

IS THERE ANYBODY THERE? | WW GALLERY

This piece was commissioned by WW Gallery for their exhibition celebrating both the dark side of the year and the Victorian house which accommodated the gallery itself.

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Gas lamps hiss apologies into the Middlesex night. She climbs into the cabinet and allows herself to be bound to the chair with ropes about her neck, waist and wrists.

We sit at the table in the semi-darkness and link our hands, calling upon our Heavenly Father as we intone in vociferous vibrato, “lead, kindly light, amid th’encircling gloom, lead Thou me on”, inducing in her the harmony of our circle.

She breathes deeply, freeing herself from care and anxiety, building and shaping her psychic energies that the manifestations may be displayed with greater power and clarity.

Bright stars flit about the room, and a stringed instrument lying on the table is taken by spirit hands and played, producing the sweetest music. The cabinet curtain parts and a pale figure, dressed in white, emerges.

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No. 30 Queensdown Road was the bane of my life, its boarded-up presence representing twenty years of council neglect. It housed a frustrated family on the upper storey, and the anonymous presence of the junkies who lurked in the dilapidated basement during the dark hours. Their shadows crouched among broken glass, fag-ends and needles, hugging a bivouac fire, streetlight catching eyes through cracks in the hoarding before they evaporated into the bowels of the building. Confrontation drove those with strength to jump the garden fences at the rear, or break through the basement flats to make their escape.

Base and bastard child of bureaucratic denial, the house emitted a signal of despair. It bought into its own personality, a decaying cavity that swallowed cats and broken furniture in exchange for fire.



We averted disaster many times, our senses augmented by a constant state of apprehension, spotting the ominous crackle and flicker shadow of an untamed flame or the scent of smoke drift before it took hold. So imagine the dread feeling of coming home to encounter fire engines outside the house. One of the legal occupants had carelessly discarded her cigarette and the whole building was a blackened shell. For many weeks afterwards, the adjacent houses endured the stale smell of smoulder, which penetrated the hallway carpets, dido rails, ceiling roses, shutters and other original accoutrements of Victorian desirability. Soon afterwards, the building was auctioned and refurbished. Disaster is always a catalyst for alchemical change, the crucible of fire that cleanses the past. The homunculus of WW was wrested from the jaws of the dragon, to be nurtured as a child of promise.



At the peak of the smallpox pandemic in 1872, an expanding populace rapidly paved over the death and mysteries of the borough to assure its transformation from Home County to dense London suburb. Only half of the houses in the newly named Queen's Down Road had been built, but they rose as sturdy and proud as the merchants and middle classes they would accommodate. The Hackney carriages were already queuing at the junction of Down's Road, touting for business to the City or docks.

One gets the impression that the builders exhausted their passion for the project long before it was complete. Houses 1-10 are wider, more ornamental, tiled and puffed up with the shock of the new, before settling into a homogenous architectural bent, the odd frill or furbelow added as an afterthought. No. 30 looks much like its siblings, the configuration of its door arch and dragons-teeth embellishments only subtly different from the rest of the terrace.

The road still hugs the Lammas Land of the Downs, which confers the right of legal trespass only after haymaking, when one may step across the liminal boundary set by Hecate's feast day as the sun begins to fade to grey. Beneath flocks of silver seagulls and avenues of London Plane, hide remnants of Roman pottery, railway tunnels and, so it is whispered, secret bunkers.

Disgruntled Victorians used to write to the local press to complain about the ‘cesspit’ of youths who gathered there at dusk.

An ancient spring lies beneath the south-west of the park, ‘a considerable spring ... continually flowing’, daughter of the once famous Hackney Brook now culverted under the western footpath. It still runs beneath Amhurst Road, the waning eddies and currents below inversely proportional to the raging menace and violence above, a retaliation against its enforced purdah.

Hackney is underpinned by currents unknown, a definition or state of mind, where the mundane has always brushed hands with the lunatic fringe: harbinger of orphans, table turners, Templars, dissenters and asylums for the insane.



