

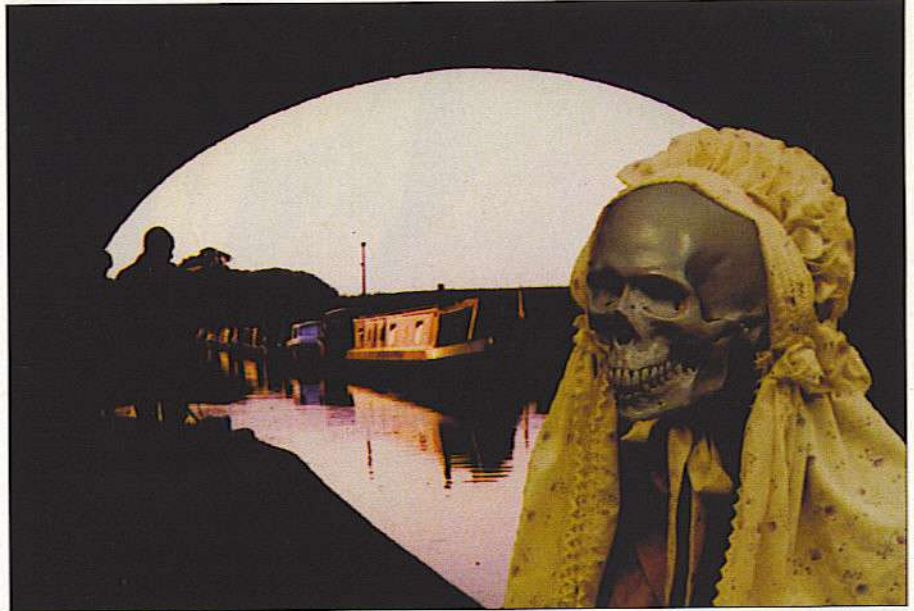
## ◆◆◆ A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

**T**HE BOAT gently rocks, water lapping on the hull. It's late and dark. Somewhere nearby an owl gently hoots. Then, in the blackened stillness, the boat starts to rock. A passing boat? An uninvited boarder? Or perhaps one of the hundreds of ghosts and spectres on our waterways.

Perhaps one of the most famous waterways ghosts is that of Christina Collins. Christina was murdered on 17th June 1839, aged 37 years. Her body was found in the Trent & Mersey Canal at Brindley Bank near Rugeley. Three boatmen, James Owen, George Thomas and William Ellis, were convicted of her murder. Two were hanged, the third transported. At the point where Christina's body was taken from the canal, there was a flight of sandstone steps (alongside the more recent concrete steps). Christina's blood ran onto, and down the steps, and even today it is believed that on occasions, traces of her blood can still be seen. These steps became known as the 'Bloody Steps'. It is believed that a ghost makes presence here. Christina's ghost perhaps, or perhaps that of one of her murderers.

Another well-known ghost is that of Kit Crewbucket, a lady boggart of canal tunnels. She has often been reported as haunting the Harecastle Tunnel, and sometimes is believed to be the spectre that appears in Crick Tunnel.

At Astley in Manchester, a grey lady appears searching for something near the canal. She may be the ghost of eighteen-year-old Ann Mort who died of a broken heart after her parents banished her suitor because he was a Catholic. In Cheshire, a hideous figure wearing a black shawl emits a terrifying cackling laugh at Buttermilk Bridge. This is the ghost of a woman who



feared Betton Cutting near bridge 66 of the Shroppie. Perhaps their fear is justified by various reportings over the years of a 'Shrieking Spectre.' A more recent phantom is that of an American pilot who appears in the Shroppie between Wheaton Aston and Little Onn at the spot where he crashed his plane during the Second World War. Another wartime pilot, but this time headless, appears on the south bank of the Coventry canal, between bridges 90 and 91.

Staying in Shropshire, but changing waterways, on the river Severn at Ironbridge, a phantom Trow can be seen drifting slowly. The boat is laden with corpses, piled high. At the tiller is a faceless hooded helmsman, believed to be transporting the bodies of plague victims.

Moving westward to the Llangollen canal and on moonlit nights a figure can often be

Wye near Hereford, particularly in the evening. What they feared was the experience of seeing the macabre 'Spectre's Voyage', for to do so meant certain death. Their fatal vision was that of a young shrouded woman, gliding past, against wind and flow.

The Thames, as one might expect, yields many apparitions. At Cheyne walk, upstream of Battersea Bridge is the ghost of a bear, believed to be one of the poor creatures forced into bear-baiting which took place here in the 16th century. Further downstream, below Westminster Bridge, echo the screams of pain of a figure jumping into the Thames from Cleopatra's needle. Though never a splash is heard, the leap is often followed by wicked howls of laughter. At Limehouse, a ghost is seen at summer sunsets. This is the vicar of Ratcliff Cross who ran a refuge for sailors, and who murdered those with money.

# Ghosts of the Waterways

**Richard Hill takes a seasonal look at some of the famous, and not so famous, ghosts which reputedly haunt the woods, tunnels and dark corners of our canals.**

sold buttermilk to the navvies constructing the canal here. In Chester, where the canal (which was dug into part of the moat) passes near to Northgate, the last Roman sentry can still be seen guarding the entrance to the city.

The Shropshire Union has plenty of eerie hauntings. At Bridge 39, the famous double arched bridge, a black creature is said to appear as a phantom. This is the ghost of a boatman who was drowned here in the 19th century.

Boatmen are reported to have always

seen 'gliding' along the towpath on the Pontcysyllte aqueduct. The form often disappears suddenly, but has never been seen leaping off the aqueduct. At Clifton Gorge, where many have been known to end their lives by jumping off the Clifton Suspension Bridge, none have been reported as ghost stories. Yet the gorge has two known apparitions: one, a pilot who died in 1957 while attempting to fly under the bridge, the other of Brunel who designed the bridge. Brunel is said to haunt Leigh Woods nearby.

Boatmen have always dreaded the River

He dumped their bodies into the Thames at Ratcliff Cross Stairs. Much further downstream, in September each year, the screams of many can be heard at Thamesmead. These are the 640 souls who perished here when the pleasure-steamer Princess Alice went down in 1878.

To Kent, near the confluence of the Thames and Medway. The Chatham Dockyard. Nelson is said to haunt the yard, as is a ghost in the Flag loft. This is probably the youngest ghost, appearing since a supervisor who worked here died in 1990. The supervisor

had an unnatural habit of digging his subordinates in the ribs if they did not work hard.

And finally, to East Anglia, where there are many reported spiritual sightings and experiences. In Norwich, the cellars of the pub opposite Bishop's Bridge is said to have been used as dungeons in the 16th century. Hundreds were believed to have been imprisoned here before being burnt alive in nearby Lollards Pit. The ghost of at least one of these wretched souls haunts here. There are ghosts all over the Broads, a drummer boy drums on frosty nights at Hickling Broad. At Oulton

Broad the ghost of writer George Borrow, dressed in long cloak and distinctive wide brimmed hat, can often be witnessed. At Ludham, opposite the confluence of the rivers Bure and Thurne, resides the ghost of a monk, who betrayed St Benet's Abbey to the Normans. At Nun's Bridge at Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire, on a tributary of the Ouse can be seen the phantom of a nun and a monk. Both were killed, and their ghosts have been witnessed here. In nearby Holywell, a white lady appears in Ye Olde Ferryboat Inn on the 17th March each year. She points at her

own gravestone in the pub, before leaving and vanishing down the river.

Undoubtedly readers will know of more and many have written to the author about them. It is a chilling thought that so many exist.

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