully shut off the electricity, but neglected to do the same with the water supply, and pretty soon it was waist-high. When the police arrived, having been tipped off by a neighbour, the two men attempted to escape detection by submerging and holding their breath. In the end however, they had no option but to come up for air and as their frantic splashing gave them away, surrender themselves to the boys in blue.

2nd March, 1998. Buffalo, New York, USA. *'THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR'*

*** A bank robber in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, was caught in the act by police in the direct aftermath of the crime because his would-be getaway drivers were too busily engaged in having sex.

Michael Guillbault, 19, and another member of his gang were left stranded outside the car as the couple remained blissfully oblivious of the world around them.

19th January, 1998. North Carolina, USA. *'DAILY SLUR'*

*** The Banque Paysan in Toutourac, France, was the scene of an attempted robbery last May.

The unusual aspect of this case was the fact that the would-be robber was armed with, of all things, a garden strimmer. He entered the building with the implement at full throttle and pointed it in the direction of the bank tellers in a threatening manner. So doing, he ordered them to hand over the cash...*'It was one of those heavy duty strimmers for thick grass and shrubberies,'* one badly frightened staff member was later quoted as saying. *'We were terrified and did everything he asked.'*

Whilst the staff were busy trying to stuff the bags the robber had thoughtfully brought along with him, he kept them all at arm's length by occasionally strimming pieces of paper and bits of the carpet, just to prove he meant business. And when at last the heist was completed, he raced out onto the street, only to trip headfirst onto the hard, unforgiving pavement after he collided with another gardening implement, this time a hover mower, that someone had left standing on the sidewalk.

He was arrested before he could get to his feet.

5th May, 1998. Toutourac, France. *'THE BIG ISSUE'*

*** Before embarking upon a robbery at Herman's Fine Jewellery Store in Des Moines, Iowa, USA, Kenneth Ray Bruner, a minister's son, amazingly decided to hold a prayer meeting with his seven accomplices, in order to elicit the Good Lord's assistance in carrying out a successful heist. According to a Federal indictment, Bruner informed his gang of not-so-merry men; *'We're going to do bad things, but we're not bad people.'*

All eight members were quickly arrested at the height of the meeting.

25th June, 1998. Des Moines, Iowa, USA. *'ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'*

*** Kurt Littlewood was jailed for a total of three-and-a-half years after he thought it might be a jolly good wheeze to rob a petrol station armed with a vacuum cleaner suction tube (there seems to be something of a

trend developing regarding the business end of these normally boringly functional machines - see the story of Fred Finnegan elsewhere in this issue). Littlewood threatened staff behind the counter with the metal tube and got away with the not-so-princely sum of £200 from the till. Perhaps, considering the sheer level of bufoonery we've become accustomed to in compiling these pages, we shouldn't be too surprised to learn that the station he chose to rob was less than 30 yards from his own house. One of the attendants was able to recognise him as a regular customer (hardly astounding when you consider that Littlewood had neglected to don any kind of disguise) and the police were calling round to arrest him before he'd even had a chance to count his booty. He'd dropped most of it anyway on the short journey home.

12th May, 1998. Falmouth, England. *'DAILY SLUR'*

*** A faintly ridiculous gang of four bank robbers were easily caught after a raid on the Midvale Zions Bank in Utah, USA, after a passing motorist reported seeing them *'throwing money up in the air and a-hooting and a-hollering.'*

5th June, 1998. Utah, USA. *'SUNDAY PEOPLE'*

*** Even more bizarre was the story of the gang of three, who took to stealing handbags from unwitting victims, before making good their escape on pogo sticks.

At the time of going to press, the 'pogo pilferer's had not been apprehended and had reportedly struck on nine separate occasions.

8th March, 1998. Montpellier, France. *'BELLA MAGAZINE'*

*** A couple of teenagers attacked a lone woman in Dalton, near Huddersfield, and snatched her plastic shopping bag as they ran off. One presumes the thieves would be somewhat less than satisfied with their ill-gotten gains however, because the bag contained nothing more than a large pile of dog shit the woman had cleared up a while earlier deposited by her pet terrier.

11th May, 1998. Dalton, Nr Huddersfield. *'DAILY MAIL'*

*** Motorcycle policeman Dean Stephan arrested a unnamed man for assault in Mesa, Arizona, last Spring...He'd come under unprovoked attack from about 20 feet away by a man who'd, for some reason best known to himself, took to petting the police officer with freshly-baked doughnuts...At least one of which was filed with jelly.

10th March, 1998. Mesa, Arizona. *'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'*

*** And on a more tragic note (although it doubtless gave the Cosmic Joker a good dose of belly laughs) a federal marshal shot Andre Burgess, 17, after mistaking the wrapper of a chocolate bar for a handgun.

Andre had had the misfortune to have been walking right by a car filled with undercover law enforcement officers lying in wait for a fugitive drug dealer. When the teenager reached into his pocket, the officers shouted at him to drop his 'gun.' Startled, Andre turned sharply and was promptly gunned down.

