

THE GHOSTLY PAST

by Anthony M. Foster

The professional local historian tends to turn up his nose at tales of the supernatural, preferring to leave such unproved matters to the amateur. I feel that this is a pity because it inevitably excludes the examination of the strange tales and folk-lore which abound in most parts of the British Isles. Hine, for all his literary professionalism was not above recounting some fascinating tales which we may have missed had he been solely concerned with local historical fact. Anecdotes are part of the pattern of local history provided that they are always recognised for what they are; part truth, part myth, and part imagination.

The Editor of our Hitchin Journal has recently published a lively little booklet 'Strange happenings in Hitchin and North Herts', and in it he devotes several pages to local ghosts. I also have written an article in 'Hertfordshire Countryside' (Vol.32, No.224) on 'Haunted Hitchin', a further contribution to which is to appear shortly. In one or two cases Ron Pigram and I have both referred to the same ghosts but for the most part we have told different tales. There are no doubt many more North Hertfordshire apparitions. Hine himself recounts a strange happening when he visited the prolific teller of Hitchin stories, Matilda Lucas at her Elizabethan Manor House near Shap.

This building, like our Hitchin Priory, seems to have boasted several ghosts. Hine was asleep in his room at the house on 22nd August 1929 when just after midnight he was awakened suddenly with the strange feeling that someone else was in the room. Quickly sitting up he perceived "a tall fragile woman of about thirty-five coming through the wall". The figure drew near to his bed and, "when she came through the chest of drawers and a chair", Hine knew she was a ghost. It is small wonder that he shrieked in terror when the figure stretched out her hand to touch his head. The ghost itself was obviously also disturbed by the outcry and vanished at once.

Knebworth House too has its ghost. This is an apparition of a girl called Jenny who sits spinning and is sometimes only heard. Her ghostly work is only said to be apparent as a warning of an impending death in the Lytton family. Letchworth, although comparatively new, also has a ghost. This one was very active some thirty years ago at a house called 'Scudamore', Letchworth Corner, when footsteps and thuds were heard each night in a certain room. Even a dog refused to go into the room.

At Wymondley ghostly monks are said to haunt the Priory and at Stevenage they have a phantom hound which has been seen in several parts of the town.

At Hinxworth Place Ron Pigram tells us of a ghost which walks about with 'Heavy measured treads', and of a figure which seeped 'through the newly built dividing wall on the upper corridor'. Ron however makes no mention of Hinxworth Place's ghost of a 'ghost'. Mysterious thuds and screams are heard followed by the sound of a baby crying. Usually this happens on stormy autumn evenings.

