


PREPARE TO MEET THY DOOM !!

The Hobart Spring Heeled Jack Scare Of 1896

This is an account of a period in 1896 when Hobart was gripped with fear at the appearance of a terrifying phenomena known as Spring Heeled Jack. It is commonly known that this phenomena was a kind of elaborate hoax perpetrated in many towns and cities all over the world. There are a few accounts of this happening in Australia and although known as hoaxes, they none the less were terrifying to local residents and at times quite dangerous. This account takes place in 1896 and suggests an end to it some years later. There are some information that suggests this happened before as early as 1880 and as late as 1910, in towns such as Burnie and Beaconsfield as well, as to who it might be we are unsure at this point, but this article will focus on the rather unusual occurrences of the year 1896. Information gathered from old newspaper articles of the time hosted on the Trove website.

In 1896 Tasmanian's were being stalked by a terrifying apparition. A large ghost like figure was appearing in random areas around Hobart. The large figure dressed in a long black coat worn over a bright white shroud emblazoned with the words "PREPARE TO MEET YOUR DOOM" across the chest would appear and disappear with what seemed to be unusual speed. This individual prowled the streets of Hobart for several months. Women and children were scared to go out and lovers encouraged to avoid common love spots and the usual dark alleyways were out of bounds.



The first occurrence as the papers of the time suggest is around the 20th of May 1896. The first sightings seem to be situated around the old St George's burial ground and the Sandy Bay toll gate. The paper goes on to say: "Timid Creatures have been nearly frightened out of their wits lately by the appearance of a white robed figure flitting through the trees at the old disused St George's burial ground. Now and then the figure has been seen in a field near the Sandy Bay toll gate." They are already skeptical of the spectral validity of the apparition stating: "no one for a moment supposes that the apparition is a re-incarnated being, and if the gentlemen who is acting, what the Yankees call "the ox", is sufficiently well-educated to be able to read, and has sufficient enough coin to buy a newspaper he will take a word of advice and drop his tomfoolery.

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The second incident is recorded in the same article, and it seems to suggest that the individual is getting bolder and more brazen. The article continues..“one young lady who was passing Byron Street a few nights since, saw his Ghost-ship, and was so terrified she fainted right away, and in this insensible was discovered by a pedestrian, who was attracted by her groaning. We never really get to know the true motivation of these acts, but the figure seems to gain the most pleasure out of scaring women

Five days later the news heads north. An article appears in the Launceston Examiner “Some senseless person has lately been what is familiarly called “acting the ghost” in the disused St. George’s burial ground. Numbers of females have been frightened at the appearance of the figure in white, and efforts are being made to catch the perpetrator of the so called joke. “ and this on the same day in the News in Brief section “Some fools have been frightening people by “acting the ghost” at St. George’s cemetery, Hobart. “



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Is the apparition armed? That would seem to be the case judging by this article in the Daily Telegraph (Launceston) "last evening several lads, armed with sticks and stones were watching for him, and they promised to give him a warm welcome should they come in close quarters. Several people have, it is said, been terrified lately, by seeing what they term a 'ghost.' The other evening a lad going past St Mary's burial ground saw the same object and went' after it to see what it was. The 'ghost' scaled the Wall and frightened the lad by firing of a firearm. The police are investigating the affair, who, it is hoped, will have no difficulty in running the dastard to earth'. Another article appears the day after suggesting that several women and children have suffered "ill health" at the hands of the apparition and threatens that "person doing it will have a lively time of it if caught". It seems as though the figure has ramped up it's activities , but also there seems to be more people willing to hang out and try to capture it or given it a hiding as one article suggests on the third that people were waiting at the scotch cemetery for an appearance, but were left disappointed as the figure was a no show.

Northerners threatened? On the fifth of June an a source who may know the perpetrator or may it be the perpetrator himself suggested to the Tasmanian News that his Ghost-Ship may intend to make his way up to Launceston. The residents appear to be prepared for this and men from the town form a posse, the newspaper suggests. Unfortunately this article has suffered from age and no more can be read.



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Spring Hell Jack is mentioned for the first time..In The Clipper (An early Tasmanian paper) The ghost is mentioned again as confusion as what to do grows. Three other incidents of ghost hoaxers in Tas and the mainland are mentioned "It's a pity his career isn't finished like the Adelaide party. They fined a ghost there four pounds odd.' 'Not enough for him as money goes there,' put in the Insignificant Man. 'Over in Melbourne it one time a party carried on his ghostly games so far that a reward of £25 was gazetted for his arrest. They called him Spring-Heeled lack on account of the rapidity he displayed in evading the pursuers. It was said he did it for a wager, For when they were looking for him in one place he turned up somewhere else ' The article mentions an incident at Richmond which happened sometime earlier and doesn't seem to be related "A half drunken seaman was sailing merrily home one evening in Richmond when the ghost appeared to him. Now the sailor was not a little bit scared — quite the contrary in fact — so he went for the joker in a good old fashioned style and knocked down with an iron bar for his pains. He put up his arm to stop the blow and the bar broke it and fractured his jaw.' Another incident is mentioned that one would believe to be in Melbourne, because the Alfred Hospital is mentioned. It goes on to say that a similar hoax lead to the death of a woman in Melbourne. The figure appeared from within an alleyway and caused such disturbance that she needed to be rushed to hospital were she died sometime later.



