

# Gremlins On My Shoulder

ROB DAVIS, Aerodromologist

"Well?" asked Den eagerly, when we left the Watch Office the following morning. His expression conveyed a mixture of apprehension and admiration. Craig and I looked at each other. We had exchanged no word of the sharp edge of fear which had brushed us during the dark hours we had stayed in the front upstairs room, but we each knew that the other had been afraid.

"We saw nothing untoward," I replied gravely, and Craig smiled at the expression. It was true; we had actually seen or heard nothing out of the ordinary. But the human mind works in frantic overtime when it is in a place reputed to be haunted, and can often sense a deep presence of the past even when no knowledge of a location's history is known.

The Watch Office, or what would today be called the Control Tower, at the former Bomber Command aerodrome at East Kirkby, Lincolnshire, was famous for its ghosts even before Doug Smith's and Jack Currie's excellent television programme. I had heard some months before about the odd happenings there and was determined to make an overnight stop to judge for myself. With the owner's consent we installed ourselves on camp beds and blankets in the front upstairs observation room late on a hot afternoon in summer 1984. It was the second or third such overnight trip I'd made and the first to an old aerodrome known to have "odd occurrences."

Wandering around the site during daylight presented no problems. As any schoolboy student of horror films will immediately tell you, sunshine dispels supernatural influences; and so it was only during the dark hours that we felt the presence of the past leaning on us. It was a bit of a giggle at first, if the undertone was serious; but once we had locked ourselves in, made a late night drink, experimented with a new flashgun and laid down, the whole affair took on a new significance.

I wasn't exactly scared. It was just an old wartime building, wasn't it? "Fear" would be an overstatement, surely? But it was a completely different matter when Craig had slipped down to the toilet and left me alone; and then I really was edgy, then apprehensive, then - yes - frightened of what I had come all this way to experience. Whether it was the actual atmosphere or the knowledge of what had been seen and experienced there by others which was working on my mind, I can't say. I will say this, though; there was no way I would have stayed there on my own.

We had approached this little expedition with open minds on the subject of the supernatural. Whilst I had experienced "atmosphere" in the past at other aerodromes, I had never actually seen or heard anything definite.

The awful stillness, the moonlight slanting in through the uncurtained windows and the smell of concrete dust are permanently etched on my memory. Neither of us slept much; we were far too keyed up looking for what we hoped we would not see but had gone to so much trouble to find.

In the morning we compared notes. We both said that we thought there was a definite presence in the old building. Interestingly, Craig's views coincided with my own. I remarked that I thought we'd been examined by the spirits of East Kirkby and that they'd decided we were sympathetic to them and what they had done in the dark days of Bomber Command. But it was as if they could not resist winding us up and making us aware of them in a sort of jokey way. If you like to think of it like this; we had had our legs pulled.....

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I am often asked why I wander the aerodromes. Some people would say that it is an attempt to reach back into the past and try to be part of something I am not, like those odd folk who dress up in wartime uniform or flying-kit (complete with unearned wings and medal ribbons) and who go to aviation film shows and meetings. I won't agree with this; in spite of thousands of photos of the old aerodromes and many scores of visits and experiences, I am only too well aware that I was not there at the time the deeds I have read and heard about were done. It cannot be merely curiosity about hauntings which impels me, because I have spent far more time on old Air Ministry concrete in daylight than at night.

So I can't explain what drew me into the offbeat hobby of "Aerodromology." There was an unfathomable force which gave me a peculiar restless itch until I had seen for myself some of the places I had heard about; Elsham Wolds, Wickenby, Fulbeck and dozens more. It was not sufficient to read about them, I had to go there and feel "the wind coming clean and free over the last earth touched by our wheels" to quote Don Charlwood, where the Australian, a former 103 Squadron navigator, recounts his trip back to Elsham in 1958.

Since 1979 I have explored the crumbling concrete of the mighty Lion which was once Bomber Command and these years have been punctuated by frequent photographic excursions and less frequent overnight trips. History is by necessity retrospective and today's aerodrome historian and even the layman can sometimes pick up vibrations from the past, sensations of human courage and endurance, fear and triumph, which have been absorbed by brick and concrete.

My personal theory is that a location has just so much - a finite quantity - of *atmosphere*, and that each visitor takes away a small part of it. Finally, a location with a once fully charged atmosphere becomes drained, as is a car battery when the lights have been left on all night.

