

A Brief History of the Ghosts of Bickering

by

Dr Oswald Muckleberry



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A Brief History of the Ghosts of Bickering is a book that has been compiled, edited and contributed to by Dr Oswald Muckleberry.

Dr Muckleberry has been collecting stories, myths and legends regarding Bickering on Sea, reputed to be the most haunted virtual town in the world, for many years, and is willing to receive further contributions. Simply submit your ghost stories, marked FAO Dr Muckleberry, to the Parish Council.

What follows is the prologue to his book, explaining his abiding interest in the paranormal life of Bickering on Sea, and a sample selection of those stories he has collected thus far. We hope you enjoy them.

Prologue

I was a child when my mother and father took me on holiday, to Bickering on Sea. It was a wonderful time for the seven-year-old me; filled with sunshine, seaside and sand. We built sandcastles, visited the pier, and, more importantly, went to Bickering Castle. Our first visit to the castle was during the day and my father and I played soldiers, imagining that we were fighting the Roundheads in order to save the King. Wonderful days. It was while visiting the castle ruins in the twilight of a summer's evening a few days later with my mother, however, that I discovered my life's calling.

I will never forget it. My mother and I were out walking, while my father enjoyed an evening of liquid refreshment, at the Tides Inn, near our boarding house. The noise from the musicians and gentlemen in the public bar was fulsome, so, since I was unable to sleep, my mother suggested a twilight walk up the cliff path to the Castle. It was a wonderful idea, and we set off in the mellow evening sunshine.

We wandered hand in hand, talking about all kinds of things, and followed the meandering path up the cliffs, until we reached the rather dramatic ruins of the 13th century edifice. I remember my childish mind was filled with thoughts of long past battles, knights in shining armour and kings on their thrones. My mother watched, seated on the grass, while I fought invisible enemies, using a stick for a sword, while the light faded and the sun began to dip below the horizon.

I remember my mother telling me that we should leave, and it was then that my life was changed forever. I turned for one last look at the darkening walls of the ruined castle when, in the lee of a tumbledown tower, I saw a person I thought to be a fellow visitor. It was strange, however, that his clothing seemed to glow with an eldritch light in the evening shadows.

I called to my mother, to tell her about my curious discovery. Immediately she started to walk toward me, with some urgency in her steps.

Meanwhile, the figure in the lee of the tower turned to look at us and began to move towards the place where I stood. Perhaps it was attracted by the sound of my mother's footsteps, or simply seeking to greet us. It was in that moment, however, young as I was, that I came to the realisation that the figure I was observing was not another visitor to the castle, but a long dead apparition from its past.

My mother stopped in her tracks, transfixed by what we saw. The ghostly figure seemed to be wearing some kind of loose-fitting robe and, even from a distance, I could see there was a terrible expression on his face. In that moment, the translucent figure seemed to glow even brighter as it opened its mouth in what seemed to be a silent scream. Then, it started to move towards us more rapidly, keeping to the shadows that surrounded the tower, which were now as dark as night.

The figure passed into the weak evening light, which caused it to disappear. In that moment, my mother scooped me into her arms and, grasping me to her chest, ran away from the castle ruins, towards the town of Bickering, as fast as she could. As she carried me, I was able to look over her shoulder, back towards the shadows, where once more I saw the figure, its right arm raised, as if in farewell. Even as I watched, the apparition lifted its left arm, grasped its own spectral hair and lifted its own head clear off its neck, holding it away from its body. My breath quite caught in my throat as I lost sight of the morbid scene.

Interestingly, I was not scared, as such. More, surprised. Fascinated by what I had seen as we fled the ancient ruin. My mother warned me never to tell my father, who was a rather skeptical and impatient man. I was never to talk about what we had seen, and she, for the rest of her life, never mentioned it to me again.

The next morning, we left Bickering on Sea. Whether it was the end of our holiday, or my mother and father had made the decision to return home early, I do not know. But, at least while I was a child, we never returned to the town again.

For my part, I could not forget the compelling sight of the Headless Monk, for that is who we had seen. I began to thirst for knowledge about ghosts and apparitions. As I got older, I began to collect stories and reports of sightings from the netherworld, wherever they might be. But I always watched out for stories from Bickering on Sea and, when I was old enough, I returned to Bickering on my own, spending many hours exploring the ruins of Bickering

Castle during the holidays from university.

