

The Ghost of Computer Science

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

“So where did you see this ghost?” I asked, mildly amused by the tale being told by the old porter.

The other man grunted, clearly relishing the opportunity to spin a yarn. He must have noticed, but seemed prepared to ignore, the scepticism visible on my face.

“It always shows up in that stairwell behind the lecture theatres, at the upper ground level,” he replied laconically.

The man I knew only as George was a wizened old gnome, wiry and bandy-legged. He struck me as surprisingly hairy about the ears and on the backs of his hands, which contrasted with the compact and polished dome of his head. He was apparently one of that group of men known as porters, who delivered the mail, moved the furniture and acted as general factotums to the academic staff at the University. Old George had told me that he had worked in the Computer Science building ever since it opened, back in the 1970s.

In this day and age, the porters act as the security staff, and are on duty twenty-four hours a day. While any member of the faculty could come and go as they please, they rarely did and there were usually not very many people in the building in the middle of the night.

It was two in the morning, and we were standing in the otherwise empty foyer. For some reason, I only ever encountered George in the middle of the night. Perhaps it was his preference for the night shift. Tonight, the porter seemed to be in a garrulous mood. I fully admit that I was incredulous, entirely disbelieving, but the old man seemed to be utterly serious.

“It’s always been there, as I recall. There were occasional sightings when I first came here,” he continued, with a slight shake of his head at my youthful intransigence.

“Mind you, in those days, months or even years would go by with a visitation,” he continued, “The apparition’s appearances seem to be getting more frequent.”

I shook my head but, before I could make any intelligible response, old George straightened from the slouch he had adopted.

“Well, I can’t stand around here nattering all night,” he muttered, “I’ve me rounds to do.”

And with that, he stalked off down one of the darkened corridors, soon to be lost to sight.

I suppose I am still a student of sorts, now undertaking post-doctoral work in the School of Computer Science. The Computer building at the red-brick university I have hung around for more than a decade is itself a monument to 1970’s structural design. The architectural vernacular of the time was for steel-reinforced concrete framework clad in – yes – red bricks with tall narrow windows fitted with darkened glass, arranged in serried rows on all four sides.

The building has several floors above ground level where lecture theatres, classrooms and laboratories for practical work can be found, as well as rooms full of personal computers for use by students. The latter seem to be always in use, even in the middle of the night. It always amused me to see just one or two hunched figures, widely separated amongst the rows of quietly humming PCs.

The need for a large number of rooms must have given the building designers a headache, since much of the interior is a warren of corridors and staircases. The uppermost floors are occupied by spacious individual offices for the academic staff, close to their secretarial and administrative supporters, as well as much more cramped shared accommodation for the post-docs and research students.

Further down, there are extensive basements housing the air-conditioning machinery and various workshops and storerooms, as well as several large machine rooms. These house rows of metal cabinets, these days usually painted in fashionable shades of black, containing the central computers and peripheral machines which are even nowadays adorned with green and blue blinking lights.

I have always been something of a night-owl, preferring to stay up until the wee hours whether I am working or socialising. I always rise late in the morning, even then unable to function even then without at least one large mug of the poisonously strong black coffee I favour. I am not sure just why this is. Maybe I am naturally not a morning person, or perhaps this is just a legacy of years of being a university student.

My nocturnal working habits are by now familiar to the portering and security staff. I can frequently be found working late at night. It would not be unusual for me to stay in the building all night, finally emerging in the morning, blinking in the light. Then I would stumble to the bus stop for the short journey back to the terraced house I share with three other post-grads, all of whom are attached to other parts of the Faculty of Science and Engineering.

These night-shift hours had allowed me to acquire a nodding acquaintance with George the porter, who always seemed to be on night duty. It was not uncommon for me to come across him patrolling the darkened corridors and public spaces of the School.

I occasionally found myself wondering about the story he had told and, out of sheer curiosity, took to passing by the location George had described. The stairwell was quiet and out-of-the-way corner of the building. The complicated interior design meant that there was almost always no direct route between any two points, and it was generally not much out of my way to pass by regularly on my way to my office. “My office” sounds rather grand, especially as this is actually just a desk and a couple of filing cabinet drawers in a shared room in that far corner of the building.

With hindsight, it must have been unsurprising that I did finally see the ghost. One evening, not even particularly late – certainly well before midnight – I was making my way downstairs to the machine room, picking the route through the haunted stairwell quite automatically.

