

THE KEMPTON AFFAIR

After the episode in Ross regarding the triple murder in which I was involved in solving, I settled into my mundane routine the best I could. I had given up the 5 Hundred Card Club, it proving to be full of gossipers and in the end, rather boring....same people, same conversation. Indeed Ross became for me a place of too much familiarity and what with the dreadful murder scenes which I have referred to, the memories were beginning to determine my moods. I then thought of moving.

Don't get me wrong. Ross is a charming, historic place with good people, but I thought it was time for a change. My cottage too was charming and I still had the company of Russell my dog, but in reality there was nothing to do, day after day, except the same old thing. The thought came to me that I should have a change of scenery. Going back to the hustle and bustle of the city and suburbia would kill me, so I thought of the country again. And low and behold as it often does, fortune can come one's way at the right moment.

I was scanning the local newspaper, *The Northern Midlands News*, when I saw an advertisement of a property, an ex hotel called the Royal Oakes (circa 1825), at Kempton, which is down the highway towards Hobart more close to my family, making it easier for them to visit. I am not sure what the motive was behind the wording of the advertisement, but it gave graphic details in an editorial of about 400 words on the history of the place. Were the agents trying to sell it with a colourful story behind it? In any case it certainly would increase interest in the property, but at the same time could deter possible buyers. Then I realised that whoever bought the property would know what they were exactly buying and would not be surprised with anything that occurred there whilst they occupied it. Indeed, the buyer would go into the transaction with open eyes.

I am not sure who wrote the editorial but as an ex journalist I judged it to be pretty good. As said, Kempton was south of Ross, just off the Midlands Highway. It also was an historic town, nearly as old as Ross, but without the tourists. It existed of one long main street. The Anglican Church, St Mary's (1840) had closed down, but the cemetery was still operating. It was a very historical cemetery which included a boy of eight years, James Plaster, being buried after being murdered in 1830 by murdering aborigines. Also buried was the Rev Trollope who was related to the famous author Anthony Trollope. There was a tavern owned by John Jones, a post office run by a wife of an ex disc jockey long since retired who pursued most of his time wood turning with black wood, the fumes of which made him subsequently terribly ill. There was a small take away general shop and that was just about it, other than two smaller churches, one a Congregational and the other Presbyterian, now both used as residences and some nice colonial houses, one of which was a brewery.

I said "off the Midland Highway" as one had to take a detour, say going north to Launceston from Hobart to get to the village with the main road later reconnecting with the highway. When one joined the highway travelling north there was a take-away/petrol station

business called *Mood Food* which gave a roaring trade to travellers zooming through. Kempton was, as said, off the highway, (road traffic by-passed it) much like Ross. Thus the town of Kempton was a quiet affair and as is normally the case, everyone knew each other. The village was surrounded by large farm estates containing cows, cattle and sheep. The soil was rich, life was good and relaxed.

This is for me, I thought. The editorial made mention that the home came with a resident ghost. According to the article, it was a rather harmless apparition until disturbed. If so, it could be down-right horrible. Residences over the years have been chased out, as it were, because of the behaviour of this creature. According to legend, it was the ghost of one of bushranger Matthew Brady's men called Murphy. I knew it to be an historic fact that Brady had visited the hotel all those years ago. This persecution of owners in the past, I suggested, was why the price was so low, beside the fact the advertisement said that "the property was a handyman's dream" meaning that there were quite a lot of repairs to be done. This did not worry me as it would be something for me to do to pass the time in repairing the joint and what with the ghost, the whole thing sounded rather fun.

My belief in ghosts was one of being unsure. Did they exist? I erred on the side of caution, as I could not prove it either way. Yet, in my journalistic life I came across a number of stories which were unexplainable, so who was I to say, "Humbug!"?

As a consequence I phoned the agent and after making an appointment zoomed down on the highway to Kempton. The agent was an attractive young lady, as they all seem to be these days, in a tight fitting black skirt which came just below the knees. . She showed me through the empty and vacated building and the grounds. It was true, there was plenty of work to do. Over the years there had been much internal neglect as with the exterior. The two storey sandstone building had been painted white and needed repainting. There were three gigantic chimneys, the roof was now tin from which it had two windows jutting out. There were five windows on the front side of the top floor, while on the ground floor there were four large windows intersected with a historic door, which I was told was the original.