My life was shaped by those times, and I have been lucky enough to spend an entire career studying myths and legends from around the world. I have both studied and taught at some of the world's foremost universities, and earned an enviable reputation as a leading thinker in my field. But, I never forgot my first encounter with the Headless Monk at Bickering Castle.

When my time to retire from my post as Professor of Supernatural and Ectoplasmic Studies at the University of Transylvania came, I chose to settle in Bickering on Sea. I have since committed the autumn years of my life to collecting and sharing the many fascinating stories that come from this most idyllic of seaside resorts. Bickering has, after all, a great many sites of interest where moments in history have begotten restless souls, who return, time and again, to the scene of their deaths.

As a part of my work, I take great joy in conducting tours of Bickering Castle, leading walking tours to the many sites of unexplained events, and collecting and writing stories, to educate future generations in the rich panoply of supernatural apparitions linked to Bickering on Sea.

I am always overjoyed to receive contributions for my collection, and have even written some myself. If you have come across stories of ghosts, ghouls and apparitions, from Bickering on Sea or anywhere else, I would be delighted to read them. Please send them through the Contributions page on www.bickeringonsea.co.uk.

The Headless Monk

by Dr. Oswald Muckleberry

My own fascination with the Headless Monk of Bickering Castle stems from my first visit, as a seven-year-old boy, with my parents, to Bickering on Sea. As the years have passed, I made great efforts to collect every scrap of information about this particular ghost and the many encounters that have been had with it over centuries. Much of my information was gleaned from reports found in long forgotten diaries and journals, written by residents and visitors to the town who had witnessed manifestations of the Monk in the grounds of Bickering Castle.

The earliest written account was from the writings of the personal chaplain to the 1st Marquess of Branchester, Father Humphrey of Bickren, who took residence in the castle at the time of its completion in 1278. The account dates from 1282 and was found during excavations in the 1880s in some lost papers, hidden within the walls of the vestry of the castle chapel. The castle chapel itself had been situated in the lee of the north tower, where all of the reported sighting of the Headless Monk have taken place, and was one of the last buildings to be destroyed during the sacking of the castle, by Parliamentary forces in the English Civil War. Some forgotten history enthusiast recovered the documents, among which was a fine example of illuminated script, and presented them to the Bickering Museum, where I was able to do much of my research.

Father Humphrey wrote;

“The spectre of an headless brother did be sighted by an poor lad, who was driven to death from atop the castle wall. His family were much distraught, but the Marquess interceded in their grief. I sighted the headless brother mine-self short thereafter, and was filled with such overweening guilt and ungodly distraught. Many days was I laid low with black contemplations, before finding relief in prayer. Beware all who follow and ensure pure heart in ever readiness for spiritual battle with this evil apparition.”

It is no wonder that the town of Bickren, as it was then known, was treated with suspicion by many of the gullible and superstitious souls of the County of

Branchestershire in those days. It was always rumoured to be especially close to the netherworld and there were a huge number of sightings of ghosts, visions, and apparitions in other parts of the town too. The Standing Stones in the midst of Bickering Forest are a case in point, where three separate leylines are said to coalesce and children were rumoured to have disappeared, and strange creatures were reportedly glimpsed on certain days of the year, most especially around the times of the solstices.

As a result, many Witch Hunters in mediaeval times made a point of visiting the parish of St Jude's in their grizzly search for satanic forces. And there are many stories of events and legends linked to witch trials too.

Many of the stories have, of course, been passed on by word of mouth, but those relating to the Headless Monk continued into what might be thought of as times where superstition was eclipsed by science.

For example, in 1895, Miss Milly Ethelridge, wrote in her diary:

“Gerald took me to the castle for a picnic this afternoon. I was sure he would ask me to marry him, and Mama was as excited as I. When we were at the castle, however, one of his beastly friends played a trick on us. I am sure it must be Percy. He hates that I prefer Gerald. Percy must have been hiding in the ruins, waiting for the sun to set. Then, like a beastly thing, he jumped into the shadows, as from nowhere, dressed in a glowing habit. It frightened me half to death.

“I have no idea how he made his clothes glow, but I was so afeared that I ran away. Hardly behaviour befitting a young lady of my station. Gerald was quite vexed at this childish trick and promised to give Percy a damn good thrashing.

“He didn't ask me to marry him.”

