

## The Ghosts of Soapy Sam

TWO famous ghost stories have become permanently associated with Samuel Wilberforce, successively bishop of Oxford then Winchester, and the 'Soapy Sam' of oratorical fame.

One of the stories first appeared before the wider public in Charles Harper's *Haunted Houses* (1907) where it is named 'The Phantom Monk', regarded by Harper as 'the best authenticated ghost-story on record'. The second story was first published in *Further Stories from Lord Halifax's Ghost Book* (1937). Both stories appeared before the public many years after the death of Samuel Wilberforce, and although both are certainly much older than their publication dates, neither will stand up to historical scrutiny either as genuine ghostlore or as being associated with their celebrated chief protagonist.

According to Harper [pp86-88], when Wilberforce was a canon at Winchester and rural archdeacon of Surrey (1840-45), he stayed for a few days with a Catholic family in a small Hampshire village. While there he passed a monk making his way to the family library. Thinking nothing of this at first, Wilberforce mentioned the incident only later at dinner when the monk – assumed by him to be another guest – did not arrive at the table. Wilberforce was told quite calmly that he had seen the family ghost, a father confessor of earlier times who 'had died rather suddenly and apparently in some distress of mind'. Two nights later, Wilberforce was in the library when to his surprise the monk entered and approached one of the bookshelves. Wilberforce asked the monk what it was that he wanted, to which the ghost replied that he had come 'to look for a bundle of incriminating papers he had left on the top of the bookcase before he died', explaining that his spirit would be unable to rest until these papers had been found and destroyed. Wilberforce was persuaded to retrieve them, and as they contained 'important secrets about members of the family' that would injure their reputation, the ghostly monk convinced Wilberforce to burn them there and then, which he did, and the monk 'was never seen again'.

Harper stated that this story 'is told in the Memoirs of Samuel Wilberforce', and suggested that its veracity rested in the unimpeachable probity of the witness 'by which a premium is put upon the word of a Bishop, to the depreciation of that of any mere layman'. However, in one respect the story was almost immediately discredited. James Law Challis, vicar of Stone near Aylesbury from 1879 to 1916, wrote Harper informing him that he had quoted the story to Francis Paget – his diocesan bishop since 1901 – who had then told him that when on one occasion Wilberforce had recounted this story to intimate friends he had added 'I know the story is true, because I made it up, out of my own head'. In the third edition of *Haunted Houses* (1927), Harper was obliged to note this revelation in his preface, doing so in a clearly irritated tone suggesting embarrassment at his own gullibility.

The story is in fact both derivative and generic, belonging to a large category of dubious legends with a standard motif in which ghosts lead their corporeal brethren to hidden treasure or secret documents. In this case the story is additionally absurd by the phantom monk

having spoken. Associative sounds in ghostlore, such as disembodied footsteps and cries, are one matter, but for an incorporeal entity to vocalise – a purely physical process – when at the same time it is unable to retrieve physical objects is quite another. Soapy Sam had not thought this one through.

But did Samuel Wilberforce in fact invent this story, as he had claimed? What Harper meant by the ‘Memoirs of Samuel Wilberforce’ is a mystery. The ghost story does not appear in the published lives of the bishop, and there were four issued between 1882 and 1891 – the only ones that Harper could have known before 1907. Moreover, Wilberforce did not publish a memoir or autobiography of any sort, although he *did* keep a diary used extensively for the first biography. If Harper had access to the unpublished diary he should have said so; but this material has never been published in full and remains (2003) in private hands.

Perhaps Harper had meant something like ‘lurking in the minds of those with *memories* of Samuel Wilberforce’, like Bishop Paget had implied for himself. But Paget, who was born in 1851, had been a student at Christ Church in Oxford when Wilberforce died and he did not know him at all; by then, Wilberforce was bishop of Winchester and resident at Farnham Castle. If Paget is to be believed, he must have heard the story by an intermediary, in which case by the time Harper heard it it had already come down to him at third-hand.