Despite its gentrification, No. 30 continued to be the focal point of disturbances, an elemental maelstrom wreaking havoc upon the neighbours. Water overflowed from faulty guttering, seeping into adjoining kitchens, imprinting Rorschach stains upon the walls. The west wind that swept across the rare, unfettered urban space in front of the house, fed the cyclical breath of vicious, screaming arguments, usually worse in the lower ground sections. Computers crashed, the dog circled cold spots and pungent smells lingered for weeks.

Environmental services discovered a blocked drain. A psychic discovered blocked energy. The spirit of a domestic servant who had died in childbirth could not separate from the earth, and her recalcitrance was a vehicle for disorder. Who and when was she?

William Price of Stepney was probably the first resident of No. 30 along with his much younger, childless wife Blanch. He was an East India merchant, a member of a wider human web trading in silk, saltpetre and tea. Some of his colleagues may have ended up as inhabitants of Pembroke House (where London Fields station now sits), the private lunatic asylum for employees of the East India Company who had buckled under the twin pressures of heat and opium.

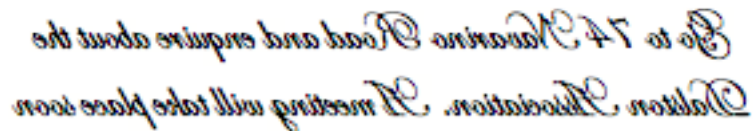
Our stubborn spirit may have been one of Price’s servants, Frances or Ellen.

Perhaps she worked for subsequent tenants, Mrs Smith, Miss Cook, Mrs Casey, Charles Stewart, Percival Costerlow or the last occupier of the Victorian era, Jacob Louis, a gentlemen of no known family who later died alone in December 1909.

We may never know. Excepting the census, historical directories only record the names of the head of the house, usually men, but sometimes spinsters and widows. Wives, children and servants – those who are owned – slip into the chasm between class and government data.



Young, beautiful and dark-haired, Florence Cook possesses a captivating allure. She once heard the voices of angels as a child and has been generating poltergeist activity ever since. Embarrassed by being levitated at a recent tea party, she returns to the safety of her family sitting room in Eleanor Road. In the presence of her rapt audience, she channels a message from the other side as her hand scribbles across the page.



Like her contemporary faery child, Alice, Florence engages with a land where words and truth are seen from a different perspective. Making her way to this neighbouring parallel road, a journey she claims to be long and exhausting, she meets Thomas Blyton, editor of The Spiritualist and secretary of the Dalston Association of Inquirers into Spiritualism. Through his guidance, she develops a considerable range of psychic phenomena for the delectation of his growing membership. The Association is soon healthy enough to move to a permanent home at 53 Sigdon Road, just by Hackney Downs station.

During séances, Florence intimates the existence of an emerging spirit, offering tantalising trance messages and glimpses of a ghostly face shrouded in linen. A phantom lies in wait, a mere potentiality to mesmerise sitters and fellow mediums, while Florence engages in a game of Arabian Nights and learns her craft. She focuses her psychic powers to gently colour in the outlines of an apparition frantic to perform to the entranced crowds of the respectable curious.

As if impatient for incarnation, the spirit becomes increasingly uncontrollable. Furniture is thrown against the wall as Florence is borne into the air by invisible hands, which rip and rapidly replace pieces of clothing from her body. Disturbed by the experience, she abandons the society and once again confines her sittings to her home, along with her parents, siblings, household maid and paying guests. She renames this cosy clique the Hackney Circle.



The psychic who cleansed the intractable ghost also revealed a ley line running straight through the house. Powerlines are not always positive and geomagnetic energy can interact with its environment, hungry for living, creative force. So be careful what you feed it.

Ghostly energies teach us that death does not deal in absolutes (apart from the absolute fact of it), nor do ley lines. They link the structures of human hands as surely as they link the megaliths of ideas within psychic landscapes. They are a paradox, a looking glass, as intricate and metaphorical as a line of Tarot cards. Make of their poetic truth what you will. Always.

