

Spring-heeled Jack

To Victorian Bugaboo From Suburban Ghost

Mike Dash

FROM HIS FIRST APPEARANCES IN THE AUTUMN OF 1837, THE DEMONIC FIGURE OF SPRING-HEELED JACK — SPITTING FIRE AT HIS VICTIMS AND EVADING PURSUERS WITH HIS PRETERNATURAL LEAPS — CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF VICTORIAN BRITAIN. LARGELY FORGOTTEN BY THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, HE WAS REDISCOVERED IN THE 1960S AND APPROPRIATED BY UFO RESEARCHERS WHO SAW HIS ATTACKS AS PROTOTYPE CLOSE ENCOUNTERS. MIKE DASH, FOR MANY YEARS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR TO *FORTEAN TIMES*, HAS BEEN RESEARCHING THE CASE SINCE 1982, AND PRESENTS HERE AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS EXTENSIVE COLLECTION OF RECOVERED SOURCE MATERIAL.. THE ASSEMBLED EVIDENCE SUGGESTS JACK SHOULD BE REASSESSED WITH REFERENCE TO HIS DUAL CONTEMPORARY ROLES AS GHOST AND SEXUAL ASSAILANT. FOOTNOTE REFERENCES TO NUMBERED DOCUMENTS RELATE TO THE MATERIAL PRESERVED IN THE CALENDAR OF SOURCES THAT FORMS A LENGTHY APPENDIX TO THIS PAPER.

The legend of Spring-heeled Jack

It started with a ring at a gate, and ended with a demonic laugh.

The gate was the front gate of a lonely cottage that stood just outside the little village of Old Ford, to the east of London, and the bell on it jangled violently at about a quarter to nine on the evening of 20 February, 1838.

Inside the cottage, 18-year-old Jane Alsop looked uncertainly at her parents and her sisters. Who could be calling at such a time? It was already dark and chill outside, and there were few passers-by in such an isolated spot. But the bell rang again, longer this time and louder, so Jane opened the front door and walked the short distance to the gate.

Her eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark, but dimly she made out the figure of a man standing in the lane. Although enveloped in a cloak, he appeared angular, and some sort of headgear augmented his considerable height. Approaching him, Jane asked what was the matter. 'I am a policeman,' the man snapped back. 'For God's sake, bring me a light, for we have caught Spring-heeled Jack here in the lane.'

Jane hurried back to the cottage to fetch a candle. Like every other resident of Old Ford – and all the other villages on the outskirts of London – she had heard stories about this mysterious demon, who had first been seen in the autumn of the previous year. Jack was said to appear as either a ghost clad in armour, or as a baboon, a bear or a devil, and his hideous appearance and preternaturally agile leaps were rumoured to have frightened quite a number of his female victims into fits, or worse.

Quickly, Jane ran back to the house, returning with a candle, which she handed to the waiting figure. His reaction was not what she expected. Far from thanking her and making off to secure one of the most wanted criminals in England, the man leaned back, threw down his cloak, and, holding the lighted candle to his chest, bathed his face in its eerie glow.

Jane could not help but scream. The face thus revealed was hideously ugly; its eyes blazed red as the coals of hell and its pinched, tight features were topped by a peculiar sort of helmet; the body, meanwhile, was encased in a tightly-fitting, shining suit, and a strange object, resembling a lamp, was strapped to the chest. There could be no doubt that, far from lending help to a policeman, Jane had been ensnared by Spring-heeled Jack himself.

She had no time to register more than these initial impressions before Jack attacked. Leaping forward, he vomited balls of blue and white fire into her face and seized her by her dress and neck, pinning her head under one arm. With mounting terror, she realised that, in place of fingers, he had sharp, long talons, which he was using to tear at her clothes and her face.

Shrieking with fear, Jane somehow wrenched herself free and ran towards her front door. Jack came after her, catching her on the doorstep, pinning her again, scratching her arms and yanking out clumps of her hair. As he did so, Jane's younger sister Mary appeared at the door, but she was too much alarmed at Spring-heeled Jack's supernatural appearance to render any assistance, and it was left to an older sister, Mrs Sarah Harrison, to come to Jane's aid. Somehow the unfortunate girl was dragged free of Jack's deadly embrace and the front door slammed in the assailant's face. Even then, Jack did not give up; he banged heavily at the door until the rest of the Alsop family appeared at an upstairs window and called loudly for the police. Then, perhaps

persuaded that he could do more mischief on this night at least, he vanished back into the darkness from which he had come.

The sensation that this, Jack's latest and most daring exploit, caused when it was reported in the press was in no way lessened by two other appearances that occurred in the same month – attacks that suggested no-one in the eastern outskirts of London was safe from Spring-heeled Jack. Two days before his visit to the Alsop family at Old Ford, Jack lurked in the shadows of Green-dragon-alley, a narrow, twisting passage in the Limehouse area of London's docklands, and waylaid 18-year-old Lucy Scales and her sister as they returned home from a visit to their brother, one of the many butchers of the district. As Lucy came up to the thin, cloaked stranger standing in the alley, he turned and spurted a stream of blue flames into her face. Temporarily blinded and terrified, the girl fell to the ground in hysterics. As Jack made off, her sister observed that he wore some sort of light strapped to his chest.

A few days later, and half a mile to the north, Jack reappeared, rapping on the door of a house in Turner Street and asking to speak to the owner, a Mr Ashworth. Before the servant boy who answered the door could answer, the leaping terror threw back his cloak to reveal the sinister features and bizarre costume that had been terrifying London. The frightened boy screamed so loud that Jack again made off ahead of any possible pursuit – but not before the servant lad had noticed one potentially vital clue: the hem of monster's cloak bore an embroidered letter 'W'.

Spring-heeled Jack was more than just an East End bogey. In the autumn months of 1837 he had appeared a score of times in the villages and hamlets to the south and west of London, and attacked a servant girl named Polly Adams on Shooter's Hill, breathing fire into her face and tearing her clothes from her body. She was certain that the monster who had assaulted her was actually a gentleman who had attempted to seduce her earlier that day. In the aftermath of the 'flap' of spring 1838 Jack broadened his activities still further. He preyed on travellers throughout the Home Counties, hovering in the unlit lanes until he found an unwary passer-by, then leaping from his hiding place to scare his victims half out of their wits before making good his escape with enormous bounds. He roamed throughout southern England between 1840 and 1870, appearing as far north as Warwickshire and as far south as Devon, scaring the townsfolk of Yarmouth in the eastern counties and the nursemaids of Herefordshire far to the west. His favoured targets were women, but on occasion he would take on coachmen, postillions, blacksmiths and anyone else foolish enough to be abroad after dark. The awful, fiery breath was seldom seen, but witnesses often remarked on Jack's blazing eyes

and always on the inhuman leaps he made, clearing hedges and gates, even mail coaches, in a single bound.

This period of Jack's career is poorly documented, perhaps because in avoiding the metropolis he also eluded the attentions of its newspapermen. But Spring-heeled Jack did return to London at least once during these years. In November 1845 he suddenly appeared in the rotting tenements of Jacob's Island, hopping up to a young prostitute named Maria Davis as she stood on one of the rickety wooden bridges that criss-crossed the open sewers of the slum. Before the terrified girl had the chance to escape, Jack seized her in his taloned hands and breathed his fire into her grimy face. Then the mysterious attacker lifted his victim above his head and hurled her into the muddy waters. Maria struggled, briefly and hopelessly, before succumbing to the sewer's stinking embrace. Spring-heeled Jack was now a murderer.

It was more than 30 years before the agile killer did anything as daring. He was at large again in Peckham around 1872. Then, in the spring of 1877, he began to haunt a place so dangerous his very presence there seemed to confirm he was no ordinary man – if indeed he was a man at all.

The barracks at Aldershot, Surrey housed the headquarters of the British army. Perhaps 10,000 troops were billeted there at any given time, guarded night and day by armed sentries. And it was the sentries that Jack chose to torment when he came to camp. On several occasions he appeared at lonely sentry boxes in outlying parts of the camp, clambering onto sentry boxes and passing an ice-cold hand over the faces of the startled soldiers within, then making off across the heath with his usual agility. At least twice the sentries recovered their composure in time to loose a round in his direction, but if any of the balls struck home, the phantom attacker showed no sign he had been hurt. And in the autumn he returned, repeating his antics of the spring.