11th April, 1998. Kansas, USA. *'DAILYMANC.'*

*** A defendant appearing at a court in Hartford, Connecticut, USA, decided to bring along a copy of the Bible to help him through his trial for driving an unregistered car. Unfortunately for him, the sheriff's deputy asked to see the Good Book and, after having flipped through the pages, found a cannabis ciggle apparently being used a marker.

The defendant was pretty soon facing a further charge of possession of marijuana.

2nd March, 1998. Hartford, Connecticut, USA. *'CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR'*

'IT'S TIME FOR THOSE BONKERS PILLS TO KICK IN AGAIN'



*** After being ordered by a court in Forssa, Finland, to apologise unreservedly to his neighbour Pepe Aksh over a boundary dispute, pedantic Thomas Hraka screamed 'sorry' through a megaphone, painted the words on Aksh's drive, then, still not satisfied, hired a troupe of singers to belt out a chorus of 'sorry's' in the (ahem) dead of night.
8th March, 1998. Forssa, Finland. *'THE VIRGINIAN MAGAZINE.'*

*** In Hong Kong, a religious fanatic by the name of Syed Atta Muhammed, was committed to a local mental hospital after he was seen to assault a 22-year-old female tour guide.

Muhammed, who refers to himself, rather unsettlingly, as a 'Knight Of God', tore into the hapless guide simply because he believed that her breasts were far too large for her to be considered a servant of the Lord.

June, 1998. Hong Kong. *'FHM MAGAZINE'*

*** A total of ten men were given a series of unspecified jail terms by the fanatically strict fundamentalist Islamic regime in Afghanistan for committing the terribly heinous crime of actually watching someone dance in the street.

My God, (or should that read Allah), that's almost as bad as whistling on a Friday!!!

It's not recorded what happened to the dancer him or herself.

23rd June, 1998. Afghanistan. *'DAILYMANC.'*

*** And the leading candidate's for this issue's 'Most-Hard-Faced-All-The-Social-Skills-Of-A-Paranoid Skunk' award includes the twenty-something couple who were arrested by police in Tunbridge Wells, for having sex outside a sports shop in broad daylight. What was even more outrageous was the fact that the woman had been

unashamedly using one of her two children as a pillow as she made whoopee in the street....

Also to be given an honourable (if that's the right word) mention, is Albert Hindley, an alleged forger from Georgia, USA, who, after the judge had had the decency to post bail at £1,200, had the temerity to settle the court costs with a dud cheque.

Details of the subsequent sentence are not recorded.

May, 1998. Tunbridge Wells. *'FHM MAGAZINE'* 14th June, 1998. Georgia, USA. *'NEWS OF THE WORLD'*

THE BRAIN EATER,

Bandang Langu, a Malaysian plantation worker, was convicted recently of feasting upon his wife's brains after he'd killed her for some unstated motive.

In offering quite possibly the worst piece of mitigation in the entire history of worldwide law, he attempted to explain to the arresting officers that he had only intended to eat a tiny portion of his deceased spouse's brain, but that, (like the greedy fat kid who sneaks downstairs on the wrong side of midnight fooling themselves into believing that they are only going to pinch the *one* chocolate-chipped cookie from the biscuit barrel, knowing full well that they're not gonna be able to stop until it's empty) he liked the taste of the organ so much that he simply couldn't resist finishing it off.

He was promptly sentenced to death for his crimes.

12th June, 1998. Malaysia. *'LIVERPOOLECHO'*

THE HOOVER-LOVER, BED-HOPPER'S, CRAZY OBSESSIVES, AND GENERAL OVER-REACTOR'S

Three pretty pissed off employees of the Cartago council in Colombia mercifully won an industrial dispute after they hit upon the less than sane notion of crucifying themselves to protest at the proposed privatisation plans.

The men were apparently hooked up onto self-erected crosses and had five-inch nails driven into the palms of their hands. The council finally acceded to the martyr's demands after three seemingly endless days had elapsed.

July, 1998. Colombia. *'FHM MAGAZINE'*

*** A funeral turned into a full-blown altercation after the deceased's ex-wives, an amazing *five* in number, kicked off over who should be afforded the honour of sitting nearest to the coffin. Up to a dozen graveside mourners were forced to intervene and managed to pull them apart and acted as a peace-keeping force until the police arrived on the scene.

Undertaker Gerhard Loffenburg, of Essen, Germany, was quoted as saying; *'I've never seen anything like it.'*

14th June, 1998. Essen Germany. *'NEWS OF THE WORLD.'*

*** A Tinton Falls, New Jersey, man was jailed for joining complete strangers in their beds as they slept blissfully unaware of his presence.

Tho Le, 24, was charged with illegally entering two homes in the early hours of the morning and calmly climbed beneath the covers alongside the slumbering occupants.

