



My mother's ruin

Long abandoned, this grim orphanage has reopened — as a tourist attraction for believers in the paranormal. *Caroline Scott* went back to the institution that made her own mother's childhood a misery

The ghost hunters gathering inside the dining hall of the Grade II listed Victorian orphanage in Liverpool have been promised a top night out. This is the number one paranormal venue in the UK, apparently so chugging with psychic energy it is booked solid for the next 18 months. As night falls, there's a feeling amongst the group that, having paid £60 each to wander through acres of empty rooms and crumbling corridors, an appearance by the spirits of actual sobbing orphans would represent good value for money. I just feel overwhelmed with gloom at such crass commercialisation of a ghastly childhood — my mother's childhood.

The official records for the Royal Liverpool Seamen's Orphanage 1874-1949 are now in the archives of the Liverpool Maritime Museum. They included a tattered, much amended strip of paper from January 1931 in the name of Hughes, my mother's maiden name. It came up from the vaults covered in black and red ink and smelling of sadness. I don't know what I'd been expecting. Detail. Photographs,

maybe. Something personal. Four little girls aged from seven to a baby of five months, and they didn't even warrant a form each. Their future looked as though it had been mapped out on the back of an envelope.

My grandfather, Edward Hughes, was a master mariner aboard the cruise liner RMS Adriatic, once the fastest ship in the world. Ned's death from heart failure on January 15, 1931, at the age of 32 threw the family into penury. The children weren't orphans, since their mother, May, was still alive, but the welfare state was a long way off and, like many of the inmates of the seamen's orphanage, abandoned, neglected or just born into families too big too care for them, this was their new status. When May was offered a job aboard another ship, taking thousands of emigrants from Liverpool to New York, she took it and two weeks after Ned's death, their girls were dispatched to the orphanage in Liverpool's Newsham Park.

The only personal question on the scant official orphanage entry forms from 1931 was to enquire whether the children had "any

troublesome habits" at night. When my mother, Dorothy, aged six years and three months wet her bed, she was made to stand outside the dormitory with the sheet over her head until it dried. Her sisters, Gwen, 7, Ruby, 3 and the baby, Bryn, were segregated according to age. Relatives were allowed to attend church to see the children on special occasions, but no physical contact was allowed. Their mother, my grandmother, visited once a year, bringing poignantly useless presents — shells from the south seas and polka dot dresses from Bloomingdales which were immediately confiscated because the orphans all wore the same uniform. Dorothy learnt to do without her. Bryn failed to thrive and was sent out to live with relatives, suffering from malnutrition. My mother recalled crying and pounding on a glass partition as staff tried to force feed her baby sister, but not being allowed to comfort her.

She described canes kept in vinegar to sharpen the sting, and of children made to clean up their own vomit. But she only rarely

spoke about any of it because she was ashamed. "For years and years, I didn't feel I had the right to ask for anything," she told me. "I was permanently afraid of appearing ungrateful. What astonishes me now is the ability of little children to accept the cruelty of adults. Not just the physical violence, which was so totally unnecessary but the rules which were designed to break us. Just the sheer sadistic hell of it all."

The wealthy shipping magnates and merchants who raised the money to build this place did so in the spirit of Victorian philanthropy, and possibly vanity — it was designed by the celebrated architect Alfred Waterhouse (The Natural History Museum, Manchester Town Hall). But they were led by a moral obligation to feed, clothe and provide a sound moral training to the teeming fatherless children of the city's seamen.

Since the orphanage closed its doors in 1949, the building, which runs to 90,000 sq feet has been used as a psychiatric unit and a geriatric hospital. It lay empty for a while

Inside the orphanage *Accus, tore aboria volent est adigendae que que ditiberi consequue nosam*



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before John McKenzie, a financial advisor turned property developer, snapped it up at auction in 1997 for 214,000 pounds on behalf of some “Arab friends”. He struggled for a bit to find a use for it — it’s been a location for film and fashion shoots, and even an episode of Brookside before he had the idea of renting it out for ghost tour companies.

McKenzie is now busy finding more buildings at auction which he instructs his Arab friends to buy. So how much can you pick up a haunted house for then? “Mmm. Not cheap. They run to six figures, but they’re a bargain when you think what you’re getting for your money.” Most recently, he’s purchased a magistrates court, a mill, and Winston Churchill’s 52-bed house in Cardiff.

Today, 27 ghost-hunting companies pay £1,000 per night to hire the orphanage, out of which McKenzie takes a cut. On any weekend of the year, you can spend a night here, exploring the dining hall where the orphans ate their breakfast of dry bread, milk and water and venturing if you dare up to the “punishment corridor” and a row of 14 airless cupboards where children who didn’t obey the rules were locked up alone all night. Isn’t it all a bit exploitative? “I’m not exploiting it, I’m not even promoting it,” McKenzie snaps, saying that would be “undignified.”

“Put it this way,” he says. “A night out will cost you 60 quid. A night in the orphanage will cost you the same and you’re on the boundaries of knowing or not knowing

whether the paranormal exists.”

I visit the building with a tour company called Haunted Happenings, a Nottingham-based outfit. At the very least, the ghost hunters are expecting some kind of paranormal event to say it’s not just us, here, in the middle of the night, in our thermal underwear with our flasks of tea. And they’re not disappointed. Business begins surprisingly briskly.

“I’m just going to turn my torch off now and tell you what I’m sensing,” says Carolyn Lee, tonight’s psychic. “Coming through the door and up the corridor, walking towards us is a female. She’s about 5ft 2, slightly built, brown hair, dark dress with an apron over the top and she’s got a bunch of keys at her waist. I do get the impression that she would have walked along this corridor, calming and comforting the children that were put in these cupboards as punishments. They were very, very frightened children. There’s a lot of crying. Those poor, poor children. But I can tell from her energy that she really did care for them.”

