

This page: the church at Borley in Essex. Opposite: the ruins of Borley Rectory, which burnt down in 1943. Overlaid: messages found on the walls of the house with, in capitals, responses written by paranormal investigators

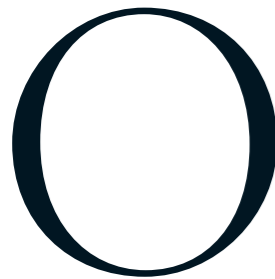
# THE SPIRITS OF BORLEY RECTORY

*Whether bedevilled by restless wraiths or steeped in hoax and hysteria, the site of Victorian England's most famous hauntings still attracts hordes of ghost-hunters, 80 years after the ill-omened vicarage mysteriously burnt to the ground*

BY CATRIONA GRAY PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY CORY WRIGHT



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, TOPFOTO



On 28 February 1939, Borley Rectory, then known as ‘the most haunted house in England’, was engulfed in flames. Fire danced behind the dark windows, and several onlookers claimed to have seen spectral figures shadowed against the blaze. This inferno was to prove the climax of a spate of unearthly incidents that had troubled the inhabitants of this quiet corner of Essex for more than half a century.

Eighty years after that dramatic night, the tiny village of Borley, surrounded for miles by featureless wheat fields, seems entirely unremarkable. The burnt-out ruins of the Rectory have long since been razed to the ground and the gardens built over with bungalows. All that remains of the old estate is a scrubby patch of neglected land, hidden away between the plots.

‘There was never anything in the stories,’ insists Reverend Margaret King, the current head of the parish. ‘It’s just a torment to current residents; we all want to be left in peace.’ Along with the rest of the village, she does everything in her power to discourage visitors – the Rectory’s site is unmarked, and the church doors are kept firmly locked. Yet every Halloween, the local police force is obliged to install road blocks as droves of paranormal enthusiasts descend upon Borley, some travelling from across the globe to mount vigils and séances in the hopes of encountering a spirit. The reputed ghosts of the Rectory are many and varied – from a French nun to a poltergeist to one of its own vicars. But few of the ghost-hunters who throng here are aware of the true saga that built the peculiar legend of Borley Rectory, and the part that was played by its successive inhabitants, each stranger than the last.

To begin with, Borley Rectory was no venerable pile. Completed in 1863, it was a large, red-brick building typical of the mid-Victorian period, with pointed gables and chimney stacks. Henry Bull, the first occupant, was a member of a long-established ecclesiastical dynasty, who continued the tradition by having 14 children. The speed with which his family expanded meant that the house had

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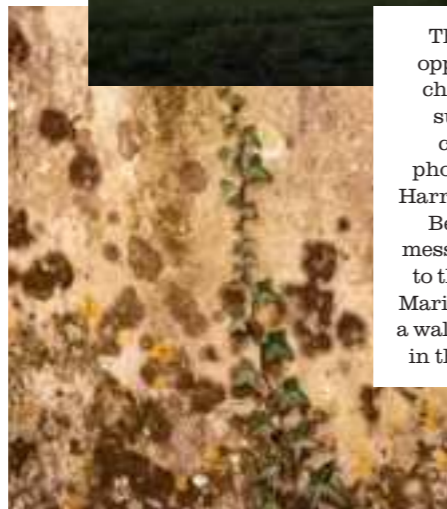
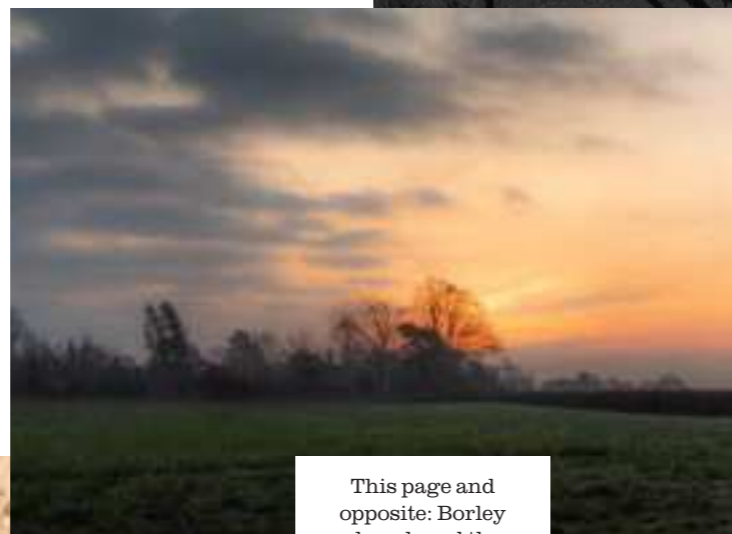
was not the sort of man to be easily unnerved. Yet he believed the local story of a ghostly nun, murdered on the night that she had arranged to elope with her lover. Like all folk tales, there is no one definitive version – some say she was strangled by her suitor, others that she was buried alive for her transgression and the man beheaded – but sightings of her in the churchyard, the lane and the grounds of the house were reported before the building of the Rectory, from the early 19th century onwards.

