

The House that Mr Jack Built

There is always one house that you think of as haunted no matter where you are. Get a group of you together as kids and the clues are all there. Just because it does not look like something from Scooby Doo when you repeat it often enough it has a habit of coming true in your head.

Take Mr. Jack's house. I could not even tell you what his surname was but because we had been brought up to be polite we called him mister.

I remember him on his rusted bike squeaking past the front window as I architected with my Lego. Coming back from another odd job, my mam would say.

He fell in front of a bus, it broke his foot and he stopped the odd jobs. He gave up, moved on.

His house was left behind though. And his collection of cats. What started as one stray quickly developed into, whilst not quite a menagerie, certainly a sizeable number. Like small fish in a large bowl they were never still enough to count so I could not tell you exactly how many they were.

With the quick logic of youth we put together cat equals witch equals evil equals ghosts.

So Mr. Jack's house was the haunted one. No one moved in, adding to our delighted fear.

Dares were taken to explore the back garden, overgrown, nettled and full of cat muck. We would search the through looking for signs of recent sacrifices, gaping doorways straight to hell or the sticky ectoplasm of the ghouls that picnicked there.

The closet we ever got though was the petrified body of a mouse, we trembled to see it was lacking a head.

A summer soon finishes and we went back to lessons. As the nights closed in we dared each other less. The news told tales of miners and coal drying up so we found new games of coppers versus strikers and it left little time for supernatural pondering.

Chris, a friend of mine – big lad who used to take a crisp from everyone every break time but never bought his own -, noticed the change first.

He saw the new doormat on the porch of Mr Jack's. It was still in it's wrapping (all the better to wipe the blood off) and a path had been beaten through the front garden jungle.

We left the grown-ups to continue their game and once again set our minds to the house and the coven that had obviously moved in there. Their midnight dancing had caused the flattening of the grass (the time meant this was why no one had seen them) and the sudden strange absence of the cats was due to the surge in sacrifices and the need to cleanse the house of the old warlock.

It was decided (due to a mix up between vampires and witches that I should have spotted but after getting caught in the excitement missed) that as they would all be asleep, or at least of minimal power during the day we would have to go in to explore and if possible, and necessary (Chris, with Chipstick breath, insisted already it was necessary) get rid of the demon conjurers.

Over the next few nights and weeks as we prepared our arsenal of weapons we saw the defences of Mr Jack's house growing stronger. The window that

had always been broken (even when he lived there) was fixed or replaced. The paintwork was done up and made brighter and fresher in an attempt to put us off the scent, it only strengthened our resolve though so each night we met to discuss what else was needed.

A stake – but what wood, how would we point the end and where was *exactly* the heart? Best leave this.

Holy water – cubs was the only point I, or any of us, got to go to church so this did not seem likely as the monthly parade was still 3 weeks away.

Crosses – thanks to older sisters flirting with a Madonna fixations these were easy to get hold of . Perhaps not such an impressive arsenal.

It was not lost on us that the day that we were looking at was Halloween. Largely because we would all be allowed out and it fell on a Saturday that year so we had no school the next day.

My hands smelled of the turnip that we had been hollowing out all day and I had gassy burps from the Dandelion and Burdock that we were allowed at this time of year. Partly the nerves, mainly the excitement swam about us as we met with our Elizabeth Duke crosses.

This was in the years before the American idea of Halloween came so there were no costumes or any bowls for sweets., just the abandon that our parents let us have the week before Guy Fawkes day when we would get sweet rewards for our burning effigies. So we were free to wander as we wished and we wandered through the old field into the back garden of Mr. Jack's house. The grasses here had still not been properly cut back (all the better to hide whatever evils were ejected or summoned) so we crept forward.

I was the one with the short straw, the one with the best cross, so the best protection. Besides Chris was too big to get in the window that flapped open near the back of what in our house was the kitchen. My palms were greasy

from the sweat, the turnip juice and the cheap silver jewellery so I slipped a little as I got into the window.

The dark, and the quiet, and the smell were the first three things to strike me. The smell was of new paint and old decay mixed together to create something not wholly unpleasant but also not really something you wanted to have under your nose all night.

Even though I was frightened the sensible part of my brain, that part that was growing up and liked cups of tea and listening to the headlines (but not the whole news) told me the place was empty and there was nothing natural never mind supernatural in the house. It was wrong.