

Ghostly Doings

On a ghost hunt, Bob Nixon finds that living people are more interesting than dead ones.



Bob Nixon, a systems analyst for a large corporation, is Chief Investigator for the Skeptic.

The Australian Ghost Hunting Society – can you guess, dear reader, the function of this group? Any good Skeptic will quickly determine, from the name alone, what the AGHS is about. Like the Crop Circle Investigation Society, or the UFO Studies Group the Australian Ghost Hunting Society exists to prove that its subject of interest exists and to offer a supportive environment to anyone who wants to believe in them.

So let's get the hard bit out of the way at the beginning. The correct Skeptical attitude is to declare that ghosts may exist. It is entirely possible that the disembodied spirits of the dead are all around us. You'll often get an argument when you try to define what a ghost is, by the way, but for the purposes of our discussion here I'm taking the view of the AGHS, at least as I understand it – a leftover bit of a dead person.

The AGHS conducts many ghost-hunts (their own term). Based in Melbourne and organised by Eoghan Arnold and Rowena Gilbert the AGHS seems to be made up entirely of people who accept without question that ghosts are very real and plentiful. While individual cases may be the subject of controversy or even skepticism, there is no doubt

that, given time and fearless investigation, the truth of spectral visitations will one day be proven.

On a ghost hunt

But what is a ghost investigation like? What constitutes evidence for a true believer? It was to answer these questions that I joined an AGHS investigation into the highly haunted Horses and Coach pub and stables at Clarkefield, outside Melbourne. Ray Crossley, from the Dowsing Society of Victoria, and myself joined about ten AGHS members.

Rowena Gilbert was unfortunately unable to attend. Only a few days before the AGHS internet discussion group had undergone something of a ruction when Rowena, the owner of the group, appeared to be threatening to dismiss someone who criticised the silliness and uselessness of a particular discussion. Several of the members of the group – myself included – had suggested that this was not a suitable way to deal with what appeared to many of us to be a valid complaint, given the content of recent discussions. I, for example, had already set my mail software to delete automatically any mail from the AGHS group that contained the word "cheesecake", which had proven to be

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a hint that the remainder of the note would be entirely useless. Rowena had not taken the original complaint or the support the writer received very well at all and had removed herself from the group and, for the foreseeable future, all activities of the AGHS.

Even so, the cross section of ghost hunters was pretty broad. Eoghan (pronounced Evan) was there, along with a surprisingly normal looking bunch of fairly happy people. Eoghan had organised permission for us to spend the night in the stables behind the pub. Although no longer entire, the bluestone building dates from the days of the Cobb and Co coaches that ran from the gold fields to Melbourne, so it naturally has some history. These days it is used as a modest function centre and a bar has been fitted to one end of the building. Sadly the bar was closed during this evening, but coffee and biscuits were available. Since the plan was to stay awake most of the night this was quickly seized upon by the majority of the attendees.

The group fell into two very distinct groups fairly quickly. There were the believers and there were the skeptics. The second group consisted entirely of Ray and myself. Ray, like me, was attending more to study the techniques of the ghost hunters than in the hope of seeing a ghost for himself. I had made clear to everyone who I was and why I was there, so they knew they had a real Skeptic in their midst.

The believers looked initially to Eoghan for guidance. He was, after all, both the organiser of the evening and the co-founder of the AGHS. He ran us through a brief description of what he hoped to do during the night. There were some specific stories to examine. There was, for example, the tale of the young girl who had been murdered by her father, and the story of the Irishman killed when he fell down the stairs inside the hotel while attempting to flee the attention of two corrupt troopers who were after his gold.

We were to be permitted access to most of the hotel and grounds, the

only exception being the upstairs rooms where the owner and his family lived, and Eoghan pointed out a couple of significant places to us. Perhaps the most significant was the site of the original well that provided water to the hotel before the mains water arrived. We guessed that this was now marked by a concrete and steel covering, but, so far as I know, no one thought to ask the question of the owner. This may be because the owner and most of his patrons had been caught by more than one of us discussing the fact that a group of ghost hunters were coming to spend the evening. They thought it a great joke and the serious ghost hunters, particularly Eoghan, found this insulting. I did have the opportunity to ask both the owner and one of his staff if they had ever experienced anything unusual in the hotel; neither had. Interestingly, until I told both these people who I was they were largely dismissive of my questions, but they brightened noticeably when they knew I didn't really expect to find a ghost. I suspect that this is not an uncommon attitude and one that Eoghan and his group probably has to deal with regularly.

