

Have ghost lights really declined?

Alan Murdie

Review article

In their interesting article on unexplained '*Jack-o'-lanterns, will-o'-the-wisps, and ignis fatuus: Making sense of ghost lights*' (Vol 10 No.1 2024) Andrew Dean and Sylvia Dean ask, 'Where did all the ghost lights go?' and further asking, 'What Next for Ghost Light Scholarship?'

I would challenge the assumption that ghost lights 'are no longer being witnessed' and suggest that at least two factors may be at work giving this apparent impression.

Firstly, I would propose the decline may in fact only reflect a lack of research initiatives and surveys and collecting efforts within the UK and other countries. A problem impacting approaches to spontaneous experiences is that work is largely left to occasional efforts by those who do not necessarily share any common perspectives. Many topics in parapsychology and the study of anomalies may still be described in terms of philosopher Thomas. S. Kuhn's 'pre-paradigmatic science'. Whereas experimental work with psi in laboratories has allowed some standardisation of paranormal research, as will be appreciated approaching spontaneous experiences working in such a way is not possible. This leaves the small number of researchers proceeding on a case-by-case basis, not really knowing where they are heading next –whether geographically or any other direction. This problem is compounded in anomalies research by such studies being the preserve of a small number of individual investigators, each with his/her own methods, perspectives and own set of findings. In the natural course of things these researchers die leaving no successors, and decades may pass before any researcher returns to their findings, if at all. Quite simply if no-one is collecting accounts of a particular class of phenomena then an apparent decline will be perceived.

Whilst I have not made specific efforts at collecting accounts of anomalous light phenomena myself for some years, contemporary reports of ghost light phenomena can still be obtained. For instance, at the end of August 2022 I visited the Glencoe Folk Museum in Argyllshire, Scotland. Founded in the 1960s, it holds more than 6,000 artefacts and chronicles daily life in the Glencoe district between the 17th and 21st centuries, as well as displaying exhibits harking back to even earlier epochs (for example a replica of

the mysterious Bronze age Ballachulish Goddess figure unearthed locally in 1880). Here I learned from staff of strange, unexplained lights reportedly seen on the nearby hills around Glencoe within the last four years. Seen moving along the tops and sides of crags it might be thought these sightings arise from torches or lanterns carried by walkers or in some cases are the headlights of off-road vehicles. But inexplicably these lights have been seen suddenly dipping down the steepest slopes and then glide out across the waters of Loch Leven towards its centre(Murdie, 2023).

A clue to their origins was suggested with one of the highlights of the museum collection. This is a coffin boat once used to transport bodies to the former clan burial island of Eilean Munde situated in Loch Leven. A local woman Christina MacDonald was the last MacDonald buried there in 1972 (See *Scotland On Sunday* 17 February 2013). Locally it is suggested the phenomenon may represent spectral traces of torch-bearing funeral parties from afar who once descended down from the hills and then proceeded by boat to cross the water to Eilean Munde.

One helpful guide at the museum who shared this theory with me drew attention to a pamphlet *Highland Folk Lore* by Barbara Fairweather, who founded the museum in 1963 (Fairweather, 1986). This contains earlier stories of strange lights, one seen so frequently it earned the name the Callart Light, after Callart House and adjacent lands on the shores of Loch Leven. A number of these appearances were deemed prophetic, heralding of the deaths of clan members, examples of the widespread Highland belief in second sight. There are parallels here with the patterns of ghostly lights reported across the UK, with a concentration in the Highlands of Scotland, the Western Isles and often in rugged parts of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Secondly, I think any perceived decline may also reflect changing trends and shifts in interpretation by researchers of what were once labelled ghost lights. Strange lights are still reported, however, in the West the paradigm of understanding has changed from ghost lights to ufology, Fortean anomalies and general psychic experiences. The first of these has lately resurged with claims from the United States of UAP – Unidentified Aerial Phenomena as they are styled in the 21st century.

I would suggest examination of contemporary experiences in the fields of ufology still carry contemporary examples of what in the 19th century were labelled ghost lights or ignis fatuus. One of the best known sightings is the alleged Rendlesham Forest incident

in Suffolk in December 1980 where a strange light was seen by personnel at the Bentwaters American airbase (Pope, Burroughs and Penniston, 2014).

Interestingly, a nearby village of Sudbourne saw a wintertime outbreak of strange lights a century earlier. Buried in an obscure collection known as the *East Anglian Miscellany* published during the First World War and then again between 1933-1943 is a letter published in 1942 from a correspondent - a Mr G F Fell of Orford - seeking an answer to a mystery some sixty years in his boyhood at Sudbourne. Around 1882 he and some friends encountered a manifestation of what were known as 'hobby lanterns' on 'certain nights' in two local fields known as Workhouse Field and Kiln Field. He writes '....one of these objects could be seen on these fields. They look like a dull red light, like a lantern with the glass smoky. It moved to and fro across the field, about walking pace, always in the same track above the ground: it never went near the hedge.' This report indicates a continuity of experience in the area (Murdie & Halliday, 2005).

