

# LAUNCESTON PAST AND PRESENT

a historical and descriptive sketch

by  
ALFRED F. ROBBINS

Walter Weighell  
1889

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The chronicle of a town of such antiquity could scarcely be considered complete without a ghost-story, and though that with which Launceston was in some way connected was not of an astoundingly remarkable character, it was fortunate, at least, in its historian, who was none other than the author of "The Remarkable Apparition of Mrs. Veal," Daniel Defoe. The latest biographer of the writer of "Robinson Crusoe" gives a description both of the ghost and the publication concerning it which may well be quoted. "On the 18th of June, in the same year [1720] there was published a pamphlet of two and a half sheets, entitled 'Mr. Campbell's Pacquet, for the Entertainment of Gentlemen and Ladies. Containing . . . an account of a most surprising Apparition sent from Launceston, in Cornwall, Attested by the Rev. Mr. Ruddle, Minister there.' I have only now to do with the third section of this pamphlet, which occupies from pages 20 to 33 inclusive, and is headed 'A Remarkable Passage of an Apparition, 1665.' There can be no more doubt that this was written by Defoe than that he wrote the Apparition of Mrs. Veal . . . The professed relator, Mr. Ruddle, a young clergyman, kept a school in Launceston, and some of his scholars died of a disease that happened in the town. Among them was John Elliott, the eldest son of Edward Elliott, of Treberse, Esq. At the youth's request Mr. Ruddle preached a sermon at the Funeral, 'which happened on the 20th day of June, 1665.' An Ancient Gentleman in the Church was much affected by the discourse, having a son who, a few months before, had a character like that given of young Elliott ; but had changed greatly to the affliction of his parents. The old man afterwards addressed Mr. Ruddle, and importuned him to visit him at his House. There

seems to have been considerable difficulty in fixing a day convenient to all parties; but at last, on arriving, he found there a Brother of the Coat, a neighbouring Minister, and as soon as an opportunity occurred after dinner, the two clergymen went into the Garden, where Mr. Ruddle learnt that this poor Boy had grown melancholy from being, as he stated, haunted with a Ghost. After several conferences with the parents, it was agreed that Mr. Ruddle should talk with the boy alone, before giving his advice. 'He told me,' Mr. Ruddle says, 'with all naked freedom, and a Flood of Tears, that his Friends were unkind and unjust to him, neither to believe nor pity him, and that if any Man (making a bow to me) would but goe with him to the Place, he might be convinc'd that the Thing was real,' etc. 'This Woman which appears to me (saith he) lived a Neighbour here to my Father; and dyed about eight years since, her name Dorothy Dingley, of such a Stature, such Age, and such a Complexion.' She met 'him on his way to and from School, morning and evening, in a Field called the Higher Broom Quartils.' He began to be much alarmed and says 'Then I changed my Way, and went to School the under Horse-Road, and then she always met me in the Narrow Lane, between the Quarry Parke and the Nursery, which was worse.' He goes on to describe his growing horrors: 'Night and Day, Sleeping and Waking, the Shape was ever running in my Mind, and I often did repeat these Peaces of Scripture (with that he takes a small Bible out of his Pocket), Job 7, 14 - Thou scarest me with Dreams, and terrifiest me through Visions; - and Deut. 28, 67 - In the Morning thou shalt say, would God it were Evening,' &c, &c. At last his misery became unsupportable, and he told his Brother William, who acquainted their Parents. Mr. Ruddle, by arrangement, went next morning with Master Sam to see the Spectrum. He says, ' The Field he led me to, I guessed to be about twenty acres, in an open Country, and about three Furlongs from any House.' Both saw the Ghost, but had no communication with it then, and Mr. Ruddle was compelled to return to Launceston the same evening. He could not go again in consequence of his wife being taken ill, until three weeks afterward, but he says, 'I studied the Case, resolving by the help of God to see the utmost.' After several visits to the Field, generally alone, all of which are described in the most circumstantial manner, he persisted on Thursday, the 28th of July, 1665, in speaking to it 'until it spake again, and gave me Satisfaction. But the Work could not be finish'd at this time; wherefore the same Evening, an Hour after Sun-set, it met me again near the same Place, and after a few Words on each side it quietly vanished, and neither doth appear since, nor ever will more, to any man's disturbance. The Discourse in the Morning lasted about a quarter of an Hour.' He then solemnly affirms the truth of his narrative, answers the arguments urged by the incredulous, and fortifies himself in a Postscript, by referring to the ancient Fathers of the Church, and quoting from St. Cyprian, and Pamelius's notes on Tertullian. It is observable that he artfully conceals every word of his discourse with the Ghost, intending no doubt to leave that to the individual imagination of the reader, but assigning as his reason, 'I being a Clergyman, and young, and a stranger in these Parts, do apprehend silence and secrecy to be my best security. In rebus abstrusissimus abundans cautela non nocet.' The Account is subscribed with the date, September 4th, 1665.