In one of the cases, according to Lt Gerald Turning, the investigating officer, *'he joined a sleeping couple and actually fondled the woman. The woman woke up, and she and her boyfriend chased the intruder out of the house.'*

Two nights later, he entered another house on the same

street and crawled into bed, this time with a man who woke up and chased him out.'

Le was eventually caught after a police dog tracked his scent to the 'bed-hopper's home address.

22nd February, 1998. Tinton Falls, New Jersey, USA. 'ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** The all-consuming mania surrounding the build-up to the World Cup in France this Summer, had already reached (ahem) fever pitch in the suburbs of Paris, several weeks prior to the great event itself.

The wife of a 31-year-old man committed the cardinal sin of switching channels during the midst of the UEFA Cup Final between Lazio and Inter Milan. Quick as a flash, the footy fan turned back over, resulting in his beloved issuing an ultimatum that she would fling herself from the balcony if he refused to allow her the luxury of watching her own programme. He refused, and just to show he meant business, he claimed he'd follow suit. So saying, he climbed onto the balcony and promptly lost his balance falling 15 floors to his death.

July, 1998. Paris, France. 'FOURFOUR TWO'

** And here's living proof that 'cleanliness isn't always next to Godliness...whatever your parents/teachers at school/boss at work (delete were applicable) may say to the contrary....

A 41-year-old man from Cardiff, by the name of Kevin Pleece, wound up being made the subject of a 12 month probation order after he took to spending up to five hours a day happily cleaning up the courtyard that dominated the other flats in Cathay's Terrace.

No harm in that, you might well say. But then, the latter-day 'Mr Clean,' (ask the once and future king of Mod, Paul Weller-Ed), progressed to staring in through his neighbours' windows and shouting at the astonished residents that their humble homes were simply not clean enough.

The final straw was when an argument erupted with Julie McNamara, 21, and at its height he threatened to blow her car to smithereens if she didn't keep her house tidy to his own, fastidious standards...

July, 1998. Cardiff, Wales. 'FHM MAGAZINE'

*** Someone who would certainly incur the wrath of our hero above was Fred Finnegan, 51, who rather than utilise his vacuum cleaner for normal purposes, chose instead to get his sexual kicks by inserting his penis inside the machine (as you do).

All well and good you may feel, but unfortunately for Fred, when he elected to go out and purchase a brand new Hoover, he failed to realise read the instructions properly...The model he'd bought featured rotating blades in the nozzle of the hose designed to chew up the accumulated rubbish. Fred's much-abused penis didn't stand much of a chance when it duly came into contact with those razor-sharp blades and he very nearly bled to death as a result.

The police who arrived on the scene were shocked to discover various pieces of chopped up foreskin in the blood-soaked dust-bag.

1st July, 1998. Long Branch, New Jersey, USA. 'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** And the Award For The Biggest, Most Highly Irrational Over Reaction Of The Year, So Far, must surely go to the incredibly short-tempered populace of a village in Yemen.

A staggering total of fourteen people were killed and thirty wounded during a vicious tribal war sparked over, of all things, an argument about who in the remote village, actually owned a chainsaw

30th March, 1998 Yemen. 'DAILY MANC.'

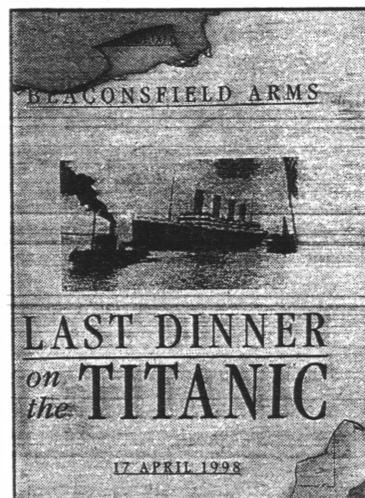
Laughter In Heaven: THE LATEST BATCH OF COSMIC JOKES

A truly remarkable 'coincidence' occurred smack bang on the 86th anniversary of the sinking of the 'TITANIC,' when a pub restaurant that was planning to feature a 'TITANIC' dinner theme night was forced to cancel after the place was all but gutted by a fire.

Chef Helder Filipe, 26, had hit upon the not-so-bright idea of dishing the identical seven-course meal which was served by the privileged first class passengers a few short hours before disaster struck on the night of April 14th-15th, 1912.

The idea seemed to have been a good one at the outset. In the wake of the renewed public fascination with the tragedy, due in no small measure to the phenomenal success of the James Cameron movie, reservations for all 30 places at the restaurant, selling at £21-a-head, had been snapped up within four days.

Diners and staff had planned to dress in period costume and the same bill of music by Mozart would have been played by the house band.



Perhaps Helder should have known better than to have tempted fate however, because in the early hours of the Tuesday, almost at the precise hour that the 'TITANIC' was colliding with its nemesis in the ice-cold waters of the Atlantic, a fire broke out at the Beaconsfield Arms at Occold near Eye, Suffolk.

