HOW TO BUILD A HAUNTED HOUSE
The History of a Cultural Obsession

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Contents

To my beloved husband, Bobby, who doesn't believe in ghosts, but has always believed in me

Author's note

When I was ten, my parents and I took a road trip from our home in south-western Ontario to the American South. Our main port of call was Charleston, South Carolina, once one of the largest and wealthiest slave-trading centres in colonial America, and now a thriving tourist mecca, known for its elegant nineteenth-century architecture and rich antebellum history. While there, we stayed in the quintessential Southern structure – a plantation house-cum-bed and breakfast. As a budding history buff I was enchanted by our accommodation: a two-and-a-half-storey glimmering white Greek revival mansion, set in a lush waterfront estate. Once an eighteenth-century orange grove that had played host to one of the bloodiest duels of the period (between Generals Christopher Gadsen and Robert Howe), today the estate hosts tourists, film crews and lavish weddings.

On our first evening, we explored the decadent antique-filled interiors in the fading Southern sunlight. The glittering chandeliers and gilt mirrors reflected the low light and cast intriguing shadows across the damask curtains and mahogany furniture. My father and I posed for photos in this atmospheric environment, which have survived as my only physical mementos of the place. While there was nothing outwardly unnerving about the house – it was opulent, yet warm and inviting, just as the original owners and modern proprietors intended – for some reason, I was overtaken by a nervous energy. Perhaps because our days had been spent touring the surrounding area, visiting historic sites steeped in violence, my hackles were up, my mind swimming with stories of bloody revolutionary skirmishes, cruel slave-owners and other sordid tales of the decadent lives of the Southern oligarchy.

As night fell, my nervous excitement morphed into genuine fear. I was shown where I would be sleeping – a small attic bedroom, no doubt once the accommodation of a scullery maid or house slave, since transformed into a chocolate-box children's room. I remember it as a shadowy garret with a brass four-poster bed, diminutive dressing table and antique rocking horse (though the extant photos prove that my memory invented many of these details). As I recall, the doily-covered lamp shed a dull, eerie glow across the tiny bedroom. In that moment, I decided that nothing could make me cross the threshold into this unsettling space, so convinced was I that it was haunted. And so I spent the night in my parents' room. Thankfully, it passed uninterrupted by spectral visitors, as did the rest of our stay at the plantation. There was nothing that ever confirmed my feeling that the place was haunted – no anecdotal evidence later recounted by the proprietors or posters on ghost-hunting internet message boards. I didn't experience a ghost that night – nor have I ever, before or since. It was just a sensation born out of the atmosphere, the architectural aesthetic, the historical context … and my own imagination.

And so began my lifelong obsession with haunted houses. This isn't to say that I'm a wholehearted believer in the supernatural; far from it. The obsession is more likely born out of my passion for social, cultural and architectural history (as well as, perhaps, a slightly macabre sensibility). More dynamic than the military monument or the national history museum, haunted houses offer a unique portal to the past: an intimate point of entry to the daily lives of those who came before us – those who just might still be communicating with us from the beyond.

What is it that makes a house look or feel haunted? And why do certain houses attract a reputation for being haunted? Setting aside the possibility of the actual existence of ghosts, is there some recipe of ingredients that makes a building take on this identity? This book is not, strictly speaking, a book about the paranormal. It is not a collection of personal and second-hand tales of things that go bump in the night. Rather, it is a book about a cultural concept, a literary trope,

an iconic image, and a particular kind of place that looms large in our shared imagination.

Regardless of your beliefs about the afterlife – my own is a kind of hopeful agnosticism – you will have at some point engaged with the concept of the haunted house. It is ubiquitous in our society and culture; it serves as the subject and setting for countless short stories, novels and films; it is a long-time fixture of our urban legends; and today, it is even its own cottage industry. Countless visitor attractions and businesses thrive on the publicity of a good ghost story, while television producers capitalise on the entertainment value of watching others romp through a spooky old building.

In the English-speaking world, especially, the concept of the haunted house is so familiar that the term evokes a relatively fixed set of images and ideas which many of us accept without question. However, if we take a closer look at the historical sources that have shaped this concept, we can unlock its deeper meaning and cultural relevance.

This book explores how, and why, we have come to a collective understanding of what a haunted house is. In it, we will look to some of the most famous haunted houses in Britain and America (and further afield) for answers. Our hunt for the haunted house will take us on a journey through history from medieval Scotland to Enlightenment-era London; from Victorian rectories in rural East Anglia to plantation houses in pre-Civil War Louisiana; and finally, to the affluent suburbs of modern Tokyo. We will find them in Shakespearean theatre, Romantic novels, Edwardian short stories, late-twentieth-century Hollywood blockbusters, and contemporary reality television programmes. Over time and space, medium and genre, the haunted house adapts and morphs, but always remains intrinsically the same.

Although the haunted house of our shared imagination comes in a variety of subtly differing forms, they all have certain commonalities. Almost invariably, they are old, they are large, and were once or continue to be single-family homes. They are spaces that force us to confront the (sometimes disturbing) past; they are spaces that subvert our expectations of the house (or 'home') as a place of safety and privacy, a setting for domestic bliss; they are spaces that are simultaneously familiar, yet forebodingly strange.

What is a haunted house? Ultimately, it isn't as much a certain style of building as it is an immutable emblem – simultaneously embodying our way of life and our collective anxiety about the afterlife, the destination of our immortal souls. That a house might contain the spirit of a previous occupant is an oddly compelling notion. It offers the tantalising possibility that life continues after death, and that we might have some means of communing with the past. On the other hand, the thought that a soul might be eternally trapped in a house is profoundly unnerving. If a house is meant to be a *home*, a sanctuary from the dangers of the world, then where can we retreat in the haunted house? Perhaps there is no escaping its terrifying power, and that is why we, as a culture, can't seem to resist peering through the shadowy door.

Introduction

All houses wherein men have lived and died are haunted houses.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882)

The concept of the ghost – that is, the disembodied spirit of a formerly living human being – is a nearly universal idea, as old as human history. Indeed, in the first century CE, the Roman author and natural philosopher Pliny the Younger recorded what is widely believed to be the first written account of a haunted house. But the idea has continued to evolve, even thrive, in our increasingly secular, technologically advanced world. To some extent, a good ghost story, whether 'true' or fictional, is simply a tale designed to amuse or playfully scare the audience. But of course, it is more than that. The concept of the ghost exists to serve as some way of explaining, easing (or possibly sometimes exacerbating) the anxiety we feel about the great unknown that is the afterlife.

