

Introduction

For as long as human beings have been dying, they have been turning into ghosts. Or maybe they haven't. That's the great thing about ghosts: nobody knows if they're real, so they are endlessly entertaining, like Bigfoot and Elon Musk.

Australian history is riddled with ghosts, which is unsurprising given that our nation's past is filled with violence and sadness and people dying in entertaining ways. Seemingly every country town has at least one ghost knocking about the place, lamenting his or her unfortunate demise and whipping up that peculiar mixture of terror and civic pride that only a local phantasm can produce.

Of course, some towns are more haunted than others, as this book will demonstrate. Kapunda in South Australia and Picton in New South Wales are great examples of hamlets with especially strong paranormal resonances, where the ectoplasm is particularly sticky and around every corner is another spook ready to startle you.

Not that every ghost is an unfriendly one. In these pages you will find ghosts of both the menacing and the kindly types, as well as plenty who have no real agenda beyond wandering in the hinterland between

life and death and making funny noises or giving off odd light.

Why do we love ghosts so much? Why do they fascinate us, obsess us, cause us to write books and songs and movies about them? Why, although we may be scared of them, do we simultaneously find ourselves so attracted to stories about them, and – let's be honest – hope that those stories are true?

Part of the answer is obvious: ghosts are evidence of life after death. Even the most ghastly ghost story carries within it a seed of hope: that when our body dies, perhaps our soul will carry on existing in some form. That form might be a bloodsoaked nightmare stomping around the upper floor of an old pub and banging on innocent people's doors, but it's better than nothing.

But besides hope for ourselves, it's just plain exciting to imagine there is something beyond this world. The material realm is full of interesting stuff* but the world becomes even more thrilling if there's a whole other universe going on behind the scenes. To think that there could be an invisible presence brushing past you in a corridor; to believe that on a still, moonlit night you could catch sight of a mournful rider galloping through your town; to hope that the shadowy figure on the far side of the cemetery is a lost child from the 19th century and not just a bush ... Who can resist the tantalising idea that our world has dimensions that our everyday experience only ever hints at?

In these pages you will come across a dizzying array of ghosts, spooks, phantoms, apparitions, unearthly presences and inexplicable

* The Taj Mahal, the A-Team, et cetera.

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encounters. You will meet tragic lovers, brutalised convicts, gruesome murder victims, unhappy children, miserable asylum inmates and their callous overseers, and even the odd esteemed politician. You will be taken all over Australia, from Queensland's blazing heat to the chilly greenery of Tasmania, from Western Australia's splendid isolation to the bustling streets of Melbourne and Sydney. You may believe all the stories contained herein, or you may not. But beyond a doubt, you will come away knowing that wherever the truth lies, there is indeed a hell of a lot of creepy stuff going on out there.

Dim the lights, hold tight to the hand of a loved one and make your way inside ...

Nurse Kerry

Nurses in mental asylums don't have a great reputation, thanks to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest's* Nurse Ratched. But it turns out that if there's one thing scarier than a psychiatric nurse, it's a psychiatric nurse who has died but refuses to stop bossing you around. So it's no wonder that generations have had their spines chilled by Nurse Kerry, the stern overseer of Aradale Lunatic Asylum at Ararat, Victoria.

This grim, gigantic institution opened in 1867 and from the beginning operated as if its founders' primary aim was to provide a compelling backstory for a horror movie. The asylum was so huge that it was essentially a self-sufficient town in its own right, which was very convenient when it came to conducting controversial medical procedures well away from the prying eyes of the kind of fussy pedants who go around trying to shut hospitals down just because they specialise in lopping off bits of people's brains and shooting massive charges of electricity through them.

It took two signatures to commit someone to Aradale but eight signatures to get someone released, meaning that only lunatics with a high friend-to-enemy ratio ever got out. About 13,000 people died

NURSE KERRY

within Aradale's forbidding walls, so it is no surprise that the place is said to be crawling with ghosts, most of whom combine severe mental illness with a well-justified grudge against society. They are not, in other words, the kind of ghosts you want to take on a picnic.

But the most unnerving phantom of all Aradale is undoubtedly Nurse Kerry. This conscientious healthcare professional has been spotted by many of the tourists who nowadays pass through the cold corridors of the asylum, her footsteps heard clacking up and down the halls and her starched white uniform a common sight as she makes sure all is in order.

