

A Rush Hour of Ghosts

Ever seen a ghost? Perhaps not, but your next trip to the UK could be the best chance you will ever have. According to the British Tourist Board there are 10,000 haunted places in the UK, serving as homes to a spooky selection of ghosts, ghouls and all manner of unearthly manifestations.

British ghosts can be divided into three broad categories: firstly and most famously there are the historical ghosts. These apparitions step straight off the pages of dusty history textbooks and glide around their old stomping grounds, passing through walls and alarming the tourists. Perhaps the most famous is Anne Boleyn, second wife of King Henry VIII, who has been spotted at the Tower of London. Poor Ann was beheaded but happily her ghost has been witnessed intact. Also occasionally seen at the same location is the explorer, Sir Walter Raleigh and the princes, Edward and Richard who disappeared there more than 500 years ago.

Britain also has a number of theatre ghosts. In fact, no respectable London theatre is without some resident supernatural entity. Famous examples are the 'woman in black' at the Fortune theatre in Russell Street (seen sipping champagne at the bar) and the 'man in grey' at the Theatre Royal. Some claim that Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen haunts the corridors and dressing rooms of the Dominion theatre in Tottenham Court road, which is reasonable considering the musical inspired by his band's music opened there. The Victoria Palace theatre has reported numerous bizarre paranormal events, including a room where the hairpieces were seen flying around unaided. Male staff at the Queen's theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue have even reported a gay ghost watching them as they change!

Animal ghosts are also quite common in the UK and include a ghost cat at All Hallows Church near the Tower of London and a ghost bear seen in the Tower itself. Ghost horses are often seen throughout Britain, especially at sites of major battles e.g. Edgehill. More exotic though is the story of a ghost monkey which is heard (not seen) scratching at the door of his mistress in Athelhampton Hall in Dorset. There is even apparently a ghost rabbit who hops around Thetford Warren Lodge in Norfolk.

All this spookiness has inspired some interesting ghostly idioms which have enriched our language. Examples include:

(not a) ghost of a chance – a very slim possibility:

There isn't a ghost of a chance of getting to the church on time.

to lay the ghost of – to finally deal with a worrying or upsetting memory once and for all:

He finally laid the ghost of his past failures by winning the gold medal.

To give up the ghost – to die (though often used of machinery)

My computer has finally given up the ghost. I'll need to get a new one.

Compared to their Japanese equivalents, like the creepy Yotsuya kaidan story, British ghosts are discreet entities and not particularly scary – you are unlikely to be traumatised by encountering a ghost rabbit after all – and this may be one reason why ghost hunting has enjoyed a boom recently. If you fancy a bit of spook spotting the Tower of London and Windsor Castle would be obvious places to start since both boast a Who's Who of historical phantoms. Ghost walks are often held in Britain's most haunted cities (officially - Chester, Derby and Edinburgh) - but there are numerous other haunted hot spots with organised tours and even all night vigils for the truly fearless.

So if you fancy a spooky experience in one Britain's most historic locations or are just after the ultimate holiday photo, check out these options:

<http://www.ghostevents.co.uk/>

<http://www.ghosttoursuk.co.uk/#/events-2009/4525454979>

<http://www.ghost-hunting-uk.co.uk/>

One word of warning though, according to a report in a British newspaper, ghost sightings started to decline about 15 years ago at around the time when mobile phone use in the UK really took off. Some believe that electronic noise produced by phone calls and text messages drowns out paranormal activity. So remember to set your phone to manner mode. After all, you don't want to spook the spooks.

Written by Philip Patrick

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