Social historians, literary theorists, folklorists and parapsychologists have filled volumes devoted to the subject of ghosts – covering the what, why and how of this cultural phenomenon, as well as offering scientific or quasi-scientific inquiries into whether or not ghosts actually exist. Today, a quick search of Amazon reveals some 40,000 books on ghost-related topics, ranging from the popular regional tales of 'Haunted [insert locality here]' to more serious scholarly considerations of the subject.

Meanwhile, considerably less attention has been devoted to the study of the ghost's assumed natural habitat – that eternal home and earthly prison known as the haunted house.

The concept of a haunted house is similarly ubiquitous. There are examples of famously haunted dwellings all over the world, from Höfði House in Iceland to Château de Brissac in France to the Laperal

White House in the Philippines. But, as a cultural icon, the haunted house looms especially large in the West. In the English-speaking world in particular, the haunted house has a specific connotation and a unique cultural history, and it is with this history – the history of the haunted house of Great Britain and North America – that this book is primarily (though not exclusively) concerned.

The Anglo-American haunted house is a concept built on a foundation of folklore, narrative fiction, and social and architectural history. A construction process spanning centuries, the concept continues to evolve to this day. As the story of its evolution will demonstrate, the haunted house is more than just an arbitrary symbol; a simple signifier of something we collectively find scary. Its enduring power reveals just as much about us and our modern way of life as it does about our collective attitudes and anxieties towards death. The 'house' part of the phrase is as significant as the 'haunted', for in no other culture in the world is the supernatural so indelibly linked to the domestic dwelling.

'Haunted houses have been familiar to man ever since he has owned a roof to cover his head,' claimed Andrew Lang, a Scottish poet turned psychical researcher writing in the late 1890s, when the spiritualist craze was sweeping Britain and America, and the field of parapsychology was in its excited infancy.

It's a grand statement, but convincing enough on the surface. Ghosts were the subject *du jour* in Lang's time, and virtually everyone in Victorian Britain would have heard, read stories about or seen pictures of reputedly haunted residences. Indeed, the same could be said today. So it might be natural for us to assume that, as Lang tells us, they've simply always existed. Or, at least, they've existed for as long as the house itself. And this, he suggests, is a global phenomenon.

Quoting Lang over a century later, paranormal researcher David Taylor wrote: 'Every community in every corner of the world has a "haunted house", a building that has become a strong cultural icon both within our conscious and subconscious minds.' Again, it is a persuasive statement. Well, it is if we judge it purely on our own cultural assumptions.

But actually, the statement is only true-*ish*. Yes, there are examples of supposedly haunted structures in most parts of the world. And yes, some of those buildings are 'houses' – domestic structures in some capacity. But is the haunted house of our present, Western understanding – a multi-room, multi-storeyed domestic structure, occupied by a nuclear family and haunted by the spirits of its past occupants – truly global? Timeless?

Lang slightly undermined his own argument when, in his 1897 tome *Dreams and Ghosts*, he followed his declamatory statement on the longevity and universality of the haunted house with a number of tenuous examples. 'The Australian blacks [sic] possessed only shelters or "lean-tos", so in Australia the spirits do their rapping on the tree trunks,' Lang reported. So, more of a haunted *tree*, really…

He went on to list the 'perched-up' houses of the Dayaks – the indigenous peoples of Borneo, who traditionally lodged in communal dwellings on stilts that accommodated up to thirty families. He cited the monasteries of medieval Europe, huge ecclesiastical complexes that housed dozens of men bound by faith rather than blood. And finally, he provided 'palaces and crofters' cottages' as his only examples that realistically stand as the precursors to our present understanding of the haunted house.

When it comes down to it, our version of the haunted house is really just a reflection of the way many of us live today: a warped mirror image of the average single-family home. Yet it's only relatively recently that anyone outside the very wealthiest of European society could afford to live in any other way. In England, it wasn't until towards the end of the seventeenth century that the working poor were able to move out of their one-room wooden hovels into more durable, permanent dwellings made of stone or brick, with glass windows and chimneys – comforts that were once the sole preserve of the upper classes.

Even today, much of the world is either unable to, or unaccustomed to, living this way. To say nothing of the unfortunately vast number of people across the globe who are involuntarily homeless, transient or temporarily displaced. Many citizens of developed and developing nations are simply unfamiliar with life in a single-family house.

In modern-day China, the majority of the population live in multi-unit complexes – even those considered to be of middle- or

upper-class status. Some estimates suggest that over 90 per cent of the Chinese population reside in urban apartment buildings. Space restrictions and the desire to live in cities preclude people from living in detached or semi-detached homes. In Japan, over 110 million people live in either small houses or apartments, as the majority of the country's population is concentrated in big cities such as Tokyo.

In East Asia, belief in haunted houses is less prevalent than in the Western world. Granted, there is some talk of 'tainted' homes – called *hongza* in Cantonese and *jiko bukken* in Japanese – and these properties tend to rent or sell for as much as 40 per cent below average house prices. Japan has its own equivalent of the haunted house, called *obake yashiki*, but, as we will learn, this is distinct from the Western version, and for the most part, Japanese supernatural traditions are far less focused on domestic spaces.

According to Japanese folklore expert Zack Davisson,

> *There are two kinds of ghosts [understood in Japanese culture]. The jibakurei or earthbound spirits who are bound to their location, but those are less common … Most Japanese ghosts (yurei) are furei or free-travelling spirits. They go wherever the person they're haunting goes. It is rarer for Japanese ghosts to haunt locations. Much more common for them to haunt people.*

Similarly, in Mexico, where people have famously strong spiritual beliefs, ghosts are somewhat more apt to be free-floating entities. This is unsurprising when you consider that nearly 34 per cent of the population live in poverty, unable to afford spacious single-family accommodation. Around 34 million Mexicans live more than two people to a room in houses built from weak, impermanent materials such as cardboard and reeds in shanty towns on the outskirts of urban centres. Mexican spiritual beliefs reflect a unique hybrid of Roman Catholic and pre-Columbian Aztec and Mayan traditions, the lines of which have gradually blurred over time. For that reason, perhaps, historians are divided over the true origin of Mexico's best-known supernatural tradition, *Día de Muertos* or Day of the Dead, an annual festival usually celebrated from 30 October to 2 November, during which family members gather to pay homage to their ancestors.

