

Basildon Ghosts

Ghosts and mysteries happenings have always fascinated people and most towns and villages across the country will have its ghost stories. Here are just a few from the Basildon area that have made peoples hair 'stand on ends'.

Whether there is any truth to these tales or not, and if you believe them or not, these stories add a bit of colour to the history of the area. They may even hint at true events that have become embellished over the years.

Eerie vigil to spot the ghost of a monk in a crimson gown!



Curate – and others – watched all night without any luck!

Women in Basildon are being terrified by a crimson-gowned ghost of a monk.... reported national newspapers this week (February 1964). He shuffles across the road into Holy Cross Churchyard...it is said. "He has been seen always between 4 a.m. and 6 a.m. by at least ten people (all women) in the last two months..." it is also said. One person who claimed to see the apparition said, "the second time I saw the monk I cycled right through him. The air was cold and clammy. I went numb all over and could not speak".

True or False? This was the question "Standard" reporter Peter Lucas and the curate of Holy Cross Church (Rev. Bernard Lloyd) sought to answer when they kept a vigil outside the church early on Tuesday morning. With them in the hope of the ghost scoop picture of the year was photographer Bob Wall. They were disappointed.

The three arrived at the scene in Church Road a little after 3.30 a.m. to find not a solitude but a row of cars, a group of other inquisitive ghost watchers huddled together in the road and a photographer and reporter from London newspaper already there.

Yes, the ghost, whether he really does exist or not, had succeeded in putting the ancient 600-year-old church on the map, for the onlookers, in addition to those from Basildon, included two Americans from South Dakota!

The setting was just right, too...the eerie look of the churchyard at night. The street lights casting moving shadows on the road through the bare trees and the occasional rustle of twigs or leaves in the hedges. The only thing missing during the vigil which lasted until 6.30 a.m. was the ghost. "Perhaps he was scared off by the photographers' flash bulbs," someone suggested. Maybe!

All was still at the scene until about 5 a. m. when a number of watchers increased by one-a policeman on a motor cycle. He had been attracted to the church not by the ghost but by the car headlights and the flashbulbs

After a quick inquiry, the policeman left quite satisfied that if people choose to endure the snow and the cold by standing out in the open in the middle of the night, who was to stop them. "You must be mad" was his only comment. Perhaps he was right!

Worried Curate.

The reason for the newspaper-men's presence was obvious but what about the others? The Americans like the few Basildon people had read about the ghost and with an open mind on the subject, wanted to see it for themselves.

While Mr Lloyd came into the same category, he was also worried about the effect of the ghost reports upon his congregation and church clubs.

"If this story builds up one thing upon another", he said, "It could eventually affect attendance a great deal on dark winter's nights."

Although Mr Lloyd or his superior, the Rural Dean (Rev. W.A. Winfield) had not been approached to "do something" about the ghost, he considered it was the responsibility of the church to investigate.

Friendly Ghost.

He said: "I've been told that the ghost a monk who shuffles across the road into the churchyard. If this is so, he is a friendly ghost operating on consecrated ground, and I could not exorcise him"

If adequate proof is provided of the ghost existence and it seems as if Mr Lloyd would want to see it himself before he is convinced, he would then seek advice from the Bishop of Chelmsford on the matter. Often Mr Lloyd has been at the church on dark winter's nights, but he has seen nothing. "I must admit this is the first time I've been here between 4 a.m. and 6 a. m.", he said.

Noises in Church.

On some occasions he has heard ghostly noises like footsteps in the church porch without anyone being there, but he believes so many things like bats or mice might have been responsible for the illusion. A few hours before our vigil, Mr Llyod had an agitated caller at his home in that night. "I heard the clink of spades," the man said.

On arrival Mr Lloyd, his dog collar just visible underneath a thick overcoat and scarf, scoured the churchyard by torchlight but all looked in order. The only change from his previous visit to the church was that a chunk of oak from the ancient door was lying in the porch. This looked like the work of vandals rather than a ghost.

If there is a ghost, who could it be? This question puzzles Mr Lloyd but he took two guesses. "It could be that of a Basildon Rector who went from here to become Dean of a London Church. If so, this could account for the crimson gown.

"It could also be the ghost of one of the two Basildon Rectors who were deposed at the time of the Reformation" he said.

Old Basildonians who lived here many years before the New Town was conceived, had a store of tales of ghost in the area, like the coach and four with the headless rider which was supposed to speed down Church Road on odd occasions...but never a crimson cloaked monk.

