

A true tale of murder, a haunting and.. calling all readers! If you happen to be a current, or former FBI agent, sheriff, miner, local news journalist, lawyer, realtor, postman, rancher, cavalry scout, photographer, hotel manager, taxi driver, native American, resident of Colorado... then I'm all ears. More about why, in the monthly newsletter. Enjoy

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It's November. The season of the uncanny...

Hello and greetings from Stratford-upon-Avon, UK

As I sit here and write, it's Halloween. A time for trick-or-treating. And ghosts and hauntings...

In the spirit of the season, I'd like to share with you two unrelated ghostly (true) tales from my local area.

I don't know what to make of them. See what you think.

Setting the scene

Picture where I live. The Midlands, England. About one hundred miles northwest of London, close to the ancient town of Stratford-upon-Avon, famous for being the birthplace of Shakespeare. To be fair, most places around here are 'ancient', or at least have origins dating far back in history.

It's the last ripple of the Cotswolds, a world-famous area of 'outstanding natural beauty' (an 'ONB' as we term it in the UK). A range of 'wolds', or rolling hills, that rise from the

meadows of the upper River Thames, to an escarpment above the Severn Valley, near the city of Bristol, and the Vale of Evesham. 800 square miles of pretty, honey-coloured stone houses and cottages, set in wooded valleys.

Anyway, I live on the very northern edge of this region, my home close to two interesting locations: a former stately home, or country house, called Compton Verney; now an art gallery (think of the houses you see in *Downton Abbey*, or any number of 'big' old houses in a British-set period TV drama. There are photographs of all the locations mentioned, below).

Secondly, from where I live it's possible to see the site of the first battle of the English Civil War. Edgehill, fought between the armies of King Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, in 1642. I've walked it many times and it's a lonely, eerie place, even on a warm sunny day.

Now, before I proceed, I'd ask you to keep an open mind on the following. This is my secondhand testimony, but I will vouch for those first-hand witnesses who recounted these tales. I've had strange experiences of my own, so I cannot dismiss the testimony of others, even if there are prosaic explanations.

The ghosts of Edgehill

I go running on the quiet roads and trails in my area regularly. It's beautiful country. Rural farms, quiet single-track lanes (narrow roads) and small, pretty villages. One route takes me close to the site of the Battle of Edgehill, fought on

a cold autumn day: October 23, 1642, at the eastern end of an escarpment close to the villages of Edgehill and Radway. Today, the summit of this escarpment is topped with woods running its full length, approximately two miles. Its lower slopes are a patchwork of small fields full of cattle, and isolated farms. The village of Edgehill sits on top of the escarpment, Radway at the bottom.

Edgehill itself is steeped in ghost lore, particularly tied to the 1642 battle. Reports of phantom soldiers and eerie sounds have circulated for centuries.

About fifteen years ago I was listening to a BBC radio breakfast show and my attention was drawn to a story being told by the show's host.

She told how, when living in the area, she had guests one New Year's Eve, celebrating the turn of the year. People from surrounding villages, including a local church minister.

Whilst sitting around the dining table eating, she and the guests began to hear the unsettling sound of phantom horses and the desperate cries of men in battle. It was terrifying. They nervously inched their way outside to investigate, only to find darkness, a gentle breeze and silence (if my memory serves me correctly). This is a dark and remote area of central England once outside the towns and cities. Only the faint glow from lights at the nearby Department of Defence military base a few miles away.

I met a fellow around the same time who lived in the village of Radway, more or less at the centre of the battle site. He

lived in an old stone house, a converted barn as I recall, some parts of the building predating the civil war. He confirmed he and his family had similar experiences. Strange, uncanny noises, more often like horses charging over heavy, sodden fields. A sound that might make sense if it were daytime and a horseracing track next door.

These eerie commotions were invariably heard on cold autumn and winter evenings, with calm weather, oftentimes with multiple witnesses; family and friends. No evidence of a prosaic cause could ever be found, or explanation offered.

A retired friend of mine recounted similar tales about the battlefield from the 1950s and 1960s when, as a schoolboy, he and his friends would investigate the site. It was well-known for the lack of animal life or birdsong at certain times of the year. One of his schoolboy friends even saw the dark outline of a cavalryman on a galloping horse, the other side of a hedge...

As an aside, some of the dead were buried in the churchyard at the nearby village of Kineton. A little known fact is John Newton, who wrote 'Amazing Grace' (yes, *that* 'Amazing Grace', possibly the most sung and most recorded hymn in the world, and especially popular in the United States) lived for a time in the village of Kineton, where he's rumoured to have written the words to the hymn in 1772, although there is no contemporary evidence for this.

(The following photographs show the view from Edgehill summit, cavalrymen and pike men, from the battle re-enactment society, The Sealed Knot, staging the battle in the

grounds of Compton Verney. The other two photos show Compton Verney House and grounds and the bridge, across the lake, where Harriet Anne Devall's body was found, in 1903. *Copyright Huey Hawke, 2025*).

Now to a more recent chilling tale...





Murder at Compton Verney: A chilling crime in Edwardian England

On a cold November morning in 1903, the tranquil Warwickshire estate of Compton Verney (mentioned above, just five miles north of Edgehill) awoke to a scene of horror that would shock the nation and stain the serenity of its manicured grounds.

Nestled in the rolling countryside, Compton Verney was a stately Georgian mansion surrounded by Capability Brown-designed parkland—an unlikely setting for one of the most brutal murders of the Edwardian era. Word of it even reached New Zealand, on the other side of the world.