Whether the celebration is a vestige of pagan belief or derived from the medieval Christian tradition of All Soul's Day is unclear. But in either case, this ritual imagines the souls of the dead returning to the earthly plane once a year to receive gifts and offerings from the living. These ghosts are deceased loved ones, rather than forbidding strangers; they are meant to be embraced and revered, rather than feared, and they are in no way tethered to their former domiciles. If their descendants move house, the ghosts simply follow, visiting them at their new address.

Similar festivals of the dead are celebrated worldwide, from the islands of the South Pacific to Nepal to Eastern Europe, suggesting that this is a far more common conception of the spirit world than the Anglo-American haunted house model.

This doesn't mean that we in the West are entirely unique in our belief that ghosts are rooted to location; across the globe there are scores of examples of haunted bridges, roads, forests, lakes and, yes, houses. But we certainly seem to be the most fixated on the notion that the ghost's natural environment is their former home.

As we will see, this widely held viewpoint emerged partially as a result of the development of our own religious traditions – an, at times, uncomfortable transition from the ritualistic ceremony and superstitious realm of Roman Catholicism to a more prosaic, predominantly Protestant belief system. Notably, however, belief – or, at least, *interest* – in the haunted house rapidly accelerated at a time when more and more Britons and Americans could afford their own homes.

The Industrial Revolution, which transformed manufacturing processes across Europe between *c.* 1760 and 1830, paved the way for a newly dominant middle class – a large segment of the population that owned and operated businesses and lived more comfortably than their working-class predecessors and present-day employees. They could afford spacious, clean and – perhaps most crucially – *private* homes in which to raise their nuclear families.

Where there was little space for privacy in the cramped conditions of a medieval peasant's cottage (or, for that matter, in the communal great hall of a castle), the average Georgian and Victorian house provided discrete, demarcated spaces for the homeowner and their kin to retreat to.

Thus, the house became the hallowed ground of personal and familial autonomy; a safe haven from the wider world. It became more than just a *house* (an impassive pile of bricks and mortar); it was now, in the fullest sense of the word, a *home* (the Anglo-Saxon meaning of the word connotes both a physical place to live and an abstract state of being: a place of belonging).

And on this site of newly important symbolic significance, bourgeois Brits and Americans projected all their most cherished values: their hopes and dreams, as well as their most profound anxieties. Deep-rooted feelings that largely persist today.

In the words of cultural geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling:

> *Home … is a place, a site in which we live. But more than this, home is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. These may be feelings of belonging, desire and intimacy … but there can also be feelings of fear, violence and alienation.*

So, if the archetypal family home was born out of the Industrial Revolution, and its terrifying inverse – the haunted house – followed relatively quickly, then it should make sense that the most familiar version of the haunted house is one that dates from precisely the same time period.

When asked to picture a haunted house, most people will come up with roughly the same image – a Gothic Victorian mansion. Indeed, if you run a Google image search on the term 'haunted house', the first hits you will get are of clip art illustrations depicting the shadowy silhouettes of dilapidated weather-boarded houses, featuring castle-like towers, oculus windows and expansive porches, flanked by decaying trees (and possibly a few bats and a tombstone or two).

According to the creator of one such image, Italian graphic artist, Daniele Montella, 'Each year at Halloween, I get [many] requests for use of the image, even from sites of paranormal research, or even by groups claiming to be ghostbusters.' As inventive as it is, the picture is not purely a product of the artist's imagination. He acknowledges

it to be a creative interpretation of a real house: Carson Mansion in Eureka, California.

Built in 1884 for the eccentric lumber magnate William Carson, the eponymous Carson Mansion looks a bit like a fairy-tale castle. It is a chaotic collage of turrets, towers, cupolas and ornately carved timber pillars, brackets and bargeboards, which mimic the intricately carved masonry of earlier medieval and Renaissance structures. Carson Mansion is a prime example of what is known as Queen Anne Revival architecture – a misleading term, given that it bears no real similarity to the sober structures built under the reign of the early-eighteenth-century English queen. Instead, it is an experimental building style incorporating a variety of pseudo-historical influences including Gothic, Romanesque, Renaissance and baroque architecture.

The houses made in this style – and they were mostly domestic structures in late-nineteenth-century America – can be described as eclectic, asymmetrical and highly ornate. Carson Mansion is held up as the movement's highest (and most extravagant) achievement, and to some, it is a whimsical masterpiece. To others, it is a testament to Victorian excess and questionable taste. Whatever your opinion, it is not hard to see why it has become one of the most photographed Victorian houses in the world.

But why has it become a visual shorthand for the haunted house? Unlike many of the houses discussed in this book, it doesn't boast a particularly well-known ghost story. Yet, as we will see, that is not necessarily a compulsory component for the haunted house. Sometimes a shadowy old edifice containing just enough dark nooks and crannies is enough to set the mind racing, creating its own ghost story.

What's more, although it is American, and post-dates most of the other buildings discussed in this book, Carson Mansion is linked with the earlier English origins of Gothic Revival architecture, and indeed, with the Anglo history of the haunted house itself.

The Carson Mansion model is one of the most familiar images we have of the haunted house. Gothic Revival architecture and the many high Victorian derivations of it are unquestionably important. As we will discover, this is tied up with the prevailing values, attitudes and interests of the society that created this architectural aesthetic. The newly powerful symbolic significance of the family home, as well as

a renewed interest in medieval history, antiquarianism, and the birth and rise of spiritualism, had a strong impact on the trajectory of the haunted house concept and its associated iconography.