"This is a new one" said Mr Lloyd, *"and one of the reasons why I think it is strange."*

False Alarm.

Standing in the road carrying on a ghostly conversation, the group had a false alarm at 5.30. A noise was heard down the road, but it turned out to be the morning's first milkman at work. A few minutes later the group's chatter stopped suddenly as a figure loomed up in the darkness. As it passed the hushed group, hardly pausing in its stride, it could be seen clearly, not in a crimson gown but in a pair of black running shorts. It was a factory worker running to work. "I do this every day," he said afterwards, "but have never seen a ghost."

Later two other workers shot past on motorcycles. To them clocking in was more important than pausing to talk to the strangers congregating in the road. Remarkably they hardly batted an eyelid, as if a dozen people standing outside the church at that time of the morning was an every-day occurrence!

At any time, the watchers expected to see a group of “safety in numbers” women workers - those who were scared by the ghost - come into view, but they never arrived. Either the ghost had done a good job, or it was their day off!



Perhaps it would be unfair to reach any definite conclusions about the phantom's non-appearance after only one night's vigil.

An 'every night' watch for a month might provide a fairer judgement.

To this suggestion, Bob Wall and Peter Lucas say: "Don't look at us. Are there any other volunteers?"

It is interesting to note that two of the former priests of the church who were later consecrated bishops, had also been monks. James Daren (1483) was a Franciscan and John Hodgeskynne (1544) was a Dominican.

Basildon

The entrance to Church Road, Basildon, from Clay Hill Road, was firmly believed to be haunted eighty years ago. This ghost was of a mischievous nature and was said to throw people over the hedge and into the fields.

The occupier of Basildon Hall was one who said that he had had this unpleasant experience. So strong was the belief that men leaving the Bull Inn after dark would not go that way alone but waited for company. There does not appear to be any story to account for the ghost, but it was a very lonely place with tall elms either side of the road and no houses in sight. Strangely enough I remember my father saying that, as a boy, he never liked that part of the road at night. Whether he had heard of the ghost I cannot say – if not, it seems as if there was something uncanny about that piece of road. A school now stands on one side and shops on the corner; some of the trees survive and mischievous spirits trouble no one. Another ghost said to haunt Church Road is that of a girl who was killed by being thrown from a trap or cart.



Basildon – Vange

A ghost walks the A13 at Vange. Mr John Howard, when he was licensee of the Five Bells Inn, saw it. At an interview in the Thurrock Gazette of 26 September 1969 he said, "There was always a lot talk in the pub about a ghost. On several occasions from the upstairs bedroom, I saw it.

"First I heard a thumping noise and then I saw the ghost. It was pure white and coming down the A13 from the direction of Vange Church and then it disappeared over in the direction of the Fobbing rail crossing. I know I saw it and nobody will ever convince me different."

In the second half of the 19th century farm hands were frightened to go on Pitsea Marshes at night because of strange lights, which they were convinced had ghostly origins, but were probably made by smugglers. Old Boosey, who lived on Vange Marshes, was frightened by a jack O'lantern, which was believed to be an omen of death.

He did not know that the ghostly light was due to the spontaneous combustion of gases from decaying vegetable matter on marshy ground.

It is said that a ghostly black dog is sometimes seen crossing the road from Vange to Fobbing where there was an avenue of trees near White Hall Farm. The shadows of the trees no doubt helped the illusion.



Basildon Hospital

One of the new builds, Basildon Hospital, had some unexplained goings-on in the 1980's. Lights would come on in a ward and had to be turned off. The ward was unused, and the doors were chained and padlocked. The ward was repeatedly searched but no one was ever found.

Nurses reported hearing someone coughing very loudly in a toilet, followed by the sound of running water after the coughing had stopped. On inspection there was no one in the toilet and no taps had been turned on.

Goldsmiths Manor – Langdon Hills

Goldsmiths Manor, standing on the southern slopes of Langdon Hills, was the country seat of Sir Joseph Dimsdale, Lord Mayor of London in 1901-2.

The original house was built in the 18th century but on either side are modern additions by Sir Joseph. In three of the ancient attics, once the sleeping place of maidservants, strange tapping's are heard, and ghostly footsteps have also been heard on the stairs at night.

One lady who slept in the attic at the head of the stairs heard these noises and felt such horrible atmosphere that she had to get up in the night and put her head out of the window. A guest asked if her host had to go out one night as she heard footsteps on the stairs, but no one had been on the stairs that night.