What began as a peek into the past has grown into a great aerodrome trek. Whilst concentrating on the Bomber Command ones, I have not resisted others when the opportunity has been there. I find the Bomber stations nearest to my heart but have felt the tug of emotion at such far flung places as Dale, in Wales, where the Atlantic breeze slaps over the clifftop dispersal pans and sweeps the empty runways; at Holme on Spalding Moor with the sad atmosphere of its Operations Block; and at Bottesford, where the Watch Office and Ops Block reached out and spoke to two of my companions.

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I won't fall into the trap of listing my visits and giving a synopsis of each one. There are too many, each of the memories are as different as the aerodromes, and such a dissertation would be shallow, empty reading. Instead, I'll tell of the ones which made the most impact on me.

It was Elsham Wolds, without doubt, which affected me most. In both its decline and decay it reached out to me, craving understanding of the deeds done from there. When I visited it for the nth time and found that it had been bulldozed, I was moved to tears. It had been eradicated with such

completeness that only the black arch-roofed J-type hangar now betrays the original identity of the once bustling bomber station.

Even with my knowledge of the site and dozens of photographs taken when it was largely intact, it was almost impossible to orientate myself with sufficient accuracy to take "then and now" photos. Such was the degree of thoroughness employed to slay the aerodrome known as Elsham Wolds.

Gone now is the half burned out Watch Office with the sound of phantom chattering Morse code and its sad but benevolent ghost. Only the airborne can see the true layout, as from the ground it is unrecognisable. May it rest in peace with its thousand dead, marked by the excellent memorial and the tireless efforts of its very own Elsham Wolds Association.

I discovered Elsham in late summer 1979. I was returning from delivering documents to Hull, the weather was glorious, and I felt as one with my motorcycle. I rode Don Charlwood's "incredibly long way" from Barnetby village to the main gate. The aerodrome lay crushed under the hot afternoon sun, the overgrown paths and peeling concrete-skinned buildings conveying an odd feeling of dormancy, as if the site was simply asleep, requiring only the firing of a red Very flare or the crackle and snort of Merlin engines to revive it.

The Ops Block imposed a more sombre atmosphere, a taut, heavy sensation, the focal point of the aerodrome's strength. The roof with its ventilation trunking and briefing rooms left no doubt that what had soaked into the Air Ministry brickwork was a powerful presence of the past. The whole building was alive with it.

On another trip and in the small hours of the morning when heavy fog had collected over the Humber Estuary and crawled silently over the aerodrome to blanket the station in grey miasma, the place took on a totally different and far more tangible presence. My companion had insisted on being told nothing about the site, wishing to tackle the overnight trip with a clean mental slate. As we walked from Guardroom to Main Stores, Parachute Room to Bombing Trainer, time yawned, the atmosphere became charged, and the ground gave up its ghosts.

We sensed the presence of others watching us and summing us up, assessing our motives for intruding on their preserve. It was like smoking in church, shouting in a library, being stared at in horrified fascination. Every bush seemed to be a figure in blue battledress and wearing the dull gleam of sergeant's stripes and to be watching, waiting..... the long walk around the perimeter track, hand torches probing the wall of fog, wondering if that bit of concrete was a runway end - a road - a dispersal pan - or the back of the Moon?

Finally came the relief of the next morning, when sunshine washed away the fear, leaving behind just a derelict aerodrome. It was that day we found the incredible graffiti on the lavatory wall in the Sergeants' Mess. Pencilled scribbings, covering most of the easily reachable wall, showed a fierce Squadron pride and were quite free of foul language. These priceless cameos from a man's most private moments are now demolished, but preserved on film for both posterity and the curious.

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There is a B1 type hangar at Wickenby, left abandoned in a field with only the old shooting butts for company. Today it is thriving in its new life as a transport depot, but when I saw it first in 1983, it had been left high and dry by the retreating tide of war and its echoing walls and roof had a sharp eeriness all of their own.

Enter then, Bomber Command's steel cathedral, and marvel at it. Ignore the havoc wreaked on the structure by fifty or more years of barometrical anarchy, and reach out with your mind. From here, men worked night and day patching and repairing battered bombers, so that other men could drop bombs on foreign lands. The high vaulted metal roof and tired walls shout this straight into your mind with neither preamble nor apology.

