



STRANGE DAYS

MAGIC, WITCHES & WEIRDNESS

ROB GANDY reports from Weekend North 2023

The newly refurbished Rixton-with-Glazebrook Community Hall hosted the sixth Weird Weekend North on 1, 2 and 3 April 2023. The main themes were Magic and Witchcraft, partly inspired by organisers' Glen and Kerry Vaudrey finding an array of witch-charms in the nearby house they were moving into. Accordingly, a surprise appearance of the World's Greatest Magician was arranged: Sooty, together with his pal Sweep, waved from behind the stage curtains to the delight of the audience!

Ever-present, fez-tooned 'Barry Tadcaster' (aka Richard Freeman) welcomed speakers in his inimitable fashion, brandishing his array of 'talking' puppets. As has become customary, I opened proceedings. My talk described what has been the darkest and most difficult research that I have undertaken. It concerned the string of paranormal experiences of a mother-of-two, dating from when she was a child in Greater Manchester, and her subsequent discovery that her grandparents had been involved in Devil worship in the 1960s. Was it possible that this was linked to the phenomena? I illustrated the potential for black magicians to create tulpas to haunt people with an attested example involving a black dog.

Claire Davy then lightened the mood with a chatty worldwide tour of graveyards. She detailed the famous Chase Vault story from Barbados (FT385:44-49), before describing St John's Church, Boughton Green, as one of the most haunted cemeteries in England. You wouldn't want to meet the wraith of notorious highwayman 'Captain Slash', but there is another ghost which is presumed English because it only says one word: "Sorry". Crossing the globe,



LEFT: Claire Davy, Barry Tadcaster (aka Richard Freeman) and Gef the Talking Mongoose in front of a full house.

Claire covered Argentina (La Recoleta), Romania (Merry Cemetery), London (Highgate, of course), Edinburgh (Greyfriars), the Czech Republic, Cuba, Australia and many in the USA (including Hollywood). Claire must have an understanding family, as she admits that when on holiday, her husband and kids head off to the waterpark while she seeks out local graveyards.

After lunch, Mark Olly set out a wide-ranging history of skulls – human and crystal – with some fantastic images and graphics. He described both tiny and giant heads from antiquity, raising the possibility there could have been a 'Lord of the Rings'-type world of hominids at some point in the past, with the extremes disappearing through evolution and interbreeding. Celts worshipped heads, and most ancient races believed the brain was the seat of a human soul; if you owned the head, then you owned the person. There were also some fascinating examples of people who could still function despite not having a brain. Mark finished by highlighting how quartz was the most common substance and discussed the Mitchell-Hedges Skull of Doom (FT237:28-35) and alien skulls.

Debora Moretti analysed archaeological and folkloric records relating to witches

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in northern Italy. The word 'Masca' means a malevolent witch, spirit, or shadow of the dead. Arguably it evolved from ancient words relating to 'mask', with evidence from bog bodies pointing to funerary traditions of wrapping the dead in mesh/net to tie them down and prevent their return. It was commonly believed that witches flew across the sky to a Sabbat and they did this using ointments/oils made from fluids drawn from kidnapped children and stored in terracotta jars. Also, while asleep, witches could leave their bodies through their mouths as insects or small animals. Unfortunately, adulterous women would be

considered witches and put to death by drowning.

Next, Richard Freeman detailed his latest trip to Sumatra in search of Orang Pendek and how his party explored a new part of the island and collected witness stories from locals. A footprint was found and a handprint suggested Orang Pendek was ground-based. There was a frustrating 'near-miss' when a (Skeleton-like) vocalisation was heard, which the guide said was Orang Pendek. Richard's colleague spotted something reddish-brown and about three feet (90cm) tall for a couple of seconds before it disappeared, leaving Richard poised with his camera, but too late. Successes included the team being the first Westerners to see some unique grave markers, and a very rare Sumatran Tiger caught by a camera trap.

After the main meal break, 'The Great Borrini' (aka Dr Matteo Borrini; see FT428:40-43) entertained the audience with a dazzling display of stage magic and mentalism wrapped around the theme of the Inquisition. This entailed panache, humour and detailed historical information about witches, torture and other related issues. Using a ring, he illustrated how Knights Templar would deliberately confuse inquisitors. Audience members were welcomed on stage with sharp spikes narrowly avoided, poisoned apples, mind-reading and a past-life regression. The finale had him foretell which of five 'witches' would be chosen by a random conference attendee to be the one saved from being burned at the stake! Comments from the audience included "Fantastic!" and "There's never been anything like it at any similar



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conference!”