It was astonishing. The whole experience was exactly what I would have expected from folklore and children’s tales. The first indication was a sudden chill, a drop in temperature which somehow did not quite feel like a malfunction in the air-conditioning. Then I caught sight of a vague shape, hanging in the air, as if a humanoid figure have been draped head-to-foot in a badly-washed white sheet. Whatever it was, it was hovering in the stairwell in such a position that taking the steps downwards would have brought me level with the spectre.

The figure had its back towards me, as far as I could tell. As I watched, I thought it made to turn in my direction but, before the movement had barely begun, the apparition faded into nothingness. The chill in the air dissipated just as rapidly, and I found myself standing mouth open and wondering whether I had imagined the whole thing.

The only thing that jarred with the bedtime storybook was that I did not feel in the slightest bit frightened. The ghost just was not scary. I was curious, intrigued even, and I resolved immediately to investigate further.

That turned out to be easier than I expected. After that first sighting, the spectre always seemed to be there, sometimes plainly visible and at other times just the mere suggestion of a presence. Strangely, it was only apparent when I was on my own; on the rare occasions when I was in company, I always found the stairwell entirely uninhabited.

I made opportunities to talk with some of the other postgrads, and even some of the younger members of staff. But, having asked around a few times whether anyone sensed anything unusual or spooky in that stairwell, but mostly gave up after the number of strange looks I received.

I had heard that theory that ghosts are somehow representations – echoes projected through time – of a moment in a person's life, especially an intensely emotional moment close to death. Logically, this means that graveyards are the last place you should expect to find ghosts, since people almost never die there except under the – I hope! – rare circumstances of being buried alive.

From its beginnings in Victorian philanthropy and mock-gothic majesty, the University buildings had grown organically over ground previously occupied by rows of back-to-back terraced houses – a classic *Coronation Street* scene now bulldozed flat. The Computer Science building was in fact squatting on a foundation of broken bricks and torn-up cobblestones – the remains of homes for thousands of workers in the early ages of industrialisation.

These old houses must have seen any number of births, deaths and marriages over the years. I have seen black-and-white photos of the Computer building under construction, on posters decorating the otherwise bare breeze-block walls in out-of-the-way corridors. As I saw it, the level of that haunted stairwell was at the height of an upstairs bedroom of an old terrace – just the place where a bed-bound person might have lived their last, and died.

The haunting was beginning to prey on my mind and I felt I needed someone to talk to. I wanted to find some explanation of what I had witnessed.

Finally, I was struck by a brainwave. I tracked down one of the younger lecturers in the School, named Tony Howarth. Tony had a

rather studious, even anxious disposition, forever glancing around through thick-rimmed glasses. He generally spoke and moved quickly, as if bursting with nervous energy.

The reason I had picked Tony as my confidante was that I had recently discovered that he was a subscriber to the *Sceptical Enquirer* periodical, as well as being part of an enthusiastic – if slightly nerdy – group dedicated to investigating, and debunking, claims of UFO sightings and ghostly hauntings. He displayed a sharp and enquiring mind, always ready with a plausible mundane explanation for apparently paranormal events.

Sitting in his small office, Tony listened with great interest to my story and then asked a few questions, such as whether I had searched for hidden projectors or wires. I admitted that I had not – it simply had not occurred to me that the presence on the stairs was anything other than completely genuine.

I think Tony could hear the earnestness in my voice and was apparently satisfied that I was not attempting to wind him up as a prank. After a few moments thought, Tony said that he had not heard such a claim but was happy – even eager – to investigate. He said he would make some gentle enquiries around the building and from the University authorities, and asked me to come back the following day.

Tony's report was non-committal. He had explored the area himself and had sensed nothing himself – a situation I had somehow anticipated. He also said that, as far as anyone knew, no-one had ever died in the Computer Science building, but it was impossible to be sure about the residents of the former houses on the site. Finally, Tony said he would talk to some of his contacts through the *Enquirer*, undertake some further investigations and let me know anything he discovered.

This was a far less positive outcome than I had hoped for, with limited scope for some kind of a resolution. I started to avoid that part of the building, which was always dimly-lit and quiet – especially after dark, when the massed hordes of undergraduates had returned to their usual evening haunts of residential halls and public houses.

Even so, in a hurry one early evening, I casually decided to take that route back to the office. I was shocked and horrified to find Tony, on the floor, apparently dead. The poor man surrounded by a litter of apparatus – assorted cameras, tape recorders, lights and other devices with more obscure purposes – all tied together with a rats' nest of

cabling fixed to a latticework of aluminium poles and garden canes with heavy-duty gaffer tape.