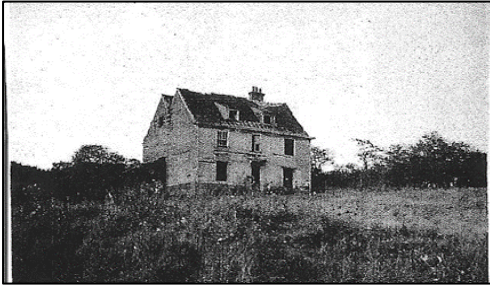


One misty night the lady of the house was on her own as her husband was in Paris and it was too foggy for him to fly home. On coming into the hall in the old part of the building from the kitchen with a cup of tea on a tray she noticed a lady standing to one side of the hall. She wondered vaguely how she had got there and noticed that she wore no outdoor clothes, although it was such an inclement night. As she was going to ask what she wanted the woman vanished before her eyes. Feeling very shocked she managed to walk into the sitting room and put the tray down, but her pet pug dog began to howl and kept howling.

That evening she went to friend's house, and they commented that she 'looked as if she had seen a ghost'. "As a matter of fact, I have", she replied and told them of her experience.

On describing the ghostly lady's appearance and clothes – she wore a beige tuckered dress – her friend's husband said the description fitted a former inhabitant of Goldsmiths.

Northlands Farm – Langdon Hills



Not far from Goldsmiths stood, until 1933 when it was destroyed by fire, the ancient timber farmhouse of Northlands, which was probably 300 years old. Its kitchen had a most uncanny atmosphere and a door in it was reported by an old resident that they had seen often open by some invisible agency. Blood stains on the floorboards in another part of the house were said to come from a man who had committed suicide. Could this be our invisible agent?

Laindon

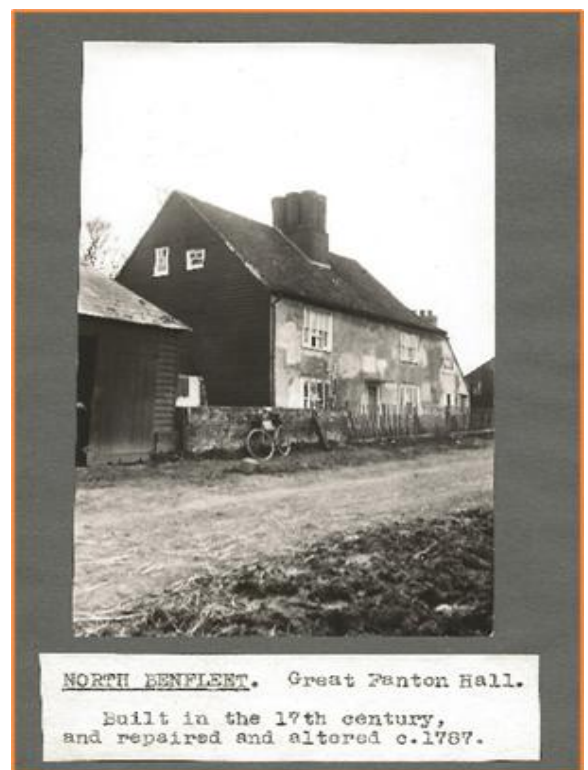
During the late 1990's some children claimed to have seen a woman, dressed in the uniform of a lollipop lady, crying near where they lived. The woman then vanished before them.

Fanton Hall – North Benfleet

Not far away from Holy Cross Church a wood adjoining the land of Fanton Hall, which was known as Shrieking Boy, or Screeching Boy's Wood. It has said to be so called because a ploughman had killed his plough-boy with his plough spud. According to the church registers a murder was committed on Fanton Hall Farm in 1734 and this seems to support the legend.

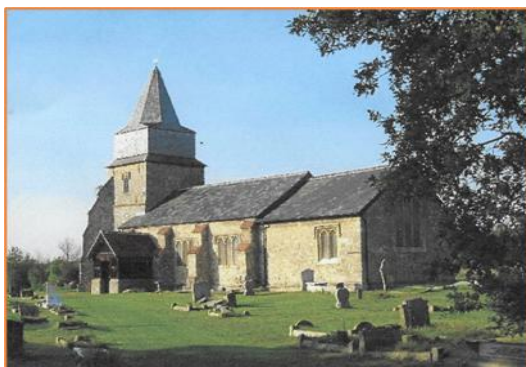
A more colourful version is that, in a fit of temper, a woodsman working in the copse at the end of Kingsley Lane cut off his working boy's head because he was not working hard enough. Hiding the torse in a hollow tree the woodsman told the local people who asked about the boy that he had run away.