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Citizens of Hobart protest...A letter to editor from someone calling themselves "Anti-Ghost" in the Mercury on Friday the 26 of June suggests the police should use firearms to subdue the ghost and confidence in the police seems to be lowering. The writer mentions another incident were two girls were made ill and they are concerned for the further injury and possible death occurring.

Injury to Insult... Up to this stage the ghost had caused more emotional injury than physical, but this would change by proxy as this article in the Clipper on the 27th of June suggests "It is time that the police should take more energetic measures to discover the people who are working up the ghost? scare. During the last few weeks men, women, and children have been scared by the approach of a faked apparition, worked up no doubt by the aid of luminous paint, and even more serious injuries have resulted. Recently a little child ran into the house and told her mother, a young woman, that the ghost was outside. Armed with the fire poker the girl ran out and meeting another little girl in the passage struck her, on the head, to her horror discovering that in her alarm she had severely injured the infant. In many parts of the city the usual lovers' walks have been deserted and servant girls and others are afraid to even get about their ordinary household duties should they take them out into the dark. If the scare is permitted to continue it is quite possible that some untoward circumstance may eventuate in a tragedy. The most effective way of putting a stop to this devilish masquerade would be for a police reward to be offered. Once let the offenders see that energetic steps are to be taken to discover them and they will cease from troubling.



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Spring Heeled Jack is mentioned again and a clearer description of the figure is offered...

"The senseless individual who is acting the ghost continues to appear at intervals to persons in diverse places, and has, so far, been successful in eluding capture. But there is an old proverb "That the pitcher goes to the well once too often", and it is on the books that the ghost will yet make a mistake and find it rather a dear and painful matter to act the fool.

A number of highly respectable people have now seen the thing, and their description of it is a rather weird one. It wears a high hat and an overcoat. When it meets somebody whom he considers a fit person to play a lark on the coat opens and there are exposed the ribs, apparently, of a skeleton, the skull and crossbones, and the words "Prepare to meet your doom." All this is emblazoned with phosphorus, and which, for the time being, at any rate, strikes terror into the stoutest heart. He has got rather too close to some, however, who made a dash for him. He was off like a rocket and with a bound cleared a very high wail, which proved conclusively to his pursuers that he must wear some kind of springs on his heels like a noted "Spring heeled Jack" in London some 60 years back. What purpose the ghost has in view, and what satisfaction or pleasure he derives from his pastime is beyond comprehension. Our informants add that when his Ghostship approaches an individual

he throws open his coat by extending his arms heavenward, making them look like two horns, while he also distorts his face, and appears a veritable imp of Satan."



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Ghost or...g..t – Entering into July a great excitement came over those who worked at the Postal-Telegraph department for it was believed the ghost had been captured. The article in the Mercury reads - “THE GHOST-Yesterday evening considerable excitement was caused in the

Postal Telegraph Department by one of the staff rushing in and announcing that the ghost had been captured at Sandy Bay A few minutes later one of the messengers appeared on the scene and very excitedly gave the information as authentic, but the rumour proved to be unfounded. The other evening a policeman on duty in Davey street was somewhat startled by seeing what he took to be the ghost in St David’s burial ground leaning against the fence. Being some distance away from the unwelcome visitor he stopped thinking of what he should do, He was alone, and naturally felt a bit nervous However, he decided to “face the music,” and drawing his staff saunter along, bracing himself up with the thought that he was there to protect life and property. The night was dark, and in the distance he could see the “white monster,” with piercing eyes, staring fixedly at him Still he went on, but wishing all the time that someone else was in his shoes. On getting pretty close to what he took to be the meet-me-at moonlight-alone-visitor he asked him a question, but, getting no reply, he made a terrific hit with his staff, but the animal (for, sure enough, it was a billy goat) dodged, and was soon out of reach It had been standing on a tombstone, with its two fore legs resting on the fence The policeman suffered a good deal with the proud satisfaction of having done his duty.

