

Extracts from “Ghosts”, a talk by Jim McKnight in 2002

.... And then there is another effect that contributes to seeing ghosts. Our senses, hearing and sight don't record things exactly as they are, but our brains interpret the input to create an illusion of reality. To a tired brain, the result can be quite false. A scholar working late in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had all the conditions to see a ghost – strain because of bad light, and flickering shadows.

The ability to form images from slight evidence is amazing. There are similar effects with our hearing. When I worked at Risley, for example, you could hear people approaching the office down the corridor, and you knew who they were, from the sound they made. And women were particularly distinctive, the high heels, you see.

But back to the ghosts. I've recorded a few genuine experiences in my life, I only have time for

The Ghost of Trinity Church

This story you won't have heard about before, but it happened in this church about 1965 or 6.

The Convener of the property committee was a Mr Galbraith, who was the financial director of the Coal Board, which at that time had its headquarters in Manchester. (before too long, like everything else at the time, it joined the drift south, and we lost the Galbraiths). Despite his high position, and the large house in Hilltop, Mr and Mrs Galbraith were two of the most kind and generous people I have met. They both worked tirelessly for the church, and if they had a fault, it was to persuade others to work just as hard!

At this particular time, we had problems with leaks in the church heating. These days, the convener simply calls in a plumber (sorry, heating engineer) to deal with it, but then we were all young and knew the value of money. So we made do and mend. The main difficulty was with a hand valve underneath the gratings near the pulpit. Why we needed the valve I never knew, and it has since been removed. But Mr Galbraith and I had to try and repair it, more than once.

I made a new gasket out of neoprene and this was duly fitted. Duly? Well, that implies it was easy, but it wasn't. As everyone knows

heating systems must first be drained. The water supply was from a ball-cock cistern in the toilet of the Session Room. There was no shut-off valve, so we had to tie up the ball cock to stop the water running!

The drain cock was that installed on the boiler itself in the cellar, and the entire church system had to be drained - large 5 inch diameter pipes doubled in rank and running the length of the church six times over, and around two sides of the church hall as well. It took a long time to drain. And it took an even longer time to fill; hours in fact. All pipe branches had to be bled, using substantial screw valves in most cases. Curiously, two of the under-floor sections (those on either side of the church) are self bleeding, that is they are connected to vertical balancing pipes running up the rear wall of the church. I have never understood why the others weren't fashioned the same way, but they weren't, and so needed the attendance of someone to close the bleed valves. This night we had done our task, and waited for the system to fill. The boiler filled first, and then after an extensive wait the hall pipes filled and the bleed valves there were closed off. Now an even longer wait was inevitable, and this would go past midnight. There was no option but to wait, even if we had sealed the bleed valves, the water would carry on running because of the self bleeders, and we were very unsure about the integrity of the rickety old ball valve in the cistern in the session room toilet. It had an uncommonly bad habit of sticking. We had to wait until all the church pipes had filled and I could close the two bleed valves in there.

Mrs Galbraith had been doing various other tasks in the church, and came in to say that she was ready to go home, it must have been about eleven o'clock. I suggested that Mr Galbraith went with her, after all, only one person needed to stay (and it would be a fair bet that Kathryn would be asleep by then.)

Mr and Mrs Galbraith were very hesitant about this. On reflection, it is now clear that it was not that they felt guilty because they were leaving me to do the dirty work, but out of a genuine concern for my own well-being. Anyway, I persuaded them, and as they left, they again asked if I would be alright, and when I assured them I would be, they told me that they would lock the door on the way out, ring Kate when they got home, and one of them might return later to check up. What this meant is that they would release the "snib" on the lock before they shut the door. Now, as you know, the connection between the church and the hall is either through the

vestry or through the session room. It was normal to leave the vestry door locked from the inside, and the Galbraiths ensured, and made me confirm, that it was on this occasion, such was their concern. In those days the vestry door was secured with the ordinary lever lock fitted, not with the yale lock fitted later. That is, it could only be re-opened from the inside. In addition, there was a certain air of privacy about the vestry, one did not go into it unless one had business in there, it certainly was not a thoroughfare. One normally went from the church, through the session room, and across the hall to reach the outer door.

Time went by, and I waited in the church, moving around the various valves waiting for one to complete bleeding. This was not the first time I had spent alone in the church or, for that matter, listening to the system fill. The church and the hall can be very noisy at times, and all the wood creaks, and I was familiar with it all.

Then I heard one of the Galbraiths return. I heard the side door open and shut. I heard the hall door open and positive footsteps cross the hall and enter the session room. Now remember what I said earlier about footsteps in the corridor, normally you can work out if the footsteps belong to a man or a woman, but not his time. I called "hello!" but got no reply. No-one came into the church. I went to meet whoever it was in the session room. There was no-one there. I went into the hall, and there was no-one there either. I checked the side door, it was still closed and locked, so too was the vestry door. With infinite caution now, I checked the ladies' parlour, but it was in darkness, and when I switched the lights on, empty. I was not surprised, for I had heard nothing after the footsteps had reached the session room. No-one could have left, or gone down the stairs to the old kitchen, without me hearing; as I said, the hall is of noisy construction.

I have never told Trinity about this before. Most people know Mr and Mrs Cowie's ashes are buried under the church, just where the footsteps stopped. Both were good people with a love for Trinity. Do they still wander around at night? Should I be responsible for a feeling that maybe they do?

I crept back to the church and sat on the chancel steps. Suddenly the church was very cold, and I had to keep looking behind me. Slowly, very slowly, I realised that what was behind me was the cross. And if I could not feel safe in God's house from spooks and beasties where could

I feel safe? I had created an irrational response in myself. We are creatures forged over millions of years, before God spoke to his creation, and some primeval instincts remain.

I should add that the valve still leaked afterwards. The repair had been in vain. And as for the footsteps, I still don't know if it was the man or the woman..