If the combined resources of half the soldiers of the Empire could not catch Jack, what chance had the citizens of Lincoln when confronted by the bounding bogeyman? A few months after his last appearance at Aldershot, the elusive figure was seen at Newport, where he appeared clad in a bizarre sheepskin costume, leaping 20 feet or more as he sprang along the rooftops and over an ancient Roman monument called Newport Arch. At least two people took pot-shots at him, but the hide he wore seemed impervious to bullets. After taunting the townsfolk for a few moments more, the agile villain made his escape once again.

Little more was heard of Spring-heeled Jack for a further three decades. It was not until 1904, when his legend had been all but forgotten, that he returned for what would prove to be his last appearance. This time he turned up in Liverpool – further

north than he had ever ventured before – where for several successive nights he terrified the people of William Henry Street by bounding up onto their roofs and then down into the street again. Two young girls and two women, out walking in the road, were flung to the ground by the leaping terror. At last, one day at the end of September, Jack appeared in William Henry Street in broad daylight, clad as usual in a mask, black cloak and long, tight boots, springing up one side of the road and down the other before hopping a full 25 feet onto the roof tops and making off. As he did so, he turned one last time and laughed a mocking, sinister laugh before vanishing – this time for ever.

Introduction

Thus, to appropriate the useful phrasing of Lawrence Kusche, runs the legend of Spring-heeled Jack as it is usually told¹. And it has been told, many times, firstly by contemporary sources and then in the paranormal and ufological literature – particularly since its ‘rediscovery’ in 1961 by a contributor to *Flying Saucer Review*².

Most modern readers who are familiar with the story have read it in one of the many compilation volumes dealing with unexplained mysteries. Jack makes frequent appearances in such works, but the accounts of his doings are essentially identical, based not on any original research but on the ‘legend’ or a condensation of it. In fact – strangely for a case that is so well known and which features so memorable a villain – fewer than half-a-dozen contributions of any significance have appeared since Spring-heeled Jack is supposed to have disappeared, and this is the first general summary to be based on more than a tiny handful of contemporary reports.

The information in this paper comes chiefly from more than 45,000 words of contemporary source material drawn chiefly from newspapers. Rather less than five percent of this material was known to previous researchers. By going back to these original sources – which are reprinted as a lengthy appendix to this essay – it has proved possible to radically reassess the strange case of Spring-heeled Jack, to query most of the assumptions that are routinely made about him, and also to question his apparent uniqueness. As we will see, Jack should be classified not, as he generally is, with UFO occupant reports, but alongside other ‘phantom attackers’ and with reference to ‘urban terrors’ and other social panics.

¹ ‘The legend of the Bermuda Triangle as it is usually told’, in Lawrence Kusche, *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery – Solved* (New York, 1975).

² J. Vyner, ‘The Mystery of Springheel Jack’, *Flying Saucer Review* v7n3, May-Jun 1961.

‘What really happened’

The first step in reassessing the case is to turn to the original sources and compile a more accurate account of what had actually occurred between Spring-heeled Jack’s first appearances in September 1837 and his supposed ‘disappearance’ 67 years later.

The earliest known reports of Jack’s activities began to appear in London newspapers in the last week of December 1837. (Although it might be thought that local papers published in the Home Counties should contain accounts of his earliest depredations two or three months before this date, but a close search of five sample titles published in the immediate vicinity of London has revealed nothing for the months September to December 1837³.) It is clear that by this stage speculation about the mysterious attacker was already rife and that a relatively complex series of rumours were circulating in many villages⁴ in the vicinity of London.

The first of these appear to have originated in Barnes, then a village south-west of London, in early September 1837: a ‘ghost, imp or devil’ in the shape of ‘a large white bull’ had attacked a number of people, particularly women. It did not take long for similar stories to stream in from elsewhere, and over the next two months Jack was said to have adopted the guises of ‘ghost, bear and devil’ to visit a total of two dozen other villages to the south and the west of the metropolis⁵.

Several of these reports added further (if utterly contradictory) details to the monster’s description. In the appropriately-named Cut-throat Lane, Isleworth, a carpenter named Jones claimed to have been attacked by a figure dressed in armour, ‘with red shoes, etc.’ When he fought back, two more ‘ghosts’ joined in the struggle on Jack’s side. Jones was badly beaten, and his clothes were torn to shreds and thrown away. (A very similar report was made by an itinerant muffin-man from Hammersmith at about this time; it was declared a hoax following an unspecified investigation.) Jack was said to have appeared in St John’s Wood late in December and early in January clad in mail and as a bear⁶, and to the west of London as a devil equipped with iron claws, which he used to attack a blacksmith and a number of women⁷. He was supposedly seen climbing over

³ Contemporaries attributed this to the fact that the press had been ‘bought’ by those carrying out the crimes. *The Times* 9 Jan 1838.

⁴ Most of them – thanks to almost 160 years of development – now suburbs of the metropolis.

⁵ See *The Times* 9+11 Jan 1838; *The Morning Chronicle* 10+11 Jan 1838; *The Morning Herald* 10 Jan 1838; *Greenwich, Woolwich & Deptford Gazette* 13 Jan 1838; *The Observer* 14 Jan 1838.

⁶ *The Times* 11 Jan 1838.

⁷ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

the walls of Holland Park and Kensington Palace at the appropriately supernatural hour of midnight, to dance ‘fantastic measures on the wooded lawns’⁸, and was also said to have so terrified the residents of Stockwell, Brixton, Camberwell and Vauxhall that several had died of terror⁹. This seems to have been an exaggeration, but it does seem that the daughter of one Plutarch Dickinson, of Dulwich, was so frightened by the appearance of a ghost ‘enveloped in a white sheet and blue fire’ that she ‘was nearly deprived of her senses’ and was taken to bed ‘in a very dangerous state’, while nine-year-old Timothy Marsh, of Hammersmith, was ‘terribly frightened’ by the sight of Spring-heeled Jack in the guise of a bear¹⁰.

The London newspapers were appropriately incredulous when these wild reports began to appear in print on in the last days of December 1837. The stories were no more than the sort of rumours that tended to circulate among servant girls they said, and subsequent reports explained that investigations by both local reporters and the police had failed to uncover any first-hand witnesses or verifiable sightings. On the contrary, the few rumours that could be tracked down to their source turned out to bear little relation to what had actually occurred. One reported ‘ghost’ turned out to be a police inspector on a white horse¹¹, another a white-faced heifer, and the report that Jack had danced on Kensington Palace lawn turned out to be an exaggerated recounting of an unrelated incident that had occurred around 1822¹².

Nevertheless, most of the newspapers were prepared to concede that something must have caused the panic, and several¹³ reported the rumour that a gang of noblemen was carrying out the attacks as part of a wager. By the middle of January, a number of public-spirited citizens had formed a committee to investigate the matter and raise money to effect the capture of the mysterious ‘ghost’. The committee was told – on whose authority we do not know – that the Spring-heeled Jack ‘gang’ was made up of ‘rascals connected with high families, and that bets to the amount of £5,000 are at stake upon the success or failure of the abominable proceedings’, but they could ‘scarcely give credence to the following report which has reached their ears, that the object of the villains is to destroy the lives of not less than 30 human beings! viz. eight old bachelors, ten old maids, and six ladies’ maids, and as many servant girls as they can, by depriving them of

⁸ *The Morning Chronicle* 11 Jan 1838; *County Herald & Weekly Advertiser* (Middlesex) 20 Jan 1838.

⁹ *The Times* 11 Jan 1838.

¹⁰ *The Sun* 20 Jan 1838.

¹¹ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 January 1838.

¹² *County Herald & Weekly Advertiser* 20 Jan 1838.