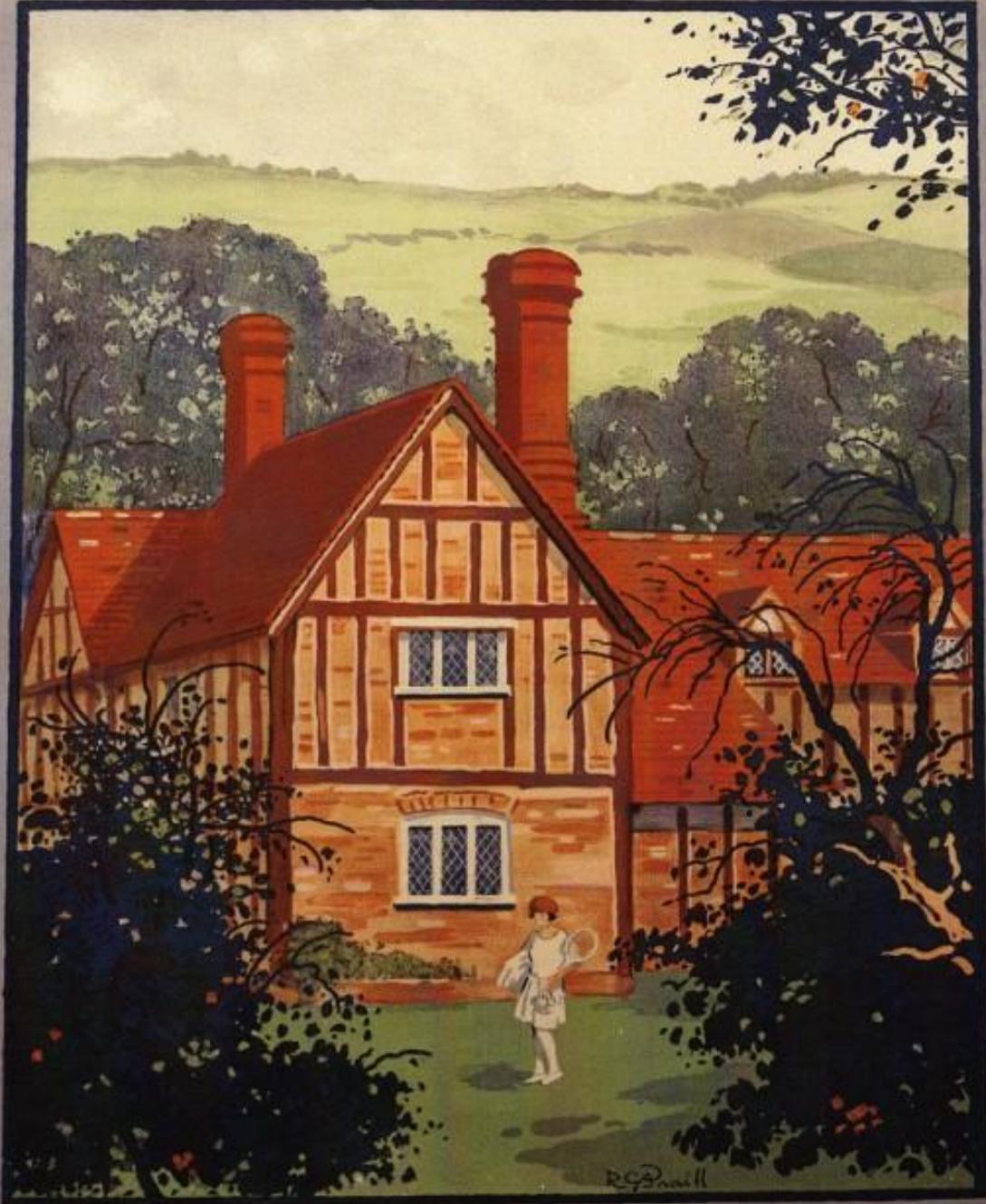
It is believed that many years ago the son of the house dressed up as a phantom to frighten a nursemaid, but the young lady stood her ground and attacked the 'apparition' with a poker. The boy fell downstairs and was killed.

At Ashwell a headless phantom in black has been seen in the churchyard and at Royston, Banyers Hotel is said to be haunted. Why not tell us your ghost story to add to our North Hertfordshire collection?



[This photograph, taken at Scudamore, Letchworth Corner, by the late Edwin Halford, was his idea of a joke. It is a classic double exposure, using the same technique used by Latchmore when he duped Reginald Hine. The ghost's "victim" is uncertain, but is most likely either Miss Elsa Wulf or Ruth Walker. SLW]

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Scudamore, in an idealised poster of 1925. The hills in the background do not exist.

The present-day compiler, our current Journal Editor Simon Walker, writes:

“I was doubtful about including this article, as I am a confirmed sceptic. The reference to the alleged ghost at Scudamore, Letchworth Corner, swung the decision however. My grandmother, Mrs E M Walker, and her second husband, Edwin Halford lived in the house for a good many years, she until 1989. It is certainly true that there was talk of thumps coming from one of the bedrooms, but it was with laughter rather than fear; and it is also true that the dog, a border collie named Meg, didn’t care for that room. But it’s quite a leap from that scant evidence to suggest that the house was haunted. I slept there many times, and the number of supernatural encounters was none. The old timbers were inclined to creak, parts of the building being quite old. To the best of my recollection, the likely cause for the disturbance was put down to the oil fired central heating.”

