

Cornish Characters and Strange Events

by

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THE BOTATHEN GHOST

IN April, 1720, Daniel Defoe published his History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell. In August a second edition was called for, of which some copies included a pamphlet that had been printed in June: "Mr. Campbell's Pacquet, for the Entertainment of Gentlemen and Ladies," and this "Pacquet" contains "A Remarkable Passage of an Apparition, related by the Rev. Dr. Ruddle, of Launceston, in Cornwall, in the year 1665."

It has been assumed that this ghost story was a bit of invention of the lively imagination of Defoe. Mrs. Bray in her Trelawny of Trelawne stated that the story could not be true, as no such a name as Dingley, which was that of the ghost, was known in Launceston. As it happened, James Dingley had been instituted to the vicarage of the very parish of South Petherwin, in which the ghost appeared, in the same reign in which the apparition occurred, and he assisted Ruddle in his ministrations in Launceston, and the name occurs to this day in the town and neighbourhood. In fact, Dingley, Pethebridge, and Dingley are bankers there.

In the same heedless fashion Cyrus Redding wrote in 1842 that the story was "told with so much simplicity of truth that it is difficult to believe that the tale is not, as novel writers say, 'founded on fact.'" And he goes on to state: "No clergyman of the name of Ruddle had been incumbent in Launceston for two hundred years past, at least in S. Mary's Church." Yet the monument of Parson Ruddle is in the church, and he occupied the living from 1663 to his death in 1699.

Again, Samuel Drew, in his History of Cornwall, blunders as to the locality, making the apparition appear in the parish of Little Petherick, near Padstow.

Next Mr. Hawker, of Morwenstow, fabricated a "Diurnall" of Ruddle, which adopted Drew's error, and by altering the date made the story as given by him disagree with the facts as they stand upon record.

The "Remarkable Passage of an Apparition" was no invention of Defoe; it was a genuine narrative written by the hand of John Ruddle himself. This has been conclusively demonstrated by the late Mr. Alfred Robbins in the Cornish Magazine, 1898.

John Ruddle, M. A. of Caius College, Cambridge, was instituted to the vicarage of Altarnon on May 24th, 1662 ; and the incumbency of S. Mary Magdalen, Launceston, becoming vacant by the ejection of the Independent intrusive pastor, Ruddle was appointed to it, and "began his ministry at Launceston on ye Feast of Our Saviour's Nativity, 1663." At the same time he received the appointment to the Launceston Free School as master.

Now it so fell out that he was invited on the 20th June, 1665, to preach a funeral sermon on the occasion of the burial of John Eliot at South Petherwin. John was the son of Edward Eliot, of Trebursey, who was the third son of Sir John Eliot, who died in the Tower of London.

After the conclusion of the service. Parson Ruddle was leaving the church, when an "ancient gentleman" addressed him, and, Ruddle says, "With an unusual importunity almost forced against my humour to see his house that night; nor could I have rescued myself from his kindness, had not Mr. Eliot interposed and pleaded title to me for the whole of the day." However, Ruddle promised to call on the old gentleman, whose name was Bligh, and whose house was Botathan.

The Blighs were an ancient family, well connected and owning a good estate, but Botathan was not a house of any pretence, and it is now the dwelling of a farmer, and has not the appearance of having been the residence of a county family.

On the following Monday John Ruddle went to Botathan, where he partook of an early dinner, and a neighbouring parson had been invited to meet him.

[At this point SBG inserts an extract from DEFOE'S account without explicitly acknowledging the transition]

It must be noted that Defoe in his printed account omits the names of the family of Bligh, and that he changes Dorothy Dingley into Mrs. Veale. [*Note: Throughout Defoe's quoted account he refers to 'the spectrum' as 'Dorothy Dingle' – there is no mention anywhere of 'Mrs Veale'.*] Parson Ruddle's original MS. is not in existence; it was probably given to Defoe; but a copy is preserved made by the son of the Rev. John Ruddle. Defoe was in Launceston acting as a spy for the minister Harley in August, 1705, and at that time he must have got hold of the MS. After the signature

"John Ruddle "at the end of the narrative and the date is the sentence: "This is a copy of wt I found written by my father and signed John Ruddle. Taken by me, William Ruddle," who had become vicar of South Petherwin in 1695, and who became subsequently incumbent also of S. Thomas-by-Launceston. This copy bears the following attestation: "The readers may observe yt I borrowed the remarkable passage of ye grandson of John Ruddle who had it from his Uncle William Ruddle. I think I'm exact in its transcription. I well know the sayd John Ruddle to have had (and daresay deserved) the character of a learned and eminent Divine, and I also knew his son ye sayd William Ruddle, a Divine whose character was so bright yt I have no room to add to its lustre, and I hereby certify yt I copyed this from ye very hand-writing of the sayd William Ruddle. Quinto die Februarii Anno Dni, 1730. James Wakeman."