The beamed dining area of the quaint, 17th century pub where table settings, glasses and napkins had been carefully set out was badly damaged in the blaze, the precise cause of which had not been established at the time of going to press.

Like the ill-fated liner, the pub sustained a substantial amount of water damage, although this was caused by the firemen in their attempts to quell the flames.

Portuguese-born Helder was quoted as saying; 'It is very strange and peculiar to think that the fire happened on the very day that the 'TITANIC' came to grief.

'I am quite level-headed and not superstitious, but it is an uncanny coincidence. It feels like something from 'THE TWILIGHT ZONE.'

17th April, 1998. Occold, Suffolk. 'DAILY MAIL'

What Are The Chances Of That Happening, Eh?

*** A whole series of the most amazing coincidences were published in the March 7th, 1998, edition of *'THE DAILY EXPRESS'* (I guess it must have been a real low news day), and we re-print a selection of them here for your delectation....

The first case concerns a Ron Norman, aged 69, who hails from Ipswich. We let Ron take up the story; *'Just after the Second World War I was serving in the RAF at Waterbeach, near Ipswich. I was on my way home to London to visit some friends but just missed the bus. A young couple pulled up to offer me a lift.*

'They told me they were visiting an aunt in Willesden. I said I was born in Willesden in 1928, and mentioned the address. They both gasped with amazement - this was the exact address they were going to.'

*** Tracy Wright, 31, from Colchester in Essex, had the following birthdate anomaly to relate....

'My grandmother was born on March 10th, 1914; I was born on the same day in 1967, on her 53rd birthday. When I fell pregnant around the middle of 1992, my due date was March 21st, but my daughter was born a fortnight early, two hours into my birthday.'

*** Helen Long, a woman who's reached the venerable age of 80, and who lives in Coventry, had a strikingly similar series of coincident dates she was eager to tell the paper's readership about....

'Ten years ago I met a friend at a local Ladies' Luncheon Club. She happened to mention her birthday was on May 14th - my birthday too. She mentioned her wedding anniversary, again the same day as mine - 20th September. We were amazed to then discover that both our youngest daughters were born on December 23rd. Her daughter is Helen. My name is Helen. My name is Helen Mary and my friend's name is Mary.'

*** Next up is the account related by Diana Robinson, 57, who's employed as a PR consultant in Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire...

'I was camping with my family in the 1950's at a remote caravan park in Dunoon, Scotland, when the heavens quite literally opened. A motor bike and sidecar drew up and one man began pitching a tent. The other, obviously from warmer climes, looked on, miserable and cold. My father could not bear to watch them struggling and invited them in.

'The keen camper's friend was from Venezuela, a small coincidence as my mother Nancie had a brother in Caracas. The Venezuelan then produced from his diary, a slip of paper in Nancie's brother's handwriting, with instructions to look my family up, with our name, address and telephone number written there.'

*** And finally, we consider the case of George Dickenson, aged 75, from Calverton in Nottinghamshire. He was apparently serving aboard the HMS Valorous, back at the height of the last war, in 1942...

'I was doing convoy duty between Rosyth and Sheerness in the North Sea. One very windy morning when I was standing on deck, my cap blew off into the sea off Flamborough Head and, as it bobbed away, I thought that was the end of that. Luckily, I didn't get into any trouble over it.

'Some weeks later, it was picked up in Blakeney Harbour in Norfolk, some 150 miles away. My name was stamped

inside the cap and it was taken to the local butcher's shop of the same name. The cap was identified by the butcher, who happened to be my father. I just could not believe it when he handed it back.

7th March, 1998. Various locations 'DAILY EXPRESS'

Fate was certainly smiling down upon a store clerk in Henderson, Nevada, USA, early this Spring.

Sindy Allen, 18, was working at a health store in the town when she picked up what she first thought to be a discarded, but unopened, bottle of soda.

It turned out though, that the bottle was part of a 'Pepsi-Cola' promotional contest called 'Globe Bucks,' and its plastic cap congratulated the million-dollar winner.

'I checked the bottle and it said, "You've won," the all but flabbergasted young lady was quoted as saying later (doubtless after she'd had ten tons of smelling salts rubbed under her nose and had an operation to lift her jaw from where it had hit the shop's floor).

Not so pleased was green-eyed co-worker Linda Richardson, who claimed she had actually purchased the cola, but had thoughtlessly put it to one side without taking a swig or checking the lid of the bottle. She'd forgotten to take it home with her and was, at the time of going to press, thinking of taking the matter to court.

21st March, 1998. Henderson, Nevada, USA. 'ST LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

Strange Deaths



Killer Mushroom's, Hapless Treasure-Hunters And Stylish Clog-Poppers....

The terminally unlucky Roy Barret, 70, managed to dislocate his knee after slipping on a mushroom at a local Tesco store in Chichester, West Sussex. He later died as a result of heart failure brought upon by shock.

8th May, 1998. Chichester, West Sussex. 'DAILY MANC.'

