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**11 PAIRS OF TICKETS. EVERY ENGLAND GROUP GAME.**

**WITH panic welling up uncontrollably within me, I waited for the cold, clammy touch of the long-dead soldier who hovered, apparently, in the pitch black just behind me.**

"He's at your shoulder," said the medium, who'd sensed the spirit presence in the narrow brick tunnel deep in the bowels of the old Victorian fort where we now stood.

Beyond my shoulder, the dark forbidding tunnel stretched only into more chilling blackness.

I'd seen that much before the batteries on my torch had suddenly died.

Now I couldn't even see medium Ian Doherty standing just four feet in front of me.

"The spirits feed on energy. Batteries often get drained.

"Can you feel anything?" he urged. "He's right there."

I felt the cold sweat on my brow; I felt tingling in my body as I tensed every muscle and every sinew and forced myself not to run.

Ian tried to reassure me.

"He's telling me his name is Archie. He's just a bit taller than you. He's in a black uniform. He's quite a jovial fellow."

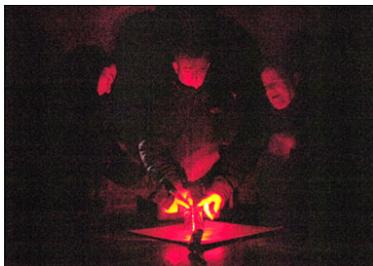
"He could be Coco the Clown, for all I care," I thought, uncharitably. "So long as he keeps his ghoulish hands to himself."

Earlier this week we told how the ghostly figure of a woman was photographed by a reader at the window of an inaccessible room at Gwrych Castle in North Wales.

Within days more readers came forward to say they too had seen the spooky woman in the past, and other sightings, elsewhere, followed.

Was this a day-to-day phenomenon or is something extraordinary stirring in the spirit world?

"Go and spend a night in a haunted castle and find out," I was told.



Scary ...glass movement test

Thanks boss.

I nervously opted for the Coalhouse Fort, a sinister Victorian gun battery and barracks built on the side of the River Thames near Tilbury, Essex, in 1874 to defend London against the threat of a French invasion and these days reportedly invaded on a regular basis by paranormal activity.

A fort built by Henry VIII had previously stood on the site and, before that, a Roman garrison. It was used as a defensive gun battery in both World Wars.

Now it stands derelict, run down, preserved only by enthusiasts who, to raise money for its restoration, host open days for visitors who have, in the past, reported seeing military figures running towards them and even the ghosts of a World War Two poker game.

No visitors have been there since last Halloween, however, and no more are due before next month.

The sun, blood red, had slid below the horizon and the midnight blue sky had turned inky black as I drove out to Essex and down the interminable track to where the fort stands lonely guard in the middle of nowhere.

Only the smallest sliver of moon sat in the starry sky and, as if on cue, swirls of mist off the Thames began to cascade over the battlements as I arrived outside the solid walls and Simon Whitehead, chairman of the Coalhouse Fort Project, opened the padlocked heavy iron gate with a heart-sinking thud.

Thor Gray-Moloney, 37, of the project's Paranormal team, arrived and told me of his regular brushes with spirits at the fort.

"I got prodded in the chest by something once - really pushed back - and I'm always getting my head stroked or my hair pulled, but I don't get freaked out.

"When we take visitors round I am always the one who walks at the back down the tunnels because no one else will.

"There have been some quite tragic events that have happened here but generally the spirits seem to have good memories.

"We do have resident spirits but we don't advertise their names because we don't want to plant suggestions in visitors' minds. People come up with the names themselves."

The team have used specialist equipment in the past to test for Electro Magnetic Frequency activity and temperature changes.

"We have seen stones thrown at the exact moment that the metre has shown an EMF spike, and in one room in particular here we have measured a seven degree drop in temperature in 45 seconds," explained Simon before preparing to lead me down into the fort's tunnels.

I felt a sudden drop in both my temperature and my courage levels.

"We have a green route which we know is safe, so please stick to that and please stick together," he said, unnecessarily.

"If you feel unwell, don't be brave, just let us know. It's easier to walk you out than carry you out," he said.

My spirit guide for the night was Ian Doherty, a 37-year-old medium from Lincolnshire who often works for Fright Nights, the country's longest-running ghost-hunting company, who had organised my evening's 'accommodation'.

"I'm like the little boy in Sixth Sense. I see dead people," he said. "Ever since I was a boy and saw my late great grandmother sitting at the end of my bed I have seen spirits wherever I go."

After walking the ramparts and casements, we descended into the labyrinth of tunnels and vaulted side rooms.

The musky smell of damp filled the air and the whitewashed walls reflected no light.

Saltpetre oozed like ectoplasm from the mortar and gave the brickwork a white fungus-like covering.

The haunting sound of distant footsteps, Simon assured me, was only dripping water. Perfectly rational.



Writings ... at fort

Not so the spirits Ian reported sensing in room after lightless room.

A small group of cheerful, red-uniformed First World War bombardiers in one guard room; in another, five exhausted WWII Tommies carrying their 303 rifles; in a third room a civilian delivery man.

In Room Five Ian stopped in his tracks.

"There's a terrible feeling of sadness in this room," he said. "It almost makes me want to burst into tears. I think someone committed suicide in here. Strangulation."

In the pitch black of the corridor Ian directed me to an area of energy that turned out, apparently, to be Archie.

"He's telling me he is 57. He's got blue eyes and an old-style helmet," said Ian.

"Archie Walden, I'm getting. From Tooting. Is that near here? I'll try to get him to touch you."

I felt nothing but an icy chill.

Suddenly Ian told me of two or three soldiers in gas masks running down the tunnel. I felt a brush against my arm, though even in the pitch black I knew no one else was stood near me.

The sound of distant small-arms fire echoed faintly down the corridor. Just the nearby gun club, Simon said. Nothing paranormal.

We made our way back outside, without complaint from me, and looked around the derelict quadrangle which had been the old married quarters, keeping well clear from the crumbling structure.

Something went bump in the night; a faint thud from within the rooms which, I was told, were completely inaccessible. A bird, possibly, or a bat.

Once more we descended into the depths of the fort, this time to try to contact the spirits with some séance-style glass divination in the darkness.

With our fingers lightly resting on top, the upturned glass repeatedly moved across the table towards a red torch light in answer to yes and no questions.

It was a woman trying to speak to us. I was told. A colonel's wife.

She died from a chest problem, aged 37, in 1914, apparently.

By now I had been in the fort for hours and had survived unmolested by ghosties or ghouls. I was feeling safer, though chilled to the bone.

A dead colonel's wife? Yeah, maybe. Maybe not.

Back above ground Simon showed me an innocuous photo of the fort taken in the summer, in bright daylight, by an open day visitor.

On closer examination there appeared to be the image of a woman, walking away, on the balcony - the balcony which it is now impossible to safely reach.

A colonel's wife did indeed die in the infirmary - next to that balcony - from influenza. It was just before the start of WWI, according to the fort's records, Simon said.

By the early hours of the morning a heavy frost had covered the fort and I was glad to be going.

I said my goodbyes and walked into the chill Essex night to find my car.

The fog had now come down thickly, wrapping around me like a freezing blanket; cold and clammy where its icy touch caressed my face.

Behind me, a footstep on the gravel.

*Archie?*