



# The English Ghost: Spectres Through Time

*Peter Ackroyd*

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## **The English Ghost: Spectres Through Time** Peter Ackroyd

An enormously enjoyable spooky collection of ghost-sightings over the centuries, full of the spirit of place, in true Ackroyd style.

The English, Peter Ackroyd tells us in this fascinating collection, see more ghosts than any other nation. Each region has its own particular spirits, from the Celtic ghosts of Cornwall to the dobies and boggarts of the north. Some speak and some are silent, some smell of old leather, others of fragrant thyme. From medieval times to today stories have been told and apparitions seen -- ghosts who avenge injustice, souls who long for peace, spooks who just want to have fun.

**The English Ghost** is a treasury of such sightings which we can believe or not, as we will. The accounts, packed with eerie detail, range from the door-slamming, shrieking ghost of Hinton Manor in the 1760s and the moaning child that terrified Wordsworth's nephew at Cambridge, to the headless bear of Kidderminster, the violent daemon of Devon who tried to strangle a man with his cravat and the modern-day hitchhikers on Bluebell Hill. Comical and scary, like all good ghost stories, these curious incidents also plumb the depths of the English psyche in its yearnings for justice, freedom and love.

## **The English Ghost: Spectres Through Time Details**

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Author : Peter Ackroyd

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## From Reader Review The English Ghost: Spectres Through Time for online ebook

### Michael Topley says

The introduction starts of very interesting and last about 12 pages if i remember correctly. Then every story is roughly between 2 and 5 pages long, most of which are very similar. I'm sure there are better real life ghost encounter books out there.

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### Otto Hahaa says

Kokoelma englantilaisia tosia kummitusjuttuja. Tietysti sana ”tosi” on vähän epämääräinen tässä yhteydessä. Ilmeisesti kaikki tarinat on esitetty tosina, mutta voi hyvinkin olla, että joissain tapauksissa jo alkuperäisellä kertoja/kirjoittajalla ovat korvat heiluneet aika tavalla. Ja voidaan myös keskustella siitä milloin tarina on kummitusjuttu, ja milloin kyseessä on poltergeist-tarina. Aikajänne on 1600-luvulta, ihan eiliseen 1970-luvulle.

Ei olisi pitänyt lukea tarinoita ihan putkeen, koska varsinkin poltergeist-tarinat ovat kovin puuduttavia peräjälkeen luettuna. Muutama tarina on kuin M.R.James'in tarinan ensihahmotelma, ne ovat luonnollisesti vähiten uskottavia, uskottavampia ovat tarinat joissa ei ole mitään järjen hiventäkään. Tekisi mieli alkaa etsi tarinoista lainalaisuuksia ja ryhmitellä niitä: Olisivatko ”pääton karhu”, ”pääton mäyrä” ja ”pianon kokoinen musta möykky” jonkun saman asian ilmentymiä? Mutta tämä lienee turhaa, koska kokoelma on kokoelma, ei raakadataa.

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### Selene says

I really enjoyed reading this, especially because a lot of the ghost sightings are very old. There is also a great bibliography at the back, with lots of books I need to seek out!!  
The usual good quality read of Peter Ackroyd and highly recommended!

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### Uncle says

Peter Ackroyd's *The English Ghost*, is a fascinating collection of firsthand or contemporary accounts of British ghosts and hauntings. Some of the stories in the collection are well-known, but most are from obscure sources. Ackroyd himself provides a a fascinating introduction to the general subject of ghosts in English history and culture.

Tales of the supernatural are ultimately about very human situations. So it is understandable that the most compelling voices in *The English Ghost* are those of the everyday men and women who were able to put their uncanny experiences to paper so long ago. What makes the stories so interesting is the sense of the gritty texture of “real life” of the past.

Most of the stories stretch back centuries, well into middle ages. In the seventh century, for example, Tortgith, a nun, is visited by the ghost of a dead abbess who foretells that Tortgith herself will be dead within a day. (Not surprisingly, the nun died just as predicted by the spirit.)

Some of the well-known incidents include the perennially controversial Borley Rectory hauntings, still discussed decades after the building itself burned to the ground in a mysterious fire. Some famous poltergeist cases are also retold, including "The Drummer in Tedworth", which occurred in 1661. Occasionally the stories involve the famous, such as "Old Jeffrey", the mischievous poltergeist who tormented the family of cleric John Wesley in 1716. There is a particularly eerie and sad incident experienced by the poet John Donne.

Ackroyd makes an interesting observation about the apparent randomness of the appearances of the spirits of the dead. Why did the vision of a dead boy appear to his school friends in 1728, complete with the coffin he was buried in? The figure of a widow, in full weeds, appeared to the daughters and servants of the Despard family in 1882. Yet she remained invisible to the parents, even when they were in the same room with the ghost. The accounts usually do not offer easy explanations as to why the dead reappear.

I did enjoy *The English Ghost*, though it left me feeling a bit unsatisfied. Popularly thought to be one of the most haunted countries in the world, there are simply too many tales of haunted Britain for just one book. Though Ackroyd is interested in the topic of ghosts, he his not necessarily a believer. The reader is free to draw his own conclusion. But who doesn't like a good ghost story?