Two local witches decided to dowse the park. A spattering of energy lines makes a confusing criss-cross where the brook still flows, but two distinct lines, one for each witch, appear to intersect at a point where WW now dwells.

The shorter ley cuts across the park from south east to north west. South it passes through the New Testament Church of God on Cricketfield Road, first registered by the Presbyterian Church of England in 1872.



It seems likely that it then runs through St. Augustine's Hall, the clubhouse for the Victoria Park Harriers, which was once a Victorian Church Hall.

More significantly, it makes its way north directly through the ruined Victorian chapel at the heart of Abney Park Cemetery, where Catherine Booth, mother of the Salvation Army, now rests. She is recorded as having made an appearance to Mr John Lobb of Victoria Park Road, during a Victorian séance. She asked, "what do you think of my grand

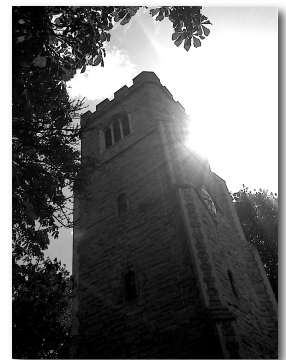
husband now?" The boast may strike as an overstated gesture, given the vast distance to travel from Heaven to South Hackney.

The witches dowsed the chapel widdershins, for it is a busy junction, bathed in the energy of death.

The larger ley line may offer more substantial intrigue; the structures that dot its route join up into a compelling narrative.

From WW, it runs south, again through the church on the corner, through St John's graveyard, to skirt past the 16th century St Augustine's Tower, built on the site of an earlier Templar Church.

The Templars held substantial lands in Hackney and until the 19th century a Templar house stood at the top of Church Street (now the Narroway), opposite Dalston Lane. These mysterious Knights of St John of Jerusalem, with their secret initiations and rites, kissed the arse of Baphomet here. Council Tax payers have been doing the same ever since.



The Borough coat of arms depicts the Augustine Tower flanking the Templar colours, underlined by the symbol of water, the constant flowing factor beneath the pavements. As if to prove the point, the line passes through a well, now buried under the Bohemia Place bus depot, once supplied by a reservoir in which sea shells were discovered.

Templar references begin to align with pleasing exposition as the line traverses the church of St John of Jerusalem (1848) and straight through St Barnabas at Mile End, the heretical Seal of Solomon, symbol of ancient Testament and modern witchcraft, embedded into the south window.

The current of conspiracy grows stronger as the line charges through the centre of Canary Wharf Tower, the obelisk built by lizards, arriving at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, gateway to the stars.



Florence lies unconscious in the cabinet while she exudes ectoplasm, the mysterious substance produced from her own body to manifest the form of another being. Katie King is that creature, liar, cheat, daughter of a buccaneer, who now perambulates the room bobbing and smiling

while we hear sobbing and moaning from within the cabinet, as if the manifestation were draining the energy from the host.

Spirit communion with mortals is a blessed and painful matter and full form materialisation in such good light is rare. How solid Katie seems, her hand smooth and warm as she flirts, kisses and exhorts us to engage. Her white dress catches on the table, a shot of black taffeta revealed beneath. Katie announces that her time allotted on earth is three years.



From WW, the major ley line heads north through the western estate boundary of Hackney's lost palace, Brooke House, named for the water that surrounded it. The house, recorded as far back as 1409, was built on the area of land between Lower Clapton Road and Kenninghall Road, about which one of the witches categorically states has 'bad energy'. King Henry VIII stayed at the house with Jane Seymour during his reconciliation with daughter Mary.

Its gardens were famous. Pepys mentions seeing oranges growing for the first time here. There was also an old mulberry tree (ruled by Mercury, and therefore beneficial for all ills of the mouth), claimed by its owner to be one of the original mulberries planted by the Templars.