*** Meanwhile, over in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, a World War II bomb that was unearthed by a group of five would-be treasure-hunters exploded when the men began pounding it with hammer in an ultimately doomed bid to try and open it.

Police later said that the men had dug up the bomb along with a stack of empty bomb shells in the town of Teresa, in Rizal Province, 22 miles east of Manila.

The men stored the two-foot bomb and the shells in a house, and left them there for a month or so. At a loss as to what they should do with the items, they eventually decided it

The men stored the two-foot bomb and the shells in a house, and left them there for a month or so. At a loss as to what they should do with the items, they eventually decided it might be a jolly good wheeze to have a go at opening the explosive by pounding it with a hammer (as you do).

All-too predictably, the damn thing didn't take too kindly to being treated that way, and promptly blew up in their faces. They were all killed instantly and some nearby homes were damaged.

The local authorities issued a belated warning that both U.S. and Japanese bombs are still being found in the Philippines more than 50 years after the war...And it is not at all advisable to set about striking at them, hell for leather with a hammer, or indeed, any other similar implement!!!

23rd March, 1998. *Manila, Philippines. 'ST-LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'*

One of this magazine's most-valued contributor's is Fortean news-clipper extraordinaire; Ray Nelke. A resident of St. Louis, deep in the heartland of the US of A, Ray has very kindly sent us, not the just usual bunch of highly unusual press cuttings, but a bunch of stuff off his own Web Site on the Internet...Including the following stories of what he calls, the '*Darwin Award Candidates for 1998*'

Seeing as it's his show, we'll let Ray himself set about introducing this mini-section of the terminally unhinged...

'It's that time of year again. Vote for the person you feel has best helped humanity by taking his DNA out of the gene pool. For the uninitiated, the Darwin Awards are given each year to the person who does the gene pool a big, kingsized favor by getting himself killed in a creative way. These are the very latest nominees;

*** Buxton, North Carolina...A man died on a beach when an eight-foot-deep hole he had dug into the sand caved in as he foolishly sat inside it. Beachgoers said that Daniel Jones, 21, either dug the hole to amuse himself, or else to protect himself from the wind. Either way, he had been sitting in a beach chair at its bottom late in the long green light of a Summer's afternoon, when it suddenly collapsed, burying him beneath five feet of sand.

People on the beach situated on the Outer Banks, used their hands and shovels, in an ultimately vain attempt to try to claw their way to Jones, a resident of Woodbridge, Virginia.

Unfortunately, despite their best efforts, they couldn't reach him and it took a professional rescue team using heavy equipment, the best part of an hour to dig him out. A crowd of over 200 ghoulish gawkers had gathered to view the inevitable outcome, and Jones was duly pronounced dead on arrival at a local hospital.

'You couldn't believe the outpouring of concern, people digging with their hands, using pails from kids,' Dare County Sheriff Bert Austin was quoted as saying.

Kinda re-news your faith human nature, don't it?

If you make allowances for the crowds of 'ghoulish gawkers,' that is....

*** In February, 1998, Santiago Alvarado, aged 24, was killed in Lompoc, California, as he managed to slip and fall face-first through the ceiling of a bicycle shop he was in the process of burgling.

Instantaneous death resulted when the large flashlight he had placed in his mouth (in order to keep his hands free) crammed against the base of his skull as he hit the floor.

*** Sylvester Briddel, Jr, 26, was also killed last February in Selbyville, Delaware, after he won a bet with friends

who said that he'd never dare put a revolver loaded with four bullets into his mouth and pull the trigger.

*** And sticking with February last, police in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, stated that Daniel Koita, 27, and Randy Taylor, 33, died in a head-on collision, thus earning a tie in the game of chicken they were playing with their snowmobiles.

*** Back in October, 1997, a 46-year-old stockbroker, who 'totally zoned when he ran,' according to his wife, accidentally managed to jog his way off a 200-foot-high cliff in the midst of his daily run.

*** And in September of last year, a 41-year-old man from Detroit, somehow contrived to get himself stuck and drowned in two feet of water after squeezing headfirst through an 18-inch-wide sewer grate to retrieve his set of car keys.

*** Also in September, a seven-year-old boy fell off a hundred-foot-high bluff near the wonderfully named Ozark Ark, after he had lost his grip swinging on a cross that marked the spot where another person had fallen to his death back in 1980.

A BATCH OF DARWIN WANNA-BE'S

In Guthrie, Oklahoma, last October, cruel Jason Heck tried to kill a millipede with a shot from his .22 caliber rifle, but this totally-over-the-top reaction resulted in the bullet ricocheting off a rock near the hole and hit his friend Antonio Martinez in the head, fracturing his skull.

Last February, Matthew Hubal elected, for reasons best known to himself, to slide down a ski run upon a DIY 'sledge' made from yellow foam. He died when he crashed into a lift tower.

The ironic thing was, those same lift towers were meant to have been cushioned by this foam, and the tower that he hit was, yes, you've guessed it, the one he had stolen the material from to make his sled.