Henry’s son, Harry Foyster Bull, took over as the vicar at Borley in 1892. Like his father, he was athletic, well-liked and not overly preoccupied with church matters. He also accepted wholeheartedly the tales of the nun and was similarly unperturbed by them. However, unlike Henry, he claimed to have seen a different apparition one evening in the garden. Observing a figure between the trees, he

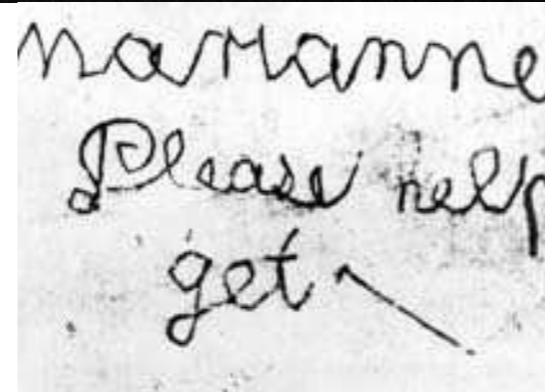
This page and opposite: Borley church and the surrounding countryside photographed by Harry Cory Wright. Below right: a message addressed to the vicar’s wife Marianne, found on a wall in the Rectory in the early 1930s

to be extended almost immediately into a rambling affair with three staircases. The extension created a wind-tunnel, and the architectural muddle goes some way to accounting for the strange murmuring sounds and creaking floorboards that dogged subsequent residents.

Stoic and practical, Henry Bull



Below: Borley Rectory before the fire that devastated the building



Above: the investigator Harry Price at the burial of the purported remains of a nun in 1945, with the vicar of Liston and his family. Left: the Rectory’s dining-room in 1910



HARRY CORY WRIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOPFOTO, MARY EVANS, ALAMY



HARRY CORY WRIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARY EVANS

assumed it was a poacher, until it walked straight through a closed gate. As he drew near, the rector saw that it was a headless man, who then vanished.

Like many rural people of the time, Harry Bull had grown up with myth and tradition, and would have had no trouble allowing these to coexist with his Christian beliefs. Indeed, one of his favourite threats was that he, too, would return as a ghost and hurl mothballs at family members who had annoyed him. Mildly eccentric, he would spend long periods of time lying on the drawing-room floor, and kept large numbers of cats, up to 30 at a time. They would accompany him on walks and were eventually laid to rest in a feline cemetery at the bottom of the garden.

At 49, Harry married Ivy, a widow with a young daughter. His spinster sisters Ethel and Freda were less than pleased, as they were convinced Ivy was a gold-digger, and after Harry died in 1927 aged 65 (from natural causes), they started a long-running rumour that she had poisoned him. This, of course, only added to the sinister reputation that the Rectory had already begun to acquire. When the next vicar moved in, the paranormal happenings seemed to take a more malevolent turn.

