

## **MAG – “What the Ghost? WTG02 – Highgate Cemetery”**

### **Content Warnings**

- Cemeteries & tombs
- Ghosts
- Human remains & desecration
- Vampires
- Discussions of: death & burial, the occult, food
- Mentions of: war, injury

[WHAT THE GHOST? THEME MUSIC]

### **GEORGIE**

Hey there haunts fans! Welcome to another episode of *What the Ghost?*, the show that brings you all the creepiest bone-chillingest stories and spooks. This time we'll be digging into the strange history of one of the world's most haunted spots – London's Highgate Cemetery.

Not just another gruesome graveyard, Highgate has been at the centre of more than one fearful fright fest since its founding in 1839. You may think that ghostly apparitions and a graveyard are nothing notable but, though you may well find your fair share of garden variety ghosts if you take a trip to Highgate, the legends surrounding the cemetery speak of something far more sinister than your standard spectre.

Highgate started life as yet another reminder of Victorian mortality. The traditional graveyards attached to parish churches had long since become incapable of managing the hoard of dead that was constantly growing in Victorian London.

Highgate was the first of seven ‘modern’ cemeteries to be built, large enough to house the incessantly growing number of corpses, with winding avenues lined with

ornate mausoleums for the rich and death-revering. And it was the first British cemetery to be built outside of church grounds.

Rumours of ghost sightings started early, but that's hardly surprising. The cemetery was big news to the locals, and the Victorians had a fervent obsession with the occult. A few fireside stories of ephemeral figures half-seen after a couple of beers were to be expected. For decades Highgate was simply a large, ornate burial ground for those souls who were either too fashionable or too scandalous for Westminster Abbey.

It wasn't until the 1940s, when the Blitz hit London, that Highgate started to change. Though it was never bombed itself, the previously sought after and well-kept graveyard became all but abandoned and overgrown. In a matter of mere years, the wild of nature took over and the weeds got so out of hand, they weakened mausoleums making the cemetery dangerous grounds to enter. Even now after decades of restoration and in the heart of a capital city, the ecosystem retains such a hold on Highgate, that visitors are forbidden from wandering around large areas of it without a guide. Legends say these precautions are to protect curious tourists from more than just falling stones.

Regular listeners will already know that the tomb walls were often built as much for protection as for reverence. And remember, that those tombs that do lock, *always* do so from the outside.

[UPBEAT AD JINGLE]

The only thing I love as much as a juicy mystery is snuggling up with my cosiest pyjamas and my adorable cat. And now I can combine the two, with PawJs, PJs for pets! Suitable for cats, dogs and some long-limbed rabbits, PawJs takes slumber

parties furr-ther than ever be paw. My favourite feline and I had a great afternoon getting them on, and the scratch marks are healing nicely.

Isn't that right, Admiral?

[DISGRUNTLED CAT SCREECH]

[NORMAL PODCASTING SERVICE RESUMES]

With the wildlife firmly in control, Highgate Cemetery lay largely abandoned by human society for decades. We can't possibly guess what may have happened there in that time. All we can know is that in 1968, on Hallowe'en night, something happened that would shock the local community and change the graveyard's history forever.

A group of teens, apparently obsessed with the occult, broke into Highgate Cemetery and turned their fascination with the supernatural into bizarre action. According to a report in the *London Evening News* at the time, they “arranged flowers taken from graves in circular patterns with arrows of blooms pointing to a new grave, which was uncovered. A coffin was opened and the body inside disturbed. But their most macabre act was driving an iron stake in the form of a cross through the lid and into the breast of the corpse.” Ghoulish or what?!

Of course, this might have just been the work of some bored underage drinkers has who'd managed to get their hands on some absinthe. But the strange occurrences didn't stop there. All sorts of people started reporting seeing grey figures walking within the grounds and even venturing into the nearby Swain's Lane. Many of the people making these claims were well-respected members of the

community. Surely they couldn't **all** have been trying drink and drugs for the first time? In fact, there may be a much simpler explanation.

The first person to claim they'd seen, one of these figures was none other than Daniel Tarrant, an 'enthusiastic' occultist whose name will certainly be familiar by the end of this episode and might appear in others. Unlike most reported ghost sightings, Daniel chose to make this one by the *medium* of a letter printed in the local newspaper. And what's more, he even put out a call for other residents of the area to get in touch with their own sightings.

Anyone who's listened to our episode on the Devil's Dance knows how contagious ideas about the supernatural can be. Is it any wonder that so many people reached out to Daniel? And can we trust anything they say? What is odd though, is how few of the responses Daniel received actually matched his own. If all the claimed sightings of ghostly figures were merely copycats of Daniel's account, wouldn't we expect them to be roughly the same as that first story?

While Daniel *claimed* to have seen a tall man in a hat striding across the cemetery grounds, others said they were startled by spectral cyclists appearing from nowhere, or that they saw eerie, caped figures, floating on both sides of the high fences around Highgate, seemingly moving straight through the walls as though they were air. Almost all of the figures were described as grey. And some were said to be accompanied by the distant sound of bells, ringing a chillingly, mournful melody.

[UPBEAT AD JINGLE]

If you, like me, have any hobbies or interests, you might wonder if you're getting enough of them through and/or putting enough of them on the Internet. Well,

with Weby's net service, you don't need to wonder... about anything! Weby makes it easy by doing all the thinking for you. When I'm on the web, I like to share and receive information, develop relationships, have a public presence and otherwise communicate. Weby always knows what I want to do next. And the best part is, I never have to worry whether I can trust anything on the net because Weby tells me I can. Don't think, just webley.com! Please personalise ad copy as a pr— Oh, never mind.