In 1759 Brooke House became a private mental asylum, in ignorance of the cardinal rule to never mix lunatics with ley lines. After bomb damage during the war, it was demolished. A neighbour recalls church treasure being discovered on the site during an excavation in the 1960s, although, like much that is precious in Hackney, it seems to have been swallowed up without official reference.

The ley travels through a grey area (of both geography and fact) in the Northwold Road vicinity, where the only discovery of note is that excavations uncovered a complete Acheulian-type hand axe, before continuing north through the gothic-style St Ignatius Jesuit Church at Stamford Hill, and Oakwood Park at Southgate, once owned by Geoffrey de Mandeville, where an igloo shaped ice well was built in 1870 by a homeopathic chemist; onwards through the old 'Gallows of Gallis Hill', before arriving, drenched with death and madness, at a surprising and enigmatic location on the outskirts of London.



They have turned against her. A prophet has no honour in her own country. An unruly ruffian, oblivious to danger and decorum, seizes Katie at a sitting, to prove that she is but a dramatic persona of Florence. Human hand should never interfere with ectoplasm and it is a miracle that the shock did not destroy the body tied up in the cabinet.



We know that Katie King is a genuine etheric materialisation. Certainly, Florence and Katie bear a striking resemblance in a dim light. But look closer. Katie is taller and heavier than Florence and has red hair whereas Florrie's hair is dark. Florrie has pierced ears, Katie does not.

We carefully examine every part of the cabinet while Miss Cook is searched by Mrs Amelia and Miss Carline Corner. Nothing could be concealed there. The seals on the ropes and bindings are intact.

Mr William Crookes, besotted with Katie's beauty, has undertaken a project of scientific corroboration. That the spirit reciprocates his tender regard is a touching testimony to his faith, not, as scurrilous rumours would suggest, the machinations of a mundane affair.

In timely fashion, Katie has announced her departure and now sits on the floor making up bouquets for her friends to keep in remembrance of her. We gaze sadly at the white clad maiden, blossom of exquisite youth cleansed of all past misdemeanours, and we too yearn to be made over new. The perfume of the lilies of the valley and pink geranium epitomises the pale, delicate sweetness of her lovely face and our own grace notes that mourn the rare and magic moments of lost innocence.



Our ley line reaches its final destination at Camlet Moat in Trent Park, adjacent to the campus of Middlesex University. The ghost of Geoffrey de Mandeville, who drowned in the moat, wanders here. Mystics agree that the name has been abbreviated over the years from 'Camelot', a theory compounded by excavations in the 1920s, which revealed the basis of an ancient drawbridge and dungeons. An obelisk was planted on the spot in 1934 and there is also a holy well, the symbolic male and female conjoined to produce the elixir of life.

Could this be the hidden home of the Knights Templar, guardians of the grail, custodians of Earth's mysteries? Pagan rites are evident here, clouties, stones and candles offered up to the sanctity and power of the location. What do they know about this place?

Camlet Moat is also the pivotal location in the theory of Christopher Street's Earth Stars, who describes London's ancient sacred sites forming a precise pattern of geometry, including pentagrams and stars, reflecting the same pattern upon which the megaliths of Stonehenge were laid out. London is a vast temple, its web of stars a mandala, its soul.

Street also draws attention to 2012, year of the London Olympics and Mayan end-time. He believes that London's Earthstars geometry has an association with St John's biblical City of Revelation, the new Jerusalem, which is said to appear in the end of the world.

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new."



From gateway to gateway. As above, so below; a fearful and wondrous symmetry where every man and woman is a star, shaped by matter, geography and time. As our past is embedded into our neurosystem, a building's past is embedded into its walls, soaked and seeping with the symbiotic spirit of human energy.

Feel it, if you dare. For good or for ill, dredge up the ghosts from their graves and hold them up to the light. Jerusalem is the ground upon which you stand, Art is a beautiful heresy, and what's good enough for God is good enough for us.

Meanwhile, the inexorable spiral dance of Death keeps whirling.

Let us create.

MORE INFORMATION

<http://www.wilsonwilliamsgallery.com/anybodythere.html>