Old man Kerr fights Back! An older man named William Kerr was another victim. On Warwick street he was attending to his horses when the figure appeared before him. Startled at first but having no belief in ghosts and therefore not being scared in the

last tried reaching for a rock to throw at the apparition. Failing to find a rock he pulled out his knife and yelled “COME MAN OR COME DEVIL, I AM NOT AFRAID OF YOU!”. He then started at the figure with his open knife. The man sensing danger turned on his heels and ran towards unoccupied ground to which he could escape either to Murray or Elizabeth street. Unfortunately Mr Kerr being of a relatively advanced age was not fleet of foot and was unable to catch the perpetrator.

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Despite Dr. Crowther's (a local government minister of the time) attempts at a solution to the problem nothing is really achieved and the ghosts goes on its merry way scaring people. On the 9th of July he makes another appearance. At nine o'clock that evening as a woman was making her way home up Colville street the ghost leaped from behind bushes and nearly scared the poor woman half to death. Her screams being heard by two young men who were in the area. She was still recovering a day later. The ghost appears again in park street near Crisps timber yard and Warwick street. A reward is now offered and some suggest shooting the individual to rid the town of this menace. If only they could catch him.

The premier comes under some scrutiny in this article from the Launceston Examiner on the 11th of July " I see that Dr. Crowther, one of the M.H.A. for Kingborough, He has asked the Attorney General if it is his intention to take any special steps to secure the party or parties who, under the guise of "ghosts," are causing much fear and anxiety among the youthful portion of the people of Hobart and suburbs. Hobart for years past has had its periodical attack of ghost, so it's just about time something was done to lay this uneasy spirit. I would suggest the Premier don that celebrated Karkee uniform of his, once so vividly described to the House by its wearer. The coat, if I remember rightly, would fit a medium sized boy, while the "continuations" would provide house-room for a whole family. Arrayed in this formidable looking attire, let the Premier some dark night station himself in the locality where the spirit takes its customary rounds. When the

ghost appears let him confront it, and at the same time start intoning choice selections from a certain work on "Shikar" in India. If the apparition gets over the uniform it will never survive the "Shikar" that is unless its capacity for swallowing is much more extensive than I take it to be".

Edward Braddon - Premier Of
Tasmania 1896



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False Positive.. Seeking some notoriety and to win a wager, a local official is challenged to seek and capture the apparition and so, goes about staking out the area around St. Georges hill. On the third night he was observing and saw a white figure flitting from house to house. Keen to catch the fiend red handed he approached, but was quickly disappointed as the so called ghost was just a friend of his moving out of his house and into another one near by. The white bedspread he was carrying covered up almost his entire body giving him the ghostly appearance. The next encounter or so the information available on Trove happens to a rail worker named Mulligan on the 11th of July. Mulligan (a rail worker) was heading home on Park Street. He turned out of the corner on Liverpool street and out of nowhere the ghost appears, so close that he was able to grab the figures coat, but Mulligan was much smaller than the ghost and it managed to get away up the domain road. Mulligan called for others to help but by then it was too late.

Caught again?...By this stage a rumour was circling of a reward offered to any policeman who captured the ghost. The reward it was said was 15 pounds for any officer with the ghost under his control. This was not true and neither were reports on the 13th of July that the ghost had been captured. The man involved sighted a figure from afar and thinking he might be the hero that captures the ghost runs towards it. He gets within reach and tussles with it only to find it's a wax head on top of two large sticks with a white sheet around it. Disappointed, he places it on his shoulder and takes it to the police. The following night a group of youths took upon themselves to form a vigilante posse and so armed with all manner of weapons one can grab from the garden or home, patrolled the streets between Trinity Hill and the Campbell street Quadrant. The patrol was fruitless and the only incident that occurred that night was also as fruitless. The incident occurred as a couple were walking by the old Wesleyan burial ground when they heard a rustling sound. When they turned to see what the noise was a figure in white burst from out from a hedge that lined an old paddock that faced the cemetery. The figure crossed Adelaide street and leaped over a 5ft rubble stone wall. The two set off quickly to tell someone and made it to Arthur where they recounted to a resident there what had just happened. Still intrigued by all this they made their way back to the area. They then discovered the remnants of a white towel and foot marks in the mud that were too small to be the ghost and assumed that this was just another prank possibly played by a mischievous young lady.

