



GHOSTS OF HOUGHTON HALL

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!

THE DOMINEERING BUILDING that is Houghton Hall can be found on the aptly named Hall Lane just east of Houghton-le-Spring's town centre. It is thought that the ancient hall was built around 1575 and it is therefore not surprising that I have heard many firsthand accounts of sightings of a ghost which haunts the former YMCA building - the White Lady.

It is possible that the White Lady is spirit of Elizabeth Elliot, the 20 year old daughter of one time resident Sir George Elliot M.P.

Elizabeth died on September 29th 1861 and was interred four days later in a large vault at Houghton Hillside Cemetery. Many locals believe that she died in a horrendous fire at the Hall and that her dress caught fire as she dressed for a party. This may explain why her spirit is in limbo, lingering about the Hall's many rooms and floors.

In 1971, Houghton Hall became the base for the local YMCA, offering a range of activities for young and old alike. Membership at this time was 300 and many have encountered spooky goings-on in the old Hall.



HAUNTED HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING

WWW.HOUGHTONLESPRING.ORG.UK/GHOSTS

copyright © 2012

UPDATED: 09/02/2013



Houghtonian Andrew Acton recently shared his encounter with the ghost:

"I was a member at Houghton YMCA for a long time and we used to play hooky from school and go along on an afternoon. Around 1983, we were playing table tennis on the top floor. My friends Wayne, Mandy, and Linda were there, because we played for the YMCA team. The lights dimmed slightly and the ball seemed to stop above the net. There was a glow coming from it! You can imagine we ran like Hell to get out of the top floor!"

One logical explanation of the White Lady was offered to me by Rowland Storey, who used to be Chairman and also General Secretary of the YMCA. He suggested that the ghost is simply moving light caused by headlights from distant vehicles driving down the A690 near Rainton.

But Andrew Acton was not convinced with this explanation. He said:

"If a ball can stop in mid flight, about six inches from the top of a table and above the net, I wish it was car lights that would explain it but I don't think so."



HAUNTED HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING

WWW.HOUGHTONLESPRING.ORG.UK/GHOSTS

copyright © 2012

UPDATED: 09/02/2013

Car lights also do not explain another ghost which is said to haunt Houghton Hall, that of Captain Robert Hutton, who died on August 9th 1680. Captain Hutton was a noted puritan and had no wish for a Church burial. He was buried in the grounds of Houghton Hall along with his favourite horse and dog! His remains were later excavated and reinterred in St Michael's Churchyard when the ground was sold as part of the Racecourse Estate pre-War housing. His tomb stood at what was later the bottom of Holly Avenue, now aptly known as Hutton's Rise at Gentoo's new development.

In a 1960s copy of the Sunderland Echo, Ted Martin, retired manager of Houghton Colliery, recalled that when his family lived in Houghton Hall in 1896, the ghost of Captain Hutton haunted a bedchamber. The terrified family kept the room permanently locked!

Another haunted room during the Hall's tenure as a YMCA was the boardroom, located just to the right of the main front door, as local resident Tracy Smith recollects:

"I first started going to the YMCA in the early 1980s. The wife of the man who ran the YMCA had many encounters on the top and bottom floors, but never the middle floor. The boardroom is definitely haunted; once I was sitting in there next to the fire and a little boy, whose mother was in the bridge project, came in and said to me, while bouncing a ball: "Who's that man?" There was nobody else in the room!"

Since 2001 the Shipman family have resided in Houghton Hall, saving the near-derelict and neglected building from ruin and converting it into a comfortable home. Liz Shipman claims that although there is a presence in her home, it is a peaceful one.

Whatever you believe, spare a moment's thought for the spirit of Elizabeth Elliot, whose bones were scattered across Hillside Cemetery when the large Elliot family vault was desecrated in 1957.

Paul Lanagan

PAUL LANAGAN BA HONS
LOCAL HISTORIAN
H-L-S HERITAGE SOCIETY



HAUNTED HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING

WWW.HOUGHTONLESPRING.ORG.UK/GHOSTS

copyright © 2012

UPDATED: 09/02/2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ghosts of Houghton Hall article was first published in the Sign Post magazine of October 2003 and as the Haunted Houghton Heritage Map in 2004. An updated version was printed in the Houghton Star newspaper of Wednesday October 24th 2012.

Thanks are extended to Liz Shipman, Andrew Acton, Tracy Smith and Rowland Storey for sharing their memories and stories of the ghosts of Houghton Hall.

DISCLAIMER

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a mechanical retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the author. The author and publisher have made all reasonable efforts to contact copyright holders for permission. Any errors that may have occurred are inadvertent and anyone who for any reason has not been contacted is invited to write to the publisher so that a full acknowledgement may be made in subsequent editions of this book.

Your attention is drawn to the full Houghton Heritage Society disclaimer which can be accessed by clicking ABOUT on the home page at: www.houghtonlespring.org.uk



HAUNTED HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING

WWW.HOUGHTONLESRING.ORG.UK/GHOSTS
copyright © 2012