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### Helen says

A book to dip in and out of. Ghost stories around England, taken from a variety of sources (old newspapers, magazines, books) - arranged loosely by theme but with no chronological or geographical structure (an index would have been good). Very wide range of dates, and of course credibility.

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### Jo says

According to Ackroyd, we English see more ghosts than any other nation. I'm not sure how true that is but it probably ties in with our long tradition of oral history and storytelling. This book brings together a bunch of stories of sightings, etc, of phantoms through the centuries. Interesting to see how similar a lot of the stories are.

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### Julia Samkova says

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## Batgrl (Book Data Kept Elsewhere) says

Ordered this after getting Ackroyd's London book, but can't help but start this first as it's shorter. It's still a sort of Halloweenish seasonal read. (Some of us wish the holiday were a lot longer.)

Meanwhile I must find out who designed the cover - I love the old fashioned layout and artwork, especially on the back at the bottom where there's a procession of people wearing robes and carrying their decapitated heads. [Ah ha: Jacket illustrations - Mary Evans Picture Library, Design by Stephen Parker] I also have to add that I'm happy to have a used book as in the inside it has stamps for Hampton Hill Library and London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Libraries.

...And now it's later, and farther into the book. So this is a collection of accounts of people seeing/experiencing ghosts, taken from magazine articles, books, letters, etc., mostly. It reminds me of the glut of books in the 1970s that were all the rage with us kids - oooo, stories of real ghosts! Except that such stories read much more like collected oral folklore - it's not a narrative with fleshed out characters, with reasons for why people are haunted and who the ghosts are and how everyone feels about the experience. In fact if you read a lot of these accounts they are actually fairly dull, because the setup is mainly "X person is very respectable, X saw this ghost, ghost appearance looked like this, and there were these witnesses." There might, just might, be one sentence or two as to who the ghost is - but not always. Because the only thing of importance in these accounts is Something Was Seen - not what or who or why it matters or what it means.

If you read collections of folklore scholarship this will feel very familiar. In the 1970s the True Ghost Stories were a lot less scholarly in that there was always a "this is who the ghost is and why it's haunting" (trying to make it all very factual and as though every fact was known and understood) - which actually seemed a lot less reality based than people admitting that they saw something but have no idea who/what it is. (Commenting on the logic there, not the reality of ghosts. I'm with the M. R. James school of "hmmm, I note that the guy who loudly proclaims there is no such thing meets up with nasty things in the nighttime, so perhaps I'll not make any sweeping statements." Hey, you never know when you'll end up a character in a ghost story, right?)

Reading this particular segment has had me laughing a lot:

p. 95, from a pamphlet published in 1683, "...At another time one of his shoestrings was observed (without assistance of any hand) to come of its own accord out of its shoe and fling itself to the other side of the room; the other was crawling after it, but a maid espying that, with her hand drew it out, and it strangely clasp'd and curl'd about her hand like a living eel or serpent; this is testified by a lady of considerable quality, too great for exception, who was an eyewitness.

...Many other strange and fantastical frieks (sic) have been done by the said daemon or spirit in the view of divers persons; a barrel of salt of considerable quantity hath been observed to march from room to room without any human assistance."

Another quote:

p. 111, from Katharine M. Briggs' *The Folklore of the Cotswolds* (1974) - "...In Crowborough, Sussex, there was Jarvis Brook Road; it was known, or believed, to harbour the presence of a 'spectral bag of soot' that would pursue the unwary."

Which immediately reminded me of an essay in *A Pleasing Terror*, a collection of M. R. James's stories and essays about his work. It too mentioned "a road in Crowborough (Sussex) was haunted by a spectral bag of soot which chased people." And that's the sort of mental image that sticks with you (and honestly, makes me laugh quite a bit). [Note: both refer to the same book by Briggs.]

Because of the way the citations are a bit fuzzy you'll come upon a paragraph/sentence like this:

p. 188 "There has been no convincing explanation for the events here related."

And from that you're not really clear on whether that's the statement of Reverend Higgs from the paragraph before, or whether this is the author. And it's possible that the author may be favoring the "no one knows what happened" frame over any other interpretation. I say this because of the chapter on Borley Rectory.

I've been reading about Borley Rectory since those "true ghost story" books of the 70s - it's still listed in almost every book of the sort. Except what the story often leaves out is Harry Price, and Price's background and motivations and showmanship have a lot to do with what we hear about Borley today. (See chapter on Price in this book.) Here's the first paragraph of the chapter in this book:

p. 153 "For many years Borley Rectory had the reputation of being 'the most haunted house in England.' It has been the subject of several books and of innumerable articles, none of which can be said to be conclusive. The general conclusion seems to be that the evidence is contrary and unreliable, and that some of the supposed events were the products of fraud or chicanery. It provides, at least, an interesting story."