¹³ *The Times* 9 January 1838; *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

their reason, and otherwise accelerating their deaths.’¹⁴ Nevertheless, something of this sort was certainly believed by some members of the public. One (probably female) ‘Resident of Peckham’ wrote to Sir John Cowan, the Lord Mayor of London that

‘some individuals (of, as the writer believes, the higher ranks of life) have laid a wager with a mischievous and foolhardy companion (name as yet unknown), that he durst not take upon himself the task of visiting many of the villages near London in three disguises – a ghost, a bear and a devil; and, moreover, that he will not dare to enter gentlemen's gardens for the purpose of alarming the inmates of the house. The wager has, however, been accepted, and the unmanly villain has succeeded in depriving seven ladies of their senses. At one house he rung the bell, and on the servant coming to open the door, this worse than brute stood in a no less dreadful figure than a spectre clad most perfectly. The consequence was that, the poor girl immediately swooned, and has never from that moment been in her senses, but, on seeing any man, screams out most violently, ‘Take him away!’ There are two ladies (which your lordship will regret to hear) who have husbands and children, and who are not expected to recover, but likely to become a burden on their families.’

Cowan’s robust view of these allegations was that the letter-writer had been ‘terrified by some burglars into this method of obtaining retribution at the hands of the Lord Mayor, but as the terrible vision had not entered the city, he could not take cognizance of its iniquities.’¹⁵

It was not long before Spring-heeled Jack did transfer his activities closer to the city. On the evening of Tuesday 20 February he appeared at Bearbinder Cottage, Bearbinder Lane, on the outskirts of the village of Old Ford, rang at the bell and savagely assaulted Jane Alsop when she came to the gate.

Next day, Jane went with her father and two sisters to report the attack to Lambeth-street police office, where an investigating magistrate sat daily to hear details of the principal crimes committed in the district¹⁶. Her initial account of the story, which

¹⁴ *The Sun* 20 Jan 1838.

¹⁵ *The Times* 9 Jan 1838.

¹⁶ Investigating magistrates performed a much-needed function at this early stage in police history. The newly-established Metropolitan Police was organised on military lines and at had no detective branch until the 1840s. Detection in London remained the province of the famous Bow Street Runners, the private force of the Bow Street magistrates – of whom there were usually fewer than a dozen – and of officers privately employed by London’s various police offices, reporting directly to the investigating magistrates

was printed in many London papers including the Times of 22 February¹⁷, is well-known, but as it is central to the whole story of Spring-heeled Jack it is worth repeating part of it here:

‘At about a quarter to nine o'clock... she heard a violent ringing at the gate at the front of the house, and on going to the door to see what was the matter, she saw a man standing outside, of whom she enquired what was the matter, and requested he would not ring so loud. The person instantly replied that he was a policeman, and said ‘For God's sake, bring me a light, for we have caught Spring-heeled Jack here in the lane.’ She returned into the house and brought a candle, and handed it to the person, who appeared enveloped in a long cloak, and whom she at first really believed to be a policeman. The instant she had done so, however, he threw off his outer garment, and applying the lighted candle to his breast, presented a most hideous and frightful appearance, and vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flames from his mouth, and his eyes resembled red balls of fire. From the hasty glance, which her fright enabled her to get of his person, she observed that he wore a large helmet, and his dress, which appeared to fit him very tight, seemed to her to resemble white oil skin. Without uttering a sentence, he darted at her, and catching her partly by her dress and the back part of her neck, placed her head under one of his arms, and commenced tearing her gown with his claws, which she was certain were of some metallic substance. She screamed out as loud as she could for assistance, and by considerable exertion got away from him, and ran towards the house to get in. Her assailant, however, followed her, and caught her on the steps leading to the half-door, when he again used considerable violence, tore her neck and arms with his claws, as well as a quantity of hair from her head; but she was at length rescued from his grasp by one of her sisters. Miss Alsop added, that she had suffered considerably all night from the shock she had sustained, and was then in extreme pain, both from the injury done to her arm, and the wounds and scratches inflicted by the miscreant about her shoulders and neck with his claws or hands.’

Jane's statement was supported by those of her sisters. The elder of the two, who was evidently married since she gave her name as Mrs Harrison, told the court that ‘her

themselves. Belton Cobb, *The First Detectives and the Early Career of Richard Mayne, Commissioner of Police* (London 1957) pp.72-3.

¹⁷ *The Times* 22 Feb 1838.

sister's dress was nearly torn off her, both her combs dragged out of her head, as well as a quantity of her hair torn away', while Jane's father added one significant detail:

'Mr. Alsop also said, it was perfectly clear that there was more than one ruffian connected with the outrage, as the fellow who committed the violence did not return for his cloak, but scampered across the fields, so that there must have been some person with him to pick it up.'

This is as far as existing accounts go in assessing the assault at Old Ford. Nevertheless, it is now possible to take matters considerably further, as several supplementary accounts of investigations conducted by the police and the private officers employed by the Lambeth-street office appeared in the press over the next few days. In particular, The Times printed two lengthy follow-ups on 2 and 3 March¹⁸.

There appear to have been two investigations of the Alsop assault. The first was conducted independently by the recently-established Metropolitan Police. The second was in the charge of James Lea¹⁹, a former member of the Bow Street Patrol²⁰ employed directly by Lambeth-street police office to look into cases that came before the court. Lea – who still enjoys, among authorities on police history, the reputation of having been the best detective in London during the 1830s²¹ – had more than a decade's experience of tackling crime in the district. He was best known for the part he had played in solving the murder of Maria Marten²² at the Red Barn in Polstead, Suffolk, in 1827, which was by some distance the most sensational British crime of the early nineteenth century. It was Lea who had tracked down Marten's murderer, William Corday, to a private girls' school

¹⁸ A fact that anyone bothering to consult the relevant volume of *Palmer's Index to The Times* could have discovered in only a minute or two. The general standards of Spring-heeled Jack research must have been low indeed for these reports to have remained undiscovered for so long. See *The Times* 2 and 3 Mar 1838

¹⁹ The name suggests that this officer was probably a local man. The River Lea runs within half a mile of the Alsop residence.

²⁰ The less celebrated – but more numerous – mounted counterpart of the famous Bow Street Runners.

²¹ According to Belton Cobb, op.cit., Lea was 'very experienced and usually successful' (p.81); 'unquestionably the finest detective of his day' (p.95) and one of 'the only really experienced detectives in London' at this stage in police history. See also Joan Lock, *Dreadful Deeds and Awful Murders: Scotland Yard's First Detectives 1829-1878* (London 1990) pp.25-6.

²² Marten's death – like the crimes of Spring-heeled Jack himself – was immortalised in melodrama as *Maria Marten, or, The Murder in the Red Barn*. The play remained a staple for many years and was eventually filmed, starring a decidedly middle-aged Tod Slaughter as the young and vigorous murderer, Corday. Coincidentally, Slaughter – Britain's most celebrated melodramatist – also played the lead in only film solely devoted to Spring-heeled Jack: *The Curse of the Wraydons* (1949).

in Brentford and secured his arrest²³. The Alsop investigation could scarcely have been in better hands.

Officer Lea began his work on the same day that Jane gave her evidence, appearing next morning with this interesting report:

‘He stated that from what they had learned he had no doubt that the person by whom the outrage had been committed had been in the neighbourhood for nearly a month past, frightening men as well as women, and had, on one occasion, narrowly escaped apprehension. A person, answering precisely his size and figure, had been frequently observed walking about the lanes and lonely places, enveloped in a large Spanish cloak, and was sometimes in the habit of carrying a small lantern about with him. On one occasion he partially exhibited his masquerade in Bow-fair fields, and was closely pursued by a number of men in the employment of Mr Giles, a coach-master at Bow, but, by the most extraordinary agility and apparently a thorough knowledge of the locality of the place, he got clear off. The officer added he was perfectly satisfied of the truth of the statement of Miss Alsop as to the violence inflicted upon her by the person she described; indeed the whole family, all of whom had seen him, agreed precisely in this description; but he differed in opinion with Mr Alsop that there was more than one person concerned in the outrage. The situation of Mr Alsop’s house being at a considerable distance from any other, and in a very lonely spot, afforded ample opportunity for the ghost, as he was called, to play off his pranks with impunity; but besides this, it was quite evident that the family were not strangers to him, as he was well acquainted with the name of Mr Alsop. After the outrage was committed, it appeared, the family threw up the windows, and called out loudly for the police and assistance, and their cries being heard at the John Bull public house, some distance off, three persons set out from thence in the direction of Mr Alsop’s and on their way thither they met a tall person wrapped up in a large cloak, who said as they came up that a policeman was wanted at Mr

²³ *Times* 24 Apr 1828; *John Bull Magazine* 27 Apr 1828; Lord Birkett (ed), *The New Newgate Calendar* (London, 1960) pp.136-50. Lea was in the news again two years later when – described as ‘an active officer of Lambeth-street’ – he broke up a large gang of heavily armed burglars which had been terrorising the inhabitants of the Commercial and East India Roads. Unsourced 1830 clip in the ‘Breaking and entering’ clippings in the Miscellanies section of the cuttings collection, Tower Hamlets Local History Library. He also figures at least twice in the Old Bailey sessions papers, now online.