As Mr. Robbins says: "The completeness of the body of proof of the Ruddle authorship leaves nothing therefore to be desired."

Parson John Ruddle eventually became prebend of Exeter, and held the vicarage of Altarnon along with that of Launceston to his death.

Ruddle does not state that the boy Bligh was his pupil at Launceston Free School, but one does not see to what other school he can have gone, and the readiness with which the lad opened his heart to him leads to the notion that they had some previous acquaintance. His way to Launceston would be over the common, on which stand three barrows, to the road at Penfoot, where he would strike the road. When he endeavoured to avoid the ghost he took the Under Horse Road between Quarry Park and the Nursery. The Quarry is still visible with a pool in it, and a stream flowing into it that rises on the moor where he saw the ghost, and Under Horse Road still bears its name. The lad endeavoured to take a short cut, though not as short as across the Higher Brown Quartils, to reach the Launceston road without having to go through South Petherwin village.

Parson Ruddle does not give the Christian name of the boy who saw the ghost, and we are thrown into perplexity at once.

The "ancient gentleman" may have been Thomas Bligh of Botathan, Esq., but he was aged no more than fifty-three. Colonel Vivian's pedigree of the Blighs in his Visitation of Cornwall is most unsatisfactory.

Thomas Bligh was buried at South Petherwin, April 10th, 1692. There is no entry in Vivian's pedigree of Walter Bligh, gentleman, who was buried January 29th, 1667-8. Besides, there are many entries of an Edmund Bligh and Katherine, his wife, and their children. Thomas Bligh seems to have lived at one time at S. Martin's-by-Looe. Dr. Lee in his Glimpses of the Supernatural calls Dorothy Dingley, Dorothy Durant ; but on what authority I do not know. There is an entry in the South Petherwin register of the burial of Dorothy Durant, widow, 1st May, 1677, but according to the story of

the boy, Dorothy Dingley died in or about 1657. Unfortunately the South Petherwin registers do not go back beyond August, 1656, but there is no entry in them in 1656 or 1657 of the burial of Dorothy Dingley.

The Dingleys had been settled in Lezant and Linkinhorne from 1577, and owned the place Hall in the latter parish; but they had connections in Worcestershire; and Dorothy was the youngest daughter of Francis Dingley, baptized at Cropthorne, in the latter county, in 1596. She married Richard, son of George Durant, of Blockly, Worcestershire. As no further trace of her can be found in the register there, it is not unfair to suppose that having kinsfolk in Cornwall she may have journeyed there, and both were buried at South Petherwin, Dorothy Durant, as already stated, in 1677. She was then aged eighty-seven. She cannot have been the ghost. But was the ghost that of her mother, a Dorothy, who came to South Petherwin with her, and died there about the year 1655 ? We cannot tell, as we do not know her mother's Christian name. Dr. Lee clearly confused the Dorothy Durant with the Dorothy Dingley, the ghost.

The Rev. P. T. Pulman, vicar of South Petherwin, writes to me: "In December, 1896, a labourer died here, aged seventy-two. For upwards of forty years he had worked at Botathan. He told me that one of the fields was called the Higher Brown Park (he did not know the name of Quartells) until the field was ploughed up. He told me there was a little path in it which they called old Dorothy Dinglet's [sic] path, and that they used to frighten the farm apprentices with stories about her, but he had never met her himself. The farm has been sold of recent years. There is a part of the old house left used for a cider cellar. They call it Dorothy Dingley's chamber."

The Rev. James Dingley was vicar of South Petherwin from 1682 until 1695. He was born 1655, just ten years before the apparition was seen by young Bligh.

Authorities: A. Robbins, "A Cornish Ghost Story," in the Cornish Magazine, 1898 ; A. Robbins, Launceston Past and Present, 1889. The portrait of the Rev. John Ruddle is in my possession. The descendants of Parson Ruddle or Rudall are still on the land, but are in a humble condition.

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