

Phantom footsteps

When Kent-based builder Richardson began refurbishing two 18th-century buildings in the heart of genteel Tunbridge Wells, it may have expected to find some surprises among the fabric of the structures, but not ghosts.

The site consists of two buildings in The Pantiles precinct of the historic spa town. On a frosty evening in March this year, site foreman Tony Bower was working after hours with three colleagues on a particularly tricky structural section. "It was about eight o'clock and the street outside was deserted," says Bower, who is considered one of the firm's best foremen.

Suddenly, the workers were disturbed by a flurry of creaking and banging noises. "It wasn't just the oak creaking, there were definite footsteps. We thought that someone had come in to try to pinch our tools," says Bower, "we were quite frightened." It would have had to have been a daring thief, though. All the downstairs doors in the building at 39-43 The Pantiles were locked and the only entry was along an overhead gangway

On the first day the plumbers arrived on site, they set to work, locking the building's doors from the inside to ensure that no curious passers-by could wander in. They worked undisturbed until the late afternoon. Just as the cathedral clock outside struck four, the workers were startled to hear ringing coming from the kitchen. Someone, or something, had rung one of the servant call-bells from somewhere in the rambling building.

Understandably, the workers wanted to know who was calling for non-existent room service, but an immediate search for a trespassing campanologist failed to yield an answer.

Having shrugged off the incident, they returned to work the next day. Again the stroke of four on the cathedral clock was accompanied by an urgent jangling from the kitchen. Another top-to-bottom search of the building found nothing.

The following day, at four, they were waiting and watching the bells in the kitchen to see if the phantom bell-ringer would strike again. When one of the bells rang, they noted which one it was and then began tracing the wire that fed the bell through the house, hoping it

completely sealed, with the door bricked up and plastered over.

The workmen broke away the plaster and began chiselling at the brickwork. As soon as one brick had been removed, a pungent, acrid aroma wafted from the hidden room. Quickly, the workmen knocked a larger hole in the wall. Before they could peer into the dark space behind, a blast of cold air swept from the room, buffeting the men, and their spines shivered as a sense of a presence momentarily moved over them.

As quickly as it had arrived, it was gone, and the demolition and rebuilding continued without any further incident. But research found that the building had been used as a hospital during the First World War and the room in question had been the operating theatre.

Ghouls' night out

If there is one site in the UK where workers can expect to see a ghost, it is Taylor Woodrow Management's Albert Hall contract. The firm is managing the refurbishment of the existing building, the addition of an underground car park

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TONY BOWER, SPOOKED AT THE PANTILES, TUNBRIDGE WELLS (OPPOSITE)

from the site compound to a veranda on the first floor, spanning about 15 m across an open courtyard.

The men set about searching for the source of the noises, which appeared to be coming from the floor above. "We couldn't find anything," says Bower. The unexplained noises continued in the evening for the next two months. Site agent Vic Smith says he hasn't heard the noises, "but I have felt uneasy in the building when I have been there by myself locking up in the evenings".

There is no record of any ghostly goings-on on the site, which was marked as a tavern in a 1739 survey. But Bower is adamant. "I'm not convinced that ghosts exist but there are some things that need explaining."

The bells, the bells

During the 1970s, the plumbing division of Lincolnshire-based contractor and developer Simons won a contract to modify the central heating in the cathedral precentor's house in Minster Yard, Lincoln. Owned by the Dean & Chapter, the medieval building was a maze of dark corridors and damp, poky rooms and had fallen into disrepair.

would lead them to the culprit.

The wire led them up to a dark attic room. Sure enough, there was a bell-pull by the fireplace, but neither the room nor the cord looked as if it had been touched by human hands for years.

There was only one thing to do. The plumbers cut the wire between the room and the kitchen and returned to work. The next day, their apprehension grew as four o'clock approached. As the cathedral clock chimed for the fourth time, the ghostly jangling peeled from the kitchen.

No explanation was ever found for the events but the workers involved maintain that the story is true.

Spine chiller

Simons workers were involved in another ghost scare in the 1980s, while modifying the Corn Exchange and market building in the heart of Lincoln.

The contract involved converting the top floor of the building to a bingo hall. The plans included knocking down a number of internal partitions.

