



THE WORLD'S CREEPIEST PLACES

By Dr. Robert Curran

Creepy or What?

What is it that makes our skin crawl? Why do we sometimes feel that sensation of fingers running along our spines or which makes the small hairs on the backs of our necks stand on end – that sensation which we call “the creeps” or simply “creepy”?

The dictionary defines the word “creepy” as “an unusual or unpleasant sensation of uneasiness or fear as of things crawling or creeping on one’s skin” and it’s certain that many readers will have experienced such a sensation at one time or another. But what causes it and are there places in the world which can evoke such a sensation in us – are there, in other words, creepy places in the world?

There seems little doubt that the feeling is a reaction to something outside us, whether it is a thing or a place. We may get “the creeps” from handling something unpleasant – snakes, spiders or some ghastly slimy material. This is, arguably, just an immediate physical reaction and we can pull our hand away but perhaps something far deeper lies in a sense of place. When we walk into a certain room, for example, we can get a chilling sensation which can be extremely unpleasant and can linger with us, even when we have left the place and shut the door behind us. This is a rather more abiding form of “creepiness”.

So are there some parts of the world which are more “creepy” than others? And if so, what makes them so? The idea of creepiness associated with a place comes from a number of sources. Firstly, there is the physical aspect of the place itself. It may be that the site has an extremely forbidding appearance. An old castle, an ancient mansion, a grim monastic ruin may all serve to stir an immediate and unfavourable response in us and this may be most probably linked directly to our impression of the site. It is very easy to imagine ancient forces, ghosts or demonic creatures haunting such a site. We can certainly think of Shangolden Abbey in County Limerick, Ireland – one of the very few convents allegedly closed on the express orders of a reigning Pope on the grounds of witchcraft – supposedly haunted by the ghost of the Black Abbess and by the screaming phantom of a Fitzgerald lady, mistakenly entombed alive there or to lonely Mortemer Abbey in Normandy France, where the spectre of a woman reputed to be a werewolf still prowls or indeed remote Loftus Hall in Wexford where the Devil himself was said to visit. In every case the surroundings lend themselves to such beliefs and stories. “If that house isn’t

haunted", an old man once told me, pointing to a distant pile on a hillcrest a good way away, "it should be!" And that is of course quite an understandable reaction for remote and forbidding old buildings and structures can sometimes poke our imaginations and cause an uneasy feeling within us.

Another source for the feeling of "creepiness" may be the history and traditions of a place. As with the physical aspect of a site, perhaps the actions which have been carried on there can sometimes provoke a "creepy" response. However, I must make a qualification here. A good number of years ago I made a visit to the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in Germany and, standing in the compound, I experienced all sorts of sensations which I wouldn't exactly describe as "creepy" or "eerie". They were probably borne out of the revulsion I felt for the atrocities which were carried on there.

It was a much different sensation that I experienced when I visited Montpelier House on the outskirts of Dublin. This was the seat of the notorious Dublin Hell Fire Club who tried to summon up the Devil within these very precincts! And it was known that they used ghastly means to try to achieve this – including murder and cannibalism. And yet the feelings which were evoked what I could only describe as "creepy" and were much different to that which I had experienced in Germany. The same can be said of Csejte Castle in Hungary where the infamous Elizabeth Bathory was confined can still, even though it is now a ruin, provoke a feeling of uneasiness, which even the great European slaughterhouses cannot. So perhaps we have to differentiate between our responses to certain histories and traditions.

But of course there are places where mysterious traditions can still influence our perceptions and where the unexplained past can reach out to touch our sensibilities in varying degrees. Remote and barren Eilean Mor, for example, an island away out in the Atlantic off the northern coast of Scotland where three lighthouse men inexplicably vanished, can unsettle us to a considerable degree. Perhaps something the same can be said of the remote village of Warleggan, far out on Bodmin Moor, England where the shadow of the eccentric Rector, Frederick Densham still lingers on. Even across the years, his influence can still make some people feel uncomfortable.

The third element may be a question of interpretation. As a small boy, I recall a great house about two miles from where my grandmother lived in County Down, Northern Ireland. It was owned by a local landlord and my grandmother was very friendly with the housekeeper. The house itself was, however, in a rather poor state of repair, the old man who lived there simply could not <or would not> do anything to it. My grandfather had worked there as a labourer and one of my uncles worked around it as a general handyman. There was an old story in the district that one of the old landlord's brothers who was blind, and it was said mentally deficient, had died in one of the upper rooms near to the top of the building. Although when I was a child, there was nothing in that room, many of the workmen who came about the house and indeed the housekeeper herself, tended to avoid it. They had "a bad feeling" if they even stood at its door. None of them could say exactly what type of feeling it was – for some it was a kind of a coldness, for others it was a crawling of the skin, for others still it was just an uneasy

sensation. And there were noises from behind the closed door too – scrabbings and furtive movements as if somebody was trying to get around the room beyond. These were put down, by the more superstitious of the workmen, to the blind mad ghost of the old landlord's dead brother trying to find its way out. My uncle of course, being a very pragmatic and practical man would have none of that – "I've worked in that house and never seen a thing" he would say. Asked about the noises and obvious movements, he would say that the slates above that room were loose and it was probably birds or small animals which had somehow got in. He wasn't going to investigate as the floors of the room were weak and dangerous. All the talk of a "haunted room" among the other workmen was only nonsense and imagination. It was only their own interpretation. He had never felt any uncomfortable sensations when working around that room. And that was how it was – they made their own assumptions and so did he and they had their own reactions as did he. But despite my uncle's viewpoint the idea of a "haunted room" in the house gained a widespread supernatural currency and local people would often refer to it in their stories and anecdotes.

Such reputations often become "fact" in the world of the creepy. There is, for instance, said to be a concealed room in the Yumbulagang Monastery in the Yarlung Valley in Tibet which is said to house something so strange and horrible that whoever sees it will be sent stark, staring mad. Whether or not this is true, the tale has intrigued many people from H.P. Lovecraft to Adolph Hitler. In fact the Nazi leader sent a scientific team to Tibet with secret orders to see if they could determine what manner of being this was. The mission report is now either lost or locked away somewhere in Germany.

So what gives us our feeling of "creepiness"? It is some form of deep response on our part to a situation or in many instances, a place which has either perhaps a forbidding aspect or a mysterious or terrible history. We interpret all these elements and we can imagine what might befall us – what we might experience there. Are some places creepier than others? Perhaps this is a matter of individual response but it might be true to say that there are certain sites around the world where human beings might find it difficult to go – or perhaps it is best not to go at all!

Dr. Bob Curran is the author of "The Worlds Creepiest Places", published by New Page and due out October 15, 2011. ISBN: 978-160163-190-9 List Price: US \$15.99, Canada \$17.95