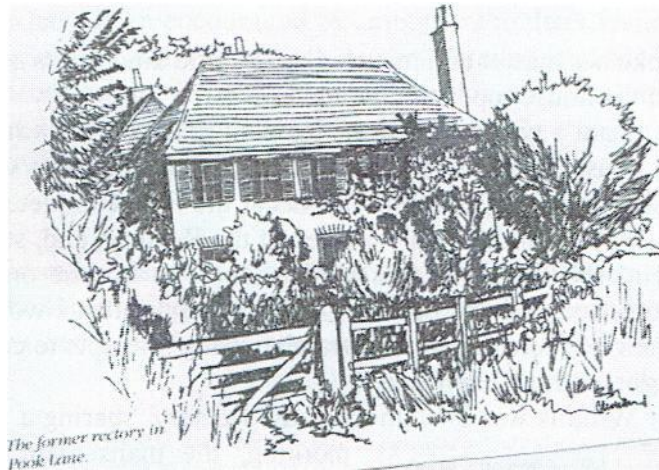


## *Old Rectory, Warblington - A Ghost Story*



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***The Parsonage House stands pleasantly in the midst of the glebe, at a short distance from the old castle and church, looking out upon the harbour, over the terrace and lawn***

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The Parsonage House still stands but the terrace and lawn are no more. Eileen Ford, who lived in one of the flint cottages at the north end of Pook Lane, near the Havant Road, remembered that those from Pook Lane attending services in Warblington Church were allowed to take a short cut through the Rectory garden and down an avenue which led to Church Lane (before the construction of the present link road). This diversion was known locally as the Sunday Walk.

However, this story concerns the 'Parsonage House', now known as the Old Rectory. *The Topographical Account of the Hundred of Bosmere in Hampshire*, published in 1817\*, was written by Walter Butler, Steward of the Manor of Havant; in it he made particular mention of some of the Rectors of Warblington, among them Sebastian Pitfield, who was presented to the living in 1671 by George Cotton of Warblington Castle. In a footnote, Butler added the intriguing comment that this rector was alluded to in a ghost story told in the *Observer*, and was stigmatised as a libertine and a murderer. (Elsewhere, it was said that Pitfield had 'got children of his maid, and to have murdered them'.) Butler stressed that there was no evidence to suggest that the rector was anything other than eminently respectable. His signature in the church records showed that he discharged his duties regularly, and presided at vestry meetings. The story of his misdeeds rested on the authority of a curate, Mr Wilkins.

The full story of the happenings at Warblington Rectory is included in an Appendix to the *Topographical Account* mentioned above. A letter from 'Mr Caswell, the mathematician, to the learned Dr Bentley' dated 15th December, 1695, enclosed a report of the hauntings.

I have sent you inclosed a relation of an apparition; the story I had from two persons who each had it from the author, and yet their accounts somewhat varied.

Mr Caswell persuaded a friend to take him to the author (Mr Wilkins the curate) and 'wrote it down from the author's mouth.' Mr Wilkins, Mr Caswell noted, 'is curate of Warblington, Batchelor of Arts of Trinity College in Oxford', and 'I hear no ill reports of his behaviour here (in Oxford).'

\* *Topographical Account of the Hundred of Bosmere in Hampshire, comprising the parishes of Havant Warblington and Hayling*. Havant Press. Printed by Henry Shelton, West Street, 1817

Mr Caswell reported that the Rector of Warblington, Mr Brereton, wanted nothing to be said about the apparition, because he could not get a tenant for the Rectory, 'though he had offered the house for ten pounds a year lease.' Mr Brereton was one of many rectors who did not reside in their own parishes, sometimes because they held several livings for financial reasons.

The story told by Mr Wilkins the curate was as follows: the figure of a man wearing a black gown was seen at Warblington Rectory in August 1695, when the house was let to Thomas Perce, with his wife and child, a manservant and a maid. The first sighting was by the maid, on a Monday, about nine or ten at night, all being gone to bed except the maid with the child, the maid being in the kitchen, and having raked up the fire, took a candle in one hand, and the child in the other arm, and turning about saw one in a black gown walking through the room, and thence out of the door into the orchard.