Alsop's, and they took no further notice of him. This person, he felt convinced, was no other than the perpetrator of the outrage himself.'²⁴

The initial results of the police investigation, conducted by Mr Young, superintendent of K division, based in Stepney²⁵, were reported a few days later. By then Young and Lea had interviewed a number of additional witnesses. Their conclusion was that 'in her fright the young lady had much mistaken the appearance of her assailant' and that the whole affair 'was merely the result of a drunken frolic, and not the act of the individual who was stated to have made his appearance in different outlets of the metropolis in so many different shapes.'²⁶

The officers made their case at Lambeth-street on 28 February before no fewer than three magistrates and a considerable crowd. Two suspects, a local bricklayer named Payne and a carpenter named Millbank, were interrogated (though neither man was formally charged), and several witnesses who had been in Bearbinder Lane at the time of the assault were called to give evidence.

The testimony of a coach-wheelwright called James Smith seemed particularly devastating. He said that he had been walking up Bearbinder Lane when he heard screams coming from Bearbinder Cottage. Hurrying on, he had met Payne and Millbank walking away from the house. Millbank was wearing a white hat and a white fustian shooting jacket (which, Lea plainly believed, was the 'white oilskin' garment Jane Alsop had described). Moreover, Smith asserted that he had come across the two men again later that same evening, in the Coborn-road, and overheard the following extremely incriminating conversation:

'Paynes said to the other, 'It was rascally; I would not have had it done upon any account,' or words to that effect. I was carrying my work upon my shoulder at the time, and they recognised me, and the man in the shooting-jacket said, 'There's the —— who was in the lane.' He then came up to me, and caught hold of the wheel I was carrying, and pulled it off my shoulder, saying at the same time, 'What have you to say to Spring Jack?' I desired him to leave my wheel alone, and then Payne came and took him away. I went into the Morgan's Arms public-house, and they followed me in, and went into either the top-room or parlour. I

²⁴ *The Morning Herald* 23 Feb 1838.

²⁵ 'Metropolitan Police Stations. K Division: Stepney, Mile End Road etc.; Edward Young, Superintendent.' *Post Office London Directory* 1840.

²⁶ *The Morning Chronicle* 28 Feb 1838.

inquired of the landlord who the man in the shooting-jacket was, and he said that his name was Millbank, and that he resided nearly opposite to his house. I have no doubt but that the man Millbank was the person who had so frightened the Misses Alsop.'

Questioned, Payne and Millbank denied they had carried out the assault, or had the conversation Smith claimed to have overheard, though Millbank did admit to being so drunk he had little recollection of anything that had happened that evening. Jane Alsop and her sisters were then recalled, and said they were quite sure that the person who had attacked them was not drunk²⁷.

While the conflicting testimony puzzled the Lambeth-street magistrates, they plainly felt that Millbank, in particular, had a case to answer. They ordered a further investigation; but this served only to muddy the waters further.

The results of the renewed investigation were heard on 2 March. A shoemaker named Richardson, who had also been in Bearbinder Lane shortly before nine, said that he had met not only Millbank and Payne, but also two other possible suspects – a boy and 'a young man in a large cloak' who 'in rather a joking or laughing manner' said 'something about Spring-heeled Jack being in the lane'. This too was a suspicious circumstance, since at that time no-one but Jane Alsop knew that her attacker had identified himself as Jack.

The identity of the cloaked 'young man' is one of the mysteries of the Alsop case. Smith was insistent that he was actually Millbank, while Richardson was equally adamant that he was not. Further information provided by a gentleman from the Old Ford area, who had conducted his own inquiry 'to allay, if possible, the terror that had spread over the neighbourhood' served only to confuse the issue. He had identified a man named Fox, who admitted to being in the lane, accompanied by a boy, when Jane was assaulted, but who also asserted that he had not been wearing a cloak at the time.

Not surprisingly, little was resolved by this inconclusive investigation. At the end of the second day of hearings, Mr Hardwick, the chief magistrate, told Millbank, the chief suspect, he now believed him innocent. He called for further enquiries to take place, but if Lea and Young were ever able to turn up any other information there seems to be no record of it in the press; nor does it appear that anyone was ever brought to trial for assaulting Jane Alsop²⁸.

²⁷ *The Times* 2 Mar 1838.

²⁸ *The Times* 3 Mar 1838.

Five days after Jane was attacked, Spring-heeled Jack appeared again in the East End of London. This time he knocked at the door of 2 Turner Street, off the Commercial Road – within easy walking distance of Old Ford. When a servant-boy answered the knock, Jack threw down his cloak and ‘presented a most hideous appearance’. The shocked boy screamed so loudly that Jack fled without accomplishing anything further²⁹.

Jack’s last generally-accepted appearance in 1838 occurred on 28 February, when he ambushed Lucy Scales and her sister in Green-dragon-alley, Limehouse³⁰, stunning the unfortunate girl with a flash of blue flame. The assault occurred at about 8.30pm, and left Lucy temporarily blinded and ‘in violent fits’. Spring-heeled Jack ‘did not attempt to lay a hand on them, but walked away in an instant’, so Lucy was taken home and a surgeon was called to attend her. Her description of Jack roughly matches that of Jane Alsop: he was tall and thin, looked ‘gentlemanly’, and wore a head-dress rather like a bonnet, and a large cloak. For some reason, this assault attracted little attention from the press (I have been able to find only a single account of it)³¹ and though Lucy, like Jane, reported it to the magistrates at Lambeth-street, there does not seem to have been much of an investigation. Officer Lea visited the spot at which the attack had happened, and observed ‘that no place could be better adopted for such an act... as persons could be seen at a considerable distance approaching it on both sides’, but it seems there were no other witnesses to be found and not much more to be done about the matter³²

By now all of London was thrillingly aware of the Spring-heeled Jack scare, and several imitators made their appearance. On either 28 February or 1 March a ‘genteelly-dressed man’ who had called at the White Lion pub in Vere Street coolly told the landlady he was Spring-heeled Jack, pulled out a ‘self protector’ (club) and aimed a vicious blow at the women, which fortunately missed³³. At about the same time, a man in a cloak grabbed a woman in Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields and slapped her face³⁴, while in Islington a blacksmith named James Priest was apprehended after assaulting several

²⁹ *The Morning Herald* 27 Feb 1838. This incident has been consistently sensationalized as well as misdated, and is generally supposed to be the last of Jack’s three ‘classic’ 1838 visitations. See *Fortean Studies* 3 (1996) p.55n for an elucidation of this point.

³⁰ ‘Green-Dragon-Alley, Narrow-Street, Limehouse, – the second on the L. about nine doors down from Mr Turner’s wharf, leading into Risby’s rope walk.’ *Lockie’s Topography of London* (London 1810). The alley has long since been swept away by the expansion and redevelopment of the docklands.

³¹ In all likelihood the reason for this discrepancy was that Jane Alsop was the daughter of a well off, middle class family. The evidence of a girl of Lucy Scales’s more modest background would have been considered intrinsically less reliable, and of less interest, by most newspapers and newspaper readers of the day. From this perspective, it is instructive to note that the solitary press account is at pains to stress that Lucy’s brother was ‘respectable’, though a butcher.

³² *The Morning Post* 7 Mar 1838.

³³ *The Morning Herald* 2 Mar 1838.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

women, and sentenced to three months' hard labour³⁵. During March, two tall men in black cloaks with faces smeared with ochre scared a boy in Westmoreland-mews³⁶, and a youth named Daniel Granville was caught in Kentish Town wearing a mask with blue glazed paper at the mouth to simulate Jack's fiery breath. He was discharged with a caution³⁷, but another imitator, James Painter, was fined £4 for his exploits in the Kilburn area dressed in a bearded mask and a sheet³⁸. Finally, at the beginning of April, as the terror seems to have died down in London, a woman was assaulted on the cliff-tops at Southend by a 'gentleman' who threw her to the ground, tore at her clothes, and stuffed grass in her mouth³⁹. Though this assault had little – save the clothes-tearing – in common with the *modus operandi* of the 'real' assailant, the local paper nevertheless headlined it 'Spring-heeled Jack at Southend', a good indication both of how far the general panic had spread and of how Jack's name was already becoming a convenient one to link to any scare or physical assault.

