

EXTRACTS FROM HAUNTED SOUTHEND BY DEE GORDON

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Leigh Hill

On the front page of the *Southend Pictorial* on the 3rd August 1962, there is a photograph of Mrs Vera Smith, J.P., on the stairs of her home: Prospect House, Leigh Hill. She had not believed in ghosts until she saw one on the stairs of her 18th century house – which did not have a dark and gloomy interior as you might expect, but was modern, white-walled, light and airy. Early one morning she had seen an elderly, short man with a long coat, knee breeches and stockings on bandy legs with heavy shoes, his hair tied back in a “cue” [braid]. He had hobbled down the stairs, without colour, and with blurred edges, lasting a few seconds before disappearing, and leaving a fishy smell behind him.

Although surprised by what she had seen, it tied in with a young (four-year-old) visitor who had screamed with fear just a few weeks earlier, telling her mother that she had seen a man “standing in the corner”. They had called round for afternoon tea, and the girl had been unable to describe the figure with any accuracy until some months later when she saw a Toby jug and told her mother that it looked “just like the man in Prospect House”!

There had been earlier reports of tradesmen wary of entering the building because they were convinced it was haunted, such reports dating back to 1894. However, when Mrs Smith was approached by a Mr Botting from Boscombe Road, offering to exorcise her ghost, she declined, preferring to leave things as they were. The *Pictorial* mentioned some days later that Mrs Smith, who became the Mayor of Southend from 1969-1970, had also had an enquiry from a demonologist...

The Kursaal

Bill Raymond told me about the time he was working on night security at this iconic Southend landmark in the 1990s. He recalls expecting a new cleaning lady one morning, due to arrive an hour later than the others (about a dozen in all), i.e. at around 7 a.m., but she had not shown up by 7.30 a.m. Bill started making the cleaning staff their regular morning cuppa during their break when he was hailed by one of the few male cleaners (the majority were women) who announced that the “new lady” was waiting in the main bar. “What do you want me to do?” he asked Bill.

Bill was baffled by this unexpected arrival as all the doors of the building were locked, no-one had been spotted on the security camera, and no-one had knocked to gain entry. The man described her as wearing “a green coat” and the two men returned to the bar to see how she had managed to gain entry – but there was no sight of her. Bill wondered if the male cleaner had been helping himself to a drink from behind the bar, which he denied vehemently, and then the two of them heard the sound of the lift outside in the foyer. They went to check out who had gone upstairs but there was no-one on the upper floor, although the lift had arrived on this floor, so someone had seemingly sent it up, or ...

A still mystified Bill mentioned the incident to another of the cleaners. She had some experience of the spirit world, and was convinced that the woman who had disappeared had been working at the Kursaal in the days before it had been refurbished, before the lift had been installed, and had walked “through” the lift to the

passage that used to be there which led to the outside amusements. The green coat, and the green scarf or hairnet which had also been identified, could well have meant that this woman had also been a cleaner – but before the war. This particular lady assured Bill that there were dozens of people around him that he couldn't see, and she had a romantic notion that some of the men who had died during the war could have returned to the building to find the women they had danced with during the Kursaal's heyday as a dance hall.

High Street, Southend

Up to and including the 1970s, there was an ironmongers in the High Street, originally (1892) known as The Padlock, and later as Owen and Wallis (close to where Wallis (coincidentally!) fashion store is now located. In – or about – 1970, one of the sales assistants was Julie Rawlinson, and she had an experience there that she was still able to recall seventeen years later in an article in the Southend *Echo*.

She was working in the toy department, above which was a stock room, often the source of unidentified footsteps. One day, when she was on the stairs leading to this room, in the process of putting stock away, she saw a man looking up at her with a large grin on his face. The door leading to the stairs was shut fast, and there had been no sound of his approach but what has stuck with Julie is that she couldn't see his legs. From the waist up, he seemed normal, with grey hair, perhaps in his 50s, but from the waist down ... Julie looked again, but the figure had disappeared.

Concerned about what she had seen, Julie told the manager of her encounter – Mr Wallis - describing the man in as much detail as she could. Mr Wallis to her surprise became quite excited and pointed to three portraits hanging on an upstairs

wall, asking her if she recognised anyone. Astonishingly, the answer was yes. One of the portraits was the very same man.

Mr Wallis told her that the man was his father, and the date was the anniversary of his death. The building had once been the Wallis family home, and the stock room had been the bedroom of Mr Wallis Senior, and the place that he had died. No wonder the experience remained for so long in Julie's memory.