But we may have other related, and competing, images of haunted houses in our minds. There is the medieval castle (a precursor to, and influencer of, Gothic Revival and subsequent related styles) and the later baronial castle (a nineteenth-century Scottish version of Gothic Revival), both of which conjure up images of the ghost of Banquo roaming the halls of Cawdor Castle in *Macbeth*. Or perhaps we picture a different sort of building altogether – the Tudor or Jacobean palace, or even the neoclassical country house so ubiquitous in England's rural landscape (and in the vast portfolio of the National Trust).

And so, the haunted house of our collective consciousness is at once fixed and fluid. Perhaps the best evidence of its subtly changing face can be found in, of all unlikely settings, Disneyland. 'Haunted house' fairground attractions have existed since at least the early 1900s, when they popped up in the pleasure parks of England and America, in places such as Liphook, Hampshire and Coney Island, New York. By the mid-twentieth century they were a fairground fixture and so, in 1951, when artists Harper Goff and Ken Anderson were tasked with designing the new Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California, they naturally thought to include a ride of this type. The first design they put forward was a dilapidated version of Carson Mansion, but Walt Disney was not comfortable with the idea of including a derelict house in his park. Instead, Carson Mansion would serve as the basis for the park's train station clock tower, while the haunted house ride would be a New Orleans-style Greek Revival mansion, a neoclassical building inspired by Anderson's extensive research of Southern American architecture and his visit to the unconventional Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California (see Chapter 8).

This original Haunted Mansion attraction, which opened in 1969, would be carried over to four other Disney theme parks around the world, though in slightly altered form. At Disney World in Orlando, Florida, the mansion built in 1971 was a red-brick Dutch Gothic building intended to evoke the high Victorian architecture of upstate New York. At Tokyo Disneyland, opened in 1983, the house was an updated version of the Florida mansion. At Disneyland Paris, the Phantom Manor opened in 1992 was a Second Empire mansard-roofed mansion

based on the Fourth Ward School, a late-nineteenth-century building in Virginia City, Nevada. And finally, at Hong Kong Disneyland, the Mystic Manor opened in 2013 was a Queen Anne-style house based on Bradbury Mansion in Los Angeles, a now-demolished home built by the same architects as Carson Mansion.

All were a bit different, all were a bit scary.

Architectural style and visual iconography undoubtedly play a big role in our conception of the haunted house, but other forms of cultural production – namely novels and films – also contribute to and reinforce our shared understanding.

The ghost, of course, has been a mainstay of our oral storytelling tradition for centuries, so it should come as no surprise that they also figure in some of the oldest surviving examples of written literature in human history. They are etched into Ancient Egyptian papyruses; they crop up in classical Greek and Roman poetry and theatre; and they even play a role in the Old Testament.

Though it would be centuries before the haunted house itself became the standard setting for the ghost story, there are some notable early precedents. The first-century BCE play *Mostellaria* – sometimes referred to as 'The Haunted House play' (though the title translates from Latin as simply 'ghostly') – is widely regarded as the earliest known work to feature a haunted dwelling. Penned by Roman playwright Plautis, *Mostellaria* is believed to be based on an even older play – a lost comedy by the third-century BCE Athenian poet, Philemon.

Yes, that's right, the first haunted house in Western literary history was a setting for high jinks, not horror. But there were no ghosts in the play at all – it was an elaborate hoax pulled off by the protagonist Philolaches, the spendthrift son of an Athenian merchant, and his mischievous slave, who together invented the haunting in an effort to avoid a debt collector and Philolaches' disapproving father.

In England, the best-known early imaginings of the haunted house come from the seventeenth-century works of William Shakespeare, who was inspired by the Roman tragedian Seneca, for whom (unlike Plautis) ghosts were no laughing matter. They were vengeful wraiths

and harbingers of ill-fortune with dire warnings for hubristic mortals.

But while contemporary audiences tend to assume that *Macbeth*'s Cawdor Castle and *Hamlet*'s Elsinore Castle are haunted by the ghosts of Banquo and Old Hamlet respectively, we might once again be projecting our own modern assumptions. As art historian-cum-historical ghost expert Susan Owens points out, Elizabethan audiences had a complicated understanding of the spirit world, shaped by both pre-Reformation Catholic beliefs and more modern Protestant lines of thinking. When religious reformers of the sixteenth century 'did away with the [Catholic] notion of purgatory and replaced it with the idea that after the death of the body the soul proceeded directly to heaven or hell, they struck a heavy blow at common ideas and expectations,' Owens explains. 'Gone were purgatory's permeable borders, which occasionally allowed souls to slip through and find ways of communicating with the living.'

Old habits die hard, though, and while some of the more progressive audience members at the Globe Theatre would have interpreted Old Hamlet's ghost not as the tormented soul of the deceased king but rather a supernatural entity assuming the guise of Old Hamlet, others would have fallen back on earlier understandings of the ghost as a dead human being. Even so, they probably saw these spectral visitors as just that – temporary visitants of the *Dia de Muertos* kind, as opposed to permanent ghostly residents.

Of course, it's possible that Shakespeare never intended for his ghosts to be interpreted literally. Famed Shakespearean scholar W. W. Greg was of the opinion that the Bard's ghosts were meant to represent the tormented psyches of his angst-ridden protagonists. In this interpretation, the characters are the ones who are haunted, not the castles.

For most of the early modern period (*c.* 1400–1800), literary ghosts wandered at will. They paid fleeting visits to living loved ones; they sporadically returned to the sites of their (usually violent) deaths; and, more often than not, they simply flitted about cemeteries and churchyards, bearing silent witness to their earthly remains. Walls did not seem to confine them. At least, not until the second half of the eighteenth century, when a new literary genre changed the rules. This was the birth of the Gothic novel – and it was the Gothic that pushed the ghost indoors.

Gothic fiction is characterised by themes of horror, death and love, and often harkens back to a romanticised earlier period of history. It is so named because of its association with the style of building that frequently serves as its setting: the medieval Gothic castle or neo-Gothic manor house. In fiction, as in life, these structures reflect the popularity of the medieval aesthetic in late Georgian and Victorian society, but they also provide an atmospheric backdrop against which to meditate on more universal subjects: mortality, identity, and the indelible link between the past and the present.

The emergence of this popular new genre marked the first time in the ghost story's long history that the *site* of the haunting would prove as important as the ghosts themselves.