For those of a romantic mind, Gerald Kubrick did, in fact, go on to marry Milly Ethelridge some years later, at St Jude's Church, but her encounter with the glowing figure was never very clearly explained. Milly refers to it several times in her diaries in later life, but never saw the Monk again. I believe that she, and her beau, had a similar experience to that of my mother and I more than fifty years later.

Encounters with the Headless Monk, however, have not always been so

benign. Some of those who have met the glowing cleric have come to rather sticky endings. Perhaps the clearest example is that of William Campford.

A young man from a well-off family in the town, William had returned home from his studies at Oxford University in the summer of 1857. The story was reported in the Bickering Bugle at the time, and created quite a stir. By its account, William Campford was seen reading in the lee of the North Tower on an especially hot, sunny afternoon, when he fell asleep. Mr Campford did not awake until almost nightfall, by which time the area within which he was sitting was flooded in shadow. A young woman of his acquaintance told town councilors that she had seen him at that time in conference with a glowing figure, and that he had looked quite terrified. Poor Master Campford was observed not long afterwards, running as fast as he could towards the cliff edge, off of which he simply ran, screaming in madness, to be dashed on the rocks below.

While stories such as these have not been recorded scientifically, they occur time and again, often at intervals of about 50 years. The Headless Monk will appear in the shadows of the North Tower and, very soon after, some terrible thing will happen. There have been reports of unexplained deaths, accounts of terrible luck on the part of those who were involved in encounters and much more. It is of no surprise that most people stubbornly refuse to make a direct connection between these events and the Headless Monk, since many refuse to believe in ghosts, but, at least to me, the link is clear and present. You can read more in my short book, *Encounters with the Headless Monk of Bickering Castle: A History*.

But the question remains, who is the Headless Monk?

My research leads me to believe that he is most probably the troubled apparition of a certain Brian Bloodaxe. His story is very old and pieced together from scraps, remnants and legends, and a very simple one that barely explains the maleficence of the ghostly encounters that followed.

Brian lived in the mid-800s. His birthplace is unknown, but it was almost certainly on the far side of the Northern Sea, in the lands of the Viking tribes. He is thought to have landed near Beacran as a member of an invading Viking force and was destined never to leave the shores again. The particular invasion of which he had been a part, failed to gain a proper foothold on land and the Viking warriors were defeated and repulsed. Those who remained, either injured or imprisoned, were given the choice, at arrow point, to convert

to the Christian faith or die. Most chose to die, since the Viking people were wild and, at least in those days, fiercely committed to their pagan gods. Brian, however, was wise enough to relent and thus began a life of servitude as a now Christian slave to one of the local lords.

It is said that he was ever seeking an opportunity to leave Britain and, in time, escaped his imprisonment and went into hiding in the lands around Beacran. In time, he found his way into the monastery which was situated on the site where, more than 300 years later, Bickering Castle was built. He underwent an apparent, and honest, conversion experience and became a monk, being granted freedom by his lord to remain in prayer and service of the order.

On one stormy night some years later, however, a Viking raid found its way ashore and the monastery was sacked. All of those who were in the chapel were put to painful and terrible death, including Brian Bloodaxe. Since he was a Viking by birth, the savage warriors of the raid cut off his hands and feet, put out his eyes, tortured and beheaded him in the belief that, after such a terrible death, the spirit of their erstwhile fellow Viking would be unable to enter the spirit world.

Their leader, however, made a terrible mistake by setting up camp in the midst of the now ruined church and, at some time after midnight, he woke his men with his own screaming. The story goes that, in the darkness of that moonless night, the spirit of Brian Bloodaxe had visited the sleeping warrior and driven him to madness. The Viking leader ran screaming from the camp and plunged headlong from the cliffs of Beacran, to be dashed on the rocks below.

The invaders, apparently convinced that the event had been the result of local magic, fled the scene and, it is assumed, returned to their homeland. The remaining monks, however, returned to their monastery and their life of prayer and work.

The monks were not bothered by the same horrific vision of the headless monk, but there followed many reports of other visitations from the spectre of Brother Brian, who became known as the Headless Monk. It was held by the brothers of the order that only those with impure hearts were driven to despair by their long dead brother. Indeed, following those times there grew a tradition whereby the motives of those suspected of sophistry were tested by a night in the shadows of the chapel. If they made it through the night, their motives were declared pure. If, however, they were unable to make it through the night, they were believed to be untrustworthy and treated as such. Some, however, at

particular times of year, were driven mad by actual encounters with the ghost of the Headless Monk. Some even leaping to their deaths, as in the case of William Campford who, following his death, was found to be married to three separate women in different towns on the road from Oxford.