[NORMAL PODCASTING SERVICE RESUMES]

As the number of reported sightings grew, so too did the scare factor of the alleged encounters. One man claimed to have been walking down Swain's Lane one dark night, when he was knocked down by a frightful creature emerging from the cemetery walls. While another told of breaking down near the graveyard and seeing, through the rain, the scowling face of a hideous apparition with glowing red eyes staring straight back at him. There were even accounts of coffins exploding underground, or shattering the walls of their tombs. Pretty creectacular! Or is it?

There's a perfectly rational explanation to most spectre sightings if you look hard enough, and the stories surrounding Highgate Cemetery are no different. Of course, it's no coincidence that these tales all take place at night, in a poorly lit area, near an overgrown miniature wilderness, in a place where residents are used to bright lights and solid concrete. Even the exploding coffins can be explained by the intense build-up of gases created by bodies decomposing in hermetically sealed mausoleums.

And while it's true that the explosions *seem* to have continued long after the Victorian burial practices that made them possible had stopped, surely it's more likely that some unknown, but perfectly logical factor, was slowing down the

process rather than that a supernatural force is working on the skeletons of the Victorian dead. Isn't it?

It's hard to trace exactly how it happened, but before long, a theme started to emerge from the reported ghost sightings in and around the graveyard. One that went back to the original ghoulish incident with the possibly intoxicated teens.

That's right, within weeks, the local consensus among the paranormal community was that a vampire had taken up residence in Highgate Cemetery and had possibly been there since its Victorian heyday, safely locked in stone until some misfortune or neglect had set it free.

Daniel Tarrant was one of the most vocal believers in the Highgate vampire. And some say it was Tarrant himself who originally started those rumours. But he was far from the only one convinced. Rival occultist, Shane Sheffield, was also fanning the garlic-scented flames that had people sharpening stakes all across Islington. Between them, Tarrant and Sheffield, had the national press claiming the king of the vampires was living in Highgate Cemetery, spending each night practicing dark magic in some crumbling tomb. By the end of the 1960s, the Highgate vampire was such an iconic tale that the graveyard was used as the location for filming *Count Dracula*, starring none other than celebrity spectre, Christopher Lee.

Despite the fact that they largely agreed about what horrors were lurking in Highgate, Tarrant and Sheffield both spent much of their time trying to discredit each other. Before long Tarrant could barely mention hooded ghosts without calling Sheffield a charlatan, and Sheffield spent less time talking about fangs and more time talking about Tarrant's trickeries. Each of them claimed that they alone could defeat the Highgate vampire, but rather than actually trying to do so, they

made the dubiously reasonable decision to take their respective magic arsenals to the cemetery to fight each other instead.

Was this just a case of a petty rivalry gone too far or was something more sinister at work. On the night of Friday 13th, March 1970, Tarrant and Sheffield agreed to hold a quote unquote “wizards’ duel” in Highgate Cemetery itself. Unluckily for them, ITV News got involved.

[UPBEAT AD JINGLE]

Do you have a craving for meat that supermarkets just can't satisfy? Do the steaks you cook at home leave your canines itching for more? Well, have I got the subscription box for you! With Steakout, you'll get a box packed with mouth-watering flesh ready to be devoured.

(Unconvincing) Mmmm.

My recent box included pork shoulder, beef brisket, goose legs, and a huge succulent ham. Regular listeners will know I'm a vegetarian, but my girlfriend tells me they were all intensely fresh. And the great news is, we've got a juicy deal especially for you. To get your first box for half price, just enter the code, MEATCUTE.

Steakout – a rare treat, well done!

[NORMAL PODCASTING SERVICE RESUMES]

Around sunset on the evening of Friday the 13th, ITV broadcast interviewed Tarrant, Sheffield and a number of less avant garde locals who claim to have seen

something supernatural in Highgate Cemetery. No doubt it was intended as a fluff piece, a light-hearted curiosity to cut across the heavy politics of the day, but the effect was deadly serious.

Within a few hours, hundreds of so-called ‘concerned locals’ had swarmed the graveyard intent on finding and killing the vampire. Or at least, that's how the night started. What followed was a violent frenzy of wild bloodlust, or at least it would have been bloodlust if their targets could bleed, but no, these were hunters of the dead.

Few first-hand accounts exist from those who were part of the mob, but by the time the sun rose, the bodies laid to rest in Highgate Cemetery had been massacred. Corpses had been dug up by fevered hands and lay in daylight with stakes driven deep into their hearts. The once sturdy stone walls of tombs had been smashed to pieces and the bones inside broken and thrown apart.

One local even awoke to find an uninterred corpse at the wheel of his car, apparently placed by the marauders, the keys hanging from the skeletal hand as if the body was set to drive away. Little seems to have changed after that delirious night – several people were prosecuted for desecrating graves, but it seems the living all managed to escape physical harm. Rumours of ghoulish and ghostly sightings are still whispered around Highgate, but no visitor to the cemetery has ever looked at a grave with furious rage since. Except, of course, fervent capitalists who find themselves at the tombstone of Karl Marx.

Perhaps it was simply a case of irresponsible news broadcasting, resulting in mass panic, but there is another, eerier, explanation. Not long after the mob descended on Highgate Cemetery, it was bought by an obscure group known only as the Highgate Friends.

For years, the entire site was closed off, with no public knowledge of what went on behind those ancient trees. Eventually the mysterious owners opened a small section of the graveyard to visitors, but even today, the west side of the cemetery can only be seen as part of a guided tour, keeping to a carefully laid route and never straying to the wilder parts of the overgrowth.

You might even visit there yourself, but be careful if you do. Some say that the Highgate vampire still haunts the place, and that if you stray from the path, you may find yourself deeper in the wilds than you bargained for. Or find that the wilds are deeper in you...