The first Gothic novel is generally acknowledged to be Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). It tells the story of Manfred, the fictional Italian ruler of Otranto, who is determined to secure the castle and save his progeny from its mysterious curse. As we will find out in Chapter 1, Walpole's Otranto had an irrevocable impact on the literary haunted house. Despite the fact that his ghosts are largely unfamiliar to modern audiences – giant sword-wielding spooks rather than shadowy wisps gliding silently down hallways – everything else is exactly what we would expect. In short, an ancient edifice occupied by a living family who are tormented by the ghosts of previous residents.

More than a century after Walpole's pioneering work came Henry James's classic novella, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), published at the apex of Victorian spiritualism. It tells the story of a naive young governess charged with the care of Miles and Flora, orphans who have been abandoned in their uncle's gloomy ancestral country house, alone but for the servants and the possible presence of some spectral residents.

Where Walpole's work traded on the melodrama and spectacle of the supernatural, James's eerie tale is cloaked in a quiet ambiguity, forcing us to question both the heroine's senses and our own expectations of the haunted house. Here, the ghosts are silent spectres who are only seen at a distance – high up in a tower, descending a tall staircase, peering through windows – making them simultaneously 'there', yet 'not there'; real, yet illusory. A perfect metaphor for the way the events of the past leave a pale but perceptible mark on the present.

James's work, in turn, inspired many of the most celebrated haunted house stories of modern times, including M. R. James's *Lost Hearts* (1904), Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983), Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* (2009), and many more. Like Walpole's and James's seminal works, most of these books describe the experiences of unwitting visitors or new occupants of old houses that seem to be possessed by the spirits of former occupants – by now, the standard plot device of the haunted house story.

Intriguingly, in cinema, one of the most famous haunted houses appears in a film that is not based on any of these literary precedents, but on an allegedly true story. The setting for this macabre tale, 112 Ocean Avenue, Amityville, Long Island, is, on the face of it, a relatively unassuming structure. Although an attractive example of Dutch Colonial Revival architecture, characterised by its sloping 'Dutch barn' roof and quarter-moon-shaped double windows (now synonymous with demonic eyes, thanks to the memorable imagery in the film), it is not a particularly grand or exceptional building, especially when compared with its Californian counterpart, Carson Mansion. But the events of 13 November 1974 would change its reputation forever, launching it into architectural infamy.

On that night, a troubled young man named Ronald DeFeo Jr shot dead his entire family as they slept peacefully in their quaint suburban home. The following year, the ill-fated Lutz family moved in, pleased to have secured their dream house for a bargain price. They were completely unprepared for the supposedly supernatural forces that would send them packing just twenty-eight days later.

Their story, as recounted to author Jay Anson, became the basis for his book *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* (1977). This was first adapted for the screen in 1979, and over the next three decades numerous sequels and remakes followed. Though later believed by many to be a complete work of fiction – a hoax devised by cash-strapped home buyers and a duplicitous family lawyer – it is striking that it includes all the same themes and plot devices as the literary haunted house narrative, making the film a striking case of art imitating life imitating art.

Throughout this book, we will constantly be reminded of the central importance of the 'house' part of the 'haunted house'.

Granted, in Britain and America, lots of building types are deemed to be haunted – pretty much any place in which humans have existed; any place where people have loved, lost, suffered and died. In almost every city, town and village in Britain (and to a lesser extent in the younger nation of America) there are reputedly haunted hotels, pubs, restaurants, theatres and schools. Indeed, it seems that if a building has stood for at least, say, 100 years, something significant has happened there. It is therefore possible that some residual energy of the beings that once occupied the space remain. This is called the 'stone tape' theory of paranormal activity: ghostly manifestations attributed to a kind of visual or auditory recording of human energy which replays itself over and over again in perpetuity.

Yet, as we are discovering, there is a reason that the phrase most commonly used is 'haunted house', not 'haunted building'. Domestic dwellings are the intimate settings in which people not only carry out all their normal day-to-day activities, but also endure the most dramatic experiences of human existence. Historically, most people were born and died at home. They raised their children there, hosted their friends and families there, and had sex there (or maybe even conducted affairs there). Statistically, the home remains the place where most violent deaths and murders take place – no doubt the dramatic, yet all too common, result of familial dispute and dysfunction. The home is where most people spend the majority of their lives, whether they are happy there or not.

The dwellings discussed in this book are of the grandest and most spectacular sort – castles, palaces, stately homes and plantations – mostly because they are the most recognisable, historically important and architecturally significant examples. But regardless of their scale and expense, they were also homes belonging to real people: people who may – or may not – still wander the halls.

STRAWBERRY HILL HOUSE

THE BIRTH OF ‘GLOOMTH’

1

…a god [or] at least a ghost was absolutely necessary
to frighten us out of too much senses…

Horace Walpole (1717–1797)

Inventing an ancestral home

Early one morning in the summer of 1764, the English author, art historian and statesman Horace Walpole awoke from a strange dream. Lying alone in a bedchamber in his home in Twickenham to the south-west of London, the lifelong bachelor blearily took in his surroundings. The pale light of dawn passed through the familiar stained-glass windows emblazoned with the coat of arms of the ill-fated queen, Anne Boleyn, casting muted colours across his collection of antique furniture, ancestral portraits, and framed prints of stately homes and castles.

Through the partially open door, he could just make out the outline of the banister at the top of the staircase, with its ornately carved newel posts adorned with antelopes – a symbol taken from the Walpole family crest.

In his drowsy haze – thanks to the previous night's dose of laudanum, taken to treat a gouty foot – Walpole felt as though he occupied a shadowy liminal space between the waking world and the world of dreams. Here, the past and the present, the living and the dead, seemed to temporarily coexist.

Ghosts are famous for frequenting such 'liminal spaces': places that exist at or on both sides of a threshold, hovering on a kind of boundary. Staircases, hallways, doors, windows: these transitional areas of the home are thought to be the ghost's favourite hangouts – no doubt because they are so used to existing on the threshold between life and death.

Some months later, Walpole recounted the experience – a vivid dream – to his friend and fellow antiquarian William Cole in a note

accompanying the gift of a copy of his new book – the book inspired by that dream. Of the dream itself, he wrote: 'All I could recover was that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head like mine, filled with Gothic story), and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening, I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate.'