Important studies of light anomalies include those of the British researcher Paul Devereux in his book *Earthlights* (1982) a term he has coined as he links them with geology. Devereux proposes these lights are part of a single Earth-based phenomenon: the geological production of atmospheric lights by the actions of strains, tensions and subsurface movement in the Earth's crust, in the form of electromagnetic discharges. For instance, light phenomena are associated with earthquakes and areas of seismic activity, particularly along the American West Coast and Japan. Devereux suggests correlations with sites of particular geological faulting (Devereux, 1982).

In a second book *Earthlights Revelation* (Devereux, 1989) he refines and redefines the earthlight hypothesis he promulgated, with a wide-ranging survey of light phenomena from around the world, and particularly in Britain, North America and Scandinavia. These include the various 'spook-lights' in the USA, and a number of historical cases from Britain, including the Egryn Lights near Barmouth in Wales of 1904-5 linked with a religious revival and the remarkable phenomena seen at Burton Dassett, Warwickshire in the 1920s, as well as more recently in the Peak District, especially the Longdendale Valley in Derbyshire. These Pennine lights have been subject to further study (Clarke, 1993, 2000 and 2015) with the luminosities investigated as part of 'Project Pennine', a research initiative which led from 1999 to the area being surveyed with a web-camera in attempts to spot them. (see 'Things that go bump in the net' *Daily Mail* 26 October 1999). Many paranormal explanations have been postulated. These range from lamps being

carried by phantom Roman legionnaires on the site track of former Roman roads, to the lights being linked with the deaths of 24 navvies in a cholera epidemic in 1838 at the time of the building of the Woodhead tunnel in the valley and representing 'unquiet souls still carrying torches to work.' More pertinently, people are still reporting strange lights and sightings from Derbyshire, with examples appearing in local press reports, e.g. recent claims of strange lights near Kilpin near Belper in Derbyshire (Toms, 2022).

Certainly, as Dean and Dean state ghost lights still thrive in other global regions Outside North America and Western Europe, they are still current in other countries, most notably in parts of Latin America such as Colombia and in rural Romania.

For instance, during the course of a number of trips to Colombia 1996 – 2006 I learned that anomalous lights remained well known and were the subject of tentative investigations by student teams at the National Observatory in Bogota. I also found that a spirit light was the local interpretation of what had been classed as a UFO incident at Anolaima in July 1969 where the main witness had died shortly afterwards (Murdie, 2002). Similarly, in visits to Romania between 2003-2006 I learned of areas such as the Hoia Bacu Woods near Cluj-Napoca reputedly haunted by spirit lights which people believed indicated the site of buried treasure.

Another possibility is that ghost lights have actually moved indoors, since still featuring in personal accounts of experiences, primarily collected by psychical researchers and parapsychologists interested in spontaneous cases. Examples include poltergeist outbreaks (Roll, 1972) and studies of alleged séance phenomena (Keen, Ellison & Fontana, 1999).

As will be recognised light phenomena feature in claims of religious experience and events associated with special or gifted persons such as mediums, mystics and saints. They are also reported in phenomena associated with dying persons, and others in which the 'luminous' persons generally have some sort of physical or mental condition. (See Alvarado, 1987, for a review). The mediums were often in trance, and the mystics and saints were generally in prayer, meditation, or ecstasy.

Unfortunately, there is frequently not enough information in accounts to undertake deeper analysis. However, if accurately reported it is probable that some of the cases involved some sort of altered state of consciousness in the person around whom the light was observed, a point also raised by Devereux (1982).

References

- Alvarado, C. S. (1987) 'Observations of Luminous Phenomena Around the Human Body: A Review', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 54(806), pp. 38-60.
- Clarke, D. (1993) *Ghosts and Legends of the Peak District*. Norwich: Jarrold Ltd.
- Clarke D. (2000) *Supernatural Peak District*. London: Robert Hale Ltd.
- Clarke, D. (2015) Lore & Legend on The Pennine Way. Available at:
<https://drdavidclarke.co.uk/2015/04/06/lore-legend-on-the-pennine-way/>
(Accessed: 23 Feb 2025).
- Devereux, P. (1982) *Earth Lights: Towards an Understanding of the Unidentified Flying Objects Enigma*. HarperCollins Distribution Services.
- Fairweather, B. (1986) *Highland Folk Lore*. Glencoe Folk Museum.
- Halliday, R. and Murdie, A. (2005) 'Magic Lanterns', *Fortean Times*, 204, pp. 40-42.
- Keen, M., Ellison, A., & Fontana, D. (1999) The Scole report, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 58, part 220, pp. 150-452.
- Murdie A. (2002) 'Spirit in the Sky', *Fortean Times*, 160, pp. 40-42.
- Murdie, A. (2023) 'Ghostwatch: Spirits of Glencoe', *Fortean Times*, 428, pp. 18-21.
- Pope, N., Burroughs, J., Penniston, J. (2014) *Encounter in Rendlesham Forest: The Inside Story of the World's Best-Documented UFO Incident*. Thomas Dunne Books.
- Roll, W. (1972) *The Poltergeist. A Mind-Bending Exploration into the Weird World of the Paranormal*. Star Books. UK edition.
- Toms, A. (2022) 'New footage of UFO lights appearing over Derbyshire village' Derbyshire Live, 11th October Available at:
www.derbytelegraph.co.uk/news/local-news/new-footage-ufo-lights-appearing-7687160 (Accessed: 23 February 2025).