

Stone and Shadows

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

The old stone bridge which even to this day gives the picturesque town of Hebden Bridge its name had been built to allow pack horses to cross the river in all weathers without having to hazard the ford. Crossing the stream in this way would have been unpleasantly damp at best and downright dangerous when the winter melt-water was in full flow.

In those days, the Hebden Bridge sat on an important trade route conveying the wool from the surrounding farmers markets, from the sheep on the hillsides and dales hereabouts, to the mills in Salford and Rochdale. The local history tells us that the stone bridge replaced an even earlier wooden structure, but this pile of masonry has ever after stood firm on this site, conveying across the river wayfarer and pack animal alike.

Wider and more modern crossings have been constructed in subsequent centuries, carrying contemporary road traffic and the railway line. Nowadays, the old bridge is just a historical relic, carefully preserved and rarely used except by the occasional pedestrian. Of course there have been numerous repairs to the masonry over the centuries; even so, the stonework is in remarkably good condition given its age.

The crossing and its surroundings were the site of a battle during the English Civil war in 1643, and both ford and bridge had seen, no doubt, its share of deaths under emotional and gory circumstances. Perhaps it was no surprise, then, that the structure of the bridge was repeatedly reported to be haunted.

The present-day town centre nearby boasts many pubs and eating-houses, and even the odd nightclub, all housed in stone-built buildings often more than a hundred years old. The cobbled streets around the old bridge were always deserted after dark, even the most drunken of revellers somehow avoiding the vicinity of the crossing automatically. In an effort to boost the popularity of the inns and restaurants amongst locals and tourists alike, the town council had recently installed modern high-pressure sodium street lighting in this area, but even the

light from the new streetlamps seemed to be somehow swallowed up by the dark stonework and shadows of the buildings and alleyways.

A few years ago, I was a member of a local group of student paranormal investigators known as the Sceptics. We were an official University Society, in receipt of an extremely modest grant of funds from the Student Union. Most of the members were regular readers of alternative magazines such as the *Skeptical Enquirer* and we prided ourselves on debunking, on paper at least, reports of hauntings, crop circles and unidentified flying objects. We had been asked by the local newspaper (inevitably called the Hebden Bridge Times) to investigate the stories of the haunted bridge and, it was strongly implied, debunk this particular myth.

A few volunteers from the Sceptics formed a little team to take this enquiry forward. The core of this team included Martin, a short and round-shouldered man with a strong and frequently unintelligible Mancunian accent who was studying Economics and always put me in mind of an angry gerbil. Nigel was a Geology student who wore his blond hair short and spiky and who walked with a permanent limp – a relic, I was given to understand, of a spelunking accident the previous year. Then there was myself – an undergraduate in the Physics Department, and a product of both the English Grammar school system and atheist parents.

Our *de facto* leader was Tony, who was not actually a student any more but had recently joined the academic staff in the Computing Department. Despite his youth, he was a university academic of the Old School. He habitually wore baggy trousers which gave him a slight resemblance to a younger Charlie Chaplin, with a worn but well-ironed shirt with a collar and tie under a V-neck pullover of a plain and indeterminate rustic shade.

I met Tony when I first joined the Sceptics and I went along to introduce myself. I found him sitting in his office with the lights off, in a chair by the window carefully positioned to catch the dim natural light from the overcast sky. He had a notebook and fountain pen in hand, and appeared to be staring pensively out of the window at the pedestrians in the streets below.

“How can you work in this light?” I burst out as I entered.

Tony looked up, slightly defiantly.

“I’ll have you know,” he replied, “That William Shakespeare produced his greatest works in conditions like this.”

“Ah,” I retorted, “No wonder he couldn’t spell.”

After an introduction like that, we could not but help becoming good friends.

This little band of geeks and anoraks set about a little research on the side, rapidly assembling a review of such history on the old bridge that was available online, or that could be dug up from the archives of the newspaper. Our researches turned up no information of a definite sighting of any ghost or spectre but just a persistent expression, in vague terms and in many reports, that there was something out of the ordinary about the location.

Undeterred, the team planned an investigative approach: an overnight vigil equipped with modern electronic cameras selected or adapted for low-light operations, digital sound recorders and torches. We also intended to keep detailed notes and records throughout the night.

So it was not long afterwards, on a cold November evening already dark and misty, Tony parked his old car in the near-deserted market-place car park not far from the bridge. We piled out of the vehicle and collected our baggage from the boot. We must have looked almost indistinguishable in the near-darkness, muffled up in dark-coloured anoraks and woolly hats against the chill, with gloves and heavy boots to keep our extremities warm. We gathered our cameras and Thermos flasks, and strode off towards the bridge.

As we approached, I got the strangest feeling, almost of dread, as we got closer – a distinct sinking sensation in the stomach making me feel listless and utterly miserable, somehow wallowing in contemplation of my own mortality. Afterwards, back at the University, when we dissected the evening, I discovered that we all felt something similar, entirely inexplicable in the cold light of day, but enough to have steered us away, in any direction at all, rather than towards the bridge itself.