6th February, 1998. *San Anselmo, California, USA. 'THE GUARDIAN'*

*** In Elyria, Ohio, again last October, Martyn Eskins, attempting to clean out cobwebs in his basement, declined to use a broom in favour of propane torch and caused a fire that completely gutted the first and second floors of his house.

*** On March 17th this year, Angler Felipe Ortiz died in a way uncannily similar to a fish when he somehow managed to hook himself in the mouth and choke to death...

The wind apparently blew the line into his mouth where it eventually got stuck in the back of his throat on a river in Lorica, Columbia.

*** In July, this year, a couple engaged in a bout of passionate love-making were electrocuted when the husband accidentally touched an exposed wire.

Geno and Claudia Favio were still locked together in an eternal, naked embrace when their bodies were discovered in Giugliano, Italy.

*** Also this July, Emile Palenca decided to commit suicide after his best friend, Carl Warry, has the sheer effrontery to beat him at chess for the first time in over 20 years.

Carl, who'd played Emile every day without fail, was all but disconsolate in the wake of his best friend's death and was quoted as saying; *'I wish now I had just lost as usual.'*
9th July, 1998. *Arlon, Belgium. 'DAILYMANC'*

*** And finally, Paul Stiller, 47, was hospitalized in Andover Township, New Jersey, and his wife Bonnie was also injured, by a quarter-stick of dynamite that blew up their car.

Whilst driving around at 2am, the bored couple decided to light the dynamite (It isn't recorded how they managed to come by this dangerous item - but then, we are talking about *America* here, guys and gals) and they tried to toss it out of the car window to see what would happen...Somehow how though, they failed to notice that the window was closed.

Against All Odds

Hiro Yukimora attempted to break into a Tokyo school during the annual vacation last Spring, and wound up spending a total of six lonely days with his hand stuck firmly in a vending machine. He wasn't finally rescued until the new term began.

26th March, 1998. Tokyo, Japan. 'NEWS OF THE WORLD.'

*** A 25-year-old Argentinian died after leaping from an eighth floor window in a bizarre effort to murder his wife. He had previously shoved her out of an apartment block in Boedo, but she became enmeshed in electricity power cables as she plunged. The man then threw himself out, hoping that he'd land on top of her.

He missed.

May, 1998. Boedo, Argentina. *FHM MAGAZINE*

*** And speaking as we were earlier, of occurrences that defy all numerical logic, consider the following case of a computer-science teacher named Ernie Carey, who asked his class in American Fork, Utah, for the probability of two of his daughters giving birth on the same day...The students responded by claiming that statistically, there was very little chance.

When he then threw in the possibility of a third daughter delivering the same day, they actually laughed out loud. So much for probabilities...Carey's daughters beat what his Utah State College students calculated as 1-in-50-million odds, giving birth, as his daughters duly did, to two boys and a girl.

17th March, 1998. American Fork, Utah, USA. 'THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR'

*** The same bullet that a Detroit man fired into his own head as he committed suicide also killed a friend, police in the USA, were moved to state.

Elrod Hill, 47, shot himself with an AK-47, and accidentally killed Brian Olesky, 46, who was unlucky enough to be sitting next to Hill on a sofa, when he decided, to quite literally, bite the bullet.

3rd February, 1998. Detroit, USA. 'USA TODAY'

*** An Alcoholics Anonymous member was caught by the police nearly three times over the drink-drive limit after becoming addicted to, of all things, a mouthwash.

Robert Jowle, who was born in England, was banned for two years, and was quoted as saying that drinking 'Listerine' gave him 'a good feeling.'

Unfortunately for him the mouthwash contains 26-27 per cent alcohol by volume.

21st December, 1997. Australia. 'SUNDAY MANC'

*** Three Afghan men who were convicted of the crime of sodomy (which carries the death penalty in that strictly fundamentalist, not to say war-torn country) were counting their blessings after their sentences were commuted following their amazing escape from 'summary justice.' Taliban soldiers tied the men up beneath a massive brick wall and then used a tank to knock it down on top of

the 'infernal sinners.' Somehow however, the men were pulled out of the wreckage alive.

17th May, 1998. Afghanistan. 'DAILY MANC'

*** And here's proof that even if you try to lead a good, honest, selfless life, Fate can sometimes choose in her eternal capriciousness, to deal out the unkindest hand imaginable....

In Henderson, Nevada, an \$8 million lottery winner who liked to share his money drowned as he tried to make his way to his mother's house through raging floodwater.

Harold 'Mel' Dittmer was knocked down by the water at a flooded intersection and swept under a parked car at the peak of a severe thunderstorm.

Passers-by managed to pull him out of the deluge and tried unsuccessfully to resuscitate him.

He died later at hospital.

Dittmer, 58, won the California lottery two years earlier and happily split the money with his mother, friend's said.