The door was the one which Matthew Brady left a message for then Lt-Governor George Arthur, in that he would pay him a visit in the not too distant future. Even in that condition I fell in love with it and offered to buy it, which although slightly more in price for which I would get for my house, was reasonable.

I asked Miss King, the agent, about the ghost. She giggled and said little other than, "Well, it's what you believe in, isn't it? Like religion."

"I suppose so," I replied.

We discussed business which would depend on selling my cottage at Ross which she said she could handle. I left it at that. Trim Miss King then got into her black sports BMW (real estate agents must be on a good wicket) and shot back to Hobart. No doubt another client

to meet. I was left there walking about the building which included extensive sheds. What I would do with them I had no idea. After I had made the decision I wondered whether I had taken on too much. I then took some photos of the building, which I would send to the family via email to show the new property which I had bought.

My cottage in Ross was soon placed on the selling list. Once home I checked the photos I had taken of the hotel, ready to send them to family and friends, informing them of my new home. Upon checking them I saw, indeed, a curious thing. There in the back ground leaning on the rail of the old wooden fence was a figure, though blurred, as clothed in colonial garb and looking directly at the camera. The strange thing was there was no one there when I took the picture. This I could not explain, so I ignored it with the thought in the back of my mind, was this Murphy?

It took three weeks for me to sell my Ross cottage. I had several offers below the going price and as I had to borrow to make up the difference with the new residence, I would not go below what I asked. Eventually I was successful. Within a fortnight, I was in my new home leaving me to settle in and put everything where it should go. It was laborious, but there was plenty of room.



Royal Oakes, Kempton. My home.

I was determined to meet the locals and the best place for that to happen naturally was the pub, the Kempton Tavern. It was a newly designed one storey tavern with, as said, John Jones as its licensee and owner.

“So you bought the old Royal Oakes?” He asked one night with my elbows on the bar drinking a stout.

“Sure have.”

“Hmm. Have you met Murphy yet?”

“Sure have.”

“Harmless ghost, unless you upset him.”

“What do you mean?”

John leaned across the bar speaking in a low tone,

“Well, upset him and he don’t like it see?”

“Explain.”

“It’s like this. The last three residences left very quickly, the last in an ambulance straight to the physic ward of the Royal Hobart Hospital,” John stressed.

“Go on. Tell me more,” I urged.

“Leave Murphy alone and he’s happy, but once you take him for granted, ignore him and even mock him, that’s when his mood changes. He can do terrible things to a person, send them crazy like he did the previous owner. Folks around here know all about it.

“You see, Johnson, Alby Johnson, the owner got so fed up with Murphy he told him to bugger off. Murphy got so incensed that he turned himself into a demon and tortured Alby so bad for three night and days, he went mad. I was there when they took him away, dribbling like a baby and muttering incoherently. And I can tell you, he had brown rich hair before that and he left with his hair as white as snow. Terrified he was.”

I listened with jaw dropped, not touching my stout.

“The thing is,” I began, “Why is Murphy there? I mean he died on the scaffold in Murray Street, hanged. Why is he at the Royal Oakes Kempton?”

“Folks get things wrong about ghosts. They think they hang round where they died, but that is not always the case. They will linger where they were they were most happy. I surmise Murphy enjoyed a pint or two at the Royal Oakes with Brady and his gang and that’s where he made his home.”

“So you think I should contact a priest or someone to exorcise him?” I asked.

“No,” came the robust reply from John, “leave the poor blighter alone. He’s harmless unless – as said – you upset him, otherwise he’s quite harmless.”

