



STRANGE DAYS

WEIRD OF THE NORTH, REJOICE! | ROB GANDY reports from Weekend North 2024



LEFT: The Four WWN Ever-presenters: (left-right) Steve Jones, Glen Vaudrey, Richard Freeman and Rob Gandy.

clacking of typewriters in the library basement.

Next up was the ever-energetic Bob Fischer, who described his magical childhood adventure on an unknown path to an alternative reality (which was actually a new children's playground in the North Yorkshire town of Yarm, although Bob genuinely believed that he had entered another world. He then took the audience on a fun tour of suburban portals in fiction, from CS Lewis to Alan Garner via Terry Gilliam, Lewis Carroll and many others. He shared a worrying reference from his 1984 diary to "washing his Chopper", but thankfully this turned out to be his bicycle....

Mark Newbrook's detailed analysis of folk linguistics was arguably the most academic presentation at the conference. He described the common mistakes celebrities make in understanding languages, and highlighted the often expressed idea that language is becoming 'worse' over time. There were also confusions between 'language' and 'script', and 'language' and 'speech'. He gave many asides about closed minds and self-appointed non-experts that Charles Fort would have recognised, and even offered a little foray into Soviet plans to communicate with animals and aliens.

WWN would not be WWN without its annual lard-eating competition! This year's winner was Ben Fiddler. However, it was noted that Bob Fischer excused himself at the start, saying incredulously that he thought it must be a joke; competition organiser Richard Freeman does have a strange sense of humour.

A scheduled speaker had dropped out, and so Glen

Weird Weekend North returned to the Rixton-with-Glazebrook Community Hall at the end of April 2024 rather than for its traditional first weekend: someone else had got in first! But as with all previous years, organiser Glen Vaudrey had curated a wide range of presentations about the weird and wonderful. Speakers were a mix of the new and the old, with Steve Jones, Richard Freeman, Glen and this author celebrating having presented at all seven events. As ever, Richard adopted his fez-tooned 'Barry Tadcaster' persona to introduce speakers with bizarre biographies.

Steve opened Saturday's proceedings by highlighting the quirky, fortean side of human nature: death and dissension in the Leeds Dripping Riot of 1865. Eliza Stafford was cook to Henry Chorley, who lived in Park Square, Leeds. He accused her of disposing of two pounds of dripping to a local dressmaker, and pressed for her prosecution for theft. She admitted to disposing of the dripping, but claimed it was a perquisite of the job. She was found guilty and sentenced to one month's imprisonment. On the day of her release several thousand

people gathered outside Armley Gaol, but she had already left for her daughter's home in Scarborough. Frustrated, the mob marched to Chorley's house. The ensuing riot resulted in broken windows at the house, and one man was trampled on and later died, with a number of men arrested for riotous conduct.

At WWN2023 Matteo Borrini wowed the audience with his stage magic (see FT432:14-15), but this year he returned in his professional guise as a forensic anthropologist. Provocatively, he began by stating "I believe in vampires." His extraordinary presentation then described historical vampire lore and the post mortem changes that led to corpses being misidentified as members of the undead. This included his excavations of mass graves of plague victims in Venice, which revealed the remains of a female 'vampire' with a brick jammed between her jaws to prevent her feeding on plague victims. Responding to questions he outlined his work as a scientific consultant on human decay for the Vatican (see FT428:40-43).

Returning to Leeds, Anna Goodridge, Assistant Librarian at Leeds Library, described a ghostly episode in the building in 1884 in which a phantom

Anna Goodridge described a ghostly episode at Leeds Library



looked round one of the bookcases, but it appeared its body was *inside* it. The Society for Psychical Research undertook investigations, with descriptions of the event being published in books and magazines. Anna detailed the debates and arguments relating to the case over the years, and delivered anecdotes about ghost-watcher Joe Cooper's ukulele, how 12 students were refused the opportunity to lay the ghost on the night of 31 March/1 April 1960, and her own experience with the mysterious

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Vaudrey stepped in to discuss Atland, the Frisian Atlantis of the North Sea. He described a saga of dodgy racist science, fake history and 1970s book sales, and justifiably gave the idea the rigorous panning it deserves. It was such palpable nonsense that even the Nazis rejected the legend, but in spite of this it now enjoys a weird afterlife among some deeply unsavoury characters online, including modern ultranationalists in both Russia and the USA.