The next several decades of Jack's history remain a mystery. Though the secondary sources make frequent mention of his activities in this part of the country or the other, they are always couched in terms too vague to make a sustained trawl through the local newspaper archives seem worthwhile. We cannot say with any certainty, then, whether Spring-heeled Jack — or his imitators — did visit the Home Counties in 1843, or Chichester in the 1840s, the Midlands between 1840 and 1869, or Middlesex in 1863. The one precisely dated incident that falls within these 'lost years' – Jack's supposed murder of Maria Davis on 12 November 1845 – is probably a hoax, as we will see.

It is not until the 1870s that further contemporary reports emerge. Spring-heeled Jack's activities in Peckham during the autumn of 1872 – mentioned only briefly in one secondary source, citing a short London newsclipping⁴⁰ – were actually covered in some detail by one of the two local newspapers⁴¹. A careful review of these reports shows how little the Peckham case has in common with Jack's earlier appearances and it is noteworthy that the local press consistently refers not to Spring-heeled Jack but to a local 'ghost'; the bogeyman's name was linked to the case only by metropolitan papers such as the *News of the World* and the *Illustrated Police News*⁴², though these doubtless were only reporting the rumours prevalent at the time.

³⁵ *The Morning Herald* 1 Mar 1838.

³⁶ *The Morning Post* 13 Mar 1838.

³⁷ *The Morning Post* 20 Mar 1838; *The Examiner* 25 Mar 1838.

³⁸ *The Examier* 20 Apr 1838; *The Morning Post* 4 Apr 1838.

³⁹ *County Herald & Morning Advertiser* 24 Apr 1838.

⁴⁰ Haining op.cit. p.87, citing *News of the World* 17 Nov 1872.

⁴¹ *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 19+26 Oct, 2+9+16+23+30 Nov, 7 Dec 1872.

⁴² *News of the World* 17 Nov 1872; *Illustrated Police News* 28 Dec 1872.

The Peckham ‘ghost story’ began around the first week of October, though it may be significant that it was preceded by an apparent poltergeist case which occurred in the same area a few months’ earlier⁴³. There were numerous reports of a white-clad figure scaring the local people. The following is a fairly typical example⁴⁴:

‘He appeared...on [14 October 1872] to Sarah Ann Foster, a girl living opposite the Crystal Palace Tavern, and charing at Mr Smith’s, in Lordship-lane. It appears that she had been to fetch the supper beer, and on her return she was required to go on another errand, when she complained to her mistress that there was a tall man waiting in the road. Mrs Smith remonstrated with her on the folly of being frightened, and Mr Smith said he would watch her from the window. She started on her errand, but had not left the front garden when a figure in white rose from behind the fence. She screamed loudly, and rushed towards the doorway, and was clasped in the arms of her master, he having seen the apparition from the window, and in rushing out caught his foot in something which threw him forward, and instead of catching the ghost he caught the girl in his arms, who, thinking it was the unearthly spirit that had got hold of her, went into a fit, in which she remained two hours, and is now seriously ill. The description given by Mr Smith and the girl is as follows: – About six foot high, dressed in long overcoat (having white lining, which when thrown open, aided by a white waistcoat and outstretched arms, give the desired effect) a dark felt hat, and a plume of black feathers, with which he hides his ignominious features.’

From this and similar reports, it seems that the chief similarities between the Peckham ‘ghost’ and the Spring-heeled Jack of earlier years were height and white clothing, both of which were the attributes of any number of other ghosts. There are only one or two hints among the several thousand words written about the case that something more intriguing was going on. One witness, an itinerant musician known as ‘George’ – who seems not, from the newspaper report at any rate, to have been a particularly reliable witness – described being chased by a figure in white, seven feet tall with its ‘face in a blaze’⁴⁵; on another occasion a party of navvies chased a white-clad ghost, but lost him when he ‘leapt’ a six-foot fence⁴⁶. More intriguingly, one GHR Davidson wrote to the

⁴³ *Illustrated Police News* 28 Dec 1872.

⁴⁴ *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 19 Oct 1872.

⁴⁵ *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 9 Nov 1872.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

editor of the *Camberwell and Peckham Times* to relate his own encounter on 6 November⁴⁷:

‘While returning from a friend’s house at Brixton-hill last evening, (*via* Herne-hill) I was accosted by that malapropre fellow the ghost. I had just arrived at the point in Herne-hill-road, where the footpath runs from the side of St. Paul’s into Half Moon-lane, when the figure came forth from beside the stile. I confess I was momentarily frightened, but speedily recovering my presence of mind, was on the point of making an onslaught with my umbrella, when the object turned sharp round, and clearing the low railings at a bound, made off across the country. Being now over forty, it was useless thinking of pursuit, but I, however, satisfied myself that he is clad in a black suit, which, by some means, he transposes into white when needful. He also has spring-heeled or india-rubber soled boots, for no man living could leap so lightly, and, I might say, fly across the ground in the manner he did last night.’

Towards the end of November, with the general hue and cry at its height, a 43-year-old man named Joseph Munday, ‘a middle-stature fellow, brawny built, with no expression in his face, save an occasional twitching however, indicative of being “not such a fool as he looks”’⁴⁸ was arrested on suspicion of being the Peckham ghost. By a suitable coincidence, he was taken before the magistrates at Lambeth police court, where the chief witness against him, Mathilda Ayers (‘an interesting child of 12’), recounted that she had been interrupted in the act of disposing of some rabbit offal ‘by Mr Tibble’s fence’ by Munday, who spread his arms wide to reveal that his black cloak was lined with a white material ‘and made a queer “bo-o-oing” with his mouth’. About half an hour later she saw the same man in the custody of the police⁴⁹.

The arrest of Munday seemed to satisfy the local newspaper that the Peckham ‘ghost’ was safely locked away, but though he was remanded and eventually required to find surety of £10 to be on good behaviour for the next six months⁵⁰, further reports of ghostly apparitions continued to be received for a short while. Nor, as one perceptive correspondent of the *Times* remarked, did this middle-aged, not especially tall man, a ‘clodhopper, who could not run the length of a street without being captured’, much

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 30 Nov 1872.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 7 Dec 1838.

resemble the tall and remarkably agile ‘ghost’ of earlier reports⁵¹. Nevertheless, the Peckham ghost scare appears to have died down at the beginning of December 1872, and the topic vanished from the local papers after the 7th.

Only a few months later, however, a very similar case occurred in Sheffield. Reports were confined to the regional press and remained unknown to Spring-heeled Jack’s chroniclers until they were uncovered by a local Fortean researcher, David Clarke, in the 1980s. Like the Peckham scare, the saga of the ‘Park ghost’ seems principally remarkable for the failure of any contemporary source to identify the ‘ghost’ as Spring-heeled Jack. It is only in local folklore, recorded many years later, that Jack’s name seems to have been linked to the case⁵².

The Sheffield flap began in April 1873 and lasted into May. There are a few noteworthy parallels with both the Peckham ghost scare and Jack’s appearances in London during 1838, but, again, most witnesses described a classic ‘ghost’ – a ‘tall man covered with a white sheet’⁵³ rather than anything resembling the terrifying figure of Bearbinder Lane. A handful reports were more interesting, but these were second hand. One described the Park ghost as ‘tall, gaunt, and of unearthly aspect... “skimming” over the ground with supernatural swiftness’⁵⁴. Six decades of telling and retelling such stories produced a figure we would find much more readily identifiable. According to one aged resident, who mailed his reminiscence to the *Sheffield Independent* in November 1934, the Park ghost ‘could spring like a goat, and jump through walls and five-barred gates like a cat’⁵⁵. Although the original ghost scare seems to have died down in May 1873, some old-timers remembered similar rumours re-emerging occasionally in Sheffield until the First World War, with one possibly related incident dating to as late as the 1930s⁵⁶ – testimony either to an unusually determined spectre or the power that Spring-heeled Jack always seems to have had over the imagination.

