



# Cambridge in spirit

James Hadley visits the East Anglian university town, where he undertakes some spectral analysis

Can there be a more fertile breeding ground for ghosts than a university town like Cambridge? Consider its cluster of ancient colleges, its dimly lit passages and courts, its mixed population of imaginative youth, and ageing dons – some of whom might give the impression of being not quite of this world. As one undergraduate recently wondered in the student newspaper, *Varsity*, “How many dons and professors, having spent all their conscious lives at Cambridge, return to while away a whole eternity here?”

The university’s most notorious ghost of recent years belongs to its oldest college, Peterhouse, founded in 1284. A couple of Christmases ago, the college bursar and two butlers separately reported seeing a mysterious figure in the college’s oak-panelled Combination Room – just by the college chapel. The apparition was described by the bursar as “smallish, slightly built and balding”. But this was no festive jape. As the college dean testified, “I saw the absolute terror on the faces of those two [butlers] so I don’t doubt that something happened. In a college full of unreliable people, they are completely reliable.”

Speculation as to the spectre’s identity soon got out of hand. Candidates from the college’s many celebrated alumni and former fellows included film actor James Mason, staging a posthumous cameo appearance, and the late novelist Kingsley Amis, returned to gather material for a sequel to *Lucky Jim*. The most “likely” suspect, though, was college bursar Francis Dawes, who in 1789 hanged himself from a bell-rope, near the spot where the ghost was seen after becoming embroiled in the rigged election of a Master. Dawes is buried in the charming churchyard of Little St Mary’s, next door to the college.

A short walk from Peterhouse up Trumpington Street brings you to Corpus Christi, boasting perhaps Cambridge’s most famous college ghost, which is supposed to haunt rooms in the corner of the Old Court. With its stepped buttresses and plastered walls, the court dates all

the way back to the 14th century – a fitting place for a haunting.

The story starts in the 1630s when Cambridge was wracked by plague. The university vice-chancellor and Master of Corpus was Dr Henry Butts. Devastated by the suffering he witnessed, he hanged himself in his rooms in Old Court shortly before he was due to preach an Easter sermon. Some say it is Butts who haunts Old Court.

Others point to Elizabeth Spence, daughter of a Master of the college in the 1690s. Elizabeth had a clandestine lover, James Betts, who is said to have slowly suffocated after being bundled into a clothes chest when one of the couple’s secret meetings was disturbed by the disapproving father. Poor Elizabeth is said to have gone into a rapid decline and died soon

after. Could the ghost be Elizabeth, or that of her lover James?

Whoever it may be, a number of disturbing sightings in Old Court were reported in the early 1900s: a student spied a headless body leaning out of a window and, on another occasion, a Fellow saw an object which spooked him so greatly that he crawled out of the room on his hands and knees. Some plucky students attempted an exorcism but the experience reduced them, it’s said, to gibbering wrecks. The ghost has not been seen for many years now but remains a part of college folklore.

I like to think that the ghost is that of the Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe, returned to his old college after meeting an untimely death in a south London tavern brawl back in 1593. He and his fellow dramatist John Fletcher, also a >

