

The home of ghouls

Cate Devine uncovers the dark side of one of Scotland's prettiest seaside towns

IF you thought St Andrews was all about golf, golden sands and genteel university students, think again. According to author Geoffrey Holder, it is full of ghosts. There's the White Lady of the haunted Cathedral tower, and various apparitions that cluster around the mediaeval quarter of the Pends and St Leonard's. Then there are the poltergeists at Pitmilly House, an evil vortex on the beach, and an extraordinary phantom village.

"St Andrews is a small burgh characterised by an immense catalogue of antiquity," says Holder. "The cathedral, castle and university buildings dominate the town architecturally, while the mediaeval street plan is still evident on the way north. Market and South Streets radiate east from the cathedral, with interconnecting north-south lanes and wynds running between them."

The town's location – on the very tip of the Fife coast – also means it is often overhung by a "haar" – the thick sea-fog that rolls in from the North Sea. "When the haar seeps into the cobbled lanes, ancient buildings, gaunt ruins and old-world town," says Holder, "they take on a distinct character redolent of centuries gone by. In the fog, the streetlights glow like gas lamps. Sounds are muffled. Sharp edges become hazy. Arched ruins loom out of the edge of vision. You almost expect a horse-drawn Victorian carriage to clatter out of the gloom.

"Once wrapped in its mantle of fog, the ancient fabric of St Andrews becomes a half-world of things half-seen and half-feared, an environment of anxiety and anticipation; a place where ghosts might indeed walk."

The White Lady of the tower in the ruined Cathedral is perhaps the town's most chilling apparition. The earliest written witness account of the mummified corpse of a "female dressed in satin and wearing long kid gloves" dates from 1868. She was seen lying alongside nine



Author Geoff Holder in the graveyard of the ruined St Andrews Abbey
Photograph: Steve Cox

other perfectly preserved bodies in the upper chamber of the tower through a chink in the precinct wall of the Cathedral by a group of young brothers, who climbed the ivy on the wall to steal birds' eggs. There are four other witness accounts of the "mummies". But before that, a resident of Abbey Walk has recorded seeing a "lady wearing a grey white dress gliding along the top of the old Abbey wall" several times in the 1820s. The "mummies" of the tower were destroyed in 1888... but the "White Lady" has been seen again since then, in 1968 and 1975. Although the physical relics and the apparition are not really necessarily connected, they have become one and the same in local folklore.

In another incident, the novelist Fay Weldon has written about her experience of seeing a mysterious male figure on the harbour at St Andrews when she was an undergraduate. A man in a black cloak and distinctive black hat was standing by the jetty and began to follow her, breaking into a run when she ran, then vanishing. She later discovered this apparition was known locally as "the preacher".

Then there's the Lady of the Pends, or "veiled nun", seen in the 1920s. The phantom was wearing mediaeval dress with her face concealed. She is reputed to have been a beautiful woman who lived in South Street in the mid-16th century and became so fed up with fending off would-be husbands that she resolved to be a nun. To avoid marriage she mutilated her face by

slitting her nostrils, cutting off her eyelids and lips and branding her cheeks with a hot iron. Her rejected suitor committed suicide and the heartbroken woman took the veil. It's said that her spirit still walks the lanes, and if anyone meets her she lifts her veil to reveal her horrific appearance.

THE phantom hamlet of Dunino has also entered ghostly folklore ever since late 19th century, when a visitor, riding along the south coast of Fife to St Andrews, decided to make a detour to the church at Dunino. There he saw a picturesque hamlet on the north side of Dunino Burn. When he later took a friend to the scene, there was nothing to see but an old tumble-down croft. Yet there had indeed been a hamlet there in the 1700s.

These are only a few examples cited in Holder's fascinating book – his 24th publication about paranormal Scotland. Has he ever seen any ghosts? "I've spent my entire professional life hanging around castles, stone circles and supernatural sites," he replies, "and in all that time I've never seen anything or had any kind of paranormal experience." Although open to the possibility that ghosts are real, he is not convinced.

Why is it that we are scared of ghosts, even if we seek them out? "Because we're frightened of the dead. Most people have experienced bereavement and may even have

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seen the corpse of a loved one laid out at home. That evidence of death tells us the person has gone, so when they return we think perhaps they're here to do us ill for some reason.

"In all the cases I've encountered people only had the one experience, and prior to that they didn't think about ghosts at all."

Pre-Reformation St Andrews was of course Catholic – and in Catholicism, being "haunted" by the dead is an indication they are not "settled" in heaven, are languishing in need of our prayers to help them there. But the Reformation removed the idea that the dead went to a "holding pen", as Holder puts it, from where they could haunt the living. "In Protestantism once you're in heaven or hell, there's no way out," he says. "So if a ghost is seen it must be a demon taking on the appearance of the dead person."

Of all the spirits that inhabit St Andrews, the most interesting one, for Holder, is the White Lady. "It's the interplay between the reported apparitions and the later discovery of the mummies that beguiles me," he says. "Although there's no connection between them, the two stories are almost joined at the hip in the collective mind. The existence of the White Lady is a fantastic and completely irresistible proposal.

"We have no idea who she was, but she is most likely to be someone we've never heard of."

Haunted St Andrews, by Geoff Holder, is published by History Press, £9.99.

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