However active he may or may not have been in Peckham and in Sheffield, Jack saved his most dramatic exploits for later in the 1870s. From March 1877, rumours began

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Sheffield Local Register* vol.3 (1840–1886), 22 May 1873; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 23+31 May 1873; *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 23+24+26 May 1873; *Sheffield Telegraph* 31 May 1873; *Sheffield Star* 10 Jun 1955 and 15 Mar 1985; *Sheffield Newspaper Cuttings* vols.12, 19, 20; *Henry Tatton’s Heeley Notebook* vol.3 p.664.

⁵³ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 23 May 1873.

⁵⁴ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 31 May 1873.

⁵⁵ *Sheffield Newspaper Cuttings* vol.12: clipping from *Sheffield Independent* Nov 1934.

⁵⁶ *Sheffield Star* 15 May 1985; *Fortean Studies* vol.3 (1996) p.109.

to spread within the huge British Army camp at Aldershot⁵⁷ that a ghostly figure was on the loose among the outlying sentry-posts, terrifying the soldiers on duty.

The secondary authorities cite a rather dubious source – the weekly *Illustrated Police News* – for coverage of the Aldershot case⁵⁸. This outlandish paper specialised in sensational reporting of grisly rapes and murder cases, and was especially popular for the lurid wood-cuts that decorated its front page. Spring-heeled Jack was featured three times on that cover during 1877; his first two appearances coincided with the Aldershot scare and it is fascinating to note that the *IPN*'s artist depicts him not as a tight-clad demon, but as a traditionally incorporeal, 'sheet-clad' phantom.

There are, nevertheless, earlier and more reliable sources for what occurred at Aldershot Camp that year. The local military newspaper, *Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette*, began its own coverage on 17 March 1877 by reporting:

'Some one or other appears to have made up his mind to play some rather questionable pranks with the sentries at this Camp while on night duty. About a week ago it appears, but we do not vouch for the correctness of the story, a sentry was on duty at the North camp, and about midnight someone came towards him, who refused to answer to the usual challenge of 'who comes there,' and after dodging about the sentry box in a fantastic fashion for some little time, made off with astonishing swiftness, not however until the sentry had loaded his rifle and fired, but without any effect. 'Spring-heeled Jack', as he has been termed, in Camp, then paid a similar visit to the sentry on duty near the cemetery, who also fired, but alas without hitting the object at which he aimed. What or who the individual who is thus amusing himself might be we do not know but such little bits of fun might be carried just too far; and enjoyment of this kind had better be discontinued before one of the nocturnal pranks leads to unpleasant results.'⁵⁹

A month or so later, the same paper noted that Jack had reappeared and been 'kind enough to inform a gentleman the other night that his object is to frighten the British army'⁶⁰, but it also observed, sceptically, that 'the moonlight night have rather interfered

⁵⁷ For a detailed history of the evolution of the Camp, see Howard Cole, *The Story of Aldershot: A History of the Civil and Military Town* (Aldershot: Southern Books, 1980).

⁵⁸ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep and 3 Nov 1877. The *Illustrated Police News* also ran a short, illustrated piece on Jack in its 28 April 1877 edition, but this was simply a reprint of *The World* 11 Apr 1877.

⁵⁹ *Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette* 17 Mar 1877.

⁶⁰ *Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette* 21 Apr 1877.

with the spectre's perambulations'⁶¹. Its correspondent was convinced that Jack was a human prankster, and *The Times* went further, reporting on 28 April that a likely suspect had entered the camp one evening carrying a carpet bag which, the paper evidently believed, contained the costume of Spring-heeled Jack.

Whether or not there was anything in this suggestion, *The Times's* reporter understood that the 'ghost' had slapped one sentry several times around the face before making off across the common 'with astonishing bounds', wrestled with another, who had received two black eyes in the ensuing struggle, and escaped apprehension near the Female Hospital by outrunning a number of pursuers⁶².

Spring-heeled Jack disappeared from Aldershot around the end of April, but according to the *Police News* he returned again at the end of summer. During this second visitation (which is nowhere mentioned in the pages of *Times* or the *Military Gazette*) he repeated several of his favourite tricks:

'His method of proceeding seems to be to approach unobserved some post, then climb the sentry box, and pass his hand (which is arranged to feel as cold and clammy as that of a corpse) over the face of the sentinel. The sentries had lately been ordered to fire on the ghost, and were loaded with ball, but this precaution had lately been given up. 'Jack' pursued his old tactics on [31 August 1877]. He managed to reach unseen the powder magazine in the North Camp. Here, having nearly frightened the sentry out of his wits, by slapping his face with his death-like hand, he disappeared, hopping and bounding in to the mist.

Jack's reappearance was considered especially surprising, the *Police News* added, because the principal suspect for the spring visitations had left Aldershot by the end of August⁶³. There seems to have been no first hand evidence and no new suspects, and no indication that the scare persisted into the autumn.

Spring-heeled Jack made one more foray in this, his busiest year – at least if the *Illustrated Police News* is to be believed. On 3 November the paper printed a picture of a

⁶¹ *Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette* 28 Apr 1877.

⁶² *The Times* 28 Apr 1877.

⁶³ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep 1877. According to the *Army List* of 1877, the following units were stationed at Aldershot in April of that year: 5th Lancers; 7th Lancers; E Battalion, E Brigade Royal Horse Artillery; 2nd Battalion 2nd Foot; 2nd Battalion 8th Foot; 2nd Battalion 13th Foot; 1st Battalion 19th Foot; 2nd Battalion 20th Foot; 58th Foot; 3rd Battalion 60th Foot; 61st Foot; 64th Foot; 100th Foot; 27 Company Royal Engineers; Half of C troop, Royal Engineers; C Battery, 1st Brigade Royal Artillery; D Battery, 1st Brigade Royal Artillery; G Battery, 1st Brigade Royal Artillery; F Battery, 1st Brigade Royal Artillery; B Battery, 1st Brigade Royal Artillery. Divisional troops: 96th Foot; 5 Company Royal Engineers.

man dressed in animal hides and sporting a tail, clambering on the Roman ruin of Newport Arch, near Lincoln⁶⁴. Inside, the *News* noted that it had heard from a stringer that Jack had been active in the Newport area:

‘For some time past,’ says our contributor, ‘the neighbourhood... has been disturbed each night by a man dressed in a sheep skin, or something of the kind, with a long white tail to it. The man who is playing this mischief has springs to his boots, and can jump to a height of 15 or 20 feet. The other night he jumped upon a college, and got into a window on the roof, and so frightened the ladies that one has not yet recovered from the shock. Some other people were so much frightened by this object, that every night a large mob of men, armed with sticks and stones, assemble and attempt to catch him, but to no avail. The nuisance became so great that two men got guns out and chased him. The picture represents him jumping up the Newport Arch, a very old Roman building built in 45AD; as he was jumping up he was shot at, but so tough is the hide he wears, that the shot did not penetrate it, and running over the house tops on the other side he escaped, but soon appeared in another part of the town. He was again chased, and as he was running on the wall of the new barracks was shot at by a publican, but the shot did not appear to take effect.’

Surprisingly, for what should have been a worthwhile piece of local news, the story of Jack’s visit to Newport was not covered in any local newspaper⁶⁵. *The Illustrated Police News* is not the most reliable of sources, and it is difficult to know what to make of its report.

Jack’s next significant appearance is even less reliably referenced. According to the writer Richard Whittington-Egan – author of a book on Jack the Ripper and several local history books about Manchester and Liverpool – Spring-heeled Jack visited the Shaw Street area of Everton around the time of the Ripper murders in the autumn of 1888⁶⁶:

‘He was said to have been seen springing from the top of the reservoir in High Park Street and jumping over high garden walls in the neighbourhood of St

⁶⁴ *Illustrated Police News* 3 Nov 1877.

⁶⁵ There is no mention of the escapade at Newport Arch in any of the available Lincolnshire newspapers of the period – including the ‘Christmas issue of the *Lincolnshire Times*’, from which Peter Haining quotes quite extensively in his book. Haining op.cit. pp.88-9.

⁶⁶ Richard Whittington-Egan, *Liverpool Colonnade* (Manchester 1976) pp.139-40.

Michael's-in-the-Hamlet. He was even reported from as far afield as the vicinity of Childwall Abbey.

