

From the Edge of Postcards

The Wem Ghost Photo

Following a fire in a small English town, a mysterious photo of the blaze—seemingly depicting a girl ghost—circulated around the world.

BLAKE SMITH

On November 19, 1995, the town hall of the English market town of Wem burned, leaving only a charred brick shell. Among the locals watching the building burn was Tony O’Rahilly, who brought his camera and took several photos of the blaze. A few months later, in March 1996, O’Rahilly developed the photos of the fire in a little film studio he’d constructed in a shed in the garden behind his home. The series of pictures showed dramatic images of fire, light, and darkness. But one showed something even more astonishing—a ghostly girl standing amid the flames (Topham, n.d.).

O’Rahilly sent the photos to the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP) for analysis. The ASSAP, which specializes in paranormal investigations, assisted O’Rahilly by having Vernon Harrison, former head of the Royal Photographic Society, examine the photos. Harrison concluded, “The negative is a straightforward piece of black-and-white work and shows no sign of having been tampered with” (Laursen 2007).

The ASSAP’s conclusion was that the photo (see figure 1) showed a simulacrum (a random, ambiguous image interpreted as meaningful) caused by falling debris filmed during the fire. It did not appear to be a hoax. However, this conclusion was called into question

by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), which investigated the case for its television show *Out of this World*, hosted by current Independent Television (ITV) presenter Chris Choi.

In the BBC show, Choi interviewed O’Rahilly in his garden and also toured the burned-out remnants of the town hall. The conventional story of the ghostly photo was also told. But when the BBC took the photo to the National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television (now known as the National Media Museum), viewers learned a different story. Both of the photography

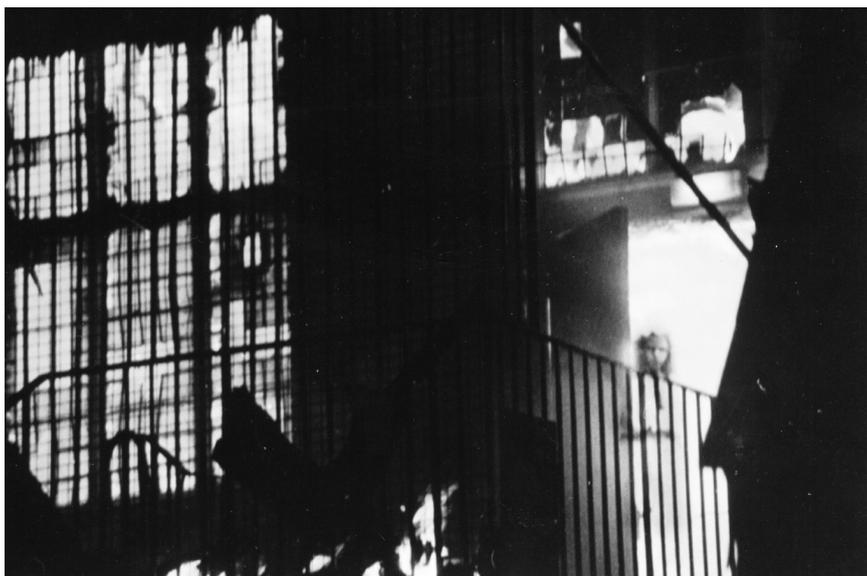


Figure 1. Tony O’Rahilly’s hoaxed photo created by combining actual images from the town hall fire with an old postcard. [Courtesy of The Fortean Picture Library]

experts there, Paul Thompson and Will Stapp, agreed that the photo showed signs of manipulation and double exposure. Thompson in particular noted that he saw horizontal scan lines, as though the image consisted of a photo of a face on a video screen pasted into the picture of the fire. With that damning revelation, Choi returned to confront O’Rahilly, who responded, “No way . . . It’s none of my doing.”

I first became interested in investigating this case in September 2009. At that time, the allegations of the *Out of this World* show were not widely available on the Internet. As is usual in the echo chamber of ghost literature, the ghost stories rang loud and clear while the facts lay quietly subdued out in the back shed. I came across the BBC piece online and found it very interesting. A check of the ASSAP’s website showed that they still felt the case was one of pareidolia instead of hoaxing. I found that intriguing and asked them why; they replied that the photo they’d provided to the BBC during the television investigation had been a duplicate, and in their opinion the “scan lines” observed by Paul Thompson had been the result of duplication, not hoaxing.

Trying to find a more pristine copy of the photograph to examine, I reached out



Figure 2. This 1922 postcard, reprinted in the *Shropshire Star*, helped prove O’Rahilly’s hoax.

to Janet Bord at the Fortean Picture Library. She was able to provide me with a high-resolution photo as well as a shot of the negative strip from which it was produced. As the ASSAP had said, the original did not have any scan lines. It showed a ghostly girl in the fire, but there was no evidence of digital scan lines.

I tried to contact Paul Thompson and Will Stapp. Both are still involved in photography but are no longer working with the National Media Museum. Neither Thompson nor Stapp responded



Figure 3. This unnamed girl from the 1922 Wem postcard was used by O’Rahilly to create the ghostly image.