Guy Smith and his wife Mabel arrived from India, after a dozen other better-informed candidates had turned down the ill-omened position. The Smiths knew nothing of the gossip at first. Soon after their arrival, however, they heard whispering sounds, the servants' bells rang inexplicably, and footsteps were heard treading the upstairs rooms. Two successive maids saw apparitions, and eventually the Smiths wrote to the *Daily Mirror*, seeking help. The tabloid duly dispatched Harry Price, a celebrated ghost-hunter, down to Borley to investigate.

Price recalled his first experience of roaming the grounds at nightfall. 'Against the darker background of the trees I fancied I could discern a shadowy presence, blacker than the background, gliding towards the end of the garden.' On returning indoors, a series of disturbances took place: a brick smashed through the glazed roof of the verandah, and various items were thrown down the staircases, including a glass candlestick, pebbles and, most disturbingly, a mothball. Was the ghost in residence not the legendary nun after all, but the late Reverend Bull? An impromptu séance was held, at which the two Misses Bull were present, and many of the questions were directed not to the ghostly nun, but to their dead brother.

'Mysterious replies to our questions were given by means of one, two or three raps on the back of a mirror,' wrote a *Daily Mirror* reporter in an article of 15 June 1929. 'I suggested to Mr Price that he should ask whether it were the Rev H Bull, the late rector. I had hardly finished the name when three hurried taps came on the



Right: Harry Price looking for spirits in the Rectory grounds in 1945. Below: Mabel Smith, wife of the rector, Guy, in 1928



mirror, which meant an emphatic "yes".'

This was the fifth article the newspaper had published on the topic in a single week, and the effects were already becoming apparent. 'The worst part about these manifestations, from the rector's point of view,' the story concludes, 'is that Borley is fast becoming a show place for the whole of Suffolk and

Essex. Crowds of visitors arrive on foot and by motor-car to see the alleged haunted house.' It all proved too much for the Smiths, and they fled the Rectory on 14 July 1929, less than two years after their arrival.

Six months later, Reverend Lionel Foyster – a cousin of the Bulls – moved in, accompanied by his young wife Marianne. She was an extremely odd character, who committed bigamy three times, lied continually about her background and was a serial adopter of children. Lionel was also eccentric: he had abruptly left England to work as

a missionary in rural Canada, and proposed to his much-younger bride by letter, having not seen her since baptising her as a girl. In his youth, Lionel had visited Borley Rectory, and was well aware of its notoriety. However, he was chronically ill, and saw the livelihood as an easier alternative to his harsh existence as a missionary. There was also a less-commendable explanation for the move. In Canada, the Foysters had lived near another 'haunted house' in Amherst, which became the subject of a lucrative bestseller. Lionel, conscious that his illness would in due course mean he was unable to work, believed that a similar book about Borley would provide him with some financial security.

In any event, the ghostly occurrences reached a spectacular crescendo during the five years the Foysters were in residence, from 1930 to 1935. Poltergeist-like disturbances happened almost daily, more varied and dramatic than ever before. Messages to Marianne were daubed on the walls, the house was filled with strange smells, objects vanished and reappeared, bells rang and bizarre voices were heard. Lionel's notes faithfully record these occurrences. 'Books thrown out of shelves in MF's [Marianne Foyster's] sewing-room,' he wrote, in March 1931. 'Pictures in hall and on staircase taken down and laid on ground. Things thrown in bedroom.' Another, from October 1931, reads: 'I am awakened one morning by having a water jug dropped on my head. I left it on the floor and a little time afterwards it is dropped on MF's head.'

So how complicit were the vicar and his wife in these events? Marianne, who was on the receiving end of many of the supposed hauntings, must surely have fabricated some of them – if you compare the ghostly graffiti with her signature, the handwriting is almost identical. Certainly, Harry Price's conclusion upon revisiting the Rectory was that Marianne, hungry for fame and attention, was behind it all. The couple were furious, and yet, soon afterwards, the eerie happenings fizzled out and for three years all was relatively quiet.