The apparition thus described has always locally been known as "The Trebursye Ghost," but some latter-day narrators have placed it much farther down in the county than the immediate neighbourhood of Launceston. According to Drew, the Rev. John Ruddle showed his powers of exorcism "in a field about half a mile from Botaden or Botathen," in the parish of Little Petherick, between St. Columb and Padstow; and the Rev. R. S. Hawker, of Morwenstow, in his "Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall," adopts this view in his narrative of "The Botathen Ghost." The Little Petherick theory, however, does not at all fit in with the earliest printed relation – that of Defoe – Little Petherick being somewhat too far from Launceston for an incumbent of St. Mary Magdalene's to have been running thither night and morning. The Rev. F. Jago-Arundell (who vouched for the fact that the account given by C. S. Gilbert was discovered by him in the course of his antiquarian researches – which were especially directed towards a history of Launceston – and was in the handwriting of Ruddle himself) believed that the apparition made itself visible near Trebursye. His opinion was shared by Mrs. Bray, who made the story the basis of her novel, "Trelawney of Trelawne," and who was so convinced that it was a ghost of the vicinity of our town that she fell into the singular error of imagining that the name "Dorothy Dingley" was a fictitious one, designed to spare the feelings of relatives, because she had "never heard of it in Launceston or the neighbourhood" ; and she argued that it was likely to be Durant (as in some versions) because she remembered "a tall respectable man of that name in Launceston." And not only are these opinions, as well as the detailed description of the locality given by Defoe, in favour of the tradition that the apparition was seen near Trebursye, but there is the convincing fact that the name of the ghost-ridden boy was Bligh, and that the family of Bligh had its home for generations at Botathan, in the parish of South Petherwin. And, therefore, although when the Rev. F. G. Lee published in 1875 his "Glimpses of the Supernatural," and therein unhesitatingly accepted the story as true, his belief was laughed at by such grave journals as the Examiner and the Athenaeum, it is as well, as long as the apparition is spoken of at all, that it should be spoken of in its old and correct fashion as "The Trebursye Ghost."

John Ruddle, Ruddell, or Rudall, who is mentioned so prominently in this narrative, took the degree of Master of Arts at Caius College, Cambridge, in 1662, and, according to our Register, "began his ministry at Lauceston at ye Feast of our saviours Nativity, 1663, he then being some twenty-seven years of age; and there are entries in 1664 and 1666 of the baptism of two of his sons, in 1667 of the death, of his first wife, and in 1671 of the marriage of "Mr. John Ruddle Minr. of this town and Mrs. Mary Bolythoe." In 1679 he was appointed vicar of Altarnun, and in an inscription on the communion rails in that church, cut in 1684, he is described as "minister of Lauceston, preb. of Exon., and vicar of this psh.," he having been made prebendary of Exeter in October, 1680. He held all these preferments until his death in January, 1699, when he was buried in our church at the age of sixty-two. This "fanatical minister of Lauceston," as some of his critics have called him, is probably

responsible for many of the polemical alterations in the Register already noted; and it was during his tenure of the living that the Register closed, all the entries for the two or three years after 1670 being struck out with the appended remark "These are entred in ye new Booke."

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