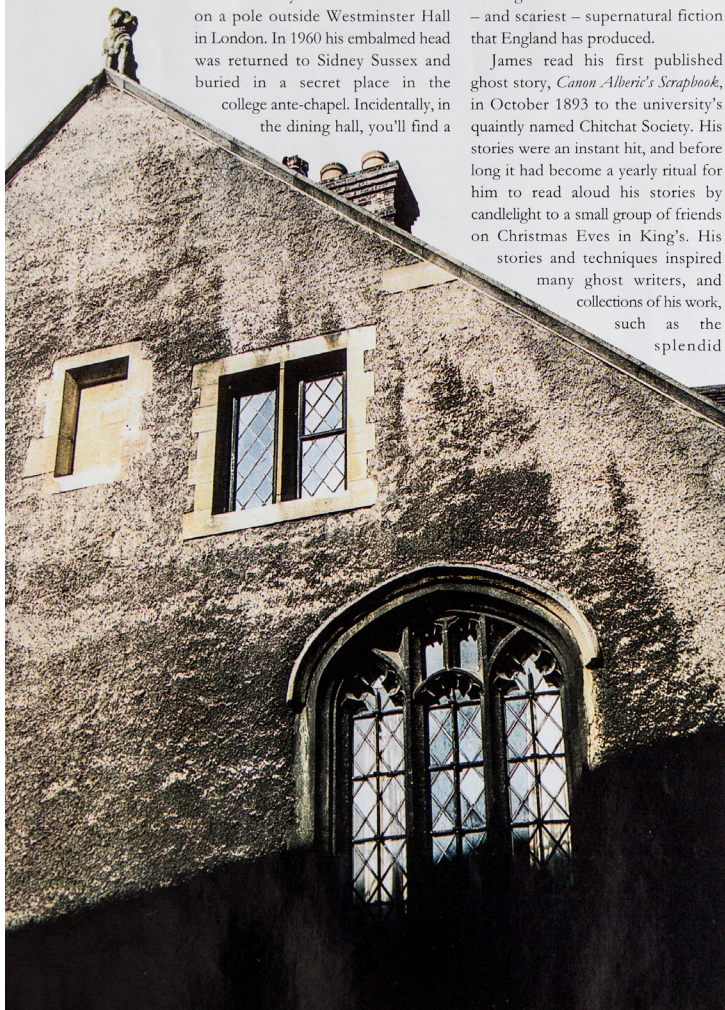


Haunting images of Cambridge: Peterhouse College chapel where a balding apparition was seen (far left) and the Fellows’ Garden at Christ’s College (left)

All photos: J Hadley



Old Court, Corpus Christie College (below) the scene of some "disturbing sightings" and Trinity College where the Ghost Club was founded (right)



Corpus student, are commemorated by a plaque in Old Court.

In 1967, a "vague emaciated head", as it was described, troubled hard-working undergraduates in their rooms at Sidney. Identifying ghosts is an inexact science but Oliver Cromwell, an alumnus of Sidney Sussex makes a likely candidate for this particular sighting. Having presided over the decapitation of Charles I, Cromwell's body was dug up on the restoration of the monarchy and his head stuck on a pole outside Westminster Hall in London. In 1960 his embalmed head was returned to Sidney Sussex and buried in a secret place in the college ante-chapel. Incidentally, in the dining hall, you'll find a

striking curtained portrait of the Lord Protector himself.

No visit to Cambridge would be complete without a look at King's College and its magnificent chapel, arguably the finest Gothic building in Europe. Surprisingly for such an old college (founded by Henry VI in 1441) King's doesn't have a ghost. No matter, it can boast the next best thing: a ghost writer. MR James (1862-1936) was a brilliant Biblical scholar and Provost of King's who wrote some of the best – and scariest – supernatural fiction that England has produced.

James read his first published ghost story, *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook*, in October 1893 to the university's quaintly named Chitchat Society. His stories were an instant hit, and before long it had become a yearly ritual for him to read aloud his stories by candlelight to a small group of friends on Christmas Eves in King's. His stories and techniques inspired many ghost writers, and collections of his work, such as the splendid

*Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* have never been out of print. His practice was never to reveal the ghost completely; the horror is always left to the reader's imagination.

If you step out of King's, across the majestic sweep of King's Parade and turn down the narrow St Edward's Passage you will come to The Haunted Bookshop, one of the town's many specialist booksellers. When the current proprietor, Sarah Key, took over the shop five years ago, she was told of the ghost – a woman dressed in white, or grey, with long blonde hair, who haunts the first floor.

She recalls, "I didn't know whether to believe it or not. But a couple of years after we moved in I did see somebody go upstairs who I thought was a customer. I followed them up and there was nobody there. I've no idea who it was, apart from the fact that it appeared to be a youngish lady wearing something long." I recommend a visit to the shop – not for the ghost but to sample its remarkable collection of children's books.

Some sceptics might feel that a building of wall-to-wall fiction is an apt place for a ghost and it must be admitted that certain university spooks do have a habit of gliding mysteriously across the border between fact and fabrication. The Fellows' Garden at Christ's College is a tranquil spot that some believe is haunted by the spirit of Christopher Round, once a Fellow of the college. On summer evenings he is said to mournfully pace round the ancient mulberry tree because he was accidentally responsible for the drowning of another Fellow.

But, according to former college archivist Henry Button, this isn't quite the case. Mr Round is a fictional character; he and the tragic drowning feature in *A College Mystery*, a murder story set in Christ's, written in 1918 by AP Baker, a college Fellow. "It's very realistic," says Mr Button. "In fact, I have difficulty sometimes in persuading people that these characters did not exist. It's a good yarn."