The first day closed with Nathan Jackson’s presentation on the little-discussed cryptozoological aspects of bears. He showed that if you go down to the woods today you may be in for a big (and nasty) surprise. There was a (potential) solution to what MacFarlane’s Bear, killed in 1864 and held at the Smithsonian, might actually be. He then took the audience on a trip across the seven continents, describing crypto-ursids both small and gigantic. No bears are found in Africa today, which wasn’t always the case. The Atlas bear was found in Morocco until the 19th century, but there are alleged sightings to this day.

Because of a late withdrawal by one speaker, I opened the second day with a talk about the ‘Brides on the Bridge’ (FT389:42-47) and asked if the photo of ‘Emily’ was a genuine photo of a ghost? ASSAP Chair CJ Romer added to the lively debate by describing how ‘ghost apps’ had become widely available and explained how even ‘experts’ struggle with alleged ghost photos. Several audience members were adamant ‘Emily’ was a fake, but I highlighted my understanding that the witness did not have the wherewithal to do this and he had never sought publicity or profit in the nine years since the photo was taken. I trusted his sincerity and CJ and I agreed to maintain an open mind.

Brian Hoggard’s well-illustrated and informative presentation explored a wide range of apotropaic practices over many centuries and cultures. He described curse dolls, written curses with mirror writing, witch bottles and various charms; and referenced an *Antiques Roadshow* where the presenter drank from a witch bottle thinking it was wine, when in fact it contained urine (FT392:10). Unofficial English saint John Schorne believed footwear could be used to trap Evil (FT425:66-68), reflecting the practice where well-worn shoes were concealed in



PHOTOS: STEVE ROBINSHAW

ABOVE: The Great Borrini asks which witch should be saved from the flames. LEFT: The controversial photo of ‘Emily’ by the bridge in Great Haywood.



houses as a form of protection. Similarly, dead cats and horses’ skulls were found in house foundations and behind walls. Brian thought that this was because they would look very scary to any entities trying to enter the house.

There are over 50 locations around Scotland’s coast where sea serpents of many types have been seen since 1808: turtle-shaped, long-necked and many-humped. Unfortunately for monster-enthusiasts, Glen Vaudrey, who used to live in the Western Isles, was able to debunk virtually all of them. With his dry sense of humour he highlighted the best-known cases and proposed rational explanations: Sound of Soay (leather-back Turtle); Gourock

(highly-decayed basking shark); Eriskay Water Horse (walrus); Lochalsh (a seal in periscope position); Butt of Lewis (remains of shipwreck seen at distance); and Sound of Sleet (a herd of cows swimming to fresh pasture). He added the key observation that no one ever sees the serpents’ bodies....

Steve Jones asked whether people knew of the parallels between Gardnerian Wicca practices and those of Masons? The first written reference to Masons was by Elias Ashmole (of Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum) who was initiated in nearby Warrington. Gerald Gardner was a Mason who adopted Naturism to deal with his asthma and became involved in Wicca when meeting practitioners at the Rosicrucian Theatre. A series of photos showed clear parallels, and Steve indicated how Gardner mimicked Masonic rituals, listing 13 similarities. Wicca is not an ancient religion, but it is the only one that Britain has given to the world.

The annual quiz featured questions on monsters, ghosts and UFOs, with Team 1 beating Team 2 by 7½ to 5 after a slow start. First prize was packs of

‘Cryptid Top Trumps’ with the runners-up receiving ‘Cryptid Colouring Books’. Richard Freeman then denounced over half of the creatures in each as not being actual cryptids!

The final talk saw David Adams reveal that he was ‘David Barton’ (FT371:40-44) and then detail his series of personal haunting experiences. A genuine raconteur, he described extremely bizarre events in an easy-going style, including disembodied hands, spectral old ladies and footsteps at midnight. Yet the only time he had ever been really scared was when he sensed something evil immediately in front of him when in his brother’s flat. He finished with a new story about a probable timeslip that had happened to him off Liverpool’s Bold Street, which is notorious for such phenomena (FT126:9, 382:40).

Glen Vaudrey deserves every plaudit for organising a sold-out WWN2023. He has since been busily preparing for 2024, with some excellent speakers already booked. Tickets are now on sale at www.weirdweekendnorth.com – you really do need to book early to avoid disappointment!