**In the years since the fire, Wem has
come to embrace the ghost...
People have reported seeing the ghost
of Jane in the intervening years,
usually carrying a candle.**

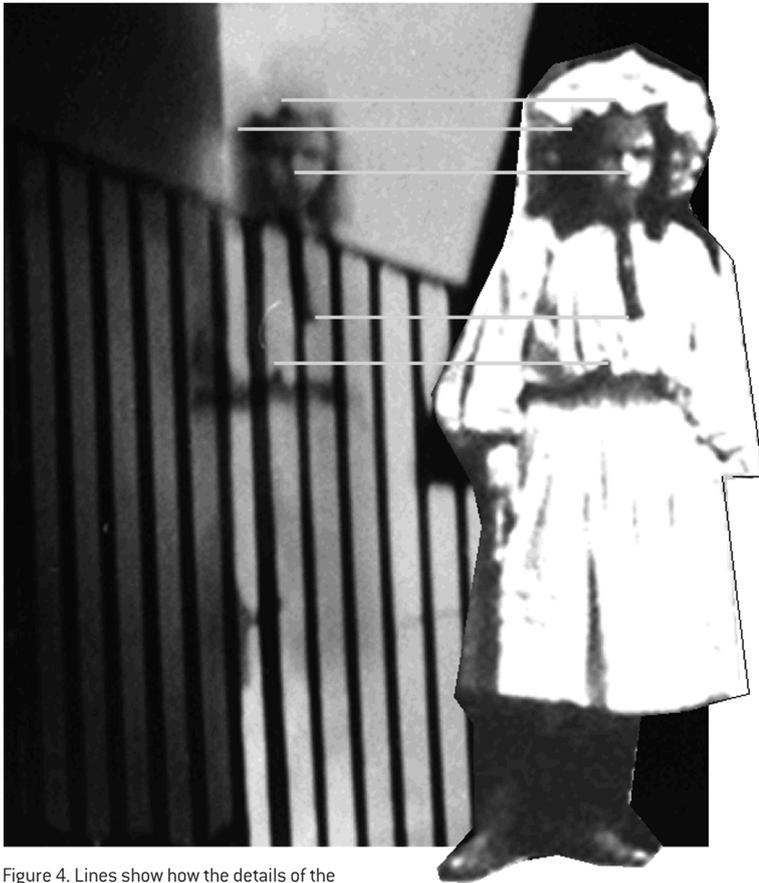


Figure 4. Lines show how the details of the “ghost” image line up with those of the postcard girl.

to my inquires, and other photography experts I approached were unwilling to opine on the matter.

To be clear, I didn’t think the photo showed a ghost—but I was deeply curious to know whether O’Rahilly had photographed a piece of debris with an uncanny resemblance to a girl or had deliberately faked the photograph. I would have liked to have asked him, but he passed away in 2005.

And then the answer arrived in the morning mail. On Monday, May 17, 2010, the *Shropshire Star*, the local paper serving Wem, ran a story titled, “Does Postcard Solve Ghost Riddle?” The *Star* had run a photo a few weeks earlier showing a postcard from 1922 of a street in Wem (see figure 2). An alert reader named Brian Lear, a seventy-seven-year-old grandfather, noticed that the girl pictured in the postcard (see figure 3) bore a strong resemblance

to the famous ghost girl and alerted the *Star*. In the May 17 article, the newspaper showed details from O’Rahilly’s photo and the postcard and agreed with Lear that the resemblance was “striking” (Neal 2010).

Striking may be an understatement. Rarely does such a clear explanation for a ghost photo come to light. Rather than simply show both photos, I have created an animation demonstrating that the two girls are indeed the same photographic image: the one superimposed on the fire photograph by O’Rahilly via a double exposure. On the blog of *The Atlanta Skeptics*, my animated image of the girl on the postcard dynamically fades in over the ghost photo; the alignments should also be apparent from the still image shown in figure 4. The points of the girl’s hat, the eyes, the nose, the neckline, and the beltline align perfectly between the two

photos. O’Rahilly used this postcard image to make his ghost photo. Details missing from the ghost photo—but appearing in the postcard—are due to either the photographic process used to make the fake image or to O’Rahilly cropping the postcard prior to shooting his double exposure.

In the years since the fire, Wem has come to embrace the ghost. The town’s history tells of a devastating fire back in 1677, allegedly caused by a girl named Jane Churm. People have reported seeing the ghost of Jane in the intervening years, usually carrying a candle (Karl 2007). It is no surprise that many have claimed that the girl in the photo must be Jane. After all, what’s a ghost photo without a backstory? Even the spot where the ghost was “photographed” had been adorned with documentation of the paranormal event. Perhaps Wem’s townsfolk should move that bit of documentation over to the late O’Rahilly’s shed?

It’s a pity that O’Rahilly died before this postcard came to light. He got plenty of media coverage when the photo was released originally, and now with the coverage of the explanation he could have enjoyed a second wave of interest. Indeed, he would have gotten double the exposure. ■

References

- Karl, Jason. 2007. *An Illustrated History of the Haunted World*. London: New Holland Publishers, Ltd.
- Laursen, Chris. 2007. In the doorway of a burning building. Available online at http://seminars.torontoghosts.org/blog/index.php/2007/07/11/weird_wednesday_with_chris_laursen_32.
- Neal, Toby. 2010. Does postcard solve ghost riddle? *Shropshire Star* (United Kingdom). Available online at www.shropshirestar.com/news/2010/05/17/does-postcard-solve-ghost-riddle/.
- Topham, Ian. n.d. Wem town hall. Available online at www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/england/shropshire/hauntings/wem-town-hall.html.



Blake Smith is a ghost researcher and computer technician living in Kennesaw, Georgia.