Once the Foysters had left the Rectory, it was never lived in again. Harry Price, who was still intrigued by the case, rented it for a short time, seeing in Borley an unparalleled opportunity to exploit its notoriety. Sensibly unwilling to live in the dilapidated building himself, he placed an advertisement in *The Times* seeking volunteers to stay in it. For 12 months, it was manned sporadically by a roster of supernatural enthusiasts, who updated him with regular reports. One of them, Sidney Glanville, became fascinated by the house, as did his two children, who often experimented with a planchette board in an attempt to contact the spirit

world. In March 1938, they received a message that the house would be burnt down and that bones would be found under the ruins, which was duly reported in the press. That December, the property was bought by another opportunist named Captain William Gregson – two months later, it was consumed by fire.

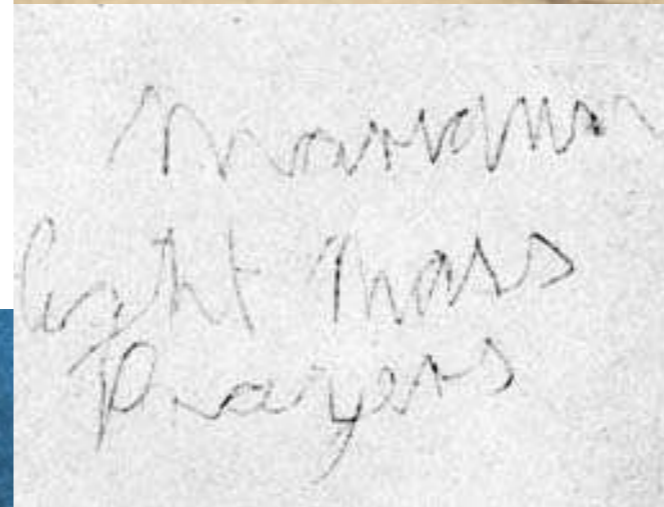
From the scathing insurance-claim report, it is fairly conclusive that Gregson staged the inferno in the hope of a pay-out. Yet excavations beneath the site subsequently revealed that there were indeed bones buried in the cellar, just as the prophecy had claimed. Price believed that they belonged to the ghostly nun and should be laid to rest in the churchyard; the locals refused, suspecting that they were the bones of a pig. Eventually, the remains were buried in an unmarked grave several miles away in Liston, with Price and the vicar's family the only mourners. It seems a fitting end to the saga, as it was he who profited most from the Borley affair, publishing a hugely successful book on the case in 1940, *The Most Haunted House in England*, followed by a sequel in 1946 that cemented both his name and his fortune.

'Harry Price was the man who really put Borley on the map,' says Paul Adams, a writer on the paranormal, who now owns many of the papers and photographs relating to the legend of the haunted Rectory, along with its bell, which hangs in his garden. 'It captured the public imagination – this remote house filled with strange goings-on. In the end, it became so powerful that even after it was demolished and the site cleared, people still felt compelled to visit.'

With so many of its inhabitants intent on manipulating the legend to their own ends, one has to wonder how many, if any, of the reported hauntings were the result of genuine unexplained episodes. But although the Rectory is no more, reports of ghostly sightings continue. So if you find yourself passing through the village at twilight, it's best not to linger, for fear of glimpsing the shadowy figure of a spectral nun, gliding across the desolate churchyard or waiting silently in the old Rectory grounds, half-hidden between the dark, looming trees. □

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Right: a skull, claimed to be that of the phantom nun, found under the ruins of the Rectory



Top left: the Rectory's drawing-room in 1910. Below: Harry Price with fellow investigator Molly Goldney, Reverend Lionel Foyster, his wife Marianne and their two foster children in 1931



The church at Borley. Above: a message to Marianne scrawled on one of the walls

HARRY CORY WRIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARY EVANS, TOPFOTO