Over the centuries, many of the locals of Bickering have warned their children to stay away from the castle at night. They have stories of the terrible Headless Monk, turning the story into a cautionary tale which none take seriously in this day and age. They say that the Headless Monk tortures unruly or lazy children, and drives people of unreliable motives mad. But perhaps they should take things more seriously, since there are those who still claim, even today, to have encountered the Headless Monk.

The stories might also account for why so many of the young people of the town see it as their youthful duty, a rite of passage even, to spend time in the castle grounds.

In my interviews with them, however, it is clear that they almost always avoid the ruins of the North Tower, where the Monk has been seen most often. And many of them tell tales of glimpsing a glowing apparition.

The Little Shell Girl of Bickering Pier

by Dr Oswald Muckleberry

One of the saddest stories from the annals of Bickering on Sea's paranormal history relates the Little Shell Girl.

On many a dark night, since Victorian times, there have been reports of a sad young lady who collects shells on the beach of Bickering on Sea. Unlike the stories of the more infamous Headless Monk of Bickering Castle, this spectre has not been linked to specific catastrophes. Rather, those who have had the privilege to encounter her tell of a feeling of over overwhelming sadness and loss.

I myself was privileged to observe her appearance a number of years ago, during one of my frequent visits to the town. She looked no more than 9 years old and was seemingly dressed in rags as she combed the beach, I believe, looking for shells. During my encounter, I was almost overwhelmed by her sense of hopelessness and a feeling of profound loss. So much so, that I found tears in my own eyes and made an ill-advised attempt to contact her, with the intention of offering some form of solace or companionship. I say ill-advised, since, while any right-thinking person would try to comfort such a tormented child, as a paranormologist, I should know better and been prepared to put aside such sentimentality in the name of science.

As I approached this sad vision, however, she simply vanished from my sight, with no acknowledgement of my presence on her part, and, despite my best efforts, she never appeared to me again. In fact, it seems to be a common theme in relation to this particular apparition that, those who attempt to approach this sad girl never see her again. While for others who find themselves unable to act, or unwilling, are even more likely to see her on other occasions.

Further observation showed me that, while I continued in my attempts to catch sight of her, often with colleagues and fellow enthusiasts, I could gain no sight even when they were blessed to do so at the same moment. On more than one evening, while standing next to a colleague who swore that they were able to see her under the pier, I saw nothing. While they reported an overwhelm-

ing sense of sadness and, indeed, often found unbidden tears well up in fellow feeling with the girl, I could see and feel nothing.

It took me some time to find evidence as to the story behind this most hauntingly beautiful child. In fact, in the end I uncovered it quite by accident, among the records of one of the oldest businesses in Bickering on Sea, and it was a clue that led me to the neighbouring and rival town of Squabbling on the Wold.

C Bottomley and Sons are the oldest firm of builders in Bickering on Sea, and were involved in the construction of Bickering Pier in 1834. The full story of the pier and the pride that built it is for another writer. But suffice to say that Sir Uriah Grey, later made Lord Grey of Bickering, believed that if the growing town of Bickering on Sea was to attract visitors on the same scale as Brighton and Southend, even royal visitors, it must also have a pier to rival them. Hence, the conception of Bickering Pier, which became commonly known among the people of the town as Uriah's Folly.

Despite the existence of both Fisherman's Quay and Bickering Point, early tourist attractions in their own right, Sir Uriah funded the construction of the pleasure pier in the middle of the harbour, causing the fishing industry of Bickering to collapse and violently displacing a community. Money changed hands and the corrupt Parish Council of the time agreed to Sir Uriah's scheme, engaging the services of several local builders to see the project through. Mr Samuel Brown, who had been the designer of Brighton Chain Pier, drew up the plans and work began.

Unfortunately, the beach front where Sir Uriah wanted to build his folly was the home of a collection of ramshackle homes and dwellings lived in by fishermen and their families. Sir Uriah's friend, the Marquess of Branchester, agreed to their removal, offering them rehousing in the nearby inland town of Squabbling on the Wold.

As one might expect, the families who called that place their home were unwilling to be moved, but the protection afforded to the population in our day and age were not existent in 1833 and, after the initial refusal of the families to leave, the local Constable was given orders to move in with his men. Armed with batons and mounted on horses, many from the stables of Sir Uriah himself, the families were ejected from the area and rehoused in Squabbling, where many of their descendants live to this day.