Aradale was closed down in 1998, but Kerry, obviously seeing how tough the job market was for older women, opted to stay on and continue the smooth running of the organisation. Given the buildings are reportedly swarming with unstable and unfriendly spirits, one might think it was almost a comfort to have Kerry around to keep the inmates under control and protect innocent members of the public. However, the impression the nurse gives is not so much a protective one: more the sense that she is keen to add those innocent members of the public to the register of patients. Visitors to the electro-shock room report a hot buzzing in the temples, the machinery apparently keen to get back to business. And with Nurse Kerry always watching over you, it's hard to escape the feeling that she's eager to strap you down herself.

This is far from the only symptom reported by guests of the asylum. Those who wander into the areas once used for lobotomies claim to suffer intense headaches, which suggests that the staff continue to hang around and do their best, with limited ghostly resources, to keep performing the procedures. Other visitors to the facility report nausea, which is not

necessarily a paranormal phenomenon but definitely in sync with the general vibe.

More disturbing, unless you've had a big lunch, are the women's screams that can be heard echoing throughout the corridors of the asylum, and the shadowy figures seen flitting between rooms and around corners. With the misery inflicted on thousands in the place – operations frequently done without anaesthesia, and patients treated less as unfortunate people suffering from serious illness than as unusually large flies under the care of scientists writing papers on the implications of wing detachment – one can assume that very few of those scuttling around the hallways or crying out in the night are happy souls.

Whether they are screaming for relief, begging for mercy, bent on revenge or simply howling in pain, you can be sure they are under the tender loving care of Nurse Kerry. And, should you take the wrong corner on a ghost tour, maybe you will be too.

Behind Adelaide's Bars

A feeling that you're being watched. Footsteps behind you, voices in the distance. A hand emerging from an empty cell to slam the slot in the door shut. Adelaide Gaol has all sorts of treats in store for mortals who like to get close to spooks. It opened in 1841, when the South Australian governor realised that not being a penal colony doesn't guarantee you won't have any criminals, and operated right up until 1988. That's a lot of time to accumulate stories, and Adelaide Gaol has some great ones.

Ben Ellis was the Adelaide Gaol hangman for ten years in the 19th century, and was known as an exceedingly fine one. He had a flawless record of carrying out executions quickly, cleanly and without undue suffering ... well, *almost* flawless. When hanging the murderer Charles Streitman, he got careless. Streitman, not properly prepared by Ellis, dropped, bounced and got caught on the platform. It took him twenty-two agonising minutes to die.

In 1873, Ellis had to hang Elizabeth Woolcock, the only woman ever executed in South Australia. Elizabeth may or may not have been guilty of poisoning her husband, who had violently abused her for years. The death of Elizabeth, just twenty-five years old, shook the hangman

and caused him to reflect deeply on his job, and his purpose. Today, Ben Ellis's ghost walks regularly through Adelaide Gaol, unable to keep still, hoping somehow to beg for forgiveness for the deadly efficiency with which he carried out his task for so long.

The first governor of the Adelaide Gaol was William Baker Ashton, a spherical man who'd once been a police sergeant in London. Ashton's rotund, jolly-looking form suited his reputation for kindness and generosity to the inmates at Adelaide. Every year he paid for Christmas dinner for the prisoners out of his own pocket; the gaol became known as 'Ashton's Hotel' thanks to his compassionate treatment. But the jolly fat man was laid low by allegations of corruption and drunkenness; by the time he was cleared by the courts, though, it was three months too late: Ashton had died of a heart attack.

Ashton, too, haunts the gaol where he once worked, unable to get any rest due to the dreadful injustice under which he died. On stormy nights he can be heard in his old office, moving around non-existent furniture.

And then there's Frederick Carr. Fred was hanged on 12 November 1927 for the murder of his wife, Maud, who had been found in bed with her throat cut. The case against Fred was strong, but he protested his innocence to the end. 'The law requires my body, but it cannot have my soul, as I am innocent,' he said. Nevertheless, he met his end by the noose.

By the stairs of the New Building of Adelaide Gaol, Fred Carr is a regular sight. Well dressed and cordial, he is reported to be far from an angry or vengeful spirit, despite the death he considered unjust. Indeed, those who've met him say he seems motivated more by friendly curiosity

than anything else, simply enjoying meeting new people and taking an interest in them. As prison ghosts go, he is one of the more amiable.

The oddest thing about Fred Carr's ghost – and the thing that, despite his cheerful demeanour, could be said to make him just a *little* bit terrifying – is that he used to appear without a face. Well turned out, certainly, and well spoken, too – but minus a face. Until, that is, November of the year 2000, when he was seen with face present and correct and, moreover, with a big smile on it. Fred's face was back, and he was quite chuffed by the development.

Why did Fred Carr go faceless for seventy-three years after his death, and why was it suddenly restored to him? Nobody knows, and it seems likely nobody will know. It's just another mystery that lives within the walls of the Old Adelaide Gaol.