That mulberry is famous for other reasons, incidentally. It is one of the

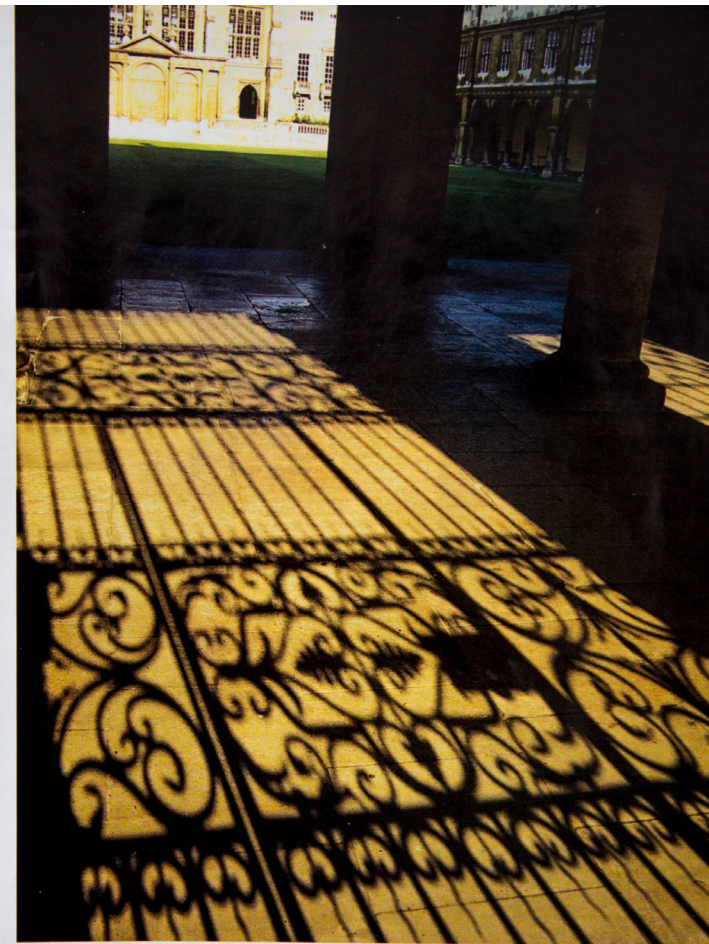
oldest trees in Cambridge. The poet John Milton, who left us the epic *Paradise Lost*, is supposed either to have planted or composed beneath the tree – though evidence for either is hard to find.

Cambridge has a well-earned reputation for sorting truth from fiction in the dispassionate spirit of scientific enquiry. I had read from an old newspaper cutting in the city library that Trinity, the university's largest college, was haunted by the ghost of a lexicographer who walks round and round the solitary chestnut tree in the middle of New Court, muttering "Lost, lost in an impenetrable forest". But all my enquiries drew a blank. No one knew of the ghost – or no one was admitting to it. "Perhaps we're too boringly level-headed for that kind of thing here," ventured one Trinity don.

Strangely, a number of Fellows from Trinity were instrumental in establishing the Ghost Club. Founded in 1862 in Cambridge, it was one of the first societies to take a serious interest in psychical research. Past members have included WB Yeats and the actor Peter Cushing. The Club's acting chairman, Alan Murdie, conducts a regular Ghost Walk round some of the shadier lanes of Cambridge.

"Because of its university status, there's been a greater effort to write these sort of stories down and investigate them," he says, accounting for the preponderance of ghost reports in the town. "Cambridge has got a long history – and it's had a quite brutal and controversial history from time to time as well." However, Mr Murdie happily admits that he himself has yet to witness a ghost.

So, if on your visit to Cambridge you should make out a strange grey figure palely loitering in the gloom of a college court, stop yourself before your imagination runs away with you. Is it a ghost? Or might it simply be an antiquated professor, over-fond perhaps of his port, who has stepped out of his lodgings and forgotten where he is supposed to be going. Now that really does have the ring the truth to it. ☐



## further INFORMATION

**Tourist Information Centre**, Wheeler Street, Cambridge CB2 3QB; tel: (01223) 322640. Open: Nov-Mar, Mon-Fri 10am-5.30pm, Sat 5pm; Apr-Oct, Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 5pm; from Easter to Sept, open also on Sundays and BHMons 11am-4pm.

**The Cambridge Ghost Walk** takes you on a 90-minute tour of selected haunted spots around the university, starting from outside King's College main entrance. Easter-Sept, Thurs, Sat and Sun, 8pm; tel: (01284) 756717. Price: £3.50.

### WHAT TO VISIT

Some colleges now charge admission (usually around £1.75) and are only open at certain times

of the day. Most close to visitors during exam time, mid-Apr-mid-June. Check with the Tourist Information Centre (see above).

### FURTHER REFERENCE

**Cambridge College Ghosts**, by Geoff Yeates (Jarrod £4.95 paperback) is a lovingly researched guide to university ghosts from a local writer, with useful histories of the colleges thrown in. Available in bookshops in the town. Several colleges have their own websites, some with virtual tours. Try Corpus Christie: ([www.corpus.cam.ac.uk](http://www.corpus.cam.ac.uk)); Peterhouse: ([test.pet.cam.ac.uk](http://test.pet.cam.ac.uk)) King's: ([www.kings.cam.ac.uk](http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk)).