The result of Walpole's feverish writing was a 'Gothic story' – the first of its kind – a tale of a haunted castle that was not so very different from his own.

That he dreamed his dream in this house – the shadowy, neo-Gothic mansion he had built for himself in the countryside near London and filled with eclectic historical bric-a-brac – lies at the heart of what this chapter – and, indeed, this book – is all about. What is it that makes a house feel haunted? And is an actual ghost a prerequisite?

Strawberry Hill House and its aesthetic, so at odds with the neoclassical, Enlightenment-era values of his day, almost certainly inspired Walpole's dream. The dream, in turn, inspired him to write his genre-defining novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. And today, whether or not we know of his house or his novel, they nevertheless live on in our shared imagination.

Horace Walpole might be credited as the inventor of the modern haunted house. His contribution to the concept is indisputably important. Yet, as innovative and idiosyncratic a character as he was, Walpole was not working in a bubble. His architectural and literary creations were shaped by the society in which he lived. And so, with the eccentric author as our phantom guide, we will delve into Horace's world – a paradoxical place characterised by stiff rationalism and wild imagination.

'Do you know anything about Horace?' asks a friendly room guide at Strawberry Hill House, a historic visitor attraction to the south-west of London, which has been open since 2012. It's a fair question. Although Horace Walpole wielded the kind of cultural power in the eighteenth century that a social media influencer might have today, he's hardly a household name.

'I know a little bit,' I say, politely downplaying my familiarity. The truth is, as a PhD student studying Georgian art, I could hardly avoid old Horace. Not only was he a highly respected art historian – the author of *Some Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762), one of the first published studies of British art, still regularly consulted by students and scholars today – but he was also a man about town, invited to all the most important social events in Georgian England. The well-connected Horace Walpole was the youngest son of Sir Robert Walpole, 1st Earl of Orford, Britain's first and longest-serving prime minister.

On top of this, Horace Walpole had a *lot* to say, and much of it is recorded in the thousands of enlightening (and often gossipy) letters he wrote to family, friends and colleagues over the course of his life. This treasure trove of correspondence, filling some forty-eight volumes (published by Yale University Press in the early twentieth century), makes Walpole an invaluable social commentator of his time; indispensable to anyone interested in eighteenth-century English history.

So, yes, I know a bit about Horace Walpole, though perhaps not as much as my companion this day does: Carole Tucker, Strawberry Hill's archivist and librarian.

'I do know an awful lot,' Carole tells the room guide, who didn't recognise her. 'I've been here since 2010.'

The guide bashfully absents herself.

Carole has agreed to give me a private tour of Walpole's architectural magnum opus – a glimmering white miniature castle, originally serving as both summer home and repository for Horace's vast collection of fine art and rare historical artefacts. Today it is best known for being one of the first Gothic Revival homes in Britain. Carole is prepared to cover all the usual highlights, but she's also aware that I've come with specific questions in mind. Questions about ghosts, haunted houses, and the inspiration behind history's first Gothic novel.

Strawberry Hill is where, in the summer of 1764, Horace Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto*. This is the building that informed the story's pivotal setting and, while the two buildings are not exactly mirror images, the fictional castle and the real one have much in common. They both hark back to a romanticised earlier period; they both trade heavily on mystery and melodrama; and they are

both underpinned by their creator's apparent obsession with familial lineage. Crucially, it is from both sources that we get the precursor of the modern haunted house.

Walpole's dual creations were revolutionary in his day – dramatic reactions against the prevailing modes of building, writing, even *thinking*. He is considered to be the grandfather of the modern Gothic literary and architectural movements, and his influence in the realm of all that is spooky is still felt today.

In the words of historian and ghost expert Susan Owens: 'In binding together ancient history, old buildings, ruins and ghosts … Walpole invented a new, highly charged way of looking at the world – one that has had consequences for the way in which ghosts have been thought about ever since.'

As Carole and I stand in the main hall, at the bottom of the staircase where, 250 years ago, Horace had his ghostly dream, I cannot help but wonder at the subtle irony of my surroundings. From where I stand, I have a perfect viewpoint of where Horace's hand in armour appeared, in that space between dreaming and waking. I can feel the richness of my environment, as if I were bathing in history itself. Yet Walpole was a famous sceptic. In spite of his masterpieces – both house and story – he never came close to believing in ghosts.

The antelope newel posts are still here, as is the hand-painted wallpaper designed to mimic medieval carved stone. Almost everything in the house has been painstakingly restored or reproduced based on Walpole's meticulous notes and records, which allow modern visitors the opportunity to experience the house just as Horace and his guests would have when it was newly built. The restoration project, launched in 2010, took two years and £9 million of grants, donations and crowdfunding to achieve – five times what it cost Walpole to construct the castle in the first place (about £20,720, or £1.8 million in today's currency).

'When Horace Walpole purchased this property [initially just 5 acres of land with a small existing house], he was looking for an escape from summer in London,' explains Carole. A London summer in the eighteenth century was a sweltering cesspool to be avoided at all costs, so his desire made sense. That was exactly what most well-to-do Georgians did anyway, especially men whose professional duties were completed at the end of the parliamentary season.

Whether it was to a long-held family home in a far-flung place such as Northumberland, or a newly acquired retreat near London, escaping to the country was essential to stave off boredom and discomfort.

'[Horace] was very keen on coming to this area,' says Carole, referring to Twickenham, which, in Walpole's time was a mostly rural area south of the Thames – a bucolic spot, just two hours by horse-drawn carriage from the city. Today it is a densely populated commuter suburb.

'He was very much into history,' Carole continues, 'and in this area, within easily commutable distance, there were historically important big houses like Richmond Palace, Kew Palace, Hampton Court, Syon House.'

In other words, an ideal location for a summer getaway for a man enchanted by the grandeur of the past. That the area had a long and noble history was of particular significance to Walpole. Not only was he a history buff, he was also keenly engaged in the practice of *creating* history. Conscious of both past and future, Horace's aim was to create something unique, important and impactful.

Carole turns to a door behind us and unlocks it to reveal a small white-walled courtyard. Pointing to the archway beyond, she remarks, 'Once you had crossed through there, you would have left the modern world behind. You left all the activity of the coaches and horses, all the barges down on the river … and you stepped into this sort of quiet ecclesiastical space.'