‘An elderly man, still living, has also told how, one night in 1888, when he and a number of his fellow-members of Everton’s St Francis Xavier’s Boys’ Guild were playing in the school-room, someone came rushing in with the news that the dread Spring-Heeled Jack was in Shaw Street. Out into Haigh Street ran the boys, and up William Henry Street. When, however, they reached Shaw Street, they saw no sign of the weird creature, although an excited crowd told them that he was crouched on the steeple of a nearby church.’

Even if accurate, this recollection tells us little other than that the name of Spring-heeled Jack could still inspire great excitement in 1888 – enough excitement, perhaps, for people to misidentify a shadow, or a bird flapping by a spire, as the mystery assailant.

Jack’s supposed second visit to Liverpool – and, traditionally, his last anywhere – turns out to be an equally confusing story. According to several secondary sources, Jack returned to William Henry Street at the end of September 1904 and disported himself in front of hundreds of startled onlookers⁶⁷. An account published by the *Liverpool Daily Post* early in 1967⁶⁸ shows this tale at its most fully developed:

‘In September, 1904, the Springing Terror made his last appearance, this time in William Henry Street, when hundreds of local folk watched in awe as the pathetic creature leaped up and down the length of the Everton Street. After more than ten minutes of leaps which would embarrass present day Olympic high jumpers (and pole vaulters too) he was seen to jump clean over the terraced houses from Stitt Street to Haigh Street, and then hop back across the slate roofs to Salisbury Street, after which he was never seen again.’

The contemporary sources are not this explicit⁶⁹. A report in the *News of the World*⁷⁰ seems reminiscent of the 1888 panic in its vagueness:

⁶⁷ Ibid.; Haining op.cit. pp.140-44.

⁶⁸ ‘The leaping horror of Liverpool’, *Liverpool Daily Post* 25 Jan 1967.

⁶⁹ Both John Rimmer, the Liverpool editor of *Magonia*, and I have searched the Liverpool papers of the time for more details of this case without finding any references to the panic. However, the Everton poltergeist scare was preceded by a similar case that took place some 20 miles away, at Upholland, near Wigan, between July and mid-September 1904. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 12 (1905) pp.124-37.

⁷⁰ *News of the World* 25 Sep 1904.

‘Everton (Liverpool) is scared by the singular antics of a ghost, to whom the name of ‘Spring Heel Jack’ has been given, because of the facility with which he has escaped, by huge springs, all attempts of his would-be captors to arrest him. William Henry-street is the scene of his exploits, and crowds of people assemble nightly to see them, but only a few have done so yet and, ‘Jack’ is evidently shy. He is said to pay particular attention to ladies. So far the police have not arrested him, their sprinting powers being inferior.’

Another London paper linked Jack’s appearance to an outbreak of what sound like poltergeist effects in the neighbourhood. The *Star*⁷¹ seems to have believed the leaping terror’s name was being invoked for no better reason than that Jack was generally supposed to be a ghost of sorts, and that something supernatural seemed to be going on:

‘The exploits of a reputed ghost have kept several streets of Liverpool in an uproar this week. Lurid stories of the doings of the notorious Spring Heeled Jack who some years ago frightened half the women and children of the city were recalled by present scenes. Pieces of brick, old bottles and other missiles came hurtling down the chimneys of the haunted house. Where they came from baffled the vigilance of watchers. The annoyance was so persistent and the terror among the neighbours so great that the residents of the house left hurriedly and the place was closed.

‘A sequel was held at the police court this afternoon when a youth was charged with breaking a window of the haunted house. The police stated that several hundred people, mostly women, swarmed about the house, expecting the ghost to appear at a window.’

It was more than 60 years before the mystery of Jack’s supposed appearance in Liverpool was solved. Responding to a newspaper article recalling the scare, a Mrs Pierpoint – an Everton pensioner who had lived in the district all her life and had been of school age at the time – confirmed that the focal point of the 1904 scare was a supposed poltergeist that ‘became so well known people from all over Liverpool used to go and stand outside and look at the place, often enough in fear and trembling.’

⁷¹ *London Star* 24 Sep 1904.

Fortunately, the witness also retained a distinct recollection of the manner in which the name of Spring-heeled Jack became caught up in the excitement. The Liverpool 'Jack', Mrs Pierpoint continued,

'was a local man slightly off balance mentally... He had a form of religious mania and he would climb on to rooftops of houses crying out: "My wife is the Devil!"

'They usually fetched police or a fire-engine ladder to get him down. As the police closed in on him, he would leap from one house roof to the next. That's what gave rise to the "Spring-Heeled Jack" rumours.'⁷²

And it was on that unsatisfactory note, rather than with his more suitably dramatic last hurrah on the rooftops of Everton, that Spring-heeled Jack actually took his leave of Liverpool.

Antecedents, parallels and successors

Spring-heeled Jack, the Victorian bogeyman, may have flourished from 1838 to 1904, but it is useless and misleading to consider the 'core cases' cited in the secondary sources in isolation. Unique though he has always seemed to be in the ufological and Fortean literature, Jack is, in fact, merely the best known of a host of more or less similar figures who have appeared in various locations between 1803 and the present day. Taken together, these supplementary cases suggest that the ideas of a devil on earth and of a spring-heeled man are deeply rooted in a number of different cultures.

Elements of the Spring-heeled Jack's reported behaviour in 1838 may be glimpsed as early as the first years of the nineteenth, when Hammersmith, to the west of London, was still 'a suburban village of scattered houses, connected by dark, unfrequented lanes, bounded in places by high hedges' – a very suitable place, in short, for a ghost⁷³. In December 1803, one duly appeared, causing just the sensation that Jack would do more than three decades later. The Hammersmith ghost looked much like him, too, being described 'as sometimes dressed entirely in white, sometimes in the skin of a cow or other wild beast... [One] witness had met and given chase to the Ghost, who only escaped by throwing away the sheet in which he was enveloped, and so outrunning his pursuer, who however got near enough to say that this Ghost was a tall man wearing a

⁷² *Liverpool Echo* 19 May 1967.

⁷³ 'Ghost stories of one hundred years ago', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* April 1904 pp.217-220.

dark coat with shiny metal buttons.’⁷⁴ Yet it must be supposed that this ghost was not Spring-heeled Jack, since on 3 January an excise officer named Francis Smith met a figure in white who ignored his warnings to halt, and whom he shot and killed with his fowling-piece. The ‘Ghost’ (if that is who it was) turned out to be a ‘respectable bricklayer’ named Thomas Millward or Millwood. Smith was quickly tried for his murder at the Old Bailey, and found guilty of murder, before being reprieved the same night and sentenced instead to one year in prison⁷⁵.

In August 1826, according to an anonymous and highly sensational report that appeared in *Lloyd’s Penny Weekly Miscellany* 17 years later, a young man, ‘Jack B.’, out walking along the Commercial Road at midnight, was attacked by a cloaked and masked man with cloven hoofs for feet, who seized him in his arms and ‘squeezed his body against Jack’s, when in a moment Jack was on fire’. The badly injured victim succeeded in pulling his assailant’s mask away, and discovered him to be his younger brother. The *Miscellany’s* reporter concluded his account with the observation that the doctor called to treat Jack’s burns ‘is still alive, and can vouch for the truth of this statement; indeed poor Jack is still much pained from this affair.’⁷⁶

Yet another fire-breathing devil turned up in the woods of the south-eastern United States in the autumn of 1841, if a story picked up from a local paper by the *Niagara Courier* can be believed⁷⁷. According to this tale, a Georgia villain disguised himself as Satan in order to rob a wealthy local woman. While making his escape, he was stopped by a local man, one Jesse Bradlock. The ‘Devil’ responded to Bradlock’s challenge by boasting: ‘I am the Prince of Darkness’, and ‘commenced swelling, emitting smoke at the same time, and burning sulphur.’ This impressive display did him no good; taking his cue from Francis Smith, Bradlock took aim and fired, killing the anonymous robber.

None of these stories, perhaps, should be taken too literally, but together they do suggest that the Spring-heeled Jack of Victorian London fits more neatly alongside a nineteenth century tradition of ‘devil-ghosts’ than he ever did among UFO occupants.

If the history of Spring-heeled Jack can be traced back before 1837, it also stretches past 1904. Several later cases have come to light which, while never associated

⁷⁴ Ibid. p.217.