I hurried over, desperately trying to remember the rudimentary first aid training I had received several years ago. Tony was definitely dead, already cold and I guessed he had been lying there for an hour or more.

I called out wildly for assistance and, almost immediately George himself appeared around the corner. The old porter leant over, apparently checking the body, then looked up at me shaking his head. Even through my rising panic, I could see he looked somehow satisfied, as if pleased with an outcome long anticipated.

I rushed back down the corridor towards the administrative offices to raise the alarm before collapsing in near-hysterics. I suppose I must have been in shock for a while. I vaguely recall being fed mug after mug of hot sweet tea – something I would normally have avoided – by the secretarial staff.

I imagine that some ambulance crew come to remove the body and senior members of the university management were dragged away from their meetings to handle the situation.

The police cordoned off the entire stairwell using that black and yellow tape familiar to viewers of TV crime dramas, making inconvenient detours necessary. After I had recovered some of my wits, I made a statement to the police, carefully omitting or playing down any the ghostly aspects, and merely noting that I understood Tony to be investigating reports of a haunting at this very spot.

The subsequent police enquiry confirmed the obvious conclusions. It appeared that Tony had been attempting to attach his apparatus to the banisters at the top of the stairs. Somehow, he had fallen and broken his neck colliding with the protruding concrete of the intermediate level, before crashing to the floor below. There was no suggestion of ‘foul play’, to use that old-fashioned phrase; no evidence that anyone else had been involved.

As a mark of respect, I was present at poor Tony’s funeral, which was attended by his weeping patents as well as an eclectic cross-section of the staff and student body. Later that day, there was a short non-denominational service (Tony was an atheist, apparently) in the Department itself, which was rather better attended.

After the funeral and the service, I remained in the Computer building, unsure of what to do. I wandered to the fateful stairwell to find

that the police investigation had evidently finished and the barrier tapes had been removed.

Absently, I tidied away Tony's equipment, carefully collecting up the damaged instruments and broken cameras. At first, I was not quite sure what to do with it, but eventually I stacked it all neatly in Tony's office, which already seemed unnaturally quiet and faintly dusty, even though the previous occupant had been dead only a few days.

Just as I finished this task, old George appeared at the doorway, the same unaccustomed look of glee in his eyes as I had seen when he had leant over Tony's cooling body.

"What's going on?" I asked, the note of alarm in my voice sounding shrill even to myself.

He made no reply, just stood there looking at me insouciantly. Then he disappeared – by which I do not mean he simply walked away, but quite literally vanished into thin air before my very eyes.

The ghost of Computer Science is more visible, more often, these days. Other people seem to have caught a glimpse of it too, judging from the looks I see on faces emerging from that stairwell. I have not been able to persuade anyone to admit to this, yet, although I do get strange reactions from those of my acquaintances who I questioned just after I had first seen the apparition.

Personally, I am convinced that the ghost in the stairwell is Tony himself. What I had glimpsed before must have been some kind of a future echo, his shade now stronger, more persistent, now that his death is in the past. It seems inappropriately ironic that he was investigating his own ghost when he died – was this the reason for George's nonchalant reaction?

What really worries me now is the old porters astonishing disappearance. The last time I ever saw him was when I was moving poor Tony's equipment back to his office. I spent long hours, night after night, wandering the deserted corridors where previously I would also have guaranteed a meeting, without encountering any sign of him.

The mysterious porter seemed to know more than he was letting on, and I desperately wanted to learn more. I made enquiries, eventually gaining an interview with the Head Porter in the tiny cupboard that his seniority allowed him to use as an office. He was a squat toad of a man, who sat in a decrepit old armchair sipping delicately from a chipped mug of strong steaming tea.

The Head Man told me bluntly that he and the other porters in the building had never heard of George, that they did not recognise the description I put to them. Despite my increasingly frantic protestations, he insisted that no-one of that name had ever been employed as a porter in the School.

So who, or what, is Old George? More importantly, why did he want our local paranormal investigator out of the way? What secret was he desperate to conceal – so desperate that he was willing to arrange Tony's death while investigating his own ghost?

My best guess is that George is a very capable and frankly rather malicious spirit who has been in this location for a long time – much longer than the present building. He did not want to be disturbed and felt threatened by Tony as a potential open-minded ghost-hunter. So the other ghost is both distraction and protection – although I am beginning to wonder about what might be happening on the Other Side...

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