The maid's screams woke her master and mistress, who came downstairs and attempted to calm her, but she refused to stay in the house 'upon any terms'.

The following day, the tenant's wife reported the incident to the curate, who 'thought it was a flam, and that they had a mind to abuse Mr Brereton, the Rector, whose house it was.' However, Mr Wilkins agreed to go to the house, confessing later that he was at the time completely ignorant on the subject of ghosts and apparitions. That evening he duly arrived at the Rectory, and, still full of doubts, proceeded to search all the rooms to see if anyone was hidden there 'to impose on me.' The last room to be searched was the bedroom, and Wilkins, 'smiling, told the tenant that I would call for the apparition, if there was any.' The tenant was terrified at the curate's jesting attempts to conjure up the ghost, but even though they sat up all night, nothing happened.

On Thursday night, Mr Wilkins was once more at the Rectory, sharing a room with the tenant. Next morning, the manservant, who had been in another room, reported that he had seen something walk along in a black gown and place itself against a window, where it stood for some time. The curate still suspecting a trick, asked why the man had not called him, but the servant professed to have been too frightened to move or speak.

On Friday and Saturday nothing happened, but on Sunday night the intrepid curate was once more at the Rectory in a separate room, while the tenant and manservant cowered in one bed in another room. Between twelve and two, the two men heard something walk into their room, 'whistling very well', and part the bed curtains. This time, the servant summoned up the courage to wake the curate. Mr Wilkins reported,

'I leapt out of bed, and not staying to put on my clothes, went out of the room and along a gallery to the door, which I found locked or bolted.'

He persuaded the terrified tenant to let him in, and by moonlight, he saw the apparition move from the bedside. Mr Wilkins challenged the ghost to reveal why it had come to disturb them, and then, still thinking that the figure might be a man trying to frighten him, 'put out my arm to feel it, and my hand seemingly went through the body of it, and felt no substance, till it came to the wall; then I drew back my hand and still it was in the same place.'

Even though he was now, for the first time, afraid, the curate followed the apparition from the room and along a gallery, 'where it disappeared where there was no corner for it to turn, and before it came to the end of the gallery, where was the stairs.' Feeling suddenly very cold, Wilkins went to bed 'betwixt the tenant and his man, and they complained of my being exceeding cold.'

When Mr Wilkins described the apparition to Mr John Lardner, Rector of Havant, and to Major Battin of Langstone, 'they both said the description agreed very well to Mr Pitfield, a former Rector of the place, who had been dead about twenty years.'

Hardly surprisingly, the tenant vacated the Rectory, and the house remained empty. The figure in the black gown was later seen by a man returning from Havant fair, and the ghost was claimed to have followed him towards the farm, where it was seen by some of the farmer's men.

Walter Butler's judgement on this story was that it might have been a tale put about by the smugglers. 'The situation of the house favours the practice of smuggling, then very prevalent and for which purpose it is known to have been used in the absence of former rectors.' It is known from other sources that smuggled goods were landed on the beach at Warblington, and transported inland via Pook Lane, known for a time locally as 'Spook Lane'. In a similar way, ghost stories connected with the Royal Oak at Langstone are thought to have been encouraged by smugglers to deter visitors. However, the account written by Mr Wilkins, an educated man of the cloth, is very detailed, and Mr Wilkins himself started his ghost-watching as a convinced sceptic. Whatever the truth of his story, it is at least comforting to reflect that the apparition has never again been seen at Warblington.

*Christine Normand*

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Editor's note: Many other hauntings have been recorded in Warblington, related in particular to Lady Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, who lived in the Castle, and was beheaded in the Tower by order of Henry VIII. She was said 'to drift headless across the lawn from Warblington Church, through the churchyard and across the fields' (*Hampshire Hauntings and Hearsay* - Patricia Ross. The King's England Press. 1998) The present owners of Warblington Castle House have lived there for 23 years, and have no sense of 'spookiness'. Their predecessors, however, used to hear unexplained sobbing in an upper corridor. The owners comment that Lady Margaret has now been created the Blessed Margaret ' and is at rest.