'He was the most generous man I've ever known,' Bob McClone, a close friend, was quoted as saying. 'When Mel hit the California lottery he did nothing but give it to other people, people he didn't even know very well.'

15th August, 1997. Henderson, Nevada, USA. 'ST-LOUIS POST-DISPATCH'

*** A mature student by the name of Jim Buck, was more than delighted to hear he'd won a luxury short break in a competition promoting the hit film; 'THE FULL MONTY.' However, his dreams of an unforgettable, romantic weekend were dashed when he discovered that the break was in Sheffield, where the film was shot....And Buck has lived there all his life.

30th March, 1998. Sheffield. 'DAILY EXPRESS'

*** Bridegroom Roger Baker wound up in court facing assault charges after he punched the hooker his friends had (ahem) thoughtfully, and in true 'MEN BEHAVING BADLY'-style, booked for his stag night in Phoenix, Arizona.

Incredibly, and just to add to the fun and frolics, the scantily-clad girl turned out to be none other than his fiancée.

As Bob Mortimer would doubtless say at this juncture, 'Nice one!!!'

5th May, 1998. Phoenix, Arizona, USA. 'DAILY SLUR'

*** Charlie Hunt's brand new motorcycle had the temerity to break down less than a week after he's bought it, so he angrily, and somewhat indignantly, pushed it back to the Texas showroom from where he'd bought it, over a mile distant.

Just as he was about to tear into the salesman however, it was politely pointed out to him that the vehicle had merely run out of petrol.

8th March, 1998. Texas, USA. 'FHM MAGAZINE'

*** The Loser's Rights Union, founded by a group of Norwegians, who, rightly or wrongly, feel they simply can't win, is, predictably enough, on the verge of complete failure.

The group launched in November, 1993, was formed to help people who have, for one reason or another, missed out on a decent childhood, never received an adequate education, were wrongly institutionalised, or otherwise seemed to be discarded by society.

The group, at the time of going to press, needed 200,000 Kroner (\$140,000) or it would be itself, doomed to failure.

16th November, 1997. Norway. 'AUSTRALIAN SUNDAY MAIL'

*** Police officers managed to persuade Dan Deblasco, 50, not to kill himself by refusing point blank to return his set of false teeth.

STOP PRESS

Drop Dead Curious

One of the weirdest cases of an unexplained death we've come across in a long time concerns the untimely demise of Susan Laws, 27, who, according to press accounts, was getting herself ready for a night out when she suddenly collapsed in front of her husband.

She was rushed to Middlesborough General Hospital, but died shortly after her arrival.

Her husband, Paul Lofthouse, who hails from Crossfields, Coulbynewham, Teeside, later stated that Susan approached him and said; 'I feel dizzy.' She then fell down. He fully expected her to get to her feet as she didn't appear to be in an unduly bad way. But of course, she didn't recover, and doctors were later at a complete loss as to ascertain the cause of death. There simply appeared to be no reason why she should have passed away. Despite extensive tests by the National Heart and Lung Institute at the Imperial School of Medicine in London, the inquest into her death was told that there had been no satisfactory conclusion as to the cause.

Dr Richard Jones, the pathologist who actually performed the post-mortem examination, said there were no signs of any drug abuse or high blood pressure. He was forced to concede; *'The cause is unascertainable, which is very rare. There may be a proportion of people to whom this happens, but the underlying causes of it are not really known.'*

He added, somewhat ominously, *'Research is currently going on which may indicate that this can happen to a relatively small percentage of people. No abnormalities were found in her brain and heart. All her organs and systems were found to be healthy.'*

27th August, 1998. Crossfields, Coulbynewham. Teeside. **'DAILY TELEGRAPH'**

INVASION OF THE SNAILS



The cold, damp, depressing, never-was-summer of 1998, has seen a vast increase in the number of snails and, according to press reports, their vast numbers have led to an unprecedented demand from gardeners for pest pellets.

'THE DAILY MAIL' reported that at Polhill Garden Centre, near Sevenoaks, Kent, new supplies of the pellets are being immediately snapped up.

And the problems are not confined merely to snails - just to add to the fun and frolics, there are also more slugs around than ever before. The theory behind the apparent population explosion is that the exceptionally mild winter, rain-lashed spring and complete washout of a summer has contributed in no small way.

Hey, no shit, Sherlock.

The common Garden Snail, *helix aspersa*, just loves the humid, damp conditions that have been the norm this year. During the winter, or if the summer here is exceptionally dry (fat chance), the snails retreat into their shells.

And it isn't just the common Garden Snail that has benefitted from the weather conditions...Rarer varieties, like the edible Roman Snail, have also been spotted in record numbers.

A spokesman from the Natural History Museum's wonderfully-named Mollusc Unit, in London, was quoted as saying; *I went for a walk in London two weeks ago and there were at least ten or twelve big Roman Snails lying around. I have never seen so many. I could have had lunch.*

'Although snails are the most noticeable pests in the garden, slugs are a far bigger problem for agriculture.'