The woodsman, so the story goes, was haunted by the boy he had murdered and used to get drunk to try and stop the bloodcurdling screams coursing through his head. The boy was supposed to sit on the gate at the entrance to the wood now and then scream when anyone approached, to remind them of his murder.



It is said that sometime afterwards some children went to see if the legend was true and sure enough, sitting on the gate was a screaming figure: they fled without ascertaining if it was a headless ghost.

St Margaret's Church – Bowers Gifford



St Margaret's is a lonely little church is near the railway line, some way from the village and it has been said that the organ is heard playing at night when the building is empty. Many years ago, four boys had heard of the rumour, so they visited the church one summer evening.

They took it in turns to sit in the church alone. As one of the boys sat in the dim, silent church, the only living person in the building, the organ began to play. He fled outside to his companions and was very upset for days afterwards.

Mrs M. Bettany of South Benfleet and a friend visited Bowers Gifford church one day.

As they entered Mrs Bettany saw standing two pews down on the south side of the church an old man with short white beard, who looked like a clergyman. She was laughing at something that had amused her and the old man glared at her and looked as if he was extremely angry that she should behave thus in the holy edifice. Mrs Bettany said that she felt rather foolish, lowered her voice and walked with her friend towards the vestry. The church door was shut but when they turned round the man had gone.

Still feeling rather annoyed Mrs Bettany said, "Let's go out" and when they reached the churchyard, she remarked that the man in the church had been most annoyed with her for laughing. "What man?" asked her friend, "There was no man in the church."

Members of the Phenomenist Research League from Southend on Sea visited the church one autumn night in 1956 to obtain evidence about the phantom organist. They reported that they saw and felt presences and that there were some very chilly psychic draughts, one 'presence' in the form of a vicar in his surplice was very strong and kept appearing.

Pound Lane – Bowers Gifford.

In the second half of the last century the ghost of an old woman was said to haunt Pound Lane, Bowers Gifford. No story connected with the superstition has survived and I do not think that anyone ever saw it. The first village policeman thought he did but discovered afterwards that it was a donkey in a ditch. He reported to have said that "His helmet fairly wobbled on his head."

Hope House and Stockwell Hall – Little Burstead



According to a report in the local press on Christmas Day, 1951, Mr B Murray of the Tower House Preparatory School, Little Burstead. Otherwise known as Hope House, heard the ship's bell peal at noon while no one was in the house.

A few days later he heard noises of 'walking about outside,' but there was no one in sight. A piano played itself without any one touching it. The Manifestations, he declared, were authentic. The house is 300 years old and the legend is that a former occupier of nearby Stockwell Hall exercised his dogs in the school grounds.

Billericay

There are several houses in Billericay that have said to harbour Ghosts. There are two connected with the Library, 118 High Street, which was rebuilt after being burnt down in 1956. One story is of an inhabitant who hanged himself in the cellars after his life savings had been stolen. Another later resident saw a girl going up the stairs in front of her and thought it was her daughter. However, as the girl should have been in bed, the mother went into the bedroom, found her daughter in bed where she had been all the time.

The 17th century house that had a projecting upper storey, which stood on the site of Billericay Post Office was haunted by a young lady in white. The house was 'extremely eerie and depressing with low ceilings and dark gloomy attics reached by a staircase with a gate at the bottom;' it was no doubt easy to imagine things.

A former tenant of St Aubyns, a 16th century house in Chapel Street, claimed that the house was haunted.

In 1951, soon after Mr Richman had moved into St Aubyns, a visitor who was not at all imaginative in this respect was lying in bed after everyone was downstairs and she swore later that she was certain someone was in the room looking at her.

At first, she took no notice, as she thought Mr Richman's mother, who shared the room with her, had returned for some purpose or other. Anyway, there was no movement or sound, so she turned round to see who was there and the room was empty, except for herself. Mrs Richman had not been near. In 1956 Mr Richman heard of two different experiences said to be some distant apart and not known by the second person to what had happened to the first till both were living elsewhere.

The first lived in St Aubyns during the First World War, it was not until she had met a lady who used to live there between the wars who said that she was never so scared in her life as when she lived in the house. Asked why, she described exactly the same experience which the other lady had years before.