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A report on the 16th of July suggest through an informant that no one can identify that the individual is doing this as a wager. He is to make 1000 pounds if he can parley his act on the streets of Hobart and Launceston and get away with it. There maybe some truth in this as the ghost is reported to have moved north. By the 18th of July it seems the ghost may have gotten tired of scaring Hobartians and decided to take his act to Launceston. This account in The Examiner explains the incident "“Prepare to Meet thy Doom.”-This is not the subject of an evangelical address or a pulpit homily, as some may at a first glance conclude, but the rather startling intimation which adorned the manly chest of a figure in white, which confronted a peaceable, law-abiding citizen as he wended his way home Invermay-wards on Thursday evening in a condition as sober as that of the proverbial judge. Before the astonished pedestrian quite collected his scattered senses, the figure, which made its appearance alongside a fence, jumped upwards and disappeared over it, vanishing into the blackness of the night. The movement was so sudden, and the disappearance so complete, that the startled individual came to the conclusion that such a volatile creation could emanate only from a magic lantern, and from nothing else. Be this as it may, a “ghost” of more substantial proportions is reported to have made a sudden appearance on Thursday and last evening before several individuals in such a variety of localities as to either give him the reputation of being ubiquitous or lend colour to the assertion that there is more than one of these undesirable gentry about, whose ardour in their senseless proceedings might well be cooled by a ducking in the nearest pond, or their skylarking propensities ballasted by a charge of buckshot in some suitable portion of their anatomy.”



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By now there's a fair amount of hysteria revolving around this subject, with some speculating that he may be someone with serious mental health issues or a former inmate of Point Puer childrens prison suffering from the scares of tragedy that one would bare having spent time in a place like that. This hysteria is also leading to some speculative violence as one man is mistaken for the ghost and gets severely bashed only to find out he's just a local prone to outbursts and mental health issues. Another gentleman is mistaken as is written in this article' Now a friend of mine who carries a thick stick was walking home up Macquarie street the other evening and when close to Harrington street saw, as he fancied, a ghostly figure approaching. It was about eight feet high, and without more ado he let fly his stick at it. Mr. Johnson's weapon rung off a tin can carried upon a sanitary gentleman's head and — well, I leave the rest to your comprehensive faculties to figure out.' The speculation continues as the spectre is seen in Launceston again. At this time there is a strong belief that the northern incarnation is a copycat. It is also speculated that if the Ghost has indeed moved to Launceston it is because he has scared all his victims off the streets of Hobart.



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Police still seem rather indifferent to the subject, but this may be due to the criticism heaped on them for not catching the figure and the individual causing them a small amount of embarrassment. This excerpt from an article in the Launceston Examiner indicates the doubt the constabulary have "Nor do the police attach any importance to the prevailing epidemic. They have received no reports on the matter, and they stoutly maintain, "from information received," that the "ghost" has no real existence. It will therefore be necessary that the "ghost" -if there is such a one among us should take an early opportunity of scaring a policeman or two into the middle of next week if he would have his personality established beyond all possibility of doubt. The general public and especially the female portion by no means share in this indifference. That there is a "ghost" there seems no reason to doubt, and that there are numbers of people who are mistakenly convinced they have seen it is equally certain. It would, however, appear that what has caused the sensation is not a kind of "Springheel Jack" who can first give people a scare and then jump 15ft. in' the air over them, but a powerful magic lantern-a sort of miniature search light, which is made to play on the fence round the Deanery and up and down those in Babington and Middle streets, and which is probably worked from a verandah higher up the hill. This, at any rate, is the opinion of a level-headed man who was startled by the apparition on Saturday evening." The rumours of indifference may be unfounded though as referenced in a July 25th article one police constable had an unusual plan "Despite all reports to the contrary, the Hobart police were particularly active during the ghost scare. One gallant bobby hit upon the brilliant if not original plan of parading the streets in female attire under the fond delusion that he was disguised, quite oblivious of the fact that the stately tramp of the Hobart bobby is every bit as unmistakable as the brogue of the Sydney cop, and

that his disguise was just as easy penetrable as that of the ass clad in the lions skin. However, he put in several evenings in this manner, and not having seen anything unusual in his in his perambulations has come to the conclusion that 'there weren't no bloomin ghost at all.' The article goes on to tell another encounter a policeman had "Another policeman got a little further one night last week, as he certainly made a capture. On his beat he passed High street, and outside the pub on the corner he spied something suspicious, and at once proceeded to investigate. Carefully approaching the mysterious object he threw a stone at it, but without eliciting any response. Then he got a little nearer, and making a bold rush, managed to secure-a double loaf of bread which some wag had carved an imitation of a human face and mounted on sticks enveloping the whole thing in a sheet"

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An end to it all? One more encounter has said to have happened at Evandale, but a look at the article suggests this may have been a sighting of a more traditional nature and not his Ghostship. The sightings seemed to have died down by the later part of 1896 and for some years it appears the person involved in these acts got away with it. Then in article on the 27th of July 1909 it said that the police capture the ghost "SEIZURE OF THE GHOST : Some time ago it was reported that a male was playing the ghost in West Hobart, but the police pooh-pooed the idea, and characterised the whole thing as fantasy. It was slated today that a certain person had been caught acting the ghost and was shot in the leg, which required medical attendance. It is further stated that he had attained convalescence, and would shortly be prosecuted for his folly.

There's probably more to be heard from this tale and if there is we will be sure to update it further.



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