7th July, 1998. Britain, General. **'DAILYMAIL'**

The Curse Of The Edinburgh Warlock

The West Bow area of Edinburgh, Scotland, is reputed to be the haunt of Thomas Weir, and whilst today it is often frequented by specially organised 'Ghost Tours,' the locale still retains a decidedly sinister atmosphere.

Not surprisingly, the tourist industry has been quick to make a killing in the wake of fairly recent accounts of apparent ghostly phenomena.

'It's certainly an eerie place, especially after dark,' Des Brogan, an employee of Mercat Tours, which, cynics may suggest, renders his opinions somewhat dubious. Still, he goes on; *'People say they don't like the atmosphere - even before they know what happened here.'*

And, you may be wondering, just what did happen back in the dim and distant past.?

Well, according to local legend, Thomas Weir, who was born in 1599, had acquired a less-than envious reputation, not least because his father was rumoured to be a traitor, and his mother; a Witch.

Folklore dictates that at first, Thomas was hell-bent on restoring some degree of decency to the family-name. He joined the army, and went on to become the commander of the Edinburgh City Guard. He was also an ardent Presbyterian lay preacher and was later to lead a zealous sect called the Bowhead Saints. He remained a bachelor all his life, residing instead with his sister, Grizel, in West Bow - an area of little narrow jiggers and sidestreets near to Edinburgh Castle.

In 1669, however, his attempts at redemption were well and truly abandoned when he announced at a prayer meeting that both he and his sister had made a pact with the Devil. He readily confessed to both human and animal sacrifice and the strange twisted stick he carried was his familiar. He also admitted incest with Grizel.

For a goodly while, his followers tried their damndest to uphold the sect's reputation, and keep the confessions of their leader covered-up but inevitably, the rumours reached the city's Lord Provost, Sir Andrew Ramsay. Equally inevitable was the resultant arrest of both Thomas and Grizel. They were subsequently tried and Thomas was subsequently burnt at the stake (on 11th April, 1670)

whilst Grizel was rather more mercifully, hanged a couple of days later.

Weir's execution made major headline news amongst the good folk of Edinburgh. One of the stories doing the rounds at the time was that when Thomas burned, his stick was transformed into a snake - writhing in the flames.

His ashes were later scattered on the surface of the River Forth, as it was then considered to be common knowledge that a Warlock could not cross running water, and so his earth-bound spirit would at least be trapped.

Sightings of what are presumed, by their percipients, to be the shades of Thomas and Grizel, have been made well into the 19th Century, especially in the area around Lanarkshire, where the two had spent their childhood years together.

Just before he uttered his dying breath, Thomas was said to have loudly cursed their former home in West Bow. Not surprisingly, given the superstition-riddled climate, the people took him at his word. One of the many tales concerning strange phenomena in the locality concerns a gentlewoman and her maid passing through the house on the wrong side of midnight, sometime in the early 19th Century. They suddenly became aware of three women standing at the windows...shouting, laughing, and clapping their hands. A female apparition appeared at the door, twice the height of an ordinary person, and chased the terrified women away.

In 1819, an army officer by the name of Sgt Patullo and his wife elected, against the advice of their family and friends, to move into the house in West Bow. They ran screaming from the building after spending just one night on the premises. They'd reportedly seen '*the hideous apparition of a two-headed, blood-stained calf, that appeared in their bedroom, staring steadfastly at them.*'

The house remained empty for a good many years after that. In fact, no one saw fit to move in before it was finally demolished in 1878.

Strange lights and inexplicable noises continued to be seen and heard however, terrifying passers by. The site often rang with the sounds of spinning, dancing and howling, and Weir's ghost was reported to have emerged from the alley at midnight, mount a headless black horse, and gallop off in sheets of flame. There are a whole slew of other stories, as well, including tales of how the very Devil Himself drove up to the house in a coach drawn by six black horses to take Thomas and his sister to Hell.

The locals, and not a few tourists have since claimed to have heard Weir's 'demonic' staff tapping its way around West Bow, as well as visions of his fire-blackened face.

May, 1998. *West Bow, Edinburgh, Scotland. 'THE VIRGINIAN MAGAZINE'*

And Now, A Right Pair Of Headcases!!!

A psychic by the name of Janet Geel, 44, had the bare-faced cheek to claim that her other-worldly powers were lost to her after a plank of wood fell on her head in an Orlando DIY store.

Her £1.6 million damages case was thrown right out of court.

19th July, 1998. *Orlando, Florida, USA. 'SUNDAYMANC'*

*** And a snorkeller named Sergio Manti, thought it might be jolly good wheeze to strap a rubber fin to his back and swim amongst the gondolas terrifying those sailing along the canals of Venice.

Unfortunately for him, his trick was too good and after a tourist literally fainted upon catching sight of the 'shark,' Manti was jailed for three days for pulling such a stunt.

19th July, Venice. '*NEWS OF THE WORLD*'

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