A more credible explanation of the story’s origins is not difficult to determine, for rather artlessly concealed in it is a thinly veiled attack on the Church of Rome. The ‘father confessor’ had obviously undermined the Seal of Confession – that absolute obligation not to reveal anything said by a penitent employing the Sacrament of Penance – by writing down the sins of the family, and surely here the Catholic notion of the Confessional is mocked as well as monkish hypocrisy and incontinence. The story would seem to have its origins at a time when the struggle between pure Anglican values and those of Rome were competing with each other for the soul of the nation. Wilberforce was virulently anti-papal, and deeply wounded by the apostasy to Rome undertaken by several members of his own family. Among his last spoken words at the House of Lords (15 July 1873) were: ‘I hate and abhor the attempt to Romanise the Church of England’.

So, having invented his anti-Roman ghost story, the anonymous story-teller grafted it onto a most suitable living candidate, one whose social status would ensure its survival as well as endow it credibility in a highly structured society – as Harper proved with his oleaginous and sycophantic attitude before the ‘word of a Bishop’. This is supported by a correspondence in *Notes & Queries* in 1881 (Series 6 Vol. III). On 5 February, as an aside to the celebrated story of the alleged haunting of 50 Berkeley Square, the contributor stated that ‘Wilberforce ... never concealed that fact that [he] had spoken to a ghost’. Really? On 2 April, evidence for this bold statement was demanded by another correspondent who retold the story of a ghostly ‘priest’ and Wilberforce in which a single sheet of paper concealed within a large book had to be destroyed. This prompted a letter from an anonymous friend of the late bishop to explain that the story went back many years. Indeed, he claimed that Wilberforce had actually said to him: ‘I have often heard the story told of other people, but it is entirely

without foundation as applied to me, and I never saw a ghost in my life'. Whether Wilberforce ever entertained guests by applying it to himself is a moot point.

The second story ('The Ghost of Bishop Wilberforce') claims that Samuel Wilberforce himself became a ghost at his death. As with the 'Phantom Monk' (in which the naturally unnamed Catholic family live sometimes in Hampshire and sometimes in Surrey), this story has also been elaborated and altered with each retelling. Modern dramatic versions put it this way: Wilberforce was riding with Earl Granville in Surrey to see Granville's brother when the bishop suddenly got it into his head to take a short detour and visit the home of the Evelyn family at Wotton, then occupied by William Evelyn, a direct descendant of the celebrated silviculturalist and diarist. Turning his horse and galloping away, Wilberforce lost his grip and fell to the ground, dying instantly. All that is missing here is Wilberforce shouting 'Up, Guards, and at 'em!' as he gallops to his death. The original version in Lord Halifax's collection is more sober: Wilberforce 'had often expressed a wish to see Wooton [*sic*]', with no mention of his actually making the attempt. In any event, at that moment, at Wotton House, William Evelyn and some guests saw Wilberforce peering in through a window on the ground floor. However, on opening the door they saw no sign of their unexpected guest, who of course had just died several miles away.

To begin with, it should be noted that this story also belongs to a large category of established motifs in which the projected spirit of the deceased continues to pursue the course that had been set upon with determination while living – 'unfinished business' as it were. Such established motifs immediately cast doubt on the superficial validity of any story, ghostly or not.

The problem here, though, is that there was in fact never any intention on Wilberforce's part to visit Wotton House during this fateful journey.

It was Saturday 19 July 1873, and both Wilberforce and Foreign Secretary Lord Granville had left London that afternoon to meet with Prime Minister William Gladstone and Thomas Henry Farrer (permanent secretary at the Board of Trade) at the home of Lord Frederick Leveson-Gower (Granville's younger brother) at his home in Holmbury St Mary, seven miles south of Leatherhead and two miles beyond Abinger Hammer.

Farrer lived close by, at Abinger Hall, while Gladstone left Downing Street at 4:25pm after a cabinet meeting. Wilberforce, Granville, and Henry George Shears, the earl's groom, travelled by horse from Leatherhead Station across Ranmore Common along a chalk wagon track (White Downs Road) with the intention of continuing south to Crossways Farm and on to their destination. Unfortunately, after crossing the railway line between Guildford and Dorking, the track was thought to be dangerously full of deep, dry ruts, and Granville suggested that they take instead a grass bridle path west along Terry's (Evershed's) Flat as far as Long (Leasers) Barn in Terry's (Abinger) Rough.

