



THE HAUNTED OLD CEM?

ENJOY THIS STORY ON A COLD OCTOBER EVENING WITH A SLICE OF WARM PUMPKIN PIE AND HOT CUP OF COCOA AND REMEMBER, THE RUSTLE OUTSIDE IS ONLY THE LEAVES BLOWING ON THE AUTUMN WIND!

I HAVE ALWAYS been very reluctant to entertain any conversation about the alleged haunting of the old Hillside Cemetery, up by Houghton Cut, on Sunderland Street, for fear of encouraging amateur ghost hunters.

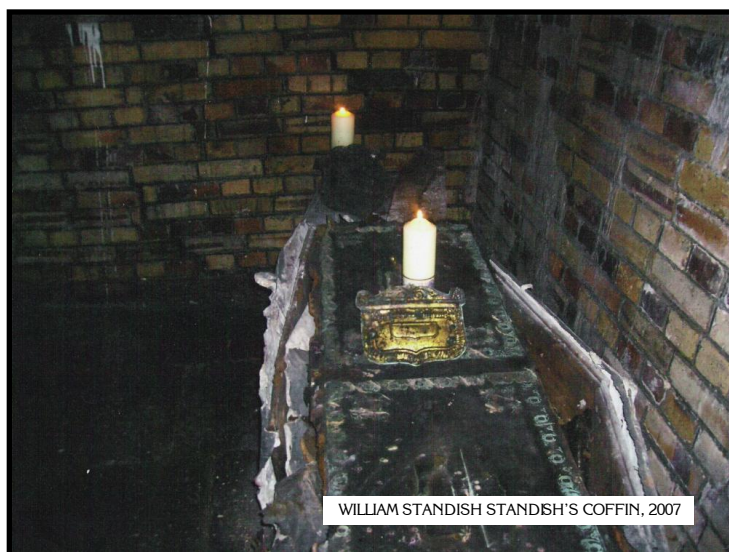
But it was the attraction of ghosts and hauntings which called me back to the site following my many visits there as a toddler with my Granddad George. In the early



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1990s, rumours circulated amongst my peers at Houghton Kerpier School about the headless horseman who was said to haunt the Old Cem.



Many locals believed that nobleman William Standish Standish had plummeted over the cliff face into the cemetery and was buried where he landed. The reality is that he died at his home, Cocken Hall, from an illness and was buried at the cemetery in July 1856. Sickeningly the 'headless' part of the myth turned out to be correct; vandals removed William's head from his body

when his vault was desecrated in the 1970s and kicked it around the nearby Ironside Street. It was later buried in the parish churchyard (in Houghton's centre) as the then Rector, Rev Peter Brett, had no way of knowing which vault it had come from as the cemetery was vastly overgrown and dilapidated.

So, there is no ghostly headless horseman at Houghton Hillside Cemetery, but are there any other ghosts?

Throughout the years of my involvement in the researching and restoration of the old Hillside Cemetery, I have met dozens of people who have told me about spooky experiences at the burial grounds.

Several residents have told me how they had taken their pet dogs up the cemetery for a walk, only for the dogs to be too afraid to enter. And yet my own dog (and many others) has no such reservations!

I have spent hundreds of hours up at the old cemetery on my own, particularly when documenting the headstones, and I will always insist that the site is the most peaceful place I know.



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I can remember on many occasions, typically on a warm, still, sunny afternoon, when my notes and papers would suddenly get scattered by a none-existent wind. This would usually happen when I was documenting the memorial for a child, and I do wonder whether it was the child's spirit getting up to mischief at my expense!

On some occasions I would be deep in the undergrowth taking notes of an eroded inscription, when I would hear a rustling sound nearby, only for a pheasant to suddenly take flight. Many a time the skin on my head would tighten and my hair would stand on end. I have had, however, some experiences, which are less ambiguous than mysterious winds, apprehensive dogs and spooked game birds.

On the cold, snowy morning of Sunday, 20th February 2005, I raced to the Hillside Cemetery to capture photographs of the snow covered burial grounds. The conditions on Sunderland Street were absolutely treacherous and it was with great difficulty that I was able to get the car close enough to the site entrance – it would appear that the local authority doesn't grit the roads within the nearby housing estate nor the very steep hill of Sunderland Street.

Upon entering the cemetery I was shocked to discover that the strong winds of the night before had felled a very large tree, and after having checked that no headstones had been crushed, decided to document the tree fall for my records. I clicked away with my digital camera, taking in numerous shots of the giant root ball, which had been unearthed. One photograph was blurry so I continued to click away.



I then reviewed my shots on the viewfinder, with the intention of deleting the blurred one, only to discover that the blur had the outline of a human head, shoulders and upper body.

Again the skin on my head tightened and my hair stood on end! To this day I still have the original shot stored on my memory card, to ensure that I cannot be accused of computer trickery – but does the photograph actually show the outline of a spirit person?



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Some spiritualist mediums suggest that we're more likely to haunt a place of meaning to us, as opposed to our place of burial, but is it too much of a coincidence? Perhaps it was just the flash reflecting off the water vapour from the melting snow?

It should be noted that three days later the dead body of a missing man was found in the snow-covered Hillside Cemetery. He had been reported missing from his home in Penshaw a few days earlier.



Since 2005 many of my Hillside Cemetery photographs have contained orbs, mists and other anomalies and I have included a selection here. These were taken at 3:50pm on January 6th 2006 when I was documenting the cemetery's fences.

I make no claims as to what they show, and will leave that for you to decide. I do ask that, upon having read this, you do not embark on a ghost hunt at Hillside Cemetery, and continue to respect the solemnity of the grounds, as I am sure that you will, being the good person that you are.



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A northeast paranormal group's website exists showing dozens of investigations at local places. One such place is Hillside Cemetery, which was visited in 2007. Whereas I have no objections to legitimate and serious investigations, this particular website shows a group with a ouija board on a grave at Hillside Cemetery. I find this totally abhorrent and disrespectful and condone such acts. Anyone serious about exploring the paranormal would not carry out such an act. The aforementioned group's behaviour sadly defames the reputation of other investigative groups.

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