

The Testing Site

Revisiting the
mystery of
Scariness, 1968



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Introduction: 001.94 and 133.1

Growing up in the 1980s felt like a perilous prospect. With our fearful imaginations set ablaze by *The Unexplained* partwork at the newsagent and Arthur C Clarke looming out of the TV, it seemed clear that if the impending nuclear war didn't get you, then spontaneous human combustion certainly would (with the Kentucky Glowing Man peeping in through the window).

A visit to Chorley Library (in its original home on Avondale Road) was almost a daily pilgrimage for me – especially when my older brother moved to Ireland at the age of 16 and allowed me to make free with his adult tickets. Within those walls I'd feel the magnetic pull of 001.94 and 133.1 (despite not having much of a grip on the Dewey Decimal system at the time). And it was around those twin poles that I first came across the apparent mystery surrounding the devastating fire at the Scarness military research base on the Norfolk coast.

The core text on the events of May 1968 is *Ghost Songs: What Happened at Scarness?* by Giles Horowitz (Flannan Isle Press, Peterborough, 1976). It was a rarely borrowed copy of this title, in a strange generic library binding, that drew my attention one evening between school and teatime.

Horowitz's thesis was that Scarness was the site of a dimensional experiment that went catastrophically awry on the night of May 21st 1968, causing considerable destruction

and loss of life. Horowitz built his investigation on the alleged discovery of a journal written by Professor Elise Weiss, an experimental parapsychologist affiliated with the University of Edinburgh, who supposedly took part in the experiment. Horowitz maintained that a loose collection of charred typewritten sheets was found and smuggled out by one of a team of Royal Engineers brought in to clear up the site.

The Ministry of Defence has played down the events at Scarness as a simple warehouse fire and denied the presence of Professor Weiss at the site. However, Horowitz was shocked to discover that the academic left her office in early May 1968 and was never seen again. University colleagues he interviewed paint a picture of a private, almost reclusive woman who gave away little or nothing about her life outside academia. Having arrived from Europe on the *Kindertransport* and lost almost her entire family during the Holocaust, she also had no traceable relatives.

Horowitz tried to make a nuisance of himself to promote his theory (and book) but became like a wasp banging against a window. An abrasive man, he alienated many potential allies and found himself increasingly marginalised by other researchers of the paranormal. He took his own life in a Bournemouth bedsit in November 1982, just 24 hours before the launch of Channel 4. Earlier that day he had incinerated his archive of research material in the lock-up garage he rented. Since then, his work has slipped out of print, and no-one has stepped up to maintain his investigations.

And he probably would have gone unremembered here, had it not been for a fortuitous alignment of elements. Earlier in the summer, as the lockdown restrictions were eased gradually, I found myself summoned to South Kensington for an audience with Jean-Paul Marsaud, an eremitic French photographer and filmmaker *manqué* of my acquaintance. Over a couple of glasses of Chartreuse (outside a café that I'd never come across before and have been unable to locate since), Jean-Paul surprised me by revealing that earlier in the year he'd spent some time with our mutual acquaintance Tracey Pitcher (*Skating for Godot, Your Actions Are Pointless If No One Notices*) on the Anglian coast.

While there, he visited Scarness, which is now a popular nature reserve. Touched by *une certaine atmosphère* among the open spaces and derelict buildings, he took a series of photographs. Interested in recreating the lucrative success of our previous collaboration, the photozine *Perdu sur le vaisseau spatial*, he laid out the contact sheets in front of me. However, the mere mention of Scarness had sent me whirling mentally back through the timestreams to Chorley Library. It seemed that some strange triangulation had taken place between here and there, then and now. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to immerse myself again in that mystery – in that sense that there's more going on in the world around us than we perhaps would like to admit.

It took slightly longer than anticipated, but through the expansive reach of AbeBooks I managed to get my hands on a copy of the volume (an ex-library copy, fittingly, which I was thrilled to find included illegible scribbled marginalia and several cuttings from local newspapers that covered Horowitz's claims and activities, including his sad demise). The publication you are now holding includes edited fragments from Professor Weiss's purported journal, as published in *Ghost Songs*, juxtaposed with Jean-Paul Marsaud's images.

I have attempted unsuccessfully to trace Giles Horowitz's literary executors, so the extracts are included without any official permission. If the current copyright holder reads this, I'd be grateful if they contacted me via Colossive Press.

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August 2021