The final talk of the day was by ASSAP Chair CJ Romer, who gave us a classic tale of a wrong turn taken in a familiar neighbourhood that led to his having a mysterious encounter with a black barn. As any self-respecting child would then do, he decided to return after lunch and break in, only to find it had completely disappeared. CJ then described the fascinating case of a vanishing and reappearing house that unfolded over several decades in the countryside between Rougham and Bradfield St George in Suffolk. This brought things to a conclusion, when many attendees decided to quickly adjourn to the Black Swan pub before it too disappeared.

Sunday kicked off with the wonderful Claire Davy, who detailed the story of the ghosts of Flight 401. The first part set out the tragedy of how Eastern Airlines Flight 401 crashed in the Everglades with 101 deaths. Some parts of the plane were salvaged and re-used in other aircraft. It was then that things got really strange, with the ghosts of Captain Bob Loft and Flight Engineer Don Repo appearing to (sometimes multiple) witnesses, usually to warn of problems or to see that things had been checked. There was the question of whether some staff had been 'primed' to see the ghosts by what was written in log books and publicity, but there a final exorcism was conducted on one of the affected planes – and the ghosts have never been seen



since.

I was up next, with a talk about 'The Ruskington Horror', using information from my FT articles (FT401:32-38, FT402:38-43) and highlighted how this short, nondescript stretch of the A15 had somehow become a 'hot-spot' for road ghosts. I gave an overview of ITV *This Morning's* investigations, and described five cases from the Internet and 17 witness statements I had collected, including writer and broadcaster Charlie Connelly's very peculiar experience (FT423:42-45). I discussed potential explanations, including the unlikely involvement of witches and highwaymen, before showing videos of 'The Ruskington Goblin' (FT405:48), which everyone agreed were "wholly inconclusive".

Richard Freeman's talk was about Tajikistan's cryptids, the Gul and the Caspian Tiger (FT373:38-43, 379:55). One

useful source for the former was a book titled *The Soviet Sasquatch*, which covered several decades of Russian hominid research. The latter was last seen in 1970, but there were regular claims of the big cats' survival, with the observation that they come down from the mountains in September to hunt livestock. Some areas in this very mountainous country were quite inaccessible to humans and rich in wildlife and food; these would be prime locations for finding cryptids. Unfortunately, increasing tourism has negatively impacted on potential habitats. Richard described his team's last trip and plans for returning in Autumn 2024.

That the Earth is hollow, or that there are underground realms, is something that has been believed by cultures across the globe since time immemorial. Nathan Jackson took the audience on a voyage through a whole pantheon of such domains – some peaceful and idyllic, others hellish and scary – and described their different denizens. These included the Green Children of Woolpit, Richard Shaver's deros and teros, and dwarfs and elves. He touched on the amazing story of what Admiral Byrd discovered when he travelled to Antarctica. Nathan finished on the serious point that the deepest man-made hole is a 7.6 mile (12km) borehole in Russia, and that the Earth's core

LEFT: Bob Fischer relives his weird childhood. BELOW LEFT: The triumphant winner of this year's lard-eating competition.

apparently spins faster than its surface. We know far less about inner space than we know about outer space!

The annual quiz resulted in an 8 points to 4 victory for Team 1. As usual, it paid to be the runners-up, who received giant fruit-flavoured gummy worms from quizmaster Richard Freeman. The winners received copies of *Trans-Dimensional Zombie Bummers, Vol. 1* (amazingly, there is a sequel!)

The final presentation belonged to Andrew Ross, who would have won the 'best-dressed presenter' award, if there was one. He detailed 'Mistaken ghosts, pranks and Spooky challenges from around County Durham'. This was a refreshingly different take on ghost stories; these were the ones where there wasn't a ghost – they were usually a hoax or a joke. They included: sheets being drawn across lanes using pulleys; a man literally scared to death because he thought he was being followed by a demon (he heard its footsteps keeping time with him, but it was a loose part of his shoe making the noise); a student prank at Durham University involving a 'Mad Professor', which lasted over 100 years; and international cricketers being terrified by Lily the Ghost of Lumley Castle.

The attendance at WWN2024 was an all-time high, with around 100 on the Saturday and 90 on the Sunday. This was despite some regulars not being able to attend because of a clash of dates. Full credit goes to Glen for this success, and he is pleased to announce that WWN2025 will take place on 5 & 6 April 2025. Tickets are already on sale (www.weirdweekendnorth.com/tickets), so book early to avoid disappointment!

I would like to thank Ryan Shirlow for his help with this article.

PHOTOS: ROB GANDY