I left the tavern and John not knowing what to think. My encounters with Murphy were indeed harmless enough. An apparition of him every so often. I would not say frequently, but say once or twice in a day then a break afterwards turning up again. I would be reading a book, look up and there he was for a few seconds and fade away. I would catch him on the stairs and even when I was having breakfast in the kitchen. Just appearing, doing nothing in particular. Day or night it did not matter nor did he ever disturb me. I have had members of the family come and visit and even some of the grandchildren stay overnight and I noticed on those occasions he did not appear. This I greatly appreciated and in the end, I respected his presence which was doing me no harm, indeed, living alone he was somewhat, strangely enough of some company. In essence I left him alone and he left me alone. Murphy and I had a good relationship. Russell my dog would look up on occasions when he visited then bow his head again as though there was nothing unusual

I had been at the Royal Oakes for several months when I was visited by Peter Hodge who was dashing through from Launceston to Hobart. Peter of course played an important role as a detective during the horrible triple murders of late, in which, as said, I was involved, at Ross. Peter had now retired and learning that I had moved, popped-in to give his salutations. I was delighted to see him and with a brandy and dry we discussed our current situations. I told him of Murphy. Peter mocked the idea and laughed uncontrollably.

“Come on Reg, don’t give me that crap. A ghost called Murphy lives with you in this abode?”

I felt a little silly about it all and immediately was sorry I brought it up. Peter was an ex-colonel who had seen action in Vietnam, then later a detective. All this to him was an old wife’s tale and he rejected it.

“You are telling me that this Murphy fellow (here he chuckled) goes bananas if you don’t accept his residency in this here premises and will haunt the living daylight out of you to the point of driving you to madness?”

It did sound ridiculous, I know. I timidly replied, “That’s the story.”

“I tell you what ole bean. I will prove you wrong. Let’s make a date and I will stay here one night with you away and I will test this this rather childish story. I will state adamantly now and here that I will mock Murphy to no end and come morning come out victorious with my belief that it is all rubbish. Wot you think?”

I thought the matter had gone too far and regretted again that I had brought it up. Yet, what Peter said would be interesting. He would prove one way or another whether the tale was true or not.

“All right, it’s a deal. We will make a date and on the night of your stay here Russell and I will take a room at the tavern. Let’s drink on it.”

I poured another brandy and dry.

It was all arranged on a particular date that Peter would move in for that one night and I would take a room at the Kempton Tavern. I arranged this with John Jones, who of course told the rest of the village and word spread far and wide, even having news items in the local newspapers, *The Northern Midlands News* and the *Brighton Gazette*. The community was abuzz with many while pouring over their pint at the pub shaking their heads in expectation that my friend Peter Hodge was to see the end of his days.

Here enters another of my mates, Andrew Walton, commonly referred to as Scoop Walton. After the Ross affair, he had been placed in charge of Australian news for Fox News America and had done well for himself in that space of time. He got wind of the pending experiment and called on me one afternoon.

“So what this all about Reg?”

“Exactly as you read,” I replied.

“Well Andrew McCarthy, my camera man whom you know, and I want to cover it.”

“Bit of a risk, isn’t it? I mean if Hodge proves the tale is false, then you have no story. Waste of time.”

“... but if the tale is true, then what a story. International exposure.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure whether I want that.

“But in anycase I have no power to stop you other than stopping you coming on my land and we being great fiends Andrew, I won’t to that,” I added.

Scoop Walton smiled. “What we would like to do is to set up camp here. Do an exposé on Hodge before he settles down for the night, interview him on why he is taking on the challenge and interview you Reg regarding your opinion on the matter.”

I shuffled my feet, feeling uncomfortable, yet Andrew was obviously determined to go ahead and yes, it was a risk...no demon ghost, no story.

Scoop Walton continued, “And Andrew and I will be here come morning and interview Hodge regarding his overnight experiences. That’s if he is capable of talking after a possible horrific night.”

I sniggered. "Well we will have to wait and see on that." The date of the impending challenge arrived. Hodge too arrived with a back pack containing his necessary gear for the overnight stay. Many of the villagers had arrived also, witnessing the event.

Scoop Walton was there with his film crew together with a number of newspaper reporters who had also got wind of the event.

It was near dusk when proceedings began. I gave the keys to Hodge who, after being interviewed by Scoop smiled confidently and entered the Royal Oakes.

"We will meet here at dawn", I said "and see the results of it all."

I then turned and walked towards the Kempton Tavern for my overnight stay. The villagers too moved away and Scoop and his team settled down on my sparse front lawn. We will see what the dawn brings.

