

SPECIAL REPORT

IT'S WEIRD UP NORTH!

ROB GANDY reports from Cheshire on Weird Weekend North 2016

The weekend of 2-3 April saw the inaugural Weird Weekend North take place in the Community Hall at Rixton-with-Glazebrook, near Warrington in Cheshire, organised by local author, painter and cryptozoologist Glen Vaudrey. Inspired by Jon Downes's annual Weird Weekend¹ in Devon, Glen decided to stage a Northern equivalent easily accessible to anyone living north of Birmingham. The local community centre was a pragmatic venue choice for Glen and his friends and family helpers, but everyone found it pleasant and spacious. The sunny weather, varied programme, and close proximity to the Black Swan pub, made for an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience.

SATURDAY 2 APRIL

It is guaranteed that no event will go according to plan, and Glen was grateful for cryptozoologist Richard Freeman stepping into the breach when the first scheduled speaker dropped out at the last minute. Richard gave an eloquent and comprehensive talk about the history of dragons, noting their antiquity and variations in attitudes towards them around the world. He finished his talk by focusing on the Shoney, a sea serpent haunting the north east coast of England. It's said that Vikings in their longboats would draw lots and sacrifice a crewmember to prevent the Shoney attacking their boat. Apparently, there were allegations as recently as 1928 that a related cult made human sacrifices to the creature, and there have even been recent sightings of the beast.

Steve Jones followed, with stories about hooded entities. These included the experience of two men who camped at the hard-to-find Black Stone circle



One sad story was about a dog that foretold deaths

on Ilkley Moor in Yorkshire. While relaxing late one evening they separately saw small (3ft/90cm tall) brown shapes circling the few remaining stones. They quickly decided to leave. Another man visiting the site saw a 7ft (2m) brown, hooded figure that seemed aware of him; petrified, he left his gear behind and ran to the nearest road, over a mile away. Strangely, all reported hooded entities were one or other of these two sizes, with nothing in between; and they have often been seen together. Steve claims to have seen one walk through a wall. They don't seem terribly interested in humans, but if you should encounter one with red eyes then Steve's advice is: "Get the hell out of there!"

Caron Charlton and Kathryn Chadwick² discussed evidence for wildmen in the UK, but

were reticent about specifying locations for fear of attracting unwelcome attention. This included indications of a "nest", subsequently vacated, with a new one built elsewhere. Photos showed bent trees and what could have been a creature peering through branches, but equally could be a simulacrum. Some woodlands where sightings have occurred appeared too small to sustain populations of wildmen, but the pair conjectured that perhaps they were feasible if there were no serious competitors for prey. Lively debate ensued.

FT regular and Ghost Club chairman Alan Murdie gave a polished presentation about poltergeists and their interpretation and history, touching on several major cases, including Enfield and Battersea. As a practising lawyer, he considered there was too much well-documented evidence about the phenomenon for sceptics to reasonably dismiss; something was happening, but how to interpret it? For example, analyses of acoustic signatures of poltergeist raps showed patterns completely different to those for humans.

Lee Walker is a regular on Radio Merseyside, where he talks about urban legends, with a particular focus on Liverpool itself. In his inimitable fashion he related several strange stories about the city. One told of an old chap he had met and a dog that foretold deaths. It was a spooky tearjerker of a tale that left sections of the audience, and Lee himself, literally weeping.

Andy Lloyd took everyone into the evening, describing the hunt for Planet X, referring to Zecharia Sitchin's '12th Planet Theory' and the mythical planet Nibiru. Andy argued for some very large astronomical body beyond Pluto, within the outer Solar System – perhaps a brown dwarf? (No, not one of the aforementioned hooded entities!) It was an excellent presentation with lots of great graphics.³

Glen Vaudrey closed with a talk about fairy sightings, covering many classic cases. Just as Richard Freeman had been scathing about Disney's depiction of dragons, Glen was critical of the way their films represented the little people.

SUNDAY 3 APRIL

Hunt Emerson opened the second day with an illustrated talk about his Phenomenomix strip, as seen in the pages of FT. He shared examples of his early contributions and covers, and showed how they evolved into his current highly recognisable style. Choice selections from stories of historical occult characters raised lots of laughs – although Hunt did complain about having to draw Aleister Crowley so often!

I was next up, presenting examples of phantom hitchhikers (I was pleased that Hunt had made one the central character of his WWN 2016 logo design – shown above). I described these in my article "The Old Man Of Halsall Moss" [FT328:32-39], highlighting the double-witness "White Van Man" case, and then presented the audience with a brand new case that had come to light after I shared the article with a university colleague. By coincidence, her

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ILLUSTRATIONS: HUNT EMERSON

mother-in-law knew someone who'd had a similar experience. She had worked in the TSB bank in Ainsdale during the late 1970s when a management work colleague described what had happened to him driving home to Wigan. During his car journey he believed he had run someone over, and got out to look for the victim. He couldn't find anything, but was so convinced that he had hit someone that he reported the incident to the police – a fact that his workmates at the bank had found most amusing. This illustrates why people who have strange experiences are sometimes reluctant to volunteer their stories. I was delighted that several people approached me afterwards with their own tales.