The events of that day, however, were not without casualties. My research into the pier's apparition took me to the library in Squabbling on the Wold, where I found an account by one of the children of one of those fisher families. Hosea Keppling went on to become a school teacher in Squabbling and kept a diary for much of his life. He had been present on the day of the "Great Injustice", as he referred to it. Shortly before his death in 1890, Hosea wrote in his diary:

"Even after so many years, I can still see dear little Prudence, alone and seemingly unaware that she was surrounded by angry horses and men. She was looking for interesting shells on the beach before she was so cruelly crushed beneath the hooves of the horses. As she was knocked to the ground, she looked at me, screaming, her eyes pools of fear. Her eyes haunt me still, and each day I pray to my God that she has found peace."

In another entry during the Summer of 1846, Hosea wrote:

"The Marquess has finally rejected our requests for recompence. Dearest Prudence lost her life for nothing"

Further investigation led me to a newspaper cutting from the time of the "Great Injustice", from one of the earliest editions of The Bickering Bugle. The report, which could be considered, even by the standards of the day, sensationalist, reported that Miss Prudence Keppling, the youngest child of Mr and Mrs Philemon Keppling, had been killed in an accident. She had fallen beneath the hooves of a horse, ridden by Constable Rodney Possett, while he sought to enforce the Parish Council's decision to make way for the new pleasure pier.

The family had, despite their terrible loss, been relocated to their new home in Squabbling on the Wold. Constable Possett, in the meantime, had faced no charges and the girl's death had passed almost unnoticed by the townspeople. This was the only report of the incident that I could find in the records of The Bugle and then only at the bottom of a file which appeared, at some time in the past, to have been rather extensively revisited, to remove pages from previous copies of the newspaper. While I cannot say for certain, one must assume that this process was undertaken to remove reports of the incident. A coverup?

I had, as intended, found the identity of the Little Shell Girl of

Bickering Pier, but the trail appeared to have gone cold. I was so very thankful, therefore, to Miss Audrey E. Possett, Curator of Bickering on Sea Museum, and a direct descendent of the erstwhile Constable. Upon hearing about this particular investigation, she provided me with access to the papers of Constable Rodney Possett, which are housed in the Possett Family Archive at the Museum. I am sure you will agree, it sets out a very sad story.

The entry from Constable Possett's papers which follows did not have a date to which it was attached, but appears to come from some months after what Hosea Keppling refers to as the "Great Injustice":

"The death of that poor girl was very sad. A pity. Necessary, but sad. It goes to show that no one can stand in the way of Progress. The bloody newspaper is still sticking its nose in, asking awkward questions and levelling entirely unjustified accusations at me, but I will talk to Uncle Alfred. He will put a stop to it.

"Uncle Alfred has ordered his people to stop asking bloody stupid questions. I feel sorry for the girl's family, and the girl of course, but these things happen.

The Uncle Alfred to whom Constable Possett refers was the owner and editor of the Bickering Bugle. Alfred Possett Esq. Philanthropist, Parish Councilor, and benevolent uncle. And later he adds:

"I don't feel sorry for the family anymore. They just won't shut up. The girl's father confronted me this morning. Told me I had deliberately ridden his daughter down. Bloody cheek. I can't think how he came to such an idea. Had him arrested. Soon put a stop to such rumours."

Constable Rodney Possett had, I found out, been a member of the 4th Battalion of the King's Dragoons and had seen active service in the Colonies, pacifying the natives. Suggestions that he had sought to pacify the people of Bickering on Sea followed him for the rest of his life, and the memory of Prudence Keppling all but disappeared from the official record and the deportation of her father who was shortly thereafter condemned to be shipped abroad for the crime of 'Making a Fuss'. He died of dysentery on the journey to Australia.

As an addendum, the ghost of the Little Shell Girl has itself become quite a tourist attraction in Bickering on Sea. There have been attempts over the years, however, to exorcise her restless spirit, none of which have been successful. Instead, people come from miles around in an attempt to experience the loss and sadness of the dead girl.

So, if you yourself witness the appearance of the Little Shell Girl of Bickering Pier, sharing in her grief at the destruction of her home and family, remember that her name is almost certainly Prudence Keppling. She died in the name of progress, but her name is no longer remembered. Perhaps we should rename our famous Pier in her memory. Prudence Pier, sounds so much more uplifting than Uriah's Folly.