It was 'just like someone with dragging footsteps and holding on to the wall for support coming from the front room door (not the front door a few feet beyond) along the main passage, then at right angles along the other passage towards the kitchen door' at which point the steps ceased. The lady who had lived there first said it also sounded as if the person was dragging something behind him. This happened on several occasions but on one little worse than usual. She was working in the kitchen when it happened, and she could not help looking towards the glass door to the passage to see who was coming. No one did and the steps ceased as they always did. She was so frightened that she could not do anything until her husband arrived home from work, when she ran to meet him trembling and almost in tears. She and the other lady, with whom there was no collusion, both said the steps were not to be confused with those of neighbours on either side, which can be heard but only faintly, at times but were quite distinctly in the house itself.

The Richman's did not have this experience, but they did hear footsteps very often coming from the front door (not the front room as the other ladies) and sometimes heard the door open and close first. The steps came down the passage and then straight up stairs to the first floor. Once they used to go and look but later, they never bothered but a male friend who frequently visited them made a point of seeing if there was anyone – but there never was.

Mr Richman said his mother also had a very curious experience in the kitchen one evening in 1956 about 10-11pm. Mr Richman arrived home to find his mother sitting looking intently at the wall opposite. She told him, "*I'm just watching the shadow of a ghost!*" and asked him to watch the walls after noting there was nothing cooking or boiling on the stove and no tea or other beverage on the table or elsewhere to cause any steam or vapour. After a moment or so they saw a hasty flash of a shadow, almost like that of steam but without any continued existence as it would have been from the shadow of steam from a kettle or other utensil.

Mr Richman laughingly remarked that it was the ghost of steam from a vessel carried from the old copper, where generations of women have worked. It was just a flash across the chimney breast (there was no fire), followed a few seconds later by the same on the next or inner wall. The shadow passed across a small mirror. Mother and son tried to repeat the shadow or reflection by means of various objects on the table but without result. The curtains were drawn and the door was shut and bolted.



The next 'shadow' flashed across the door and it was when yet another flash of the same shadow went across the fourth wall and across the white plate at the back of the gas stove, that Mr Richman remembered he had seen exactly the same thing at the same point on a number of occasions about that time of night, but had never really taken much notice of it. The same 'shadow' was repeated on each wall in turn several times as they watched.

The 400-year-old house, Hurlocks, High Street, Billericay, was also haunted. Its ruinous condition before it was demolished in 1958 made it easy to imagine ghostly inhabitants. Towards the end of the 19th century Miss E S Bayly spent a troubled night in the 'spare room' and more recently a ghost was seen looking out of a window when the house was unoccupied. The site is now a supermarket.



The beautiful Georgian house, Burghstead Lodge, in the High Street, Billericay, has a spine-chilling story told of a haunted bedroom at the back of the building (southwest room, first floor).

The story is recounted by J.A. Sparvel-Bayly, who lived there in the late 1870s and early 1880s. He tells how an old retainer in the 19th century was engaged to be a night nurse to a young, unknown gentleman at Burghstead Lodge. He was in a critical condition and was not to be spoken to unless necessary. The house, let to a non-resident nobleman and lived in by members of his family, had little

to do with local tradesman.

On the first night, as the nurse sat by the smouldering log fire in the huge fireplace, there were no sounds but the moaning of the wind. At midnight the patient breathed heavily and seemed uneasy and the nurse was surprised to see a lady in a green silk gown with a black veil over her bonnet sitting by the bedhead. The nurse was unalarmed and curtsied and moved towards the bed. However, the lady motioned her to be seated, so the nurse sat and wondered how and when the lady had come in. It was cold and late for a visitor, and she had been told that no visitors came. The lady sat watching the patient and repulsed the nurse when she approached the bed to help the patient, who was very uneasy. At last, the nurse closed her eyes for a moment – the lady had disappeared, and the patient was easier. The nurse felt uneasy and somewhat creepy and was thinking that she would give up her engagement, when heavy breathing of her patient made her look up to see the lady in the green gown again seated by his bed.

The nurse thought she must be an inmate of the house, as her dress, the very low bodice summer costume of the period, was quite unsuitable for the inclement weather. When the nurse rose to go to the bed, she waved her back. The patient's agitation, however, so increased that the nurse did approach the bed in spite of the lady's gestures. The lady drew her veil across her face and retired to the window. The patient appeared in agony, with drops of perspiration rolling down his face, while his eyes followed the lady in her glittering gown and he repulsed all the nurses's offers of help. So, she sat down again by the fire and the lady returned to the bed side. The nurse could not remember taking her eyes off the lady, but, as before, she was gone and the patient was easier.