It was a tavern and not an inn, but my friend John Jones found me a room where I could stay, he providing a stretcher and a blanket. Russell slept at my feet. After a few stouts in the bar, I retired to my little room and soon John closed the tavern. I was restless, pondering on the outcome of our experiment. I knew from a fact that Murphy the ghost existed; I had seen him too many times. Now it would show that the folk lore regarding Murphy's temperament would be proven or not. I had no opinion on the matter either way. Tonight would show. There was no other braver person than Peter Hodge. My understanding was that Peter would challenge Murphy, tease him and call him cowardly names to get him to respond. If there was no response then it was all a legend, indeed there was no such thing as Murphy and my belief in him would be an object of derision even though I knew it to be true.

Gradually the night passed with me sleeping fitfully. At 4:30 am my alarm clock sounded. I arose sluggishly, undertook my morning absolutions, donned clothing and I with Russell began walking back to my home which was located just down the main street from the tavern. I was somewhat surprised to see other rugged up villagers also were curious of the outcome and saw them walking in the same direction with torches showing as it was still rather dark and very cool. It was a bizarre scene. Several dozens of people walking, without talking with an occasional cough heard. In a way it was spooky something in common with the theme.

I arrived in the grounds of my abode when I saw Scoop Walton, Andrew McCarthy, their team and other reporters wide awake and it appeared to me somewhat shaken.

"What's the matter Scoop? You look shaken."

Scoop Walton was somewhat in a trance. My approach awakened him and he turned to me, "Eh? Oh it's you Reg."

“Well, we got a few hours sleep in the caravan, when just after midnight we heard these almighty, almost animal screams come from within the house. We didn’t intervene of course as it would break the agreement we had with Hodge. The screams, however, continued for about 15 minutes, then dramatically they stopped and all became quiet. We didn’t know what was going on inside.

“I plan in a few minutes, when the boys are ready, to venture inside. Going to join us and see what we can find?”

“Of course,” I replied.

Scoop was obviously disturbed from what he had experienced and my curiosity was at its peak. What indeed would we find inside?

The time came to do just that. It was about 5 am when I moved forward accompanied by Scoop and his crew with the other reporters. Many of the public surged forward, which now included John Jones and once radio announcer, Bob Cook, who had retired to the village.

I slowly opened the front door and peered in and called in a low tone, “Are you there Peter?” There was no answer. I slowly moved inside with the rest following. There was no Hodge. We then, while in a line following each other, moved into the lounge room where we found him curled up lying on the carpeted floor. He was whining and shivering.

“Don’t film this Scoop,” I begged.

Hodge’s hair was white from the light brown which he had prior to the affair. I touched him lightly on the shoulder. He whimpered like a baby; something had happened, but what?

I beckoned to Scoop to help me lift him up on to the lounge chair where we placed him.

Hodge was dribbling and tried to speak, but he was stuttering badly. Yes, something had badly frightened him.

“M..Murphey,” he began, “Horror, unspeakable horror,” was all he said over and over and began crying uncontrollably.

“Call an ambulance,” I asked to nowhere in particular, to which someone did.

The ambulance came from Hobart and took poor Hodge away in in a complete uncontrollable state. What indeed had taken place?

Well, we never found out. Hodge was to suffer a break down and after several months of recovering was sent back home to Launceston. I visited Hodge in the Royal Hobart Hospital several times, he looked at me with a blank look and said nothing of his ordeal. Later when

he went home I heard from his wife that while he repaired to a great deal, he was never the same.

What indeed happen? I can't really say. All I know is that he was a trembling wreck when we found him that morning. The village folk had no illusions. It was Murphy who caused it all. I tended to agree with them. As for Scoop; well, really without film coverage there was no story and the practical, stoic Andrew Walton could not bring himself to believe that Hodge was a victim of a ghost turn demon. None of us knew for sure what happened to the bold, brave Hodge that night. Hodge was not able or not willing to ever speak of it.

As for me, I returned to the Royal Oakes, knowing as I acknowledge Murphy's presence there, I was safe. Since then this is what I have done. I had no further trouble with him nor have members of my family who have never said they ever saw him nor did I tell them of Murphy in fear they could be frightened by the episode.

His presence is still at Royal Oakes today.

- **Reg Watson**