It seemed to get colder and darker as we approached. I think we were all shivering by the time we had gathered in the centre of the bridge, despite our heavyweight clothing, and we found ourselves all standing rather closer to each other than would normally be socially comfortable for a group of rather shy blokes.

It was a strange night, full of half-heard whispers in the mist and curious shadows in the lamplight. Sometimes there was a sense of movement, something caught in the corner of the eye, but before

anyone could turn around or focus a camera, whatever the cause of the movement was gone.

We shot hundreds of still pictures, but later close examination showed the only things visible were mist and stonework, and the occasional darkened form of one of the team silhouetted against the masonry by the street lighting.

Undeterred, we decided to return a few days later, during daylight hours, to install motion-sensitive cameras. This was a spectacular failure, with no movement triggering the cameras, nothing at all from the automation. We tried it out on several nights, testing it by moving nearby ourselves, but without success.

Our attempts at using automation having failed, we made a second visit as a group, again holding a night-long vigil. Much as before, the cameras showed dark shadows against the stonework, and the team members all reported the same churning feeling of dread and some half-sensed movements in the gloom. There was nothing conclusive, no evidence which would have swayed the sceptical observers we had all convinced ourselves that we were, but the feeling that there was something just beyond our observation was indubitable to those present.

We made further attempts, deploying different equipment and using a variety of technology as well as the vigilance of the team members, but to no avail. One by one, the team members began to lose interest: there was nothing to observe, nothing concrete, and even the local paper ceased to be interested. By mid-December, we had disbanded, each of us beginning to follow other interests and projects, including the demands of the University lectures and courses we were supposed to be attending.

In any case, the students amongst us would soon be leaving for home and family during the Christmas break. I had delayed my return to the parental home for a few days, not particularly wanting to leave behind the freedoms of the student lifestyle just yet and returning to the rather more constrained conditions I endured when living with my father and mother. I still had some curiosity about the old bridge, some sense, perhaps of unfinished business, or maybe I wondered if there was still something more enlightening that I could discover.

So, on that weekend just after the end of term, I packed a rucksack and caught a late train to Hebden Bridge. I made my way from the station to the old bridge, skirting the hostelrys which seemed so much

more inviting that the prospect of a long and lonely evening in the open air. I felt the by now almost familiar sinking feeling in my stomach as I drew near, and it took all my willpower not to turn away. It was so much harder on my own without the moral support, or perhaps just the macho competitiveness, of my comrades to push me forward.

I stepped onto the bridge itself, making my way slowly towards the other side. I could hear nothing other than the rush of the water which seemed to drown out all other sounds – the chatter of drinkers and the clink of glasses in the pubs and bars on the riverside, the rumble of the distant traffic, even the bass-line thud of the jukeboxes and nightclubs. I felt as if I was the only person for miles around, all alone in a world of stone and water.

I edged towards the centre of the bridge, fumbling in my anorak pocket for my digital camera. I thought I caught a movement behind me in the corner of my eye, and I spun around, pressing the camera release almost instinctively. There might have been a movement in the shadows, I could not tell for sure - perhaps some presence, only felt rather than seen. I was convinced that there had, for a split second, been someone there.

At that moment, I abandoned my plans for a long stay and set off at a fast walk – not quite a run – back to the railway station, pocketing the camera as I did so. It was only when I was safely on the train that I thought to inspect the snap I had taken. Using the little screen built into the back of the camera, I pulled up the image I had captured. There, in the picture, stood a dark shadow against the stonework of the parapet, a dark bulky form that could have been any of the old investigation team.

At first I wondered if I had inadvertently looked at an older image, one taken during the numerous previous visits, one showing a picture of a member of the team, and I had not actually taken a new photograph at all. With growing horror, I realised that I was wrong. It was definitely the viewpoint I remembered, and the shadowy figure in the image looked as if it had oozed from the very stones themselves. In a flash of insight, I realised that all of the other images showing team members we have taken before were of the same shadowy form.

As I sat staring at the image on the back of the camera, something came back to me that I had read about when researching tales and legends surrounding the old bridge. The stories told of the making of a living offering to strengthen the stones, the blood to fortify the mortar.

I had assumed that the sacrifice would have been a sheep or a goat, but now I was not so sure.

I was of course aware of the old ritual of appeasing the spirits of the river before crossing by throwing a coin, an offering into the surging waters. This is observed even these days, when people instinctively taking a copper from their pocket to throw into any running water they encounter, to appease the ancient spirits.

The making of a human sacrifice was a pagan ritual which would have been severely frowned upon by the Church, were it to have been discovered, but whose existence could not be entirely discounted. I was convinced that the rough workmen who were engaged to cut the stones and assemble the arches also engaged in a dark and heathen ritual.

I sat on the train, shivering in the meagre warmth and stark lighting. To my horror, I could not stop myself imagining the feelings of the sacrificial victim. I could see it all so clearly in my mind's eye. I felt sure that he was chosen to be a big strong lad to make sure, I suppose, the bridge was equally strong – old-school sympathetic magic, I now realise.

Even now, I can picture the poor young man, all alone, restrained, chained, in the dark and the rain, knowing that he was going to be cut open and his blood poured over the stones and mixed into the mortar, and only able to contemplate his own shadow in the mist and firelight.

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