The time was about 7:15pm. Granville rode out a little in front and to the left of Wilberforce while Shears followed about twenty respectful yards behind. The party was

riding at what Shears later described at the Coroner's Inquest as 'a very slow canter' of about six miles an hour. Just before Long Barn, Granville turned up a steep incline hoping to join the wagon track further down the hill. As Granville was 'looking up at the hill', which boasted only a narrow footpath, he heard a dull thud just behind him. Turning his head, he saw that Wilberforce was on his back with his feet facing the direction he was riding. According to Shears, who was of course behind Wilberforce, the bishop's horse had stumbled in some small depression with its near foreleg, throwing its rider over its head in a somersault so that when he fell he did so on the back of the head and broke his neck.

Granville immediately sent Shears to Abinger Hall – half a mile from the scene of the accident – where Farrer, who had not yet left for Holmbury St Mary, sent for medical assistance before making his way to Granville at the scene while Shears went directly on to give the bad news to Leveson-Gower and Gladstone. Some agricultural labourers, who had all witnessed the accident from a distance, were also at the scene. There was no mention of Wotton House or the Evelyn family either at the Inquest or in Granville's subsequent letter describing the event to Wilberforce's son. Gladstone noted in his monumental diary that Shears arrived at a time he did not specify but that an hour and a half then elapsed before Granville arrived at Holmbury St Mary. Absurdly, in Halifax's account, the Evelyn family was somehow told of the death after just one hour, although the death (as opposed to the accident) was not made known to anyone until it had been confirmed by both Charles Henry Furnivall, a surgeon and the local Medical Officer of Health living at Shere, and William Falconer Clark, a physician from Dorking who had been a medical officer in the Indian army and been awarded two medals during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Furnivall deposed that he had been called to the scene of the accident at 8pm, confirmed by Dr Clark – in other words, 45 minutes after the accident – by which time Wilberforce was already dead, having indeed died instantly.

Two days later, Gladstone inspected the location of the accident, already marked with a cross carved into the ground where Wilberforce had fallen. The Inquest (conducted at Abinger Hall to which Wilberforce's body had been taken), being satisfied that the soft depression into which the bishop's horse had inadvertently placed one of its legs had been positively identified, returned a verdict of Accidental Death on Monday 21 July.

The ghost story associated with this tragedy was well known long before Lord Halifax printed it. A variation had already appeared in *Notes & Queries* on 31 March 1888 (Series 7 Vol. V), quoted by a correspondent who had read it five years earlier. In this, there was no mention of the Evelyn family, only the equally absurd notion that at the time of the accident 'a gentleman had in a neighbouring house a party of friends ... [Wilberforce] was expected to call to see some objects of interest' whereupon 'a number of clergymen' saw the deceased bishop at two windows. The sceptical correspondent asked for confirmation of this story and also for someone to give a source for it; unsurprisingly, he received no reply.

However, a source can be proposed. In Halifax's account, the suggestion was made that Edward Harold Browne (1881-91), Wilberforce's successor at Winchester, had supplied the

story to Lord Halifax – and he almost certainly had also fabricated it in its then current form associated with Wilberforce. In his biography of Harold Browne (1895), George William Kitchin, dean of Winchester from 1883 to 1894, stated that ‘He was an admirable teller of a ghost story, just because he had so much belief in it all’ [p.505]. Kitchin followed this with a somewhat flippant story by Bishop Browne of a ghost at Farnham Castle (the episcopal residence), a story certainly well told but one that also does not ring true.

As with archaeology, seventy percent of ghost hunting is done in the library and not in the field, and promoting bogus ghost stories undermines the credibility of genuine cases while giving sceptics free ammunition. It is sad that both of these stories continue to be published and promoted as genuine incidents – or at least incidents believed to have been genuine by those allegedly involved. Perhaps some ghosts are indeed laid during lengthy night time vigils with the aid of sophisticated equipment; but most can be put to rest from the comfort of an armchair with the aid of a few good books.

**Note:** the Coroner’s Inquest conducted by the West Surrey Coroner at Abinger Hall has not survived. All the quotations and information concerning its findings have been taken from the excellent summaries printed in *The Times* (22 July) and the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times* (26 July).

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