

The Naked Monk of Beryl's Laundrette

by

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During my fulsome ectoplasmic investigations of Bickering on Sea, probably the most haunted seaside town in Great Britain, I have come to the conclusion that there is most particularly a profusion of clerical apparitions. The story of the Naked Man in Beryl's Laundrette, for example, is a case in point.

Beryl's Laundrette is situated in the small retail square in the middle of the Austen Estate, in what might be called the poorer part of Bickering on Sea. It also has to be said that it is of very ordinary 1960s design, brick with a glass frontage, so there is no obvious reason why it should be the haunt of the ghost of a 10th Century Monk... but it is.

I first heard about the Naked Man when I was in my early 40s, paying one of my frequent visits to Bickering on Sea. The eponymous Beryl Langley, the then proprietor of the laundrette, was interviewed by the Bickering Bugle as a contributor to an article for their Halloween edition. The journalist had interviewed several residents in the town about their 'supernatural experiences', and, as I read the paper, Beryl's incident stood out and compelled me to make contact with her to find out more.

When I spoke to her, Mrs Langley told me about the unusual experiences she and some of her customers had had. They had several common threads. All of them took place at night, during the darker autumn and winter months, and involved, "an overwhelming sense of an uncomfortable presence."

Beryl herself had often noticed a distinct chilliness in the air when she was working in the area which housed the tumble dryers, at the rear of the laundrette. At first, she had thought it might be down to old Mr Rush, an unusual gentleman who often sat near the door and watched her sort through the smalls. But she quickly realised that the feeling continued at times when he wasn't peering at her and she described it as, "a coldness in the air and an overwhelming sense of shame."

She went on to tell me that some of her regular customers had also reported

something cold around the tumble dryers, that same sense of presence. Furthermore, at times, freshly dried clothing retrieved from the machine felt dry and cold, rather than warm and comforting. A very odd mix for freshly tumbled garmenture.

Beryl thought nothing at all of it until, one Halloween, while she was finishing off a particularly tricky service wash, she turned around to be confronted by an apparition. I will use her words:

“I near widdled myself when I saw him. There he was, standing in his birthday suit, a short, fat man with everything showing for a girl to see. I thought someone must have escaped from the asylum, so I did, until I noticed that he was sort of see through... like a ghost. He had a hooded thing on his head too. But that was all... other than that he was in the altogether. Completely in the nuddy, he was. Naked as the day... Oh, and he was crying... Poor old sod.”

I asked her if she had been eating any strange mushrooms prior to her encounter, which she assured me she hadn't. I concluded, therefore, that the only explanation for her vision was that the laundrette was haunted.

Over time, other users of the laundrette's facilities have reported strikingly similar encounters with the naked ghost of a fat man. They all describe him as a transparent, obviously male, naked figure. The apparition has never sought to communicate, yet each person who saw him felt an overwhelming surge of shame and embarrassment, in the very pit of their stomach.

I remained in touch with Mrs Langley and, in time, the sightings became so common that Beryl's Laundrette became a popular haunt (if you can excuse the pun) for the young people of the estate. They started to use the laundrette as a place to have dates, hoping to spot the Naked Man and find comfort in one another's arms.

I can also report, most pleasingly for me, that I saw him myself. It was a moonless night in November 1993 when I saw with my own eyes, the transparent naked fat man running towards me, with a waddling gait. I stood transfixed, next to a tumble dryer, overwhelmed by the remarkable nature of what I saw and battling an almost overwhelming feeling in my stomach of guilt and shame. So bad was it, that I had to fight the compulsion to run and be violently sick. That poor man had ghostly tears flowing down his cheeks, and his face was fixed in a silent scream, inaudible to any ears in this mundane reality. One of the most melancholy sights I have ever seen.

So sad was the experience for all who underwent it that Mrs Langley chose to close the laundrette during the times of year when they were most likely (that is during the autumn and winter months, when the nights were moonless and at their darkest). Somehow, she sought to save the naked ghost from its very public, silent shame. An attitude which I believe does her great credit and, in the view of this author, is an act of great compassion. However, both Mrs Langley and her customers still undergo a cold sense of a shameful presence next to the tumble dryers. “We’ve all gotten used to it,” she told me. “He’s become a part of the atmosphere of the place, so he has. But we don’t need to see him in his shame, do we?”

The opportunity to witness an apparition first-hand is, as I well know, the greatest privilege, but this particular guest from beyond the grave raised many questions for me. Thus, I investigated further, to try to discover why a fat, naked man might be running naked, through a laundrette, and why he might emanate such a feeling of shame and embarrassment. My research led me to some interesting discoveries, although, if anything, it raised more questions than it answered.

I found out that the Abbey of St Bartholomew had once stood on the site of the Austen Estate, until, in 1537, it was pillaged and utterly destroyed by the agents of King Henry VIII, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Very sadly, none of the buildings remain, but some of the stones can be seen in the local area, incorporated into several farmhouses and some of the older houses on the edge of the Old Town of Bickering on Sea.

Further research led me to conclude that Beryl’s Laundrette had, in fact, been built on what was at one time the Monk’s Refectory. Some of the oldest documents in the archives of the Bickering on Sea Heritage and British Museums talk about the renown enjoyed by the Monks of St Bartholomew. The Abbey was known throughout Britain for the warmth of its hospitality towards strangers and the fecundity of the lands over which it held sway. One document in the British Museum comments in passing that, “... the Abbots of Bickering be right well known for their corpulence and the generosity of their tables. Many nobles alight there on their path to London, though it be well off their natural progress.”

To put it in its simplest form, the Abbey at Bickering on Sea was known for the richness of the diet of its monks, many of whom were known to, literally, eat themselves to death. So impressive was its reputation that many

of the younger sons of high-born families chose to join service to the church specifically among the brothers of St Bartholomew's Abbey.

According to the records, it became quite a source of concern for the more ascetic branches of the church in Britain, that what they saw as gluttony was taking place in sacred surroundings. But the hospitality of the Abbey was so highly regarded by the nobles of Britain that it became a rich and powerful centre for ecclesiastical culinary delights.

In one ancient recipe book, from the Royal Library at Windsor, a long- forgotten recipe for 'Bickering Mutton Stew' was uncovered. It was a mutton dish which included several gallons of butter, mead, and honey, as well as large dumplings, and was intended to feed a "goodly number of guests". The recipe is accredited by its author to the amusingly named Abbot Rodney the Wide, of Bickering, and goes on to warn, "This food is for use only on highest occasion, otherwise the eaters thereof will suffer the same fate as the Monks of St Bartholomew, most of whom do not see old age."

It seems clear to me that the Naked Man of Beryl's Laundrette, wearing a clerical hood as he seems to be, was likely one of the Monks of St Bartholomew's Abbey. He is, at least to my eyes, grossly overweight and running in shame from something with such urgency that he has eschewed clothing. Why that might be the case, and what might have happened to make him so afeared, who can tell?

In time I hope to find out, since I believe very strongly that apparitions can be communicated with and, perhaps, in time, the circumstances of his death and the nature of his shame will become evident.