Haunted Happenings’ founder, Hazel Ford, a relatively level-headed type who tries to stop imaginations running amok, is keen to “de-bunk” anything that might have a rational explanation. We listen first for natural sounds — shuffling, stomachs rumbling, ducks honking on the lakes outside — to help us identify the supernatural. Carl, who’s here with his wife, Karen, doesn’t really “believe” but Karen does, so she gave him the ghost tour for his birthday. Carl, as it happens, is the first of us

to feel a presence. He clears his throat. “If the gentleman would like to communicate with me...” And a split second later: “I saw a flash! Out of the left corner of me eye! Bright white.”

In this place, my mother learnt to sew exquisitely, to darn holes in her socks and to get up at 5am to polish taps until they shone. She experienced a level of coercion and brutality that would make childcare experts today quake, but she also learnt to be resourceful and brave. She grew up to be a practical and unsentimental woman who believed anything was possible — not least the leap from poverty to relative prosperity — if you worked hard enough. She left a job in a bank when she married my father, because that’s what you did in 1952, but she was a grafter, with early tiger-mother tendencies. When one of my brothers thought he might like to be a chef, she wrote to Prue Leith, whose books she admired, asking her if she’d see him. Leith replied personally and gave him a job in one of her kitchens. If she were able to get a message over from the other side at this moment it would probably be something like: “I can’t believe you haven’t got a pension,” or, “You’re not wearing enough clothes.”

My clothes, or lack of them was our biggest bone of contention when she was alive. “Tsk! Ballet shoes in December,” etc. As a child, her feet, hands and knees were covered with chilblains, which through the winter, cracked, bled and scarred. The orphanage, even in March, is as cold as the grave and with our torches off, pitch dark. How did a tiny girl with

a rickety spine and a heart condition survive here? I’m not expecting an answer. If there is an afterlife, you can be sure she wouldn’t be hanging about here.

Doors creak, someone complains of a splitting headache. Someone else of being “hot and cold”. In the old kitchens, a Ouija board is laid out. I can’t tell you who is pushing the glass so that it spells out the name of a little girl, Ava, but it isn’t me. As the night wears on, some people are sick, others faint. Some don’t manage to last a couple of hours, let alone a full night.

I ask John McKenzie if he believes there is paranormal activity at Newsham Park. “Do you want me to say yes? I have no idea. I just thought if I spin the tour companies a good story, I’ll convince them.” Something has been troubling me since I got here. It’s just that my mother described a level of casual cruelty which makes my flesh creep, but she never mentioned the punishment cupboards. McKenzie looks sheepish. “Ah,” he says. “Them. Yes. Basically, I made it all up.”

The only reason I know the truth is because when I was at university I used my mother’s experience at RLSO as a case study for a thesis. She crashed about in the kitchen delivering an account of jaw-dropping emotional neglect while I wrote it up and mashed it together with the work of Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault, to some effect, I felt. If you’re going to look after 400 children under one roof, it’s probably easiest if you

strip them of their identity first; I’m pretty sure that’s what had happened to her.

My mother left the orphanage on April 18, 1936, with a Book of Common Prayer and a new outfit, courtesy of the benefactors. The official minutes for that time note a kerfuffle between her mother and the committee over whether or not to fine her. Why, we’ll never know. But she was eventually let off “under special circumstances”.

There is a letter in the archive from May, pleading and slightly self-pitying, requesting extra money for the youngest girl, Bryn, which was refused. After another letter, a postal order to the value of 15 shillings was dispatched with the instructions: “Please fill in the slip and have it signed by your clergyman.”

The Royal Liverpool Seamen’s Orphan Institution (RLOI) banked £125,000 from the sale of the building to the Ministry of Health in 1951 and carried on supporting families of deceased merchant seamen. It supported my mother and her siblings for 15 years after they left, and today it supports 85 children at a rate of £220 per child per month. The RLOI’s redoubtable chief executive, Linda Cotton, is horrified by the ghost tours. “You don’t need to sink this low to make a few bob,” she says.

In its day, the RLOI provided an education that would have been the envy of other orphans; the children learnt reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar and scripture by rote and even the littlest were taught how to polish the floors with Ronuk, clean the drains, wash

their own linen and mend their own clothes. I asked my mother if any good came out of her experiences there. She thought about this one for quite a long time. “Well, we learnt to be self-reliant,” she said finally. “But we were just babies really. Actually, the only good thing I can think of is that some people weren’t completely destroyed by it.”

She had been born with a congenital heart defect which should have killed her long before it did, and she died suddenly at Christmas 1989 of an aneurism when we were on holiday in Hong Kong; I was 23 and even though I’d spent half my life waiting for this moment, I was so deeply shocked, I was certain my heart would stop too. My dad, who loved her beyond measure, didn’t survive long without her. But before she died they had 10 years of living her dream. She wanted a cottage in the country, and since he found it difficult to deny her anything, they moved to Gloucestershire where he bought her a pink house with roses round the door. She took herself off to college, she went to cookery school, she painted watercolour landscapes, she made tapestries and worked beautiful free embroideries. She was unfailingly interested in everyone and everything. My dad, who could happily spend whole days reading *The Spectator*, said he had no need to go out because she brought the whole world home. It may not sound much, but it was the way that Dorothy Hughes was able finally to put the ghosts of Newsham Park behind her. ■