

Stage fright – the Mostly Ghostly team will be carrying out a paranormal investigation at the Theatre Royal in Dumfries

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?

Have you ever seen a ghost or been plagued by a poltergeist? Do you know of any haunted happenings in your neighbourhood? Then members of a new Dumfries-based paranormal investigation group, Mostly Ghostly, would love to hear from you. **Andrea Thompson** meets the team as they prepare for their Hallowe'en fright-night launch

Photography by Phil Rigby

The heavy-curtained door slams shut behind us and we're left blinking in the gloom of the auditorium of the Theatre Royal, Dumfries. The lights in the chandeliers are turned down low and what little illumination there is seems to be soaked up by the aubergine walls and russet curtains which frame the black stage. A bust of Robert Burns peers ominously down as the four members of Mostly Ghostly emerge from the shadows.

There's certainly an eerie feel about the place, and this being Scotland's oldest working theatre, dating back to 1792, you can't help but wonder what happens when the audiences file out, when the curtains come down and the lights go off at the end of the night. Does the theatre take on a life of its own with a few phantoms putting on a performance?

That's exactly what Kathleen Cronie, Derek McCall, John Hill and Mary Wood hope to find out when they spend the spookiest night of the year, Hallowe'en, in the theatre as they launch Mostly Ghostly. They've spent the best part of a year preparing for it and are thrilled to be carrying out a paranormal investigation in an historic building with such a fascinating past.

It has experienced mixed fortunes and seen many changes during the past 216 years, from Georgian theatre to Victorian theatre, the introduction of moving pictures to modern cinema, and has played host to some of the great names in theatre history – Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready – in Scottish literature – Robert Burns and JM Barrie, who was a keen Theatre Royal goer – and some of the greatest names in cinema history, with visits from the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel.

But the theatre, owned by the 300-strong Guild of Players, also has a dark side, with a whole host of mysterious, other-worldly characters waiting in the wings.

"As with most theatres, the Royal has a colourful and dramatic history and has played host to many famous names over the years. It also has a plethora of alleged paranormal occurrences," Kathleen says.

"There have been many unusual events over the years including the sound booth being ransacked, shadowy figures witnessed and objects disappearing. A lot of people mention a notable presence in certain areas of the theatre and talk of a Green Lady.

"We hope that any spirits present in the theatre will make an appearance for us on Hallowe'en, but either way I'm sure it'll be an unforgettable experience."

Master of the Guild, Sheila Howat, says the theatre, which still boasts a busy programme and plays to sell-out audiences, believes it is bound to have its fair share of spirits.

Recent reports include strange noises coming from the empty stage and shadowy figures lurking around. Then there's the basement. Not many people like going down there on their own. It's said to be freezing and

full of strange noises which can't be explained. If the stories are true, it's where two bodies landed after a tragic double death in the theatre in the late 18th century. Supposedly, a woman fell from the balcony, killing both herself and the man she landed on. The position of the balcony in those days meant that the bodies would have landed in what is now the basement ...

Kathleen and her team have been talking to a number of paranormal experts, including an investigator from the Ghost Club of Great Britain, and have been busy researching the pros and cons of the different types of equipment often used in paranormal investigations, such as EMF meters. But for Hallowe'en, they're taking a more low-tech, traditional approach. Among their so-called 'trigger objects' are iron filings, which will react to a change in magnetic fields, and magnetic letters. They hope that, if there is 'somebody out there' they'll send messages by rearranging the letters.

"We'll also be lighting tea lights, asking for protection, and holding a quiet vigil during which we'll be observing and watching. We'll be speaking to the spirits using simple words and above all we'll be respectful," Kathleen says.

The 31-year-old support worker, of Dumfries, says she's always had a fascination for the paranormal, particularly ghosts and haunting – although she hasn't yet encountered a ghost herself. She has teamed up with Derek, 50, a taxi driver; Mary, 37, a health care support worker; and John, 58, a cinema technician and member of the Theatre Royal's Guild of Players, to investigate all manner of ghostly goings-on.

They've been cutting their investigative teeth at paranormal hotspots in the Scottish Borders, in Northumberland, and in Edinburgh, where they worked with Richard Felix, a historian who used to be part of television's *Most Haunted* team, at the Blair Street Vaults and Lady Victoria Colliery in Newtongrange.

Kathleen says there's a wealth of local ghost stories which many people are familiar with, relating to castles, lonely stretches of road, battlegrounds and historical buildings. But what they want for Mostly Ghostly, are modern accounts.