This was Strawberry Hill's main entrance, the portal through which Walpole invited his guests into his magical little world. As we walk on, Carole explains how Horace assigned each room its own story ('In this one, you've come into the Medieval Hall…'), and I find myself suddenly aware of how incongruously small and dark the space is for the formal entrance to an aristocrat's country villa.

'Deliberately dark!' Carole exclaims as I voice my thoughts. 'He coined the word "gloomth" – a portmanteau of the words "gloom" and "warmth".' (Or possibly 'depth', according to some scholars.)

Horace certainly had a way with words. His much more famous contribution to the lexicon is 'serendipity' (a 'happy or fortuitous accident'), a word that has become so commonly understood that it has been translated into multiple languages and has even served as the title of a Hollywood film in which such 'happy accidents' drive

the plot and bring the romantic leads together. The word 'gloomth', on the other hand, never really took off in the same way – though, for our purposes, it is far more significant.

The first of only a handful of times Walpole employed the term was in April 1753, in a letter to his dear friend Sir Horace Mann, then an ambassador in Italy. In the letter, Walpole writes of the 'satisfaction of imprinting the gloomth of cathedrals and abbeys' on his home. He doesn't provide a clear definition for his invented word, but we can surmise that he was referring to a certain atmosphere we might expect to encounter in a very old building, created by the effect of dim or diffuse lighting. In distinction to the existing term *gloom*, with its exclusively negative connotations, gloomth was apparently – to Walpole – a desirable quality. An exciting contradiction. A *feeling*. Simultaneously eerie and enticing, it was the very essence of the haunted house.

Evoking the shadowy cloisters of medieval monasteries and the candlelit corridors of ancient castles, Walpole's desired gloomth is felt throughout his home. One of the most obvious effects of gloomth is the result of the extensive use of stained and painted glass, found in windows in almost every room of the house. Nearly 400 pieces of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish glass were carted back from Flanders in the 1750s to help set the ambiance. They cast ever-changing shafts of soft colour and strange shadows across the interior of Strawberry Hill. Walpole revelled in such theatrical effects.

Another of Walpole's eccentric design choices gives another, more prosaic reason as to why Strawberry Hill's entryway seems so small and dark. The current house – now a twenty-four-room mini-mansion – was built around a rather more modest pre-existing building, a small seventeenth-century dwelling; 'little more than a cottage', as Walpole described it, on which he took out a lease in 1747. The following year, he purchased the house outright. The long-departed original owner, a coachman to the Earl of Bedford, allegedly named the house Chopped Straw Hall, in reference to the rumour that he had amassed a small fortune from selling Bedford's hay to the public while feeding his employer's horses cheaper, less nutritious straw. Walpole later changed the house's name to the far more charming Strawberry Hill.

Moving into the Great Parlour, Walpole's formal dining room, we stop in front of a grand chimney piece which, at first glance, appears

to be made of solid, elaborately carved stone. In fact, it is wood, painted to look like stone, one of many such cost-saving measures in the house.

After all, Horace was 'wealthy, not *very* rich', Carole explains. He lived on a moderate, yet steady, income based on a number of government sinecures arranged by his father. These were basically lifetime appointments that required little actual work, or work that could easily be farmed out to lower-level civil servants. He also served as a Whig MP from 1741 to 1769, though this would have made no difference to his finances, as the role was unsalaried at the time.

So, Walpole had *some* money and a lot of free time on his hands. And while the illusions created by features such as the chimney piece were economical, they were also an expression of Horace's playful spirit. He delighted in the element of surprise.

All around the room, Walpole's family members gaze down at us from stately gilt-framed portraits. There are pictures of his father, Lord Orford, his beloved mother, Catherine Shorter, his brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and, most intriguingly for our purposes, his paternal aunt, Dorothy, Viscountess Townshend, better known as the 'Brown Lady' – the ghost that allegedly haunts Raynham Hall (see Chapter 6). How serendipitous.

Though the room itself is actually lighter, brighter and altogether less gloomth-y than much of the rest of the house, there's something unnerving about being here, surrounded by pictures of Walpole's long-dead relatives. They hover above us like a circle of looming spectres. Of course, to Horace they may not have felt nearly so gloomy, and I can imagine that, in their company, he may even have felt a certain warmth. (Though, as we will see, the haunted ancestral portrait *does* play a significant role in Horace's Gothic novel.)

The importance of family in Walpole's conception of Strawberry Hill House is overwhelmingly apparent. In a 1768 letter to his old Etonian schoolmate George Montagu, Horace speaks of having been temporarily detained in London and kept from his passion project – 'the castle [I am building] of my ancestors'.

It sounds romantic, doesn't it? But what does it mean exactly?

In the eighteenth century it was standard for aristocratic families to have a 'family seat' or 'ancestral home', usually in the countryside, which provided an escape from the city in the summer months. The

estates on which these houses sat were also usually lucrative agricultural income generators.

But these houses also had a symbolic purpose: to showcase their owners' illustrious lineage. The most prestigious and established noble families could trace their ancestry back many, many centuries, and most dynasties owned at least one country house dating to an earlier period. There, the modern inhabitants could not only luxuriate in the architectural splendour; they could also take heed of, and pay homage to, their ancient ancestors.

In this department, Horace was somewhat lacking. Granted, the Walpoles did have a family seat – Houghton Hall in Norfolk, an indisputably grand four-storey manor house situated on 1,000 acres of parkland – but it was decidedly modern by aristocratic standards. Built by Horace's father in 1722, it was a testament to the fact that the Walpoles were relatively new to the aristocracy, Robert having only risen from his comparably modest origins as an East Anglian country squire to the earldom in 1742.

Horace, as the youngest of three sons, was under no illusion that he would ever inherit Houghton – although in 1791, having outlived his brothers and nephews, he unexpectedly did. Regardless, he seems to have felt very little connection to the place – at least, not for a good portion of his early life, during which time he had little to do with his father or his house. He spent the bulk of his childhood with his mother at their London townhouse on Arlington Street in Mayfair.