I had intended to walk the length of this silent, brooding place, but such was the concentration of force, so overpowering was the presence of the past that I was quickly pushed outside and back to my parked motorcycle. Does an odd energy watch over such places still, preserving them when other buildings have succumbed to the bulldozers?

Apparently not so in the case of the crew rooms and flight offices at Syerston. Escorted by an at first bored but later highly interested young aircraftsman, Mike Garbett and I followed in the footsteps of the 61 and 106 Squadron crews, taking accurate then-and-now photographs and succeeding in touching some of the tension which would have abounded in the long Maycrete huts in that awful time between briefing and take off.

Only days after our visit, the buildings were destroyed in a fire fighting exercise.

Yet the curious thing is that on so many thoughtlessly destroyed aerodromes, it is the Watch Office and often the parachute store which can still be found by the roving historian. Do the Black Magic symbols daubed on Wigsley's unique three storied Watch Office guard against more than meets the eye? Do the shades of the crews killed there in the course of training take offence at the desecration? I, untarnished by personal memories, certainly did.

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It was at Fulbeck that the message struck me with unprecedented clarity. I was exploring the derelict Watch Office, camera in hand. As I went from room to room I could feel the gremlins on my shoulder all right. Suddenly I felt as if I'd been grabbed by the scruff of the neck. "This was an operational station. Some good boys died flying from here." It was so sudden, a startling electric punch. I fled up the metal exterior staircase to the roof, where I stood for a long time in the lengthening shadows, turning from horizon to horizon.

It the late afternoon it did not take a very great feat of the imagination to visualise the black Lancasters crouched over their hardstandings, bomb doors agape, cockpit and turrets tarpaulined. I could picture the long lines of laden trollies being towed from bomb dump to dispersal, calls for whoever and whatever over the Tannoy, and hordes of blue clad humanity going about Air Force business.

Suddenly I turned and saw my modern Japanese motorcycle parked on the nearest hardstanding. The anachronistic sight made me feel really uneasy again and had me scurrying away from the frowning ghosts, down the perimeter track, and heading for home.

I went back again though, and one bleak January afternoon I was showing Fiona around. To both my relief and disappointment, the powerful presence I had detected before was not in evidence; the only chill feeling came from the winter wind rocketing in through the shattered windows. Fiona took refuge in the lee of the building, under the front balcony, whilst I went round with my camera and photographed what I'd missed on the previous trip.

Suddenly she called me. She had seen two uniformed figures walking along just to one side of the Watch Office. I knew that the site was used by the Army for training purposes and as I had written permission to be there, I wasn't worried about being stopped by the military. Fiona said that one of the men had been dressed in dark blue battledress with a forage cap; the other one in best blue with an officer's hat. The two figures had walked behind a bush, deep in conversation.

On further discussion it transpired that the two men had been walking along, apparently up to their knees in a ploughed field. As my photographs show, the curved concreted path around the back of the Watch Office is not there. Not now, anyway. We waited and waited for the men to reappear from behind the bush, but they never did.

"**Never go back**" is what they tell you; but if you do go back, beware, lest you find more than you seek.

## About the Author

**Rob Davis** became interested in wartime aviation when as a boy he was given copies of "Reach For The Sky" and "the Dam Busters" both written by Paul Brickhill. For many years he read fighter pilots' stories but in the early 1980s became more interested in Bomber Command and read avidly on the subject. This led to journeying all over Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and Cambridgeshire, making scores of visits to the old Bomber Aerodromes and he took many thousands of photos of the various locations and conversed with many ex air and ground crew. On over twenty occasions he has spent the night at an old aerodrome, and declares that this is an unequalled way to really feel the atmosphere. He dares anyone to wander about alone inside a derelict Ops Block at two in the morning.

He has now completed a 124,000 word novel which narrates, in alternate chapters, the story of a wartime member of aircrew who is blackmailed into revealing secret information; and of the modern day researcher who tracks him down. It is titled "**Nor The Years Condemn.**"

Rob was born in 1954 and works as an IT Manager and database developer. His deep admiration for the men and women of Bomber Command is obvious from the way he writes and he welcomes correspondence, preferably by email to [rob.davis@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:rob.davis@blueyonder.co.uk).