And that's really all you'll get here - just the story. There's nothing more about the chicanery or what was unreliable. I do note that some of the more fuzzy parts of the Borley legend that came from Price seem to be omitted here. But then isn't that part of the story now too? Also if we can take the older parts (pre-Price) of the Borley story as true why leave out the Price parts? We have just as little ability to say that the old stories are "real" and "what actually occurred."

The problem with most older ghost stories is that they focus a great deal on the part that "thing X was seen by a *reputable person* who would never lie and thus thing X was real." This, as most of us know, is not really good logic. Perfectly nice, truthful people can see something and then make assumptions about it that later prove incorrect. Clergymen and ladies, for instance, do not always tell the truth. There have been a lot of seemingly reputable people who enjoy hoaxes or pranks. This is a problem with any and all ghost stories, really, if your main fixation is on proving that there's a ghost rather than just enjoying a spooky narrative.

What I really miss in this book is the author's voice - giving more description about the sources of the accounts, how he researched and discovered the material, and why he chose the particular stories he did from among the large amount of such stories. There's a sentence or two here and there that gives a hint or a clue, but it's not enough. There's a bibliography, but it's not always clear which stories come from which source.

This review uses the best term for what this feels like - a scrapbook. I'm just sad that it's a scrapbook where the author didn't comment more on the choices that were made. Seems like a wasted opportunity, especially since there's a good representation of stories from many periods of history.

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## **RumBelle says**

Let me preface this by saying, I know this is non-fiction and therefore not meant to be a rousing adventure. I have to say though, I have read many non-fiction books about ghosts, and they have had vivid descriptions, mystery, horror and elements of surprise about them. This book had none of that. The ghost encounters could not have been written in a more dull manner. The majority of the book was excerpts from period accounts, that did little to describe the ghostly phenomenon. More often than not the actual circumstances and nature of the haunting had no detail to them at all. Very disappointing.

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## **Margaret says**

An interesting look at English ghosts. Most of the stories date from the 17th century and I hadn't seen any of them before, which made for quite a treat.

Of course the usual ones were there: Borley Rectory, the Enfield Poltergeist, but the fact the majority of spectres were not known to me was a major bonus.

Recommended for anyone interesting in the history and evolution of the English ghost.

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## **Ollie says**

This is a short and enjoyable collection of diary entries, newspaper clippings, anecdotes and oral stories revolving around ghost sightings in England. The English are, apparently, the people who most see hauntings and Ackroyd goes some way to explain this in his introduction. Still, I wish there was more meat to these bones: many of the anecdotes deserved some commentary or notes, and quite a few didn't really stand out. Some of the sightings are clearly from people with a strong imagination. Others are hard to explain away, especially the ones with more than two witnesses.

Ghost sightings are in decline and this collection made me wonder if our increasingly atomised lifestyle has something to do with it. Can you really notice a ghost if you are so caught up with your Nintendo DS or iPod? Another thing that struck me about the very old sightings was that people seemed to be hearing ghosts from the future instead of the past (i.e. the sound of a crowd trampling through a Victorian sitting room reminded me of a group of tourists which would visit that sort of house a few centuries later.) My favourite anecdotes in this collection: a woman who becomes unnerved by a young man who shares her train carriage and the poor bastard who is chased by a figure in black that then proceeds to scratch hay bails.

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## Gala says

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## Jean Marriott says

Ackroyd has gathered together an interesting collection of people's experience of ghosts ranging from the 15th to 20th century. He is not asking the reader to believe the stories although he presents credible accounts from the writings and reporting at the time. Many of the writings he researched are by educated men especially the clergy who are more like to be truthful.

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## Twig says

2,5

Wanted to read this book for a long time. Love the cover and the idea of collecting real ghost stories. But most of them were extremely short and not well written. I enjoyed maybe 5 of the stories the rest bored the hell out of me. What a dissapointment.

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## S.C. Skillman says

I enjoyed this book but found it inconclusive. Peter Ackroyd is known for his focus on the nature of the English (as in, for instance, another book of his on the English imagination). His contention here is that "seeing ghosts" is something the English seem to do more than any other nationality - a thesis he sets out in the first section of the book. The deduction from this would appear to be that seeing ghosts is essentially a phenomenon of the psyche, with no objective reality, and may be understood in such terms. Many of the English ghost stories in the book, however, feature different people independently having the same experience in the same place over a number of years, e.g. the A38 story in which motorists encounter the man in the grey mackintosh flashing his torch into the road, and the repeated appearances of the girl on Bluebell Hill whom many motorists swerve to avoid, and then find her to have no substance. The twentieth century stories had greater interest for me than those which were related in the sixteenth century - partly because of the verbose language in which the narrators express themselves. Ultimately I was left wishing for some kind of analysis and summing up by Peter Ackroyd but this was lacking. Later on I had a conversation about this book with the assistant in my local bookshop, and she said she believes that supernatural experiences are not monopolised by the English at all, but it may simply be that other races take it so much more for granted that they don't make an issue of reporting "sightings". An intriguing book for ghost story fans, and for those who have themselves had supernatural experiences.

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