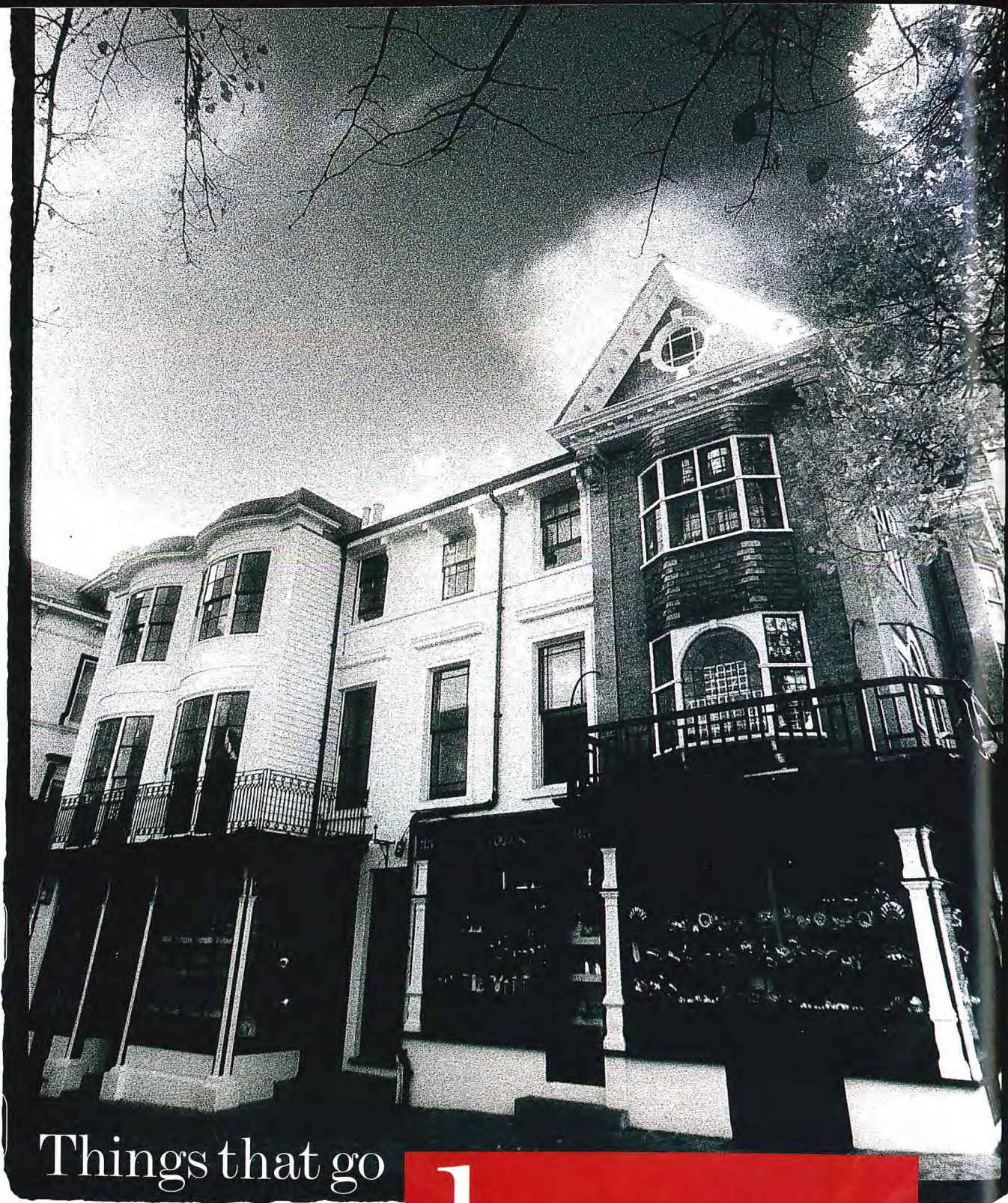
Workers demolishing partitions in the area beneath the building's central turret were surprised to find that there was one room that had been

and improvements to the external environment. Not only does it have to work around the activities at the hall, but it could face several ghosts that are said to haunt the Victorian structure.

The most famous of the ghosts is a pair of Victorian women, who are said to appear annually between 1.30 and 2am every 2 November. Witnesses say the pair giggle to one another, and there is speculation that they might have been prostitutes. A security guard who saw them in 1989 has refused to return to the building.

The second haunting is believed to be by the ghost of a former organist, Father Willis. He is said to make an appearance whenever work is done on the organ.

There is also a range of other supernatural folklore associated with the hall. The spirit of two workmen who drowned in the Serpentine, which ran through the hall's site, is said to cause sudden temperature changes in the section of the hall above the scene of their death. The area of the basement below door 6A is supposed to have been the site of a number of unspecified mysterious occurrences that have been blamed on restless spirits.



ANDREW CROWLEY

Things that go

bump

on the site

With Hallowe'en next week, ghosts and ghouls will be out in force, but many do not reserve their haunting for one night of the year, as James Macneil discovers. He hears four chilling tales of bricked-up spooks, unexplained footsteps and jangling bells on construction sites.