On Sunday, 1 November, 1903, Warwickshire Police received reports saying 28-year-old Harriet Anne Devall, a respected domestic servant at Compton Verney, had gone missing from her home in Kineton the night before (yes,

Halloween – a fact that only became apparent to me whilst researching the story).

Known locally as Nancy, she was last seen on a bridge with a young man crossing the lake at the bottom of the Compton Verney estate. The police dredged the lake but found nothing. They searched woods near Compton Verney and this is where they found their first clue; Nancy's abandoned bicycle and next to it an empty razor blade case.

Sadly, the body of Nancy was eventually discovered in a ditch on the estate. A scene of unspeakable violence and done with such ferocity the wounds extended from her head down to her chest. The brutality of the attack suggested a crime of passion or madness, not a calculated act.

Curiously, on top of Nancy's body was a letter, as if placed there by the killer. It's a note Nancy herself had written. It said words to the effect:

"I shan't alter my mind from what I said last night. It will be no use you trying to make a bother, and get me the sack, for if you did I would not have you."

The letter was assumed to be for her sweetheart, Walter George Couzens, a 19-year-old man from a town called Chippenham, about 60 miles south, in southern England.

They had become lovers, and then engaged, whilst working together at a different stately home. However, Nancy had recently separated from Walter, according to reports. The inference being he was none too pleased at this situation

and had returned to Compton Verney to try and change her mind.

It didn't take the police long to track the young man down, to a pub in Wootton Bassett, near Chippenham. Once arrested, witnesses came forward who claimed to have overheard a conversation between Nancy and Walter the night before she went missing, at a pub in Kineton. She was apparently repeating her message of breaking up with the lad.

The trial of Walter began on November 7th, 1903. He is said to have 'wept piteously' throughout. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, but reprieved. The jury had 'recommended him to mercy'. He had suffered from epilepsy.

Walter Couzens lived the rest of his life in prison.

Today, Compton Verney is a celebrated art gallery and cultural destination, its elegant halls filled with masterpieces and its grounds open to the public. Yet beneath the surface of its refined beauty lies a darker history—one that reminds us that even the grandest of places can harbour secrets.

Folklore about this terrible crime began sometime in the last century. Some whispered that Nancy's spirit lingered on the estate, her soul restless in the wake of such a violent end. Staff at Compton Verney in later years would speak of strange noises in the laundry rooms, fleeting shadows in the corridors, and a chill that settled over the grounds each autumn. Whether these tales were born of imagination or something more spectral, they added a layer of gothic intrigue to an already haunting story.

In recent decades, the murder has mostly been forgotten and locals unaware of the estate's dark past.

However, fast forward to a few years ago...

I was at a social gathering and talking to friends and neighbours about local matters. I chanced to mention the murder, which many present didn't know about.

One neighbour, however, now a close friend, told me a little story that sent shivers down my spine.

She said one evening some time before, her family decided to order a pizza delivery.

They live not far from the site of the murder.

When the front doorbell rang, my friend answered to be greeted by an ashen faced delivery driver. He handed over the pizza, keen to get away. Nonetheless, he told his customer he had thought twice about making the delivery to that rural location. The man, who had no connection to the area, said the last time he had delivered to the village, after dark a long time before, he had seen a pale woman, walking across the bridge at Compton Verney (a road now runs over it), dressed in white clothing. And her head hanging unnaturally to one side...

Soon after we moved to the area, I too saw a woman, standing in the field behind our house, early one spring morning, watching, completely still, a small dog playing. She wore unusual, white Edwardian-style clothing and dark leather boots. It was a breezy day and yet her hair didn't move.

I turned around to tell my wife and when I looked back... she and the dog were gone.

I love a good ghost story. I'm not one for gore and horror. Rather, I liked to be...chilled. Spooked by the subtle, the unseen and the unspoken. The hint of something 'other' is enough to make me put the lights on!

Want to read my forthcoming new trilogy...for free?

That's right, become a beta reader for my forthcoming thriller trilogy and get to enjoy them before anyone else.

Thank you to those of you who've already said you'll read the books. I am enormously grateful.

The working title of the first novel in the trilogy is called *Black Scar*. It's a thriller featuring Scottish investigative journalist, Gene MacArthur, locked down with fellow writers in a Colorado mining town in 1983. He starts looking into a series of strange and unexplained deaths, and other odd occurrences, near a US Airforce Base, whilst also trying to make amends for a story he wrote two years before. The repercussions of which, followed him to America...

I'm particularly interested to know if any of the thousands of you out there happen to be a current, or former FBI agent, sheriff, miner, local news journalist, attorney, realtor, postman, rancher, cavalry scout, photographer, hotel manager, taxi driver, native American, or resident of Colorado?

Why? Well, the quid pro quo of reading the books before they're released is to check them for accuracy, and the

aforementioned characters feature in the story. But I also require spelling and grammar checks, and the facts as I present them. I've done plenty of research, but the acid test is critical readers. If you become a beta reader, let me know what you think of the story too... that would be fabulous!

But anyone can read them! I'd welcome everyone's opinions, not just those with the backgrounds I mentioned.

There's nothing more to it than that. Just your reading time, as much as you're able to, when you want, likely starting early in 2026. Drop me a line if you're interested, at huey@hueyhawke.com

Well, that's all for this month folks. This is where I say you'll find the usual access to free and bargain books by fellow authors across a range of genres, below.

Look after yourselves and have a great November.

Huey

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