"We want to hear about experiences which have taken place in ordinary, everyday places which we can all relate to, like in the home, at



John Hill, who used to work in the theatre with Mary Wood cutting a ghostly dash Mostly Ghostly – Derek McCall, Mary Wood, Kathleen Cronie and John Hill, on stage

school, in the work place, the pub, or indeed, as happened to one of our members, in the car. Such stories can add a contemporary dimension and a touch of realism to the classic tales already in existence.”

Derek, the self-confessed ‘sceptic’ of the group was shaken, and is still a little stirred, by his car incident. He was in his taxi, parked on the road outside the Crichton Hospital, reading his book, when he heard noises he describes as ‘grunting and groaning’. He looked around and couldn’t see anyone in the vicinity. Then came three loud bangs on the roof of his car, as if it was being stuck by a heavy object. When he got out to have a look, there wasn’t a mark on the vehicle – and, chillingly, there wasn’t anyone around.

Derek refutes suggestions that it could have been caused by a golf ball from the nearby golf club.

“From the noise, the roof should have been badly dented but there wasn’t a mark on it. It couldn’t have been a golf ball, it wouldn’t have landed three times. Whatever it was, it scared the living daylights out of me!”

The team’s early appeal for people’s stories and experiences for the Mostly Ghostly log book has met with responses from all over Scotland and as far afield as America.

Kathleen says: “We’ve received all manner of stories, from a disturbing case in a Dumfries flat and the ghostly goings-on at Cairn Farm at Auldgirth, to a highly unusual account from a local nursing home and a UFO sighting from around 40 years ago, when a forestry worker driving along a remote road between Newton Stewart and Dalry, thought he witnessed blue lights landing on the moorland.”

Here she shares some of the spooky stories from her Mostly Ghostly files:

Cairn Farm, Auldgirth: Over the years a number of families have shared accounts (the house is tied accommodation) with the local press about all the ghostly happenings there. A child has been heard crying, people have felt themselves being grabbed or touched, apparitions have been witnessed, objects have been seen moving. Some people don’t seem to mind the spirits whereas others are extremely frightened. There have been no reports of any happenings in the last two or three years.

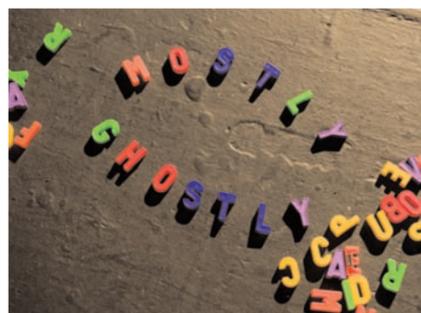
‘We hope that any spirits present in the theatre will make an appearance for us on Hallowe’en, but either way I’m sure it’ll be an unforgettable experience’



Sanquhar Castle – home of the White Lady



Scotland’s oldest working theatre



Will the theatre’s ghosts use the magnetic letters?

Dinwiddie Grieve printers building, Irish Street, Dumfries: Some strange happenings occurred in the mid 1990s. Lights were switching themselves off, the temperature changed, and when a man got up to leave, he felt his shirt was caught on something. It was stretched out taut behind him but not attached to anything. He also heard and felt someone cough nearby and once, after some events had taken place, he returned to put on the alarm and the key wouldn’t open the door. These events happened on two consecutive years on the same weekend in May, almost like an anniversary occurrence. Apparently a few businesses in the Bank Street/Irish Street area have reported strange phenomena, although no-one else has come forward.

Troqueer Arms, Dumfries: Just after Christmas there were the sounds of tables and chairs moving around preceded by three large bangs at about 4.30am. There was no evidence that the furniture had been moved although scraping sounds were heard on the CCTV footage. Other unexplained phenomenon includes footsteps, moving furniture and an apparition of man.

Sanquhar Castle: Home of the ‘White Lady’, said to be the spirit of Marion of Dalpeddar who disappeared in the late 1500s. Allegedly, she was murdered by one of the Crichton lords and indeed, a skeleton was unearthed during excavations during the late 1800s. There is also the ghost of a man named John Wilson, hanged by a Crichton. He is said to clank and rattle chains.

The famous A75 ‘Ghost Road’: The part of the road known as the Kinmount straight and certain areas along the old A75 have been the location of a number of unusual apparitions over the years, with reports of everything from people running into cars, then vanishing into thin air when the driver gets out, to an old lady with a barrage of animals – “great cats, wild dogs, goats, hens, fowl and stranger creatures.”

The truth is out there...

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INFORMATION...

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