Upon completing his formal education at Cambridge in 1739, and his cultural education on the Grand Tour in France and Italy in 1741, Horace probably returned to England with a greater appreciation for what his father had created at Houghton. Lord Orford's colossal white stone pile was a prime example of Palladianism, the architectural style favoured by the social and political elite at the time. Based on the philosophies of Venetian Renaissance architect Andreo Palladio, houses like Houghton were characterised by austerity, symmetry, and a fidelity to the architectural values of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. They expressed the 'proper' taste and ideological inspiration of their powerful owners.

Still, Houghton wasn't to be his (or so Horace thought), nor did it really *feel* like his. So, in 1748, Horace Walpole bought what he

referred to as his little 'plaything house' and set about inventing an ancestral seat of his own.

This was mostly an imaginative and enjoyable exercise, but it must have been fraught with some complicated feelings; Horace was effectively building a family home for a family that didn't really exist. He was the third son of a modern nobleman, unlikely to accede to the newly created title or take possession of the house it came with, and he was also unlikely to ever have heirs of his own. At the age of thirty, Horace was unmarried. Although this was perfectly acceptable for a man of his time, he had never really shown any interest in the opposite sex – at least, no interest beyond companionship and conversation.

Whether he was a latent homosexual, asexual, or his relationships with women had been ruined by an overly doting mother, Horace likely knew he was never going to have children. He wasn't necessarily bothered about kids – he famously didn't allow them at Strawberry Hill – but it did beg the question, who was he creating a legacy for?

However conflicted Horace may have felt about the concept of family, he was certainly clear about what he wanted for his 'family seat'. On 10 January 1750, in a letter to Horace Mann, Walpole made his intentions known: 'I am going to build a little Gothic Castle at Strawberry Hill. If you can pick me up any fragments of old painted glass, arms or anything, I shall be excessively obliged to you.'

Walpole desired a 'Gothic Castle' – that is, a castle constructed in the prevailing architectural style of the high Middle Ages (*c.* 1100–1500). Though unusual for the time, this was something of a logical choice. After all, if you wanted to invent a venerable ancestral home, why not look all the way back to the Middle Ages and the pinnacle of its architectural achievements?

Emerging in France and England in the early twelfth century, the original Gothic movement developed from the simpler, more solid Romanesque style typically used for churches and castles. Where Romanesque buildings were formed of thick walls, heavy barrel-vaulted ceilings and small windows, new feats of engineering allowed for increasingly lighter, brighter and taller structures. The solid barrel vault gave way to the pointed arch and the airier rib-vaulted ceiling, and it was now structurally possible to install large

expanses of stained glass, allowing a dazzling kaleidoscopic light to fill interior spaces.

Thus, rather ironically, the buildings that inspired Walpole's home were actually characterised by lightness rather than gloom. And yet, in the centuries that followed, the aesthetic became irrevocably associated with darkness, with the so-called 'Dark Ages' and with the supposedly primitive society that lived through it.

The very word 'Gothic' has long-held negative connotations. Where today the term in all its applications – to architecture, literature and aesthetics – is relatively neutral, for centuries it was a damning pejorative. The original use of the adjective was in reference to ancient Germanic peoples, the Goths, who helped topple the Roman Empire in 410 CE. Italian Renaissance authors later blamed the tribe for the demise of the classical world and all its values, which Renaissance Italy held so dear. The Goths were viewed as barbarous monsters, so anything described as 'Gothic' was too.

The derogatory term as applied to medieval art and architecture derives from a letter from Raphael to Pope Leo X in 1518, which was later popularised by the Florentine artist-cum-art historian Giorgio Vasari, who used it as early as 1530, calling medieval or 'Gothic' art a 'monstrous and barbarous disorder'. The meaning stuck. Even Horace, an ardent admirer of the style, referred to it affectionately as 'venerable barbarism'.

By the seventeenth century, Gothic architecture had fallen almost completely out of fashion in England. It had become strongly associated with a dark period of history, but it was also linked to the pre-Reformation Catholic Church and all its rituals and beliefs which, to a Protestant Englishman, seemed to be the vestiges of a strange and superstitious past.

Conscious of its negative reputation, Horace, in a later letter to Mann, attempted to justify his use of the Gothic, writing (rather condescendingly):

> *I shall speak much more gently to you, my dear child, though you don't like Gothic architecture. The Grecian [classical] is only proper for magnificent and public buildings. Columns and all their beautiful ornaments look ridiculous when crowded into a closet or a cheesecake-house. The variety is little, and admits no charming irregularities.*

Horace would be the first to propose that the Gothic was well suited to the domestic home and to *private* spaces. He would also be the first to put forward an alternative, more positive understanding of the word 'Gothic' – for him, a term used to describe a historicised and highly atmospheric environment; an adjective to go hand in hand with his invented noun gloomth.

As we pass through the door into the library, Carole pauses a moment for dramatic effect. 'Yes, so obviously this is the most Gothic room in the house,' she says, gesturing to the wall-to-wall bookcases adorned with a riot of pinnacles and crenelation. 'It was one of his very earliest builds, and you can imagine how important the library was to him.'

This is where he wrote *Otranto*. And here, prominently displayed in a spotlit glass case in the corner of the room, is an early edition of his most famous work.

Above the bookshelves – modelled after the medieval choir doors in the old St Paul's Cathedral – where traditionally there might have been paintings or busts of celebrated writers, philosophers and scientists, there are once again pictures of Walpole's family. This time the cast consists of only his *maternal* relatives.

As an author and a compulsive man of letters, this was likely the room in which he spent the most time. The most personal of spaces. And in the absence of any reference to his father, I find myself wondering if Horace had an issue with his dad. I ask Carole what she thought his feelings were towards Lord Orford.

'I think he was ambivalent,' she admits. 'I mean, he spent most of his childhood with his mother because just about the time of his birth [his parents'] marriage had broken down [and] it wasn't until after his mother had died and his father was out of power that he spent any time with him.'

There is even some debate about whether Lord Orford really was Walpole's father. Having been born eleven years after his last sibling, at a time when his parents were on poor terms, it is rumoured that Horace was actually the progeny of Lord Hervey Carr, Catherine's lover.

I tell Carole that it strikes me that Horace's little toy castle – in all its eccentricity – seems a bit like a rebellion against his father's more sober stately home.