Richard Freeman delivered his scheduled session about the Tasmanian Wolf, describing its history and evidence from recent cryptozoological expeditions. Certain parts of Tasmania are densely forested and far from human habitation, and the creature could have survived with a comparatively small population. Plenty of first-hand testimony is suggestive of its continued existence, but nothing in the way of hard evidence has emerged – although Richard feels the authorities know more than they are letting on.

Laurence Armstrong described the local Warburton Souling Play,⁴ a Cheshire tradition performed in early November, closely related to the more common Mumming Play. In a nutshell, it's about death and revival. Distinctively, a Horse character is included, normally a decorated horse's skull (and not to be confused with the Hobby Horse of other English traditions). Other characters (historically all played by men) include: Enterer, King George, Turkish Champion, Old Woman, The Doctor, Beelzebub, and Driver. Plays are performed in local pubs, with songs requesting ale and asking people to "put your hand in your pocket and pull out your purse", with money collected for charity.

Finally, Mick Walters presented "The Dodleston Messages". He outlined and analysed the story

of a Cheshire house where the occupants found messages left on their home computer, with some scrawled directly on to paper. These purported to come from an individual who had lived on the same site in the 16th century, and ongoing correspondence ensued, mixed with messages from seemingly mischievous teenagers from the future. There were many questions and comments, particularly from IT buffs. It was a suitably "weird" conclusion to the weekend.

There was an array of other activity to complement the talks. "Big Steve" and "Little Steve" kitted customers out with WWN 2016 T-shirts;⁵ Hunt Emerson was busy drawing caricatures and selling comic books;⁶ Andy Lloyd and Lee Walker were promoting their new books;⁷ and I was selling copies of *Looking Forward To Your Funeral*,⁸ a not-too-serious guide intended to help people help their family and friends give them the send-off that they want – even if they don't think they deserve it.

During the intervals we heard the weird ambient music of Gianluigi Gasparetti (aka Oöphoi; see FT216:57). Often drawing on fortean themes, it was played in part as a tribute to Gigi, who unfortunately died in 2013 after a long illness.

The event was a great success, with nearly 70 people attending on Saturday and 55 on Sunday. Glen was delighted to announce that WWN 2017 will take place at the same venue on the weekend of 1-2 April 2017. You would be a fool to miss it! Updates on WWN 2017 will be available on Glen's Facebook page <http://glenvaudrey.wix.com/weird-weekend-north>, where tickets will be on sale.

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The myth

Wild wolf packs are led by an Alpha Male and an Alpha Female, who earn and maintain their position at the top of the hierarchy by fighting, threatening and generally dominating their fellows.

The "truth"

There are no Alphas, wolf experts now say – and, indeed, have been saying for some years. The Alpha concept was popularised in the 1970s, following the publication of *The Wolf: Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species* by L David Mech. Mech himself has since repudiated his findings, but the book is still in print, despite, as the author puts it, his "numerous pleas to the publisher to stop publishing it". The flaw in the now-debunked theory is a familiar one in animal studies: the wolves studied were captive, or "non-natural". Far more fieldwork has been done in recent decades, which shows that the typical, natural wolf pack is composed of a breeding pair and their youngest offspring. In other words, the "leaders" of the pack are simply parents looking after their young – not Alphas who have triumphed in a competitive environment. Indeed, that is the proper term today for what used to be called Alphas: the Male Parent and the Female Parent. The idea (still popular in some dog-training circles) that your pet dog looks to you as its "pack leader", and should be trained accordingly, was based on the Alpha wolf theory, and therefore is considered similarly outdated.

Sources

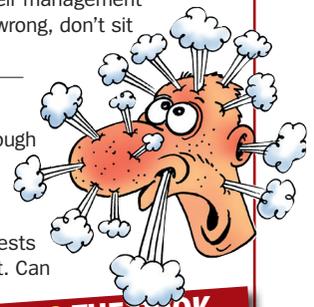
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Disclaimer

Apologies to Alpha Bosses who've just had their management strategies destroyed. But if you can prove us wrong, don't sit howling in the dark – write in.

Mythchaser

We all know that humans do not "breathe through their skin", but only through their mouths and noses; that this old myth is kept alive by hucksters selling beauty products. But a reader has heard that "recent research" suggests this might not be as clear-cut as once thought. Can anyone clear the air?



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