The cast assembles

Eoghan was taking the lead for those of us who arrived early. Then Theresa arrived, accompanied by Lucan. Theresa quickly and irretrievably took control of the night from that point on, unless Lucan was speaking, in which case she deferred to him entirely. Lucan didn't talk much, though, so we were regaled for some time by Theresa's stories and experiences. Theresa sees, hears and talks with ghosts. Her life, she told us, is very like the movie "The Sixth Sense" in which Bruce Willis encounters a boy who lives with ghosts on an almost constant basis. Theresa and Lucan are both American and while Lucan seems to brood and says little, Theresa says more than enough for both of them, while regularly sweeping her long hair back to punctuate her words. She recounted tales of her experiences and, sweeping her hair back yet again, told us

that there was a ghost right there in the stables with us. A Chinese gentleman was pacing at one end of the room. He refused to speak with Theresa, but was clearly pondering some problem or other and he paced, leaning forward, his brow deeply furrowed. Theresa warned us that we should not sleep at that end of the stables, to which Ray and I both replied we'd take that end of the room. A great advantage to being a Skeptic is that one tends not to be haunted.

Murder most foul

Theresa met the dead girl when we took a trip around the grounds. Her father, according to the story, had murdered her by throwing her tiny body into the well from the upper floor of the hotel. The father later went on to kill the girl's mother before himself dying of alcohol abuse. We had determined that the story of the girl's death could not be right because of the distance involved. Assuming that we had correctly located the site of the well it would not be possible for a man, no matter how strong, to throw a child so far. Theresa who, of course, was able to speak with the girl herself confirmed this.

First, a meal to sustain us through the long night. The Horses and Coach has an extensive menu, but sadly no suggestion book, so I was unable to advise the chef that a professional does not put a hot poached egg on top of a Caesar Salad. Ah well, there were still some biscuits left.

When Theresa met Sam

After eating we took a turn around the garden in search of more phantoms. Behind the pub we met, through Theresa, the young Samuel. He was sitting in the branches of a tree, dressed in white shirt, brown trousers and a cap. Theresa chatted to him for a while, we learned that Samuel had been born in 1872 and that he had worked as a jackhand. Theresa struggled with this word for a while, Samuel was a jack...., jack....., jackhand. As an American, only recently arrived on our shores, she might be excused for not knowing

the word jackeroo, but when I suggested that we'd wait patiently for her to hear Samuel say the word more clearly Samuel disappeared from the tree. Theresa was disturbed and concerned by this, but breathed a sigh of relief when the boy turned up at the base of the tree, against the fence behind it. Theresa did not want to approach Samuel, so I took my cue and stepped to the fence. I asked where Samuel was and she told me that he was to my right. I shot my right hand out and asked if it was now inside him. No, Samuel was on his knees, so my hand was above his head. I lowered my hand until Theresa told me I was touching him, and I twiddled my fingers. "Yes," said Theresa, "You're ruffling his hair."

What happened to his hat, I asked. He was apparently still wearing it. I asked Theresa to describe the boy again. Cap, brown trousers and a grey shirt. The shirt had been white before, I reminded her. It was dirty, she said. It was a white shirt, but looked grey because it was dirty. Through Theresa I asked Samuel a few questions. He had been born in 1892. What did he die of? I asked. This was a tricky one, because Samuel didn't know that he was dead. He apparently did not hear Theresa telling us that he didn't know he was dead, either. He did recall having smallpox, and being covered by black spots.

Then Samuel, perhaps in an effort to prove to the Skeptic that he really was there, began making a branch move. At the base of the tree was a small fern. In the gentle night breeze most of the branches were moving from side to side, but just one was moving up and down. Theresa pointed out that Samuel was doing that. My camera has a detachable flash unit and on that unit is a small white test button. The button requires only the slightest touch to set off the flash. I asked Theresa to tell Samuel that I'd like him to press the button and set off the flash. And I told her that we would wait for as long as was necessary for him to complete this small task. Unfortunately Samuel became somewhat bored with us at this point and disappeared,

sadly without the usual puff of smoke.

Theresa managed to change the subject quickly enough so that she, at least, felt good about the situation. Theresa was very good at changing the subject. When I pointed out that the year of Samuel's birth had changed by twenty years she managed to change the subject. When I suggested that smallpox might not produce black spots the subject was changed. But there was some benefit to my raising these discrepancies in her and Samuel's account. Later, when chatting with some of the other participants in the evening's investigation, one man summed up the general feeling about her. "She" he said, "is full of shit".

Next came the "circle". While Ray and I watched from outside the others took their seats in a circle and went through the process of attempting to channel a spirit that might be willing to join them. Sadly no one came, although Theresa and a couple of the others claimed to have heard horses hooves approaching the sta-

bles. For the majority however, Theresa's credibility was pretty well shot.

A premature end

The evening faltered at about half past the witching hour. Some of the group had been wandering around the rear of the pub when the owner appeared and ordered them away. A few minutes later he turned up at the door of the stables and told them that they risked being shot if they appeared in the wrong place. Eoghan not surprisingly was offended by this and decided that he'd had enough of Clarkefield. The majority agreed with him and we went our separate ways. I was not sorry to see the event end prematurely, I had seen enough. The AGHS is not an investigation group, but a mutual support group that is devoted to the idea that ghosts are real, that they are everywhere and that they can be demonstrated to be real simply by sensing their presence. There is, it seems to me, little merit in that view.



Molly, an habitual tea-leaf reader, could barely contain her excitement when she met the man who actually wrote them.