The nurse told the physician in the morning that she could not carry on. He appeared surprised when told about the lady in green and asked the nurse to resume duty for that night, which she agreed to.

That night she was determined to watch for the lady, but her vigilance was defeated. Weary with watching she raised her head yawning with fatigue and there, with lavishly displayed shoulders, was the lady. The nurse felt awestruck and when she approached the bed the lady retreated. The young man was cold with terror, his eyes straining from their socket's unconscious of everything but the mysterious lady.

Nurse thought he was dying and was going for assistance, when the lady moved to the bed and over the dying man, then moving to the door. The nurse had one hand on the door latch and with the other she tried to raise the lady's veil, but nurse fell senseless to the floor for a death's head filled the large old-fashioned bonnet. A horrid laugh rang out, the lady disappeared and nurse knew no more. The next morning the nurse was found cold and numb on the floor and the patient appeared to have been for many hours.

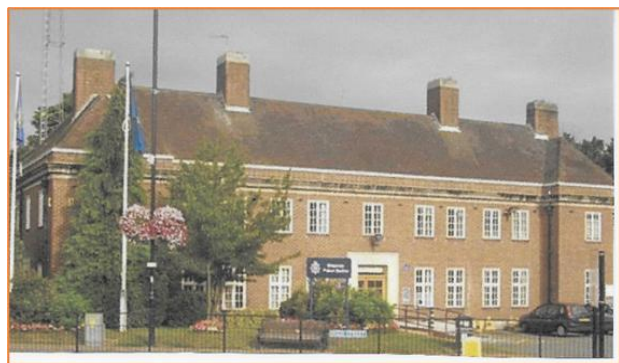
The mysterious young man was buried in the parish church with a lavish funeral. A gentleman whose features bore a striking resemblance to the effigy upon the coin of the realm and a London physician alone followed the body to the grave. A plain and exquisite tablet was placed in the church a year afterwards bearing the words, "Charles Leroy died 29 February, 18---. Remember."

Poor nurse died three months after her dreadful ordeal and the gloomy chamber was said to have a strange feeling of awe and coldness by whoever occupied it afterwards, although nothing was ever seen or heard to alarm the weakest nerves.

Mr Sparvel-Bayly used to point out the haunted room to visitors (especially young ladies), but his daughter said that she and her sisters never saw anything unusual, even when they slept in the room but then Mr Bayly did say that nothing was there to alarm the weakest nerves.

The shrubbery of Burghstead Lodge, running along the Brentwood Road, part of a still exists, was said to be haunted by ghost of a 'White Lady.' In later years a cook/housekeeper reported ghostly happenings in the basement and in 1958 two children exploring the house reported that there was a 'very nice lady' on the top floor, when in fact there was no one there.

Billericay – Police Station



Billericay Police Station was built in 1938. It pre-dates the New Town but is one of the younger buildings in Billericay.

An Inspector based there was a few days away from retiring when he was called to a burglary. The car he was in was hit whilst travelling to the burglary (which was a false alarm). The Inspector rescued the officer driving the car before collapsing. He later died in hospital.

Since then, the Inspector has been blamed for various odd occurrences in the Police Station. A Police Community Support Officer reported that while she was sitting alone in the station waiting for a lift when a stapler went flying past her. The PCSO fled to the safety of the car park and refused to return to the building. Others have heard footsteps behind them whilst walking up the stairs in Basildon Police Station.

Shuck

The Shuck is said to be a demonic animal, like a large black dog with glowing red eyes, which is often seen across Anglia, but there are reports as far south as Basildon.

A large black animal has been reported in Billericay and Pitsea on separate occasions¹. Another large animal, around 5 feet high but resembling a dog, has been seen walking from Vange towards Fobbing².

In the late 1980's a group of youths were on Pitsea Mount when they saw two big black dogs². The dogs copied each other's movements. The children, obviously terrified, ran to higher ground to get away only for the dogs to vanish as suddenly as they had appeared.

A few years later and another Shuck was seen at St Nicholas Church in Laindon². A group of teens were sitting in a field when they were disturbed by a screeching noise in the bushes, which they took to be the prey of a fox. What they actually saw was a huge black dog with glowing eyes that began to growl at them.

References:

- Basildon Standard, February 1964
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- Haunted Essex by Carmel King
- Memories of an Essex Ghost Hunter by Wesley Downes
- www.paranormaldatabase.com

Ken Porter

Basildon Borough Heritage Group/Society

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