⁷⁵ See also *Annual Register* 1804 pp.358-9; Anon, *Celebrated Trials & Remarkable Cases of Criminal Jurisprudence* (London 1825) pp.574-8.

⁷⁶ ‘The old tar and the vampire’, *Lloyd’s Penny Weekly Miscellany* v1n5 (1843) p.76.

⁷⁷ ‘The devil killed’, *Niagara Courier* 27 Nov 1841, citing the North Carolina *Raleigh Rasp* (undated). The location of the incident is nowhere stated, though presumably it occurred either in Georgia or North Carolina.

with Jack, bear some of his hallmarks. Had they occurred in the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth it seems reasonable to assume that these visitations might have been added to his tally – as the Sheffield and Peckham ‘ghost’ scares seem to have been.

For example, during the autumn of 1926 a white-clad ‘ghost’ terrorised the Grafton Street area of Bradford for several nights⁷⁸. Like Spring-heeled Jack, the freak of Grafton Street was described as tall and exceptionally athletic – ‘gifted with wonderful agility’, as the *Bradford Daily Telegraph* put it, ‘and a fleetness of foot comparable... to that of an Olympic champion’⁷⁹. As Jack was supposed to have done in Liverpool, the Bradford ghost was said to make use of the rooftops to effect his escapes⁸⁰. Andy Roberts, in an article on the case, notes not only that ‘a theory went round that the figure was that of a local man who had agreed to appear in the area, dressed in outlandish garb for 14 nights, for a bet’ but also that when ‘the entity, or its emulators, was seen further afield... these reports differ in that the figure’s eyes are now mentioned as ‘glowing’ and ‘staring incessantly’ and even that ‘one account of a sighting describes the figure as being ‘on springs’⁸¹.

A few decades later, a very similar panic infected some low-class housing projects in Baltimore. A tall, thin, cloaked but this time black-clad ‘phantom’ haunted O’Donnell Heights between July and August 1951, scaling roofs and scaring people⁸². When a reporter from the *Baltimore Sun* interviewed the locals, one boy asserted that the phantom ‘sure is an athlete... you should have seen him go over that fence – just like a cat.’ The fence, the reporter noted, was ‘about six feet tall and trimmed with barbed wire along the top’. Others said they had seen the terror leap onto rooftops 20 feet off the ground and hop down again, without leaving any mark upon the ground⁸³.

Of all the parallel cases on record, though, the most remarkable must be that of the ‘Black Flash’ or ‘Phantom’ who haunted Provincetown, the little tourism-driven community at the tip of Cape Cod, between 1938 and 1944. So precisely does the Phantom’s story mirror that of Spring-heeled Jack that it must be possible that the whole tale is a hoax based directly on the legend of the Victorian bogeyman. Yet at least one

⁷⁸ This case was originally reinvestigated by Andy Roberts, who wrote up his findings in ‘The entity in white’, *UFO Brigantia* issue 21 (Jul-Aug 1986) pp.12-14.

⁷⁹ *Bradford Daily Telegraph* 11 Sep 1926.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Roberts *op.cit.* I regret that pressure of deadlines prevented me from checking out these unreferenced assertions, but Roberts is a careful researcher and there seems no reason to doubt that the relevant newspaper stories could be traced with a little effort.

⁸² *Baltimore News-Post* 23+25+27 Jul; *Baltimore Sun* 25+26+27 Jul, 8 Aug 1951.

⁸³ *Baltimore Sun* 25 Jul 1951.

journalist – Mitchell Smyth, travel editor of the *Toronto Star* – has interviewed witnesses who remember the ‘Phantom’ scare⁸⁴.

Smyth first heard of the case when he went on holiday to Cape Cod and purchased a popularised local history booklet, *New England’s Mad & Mysterious Men*, by Robert Cahill. According to Cahill, the Flash dressed in black, had ‘eyes like balls of flame’ and was ‘big, real big’ – between six and eight feet tall. He first appeared in Provincetown in the autumn of 1938 and haunted the town in the off-season (October to March) until December 1945. He attacked both men and women, hurting no-one badly, but had all the attributes of the 1838 Spring-heeled Jack. Cahill quotes ‘one teenaged boy’ as alleging: ‘It jumped out at me from nowhere and spit blue flames in my face’. Another, ‘farmer Charlie Farley’, remembered that his dog cornered the Flash, ‘a giant of a thing, all in black, with long silver ears. I thought it was some kind of wild animal, so I shot it, and when I did the damned thing just laughed and jumped over my eight foot high back fence in one leap.’ It is hard to believe, reading such descriptions, that someone in Provincetown was not aware of the legend of Spring-heeled Jack, which had its beginning exactly a century before. If so, it may have been the Flash himself – or perhaps ‘themselves’; Cahill quotes Francis Marshall, who became the town’s police chief some 15 years after the phantom’s last appearance, as asserting he knew the phantom’s identity: ‘The Black Flash wasn’t just one person. He was four men, who sometimes played the part alone, and sometimes together.’⁸⁵

By the time he was interviewed by Mitchell Smyth in October 1988, Marshall had revised his story somewhat. ‘He was three men,’ he told the reporter. ‘Yes, I know who they were, but I’m not telling. They’re all dead now, but they have relatives here.’ Smyth got no further with this lead, but he did interview Matt Costa, a local restaurateur. ‘We became afraid to go out after dark,’ Costa recalled. ‘He’d jump out on people, from behind a tree, maybe, or over a wall – a figure dressed all in black. He was very agile; some people said he must have had springs on his feet.’

There seem to be three possible interpretations of the Provincetown case. Either some local man or men heard about Spring-heeled Jack and somehow managed to model themselves on the English bogey more successfully than any other imitator before or since; or the whole thing was a local legend which witnesses such as Marshall and Costa

⁸⁴ Mitchell Smyth, ‘Hallowe’en flashback: how ‘Phantom’ joker terrorized a town’, *Toronto Star* 29 Oct 1988; Smyth, personal communication 13 Jun 1996, author’s files.

⁸⁵ Robert Ellis Cahill, *New England’s Mad and Mysterious Men* (Peabody, Mass. 1984) pp.23-9.

played along with when Smyth came calling; or something extremely strange happened on Cape Cod between 1938 and 1945⁸⁶.

Whatever the truth, other traditions of leaping and jumping men can still be heard from many corners of the world. One of the most interesting comes from the Czech Republic, where during the Second World War a mysterious figure called the 'Spring Man' was popularly supposed to haunt the blacked-out streets of Prague. According to one study of the period, he was 'rumoured to leap from murky alleyways into the paths of passers-by'⁸⁷. There seem to be no firm proof of his existence, or even written records of his activities; George Zenaty, a noted authority on the policing of the city during the war who actually served with the Presidium of the Police HQ during those years, is certain that 'in 1940-1942 none of our police precincts in Prague informed us in their daily reports of the existence of a 'Spring man'. This does not mean that such rumours might not have circulated; however, it would have been impossible to include [them] in the reports without tangible proof.'⁸⁸ It is interesting to note that an associated rumour of a slashing 'Razor Blade Man' flourished in Prague at the same time⁸⁹. As well as providing a link between Prague's 'Spring man' tradition and that of phantom attackers such as the Halifax Slasher⁹⁰, the 'Razor Blade Man' rumour also has its echoes in the Baltimore 'phantom' case. During the O'Donnell Heights scare, one female witness alleged she had been slashed twice in the stomach by the masked marauder, an incident highly reminiscent of the Halifax case⁹¹.

Many Czechs seem to have enjoyed the rumours, nonetheless. The Spring Man was successfully asserting his right to be on the streets in defiance of German curfews and the activities of both army sentries and the Gestapo. In *Springer and the SS*, a 1946 cartoon based on the case, the renowned Czech animator Jiri Trnka portrayed the 'Springer' as a chimney sweep dressed all in black, with a sock for a mask and springs in

⁸⁶ A search of available local newspapers (mainly from the Boston area) for late 1938 by Michael Shoemaker has turned up no confirmation of this essentially oral Provincetown tradition. Shoemaker notes that 1938 marked the debut of the first of the great comic book super-heroes, Superman, in Action Comics (June 1938), as well as coinciding with Orson Welles's famous War of the Worlds radio broadcast.

⁸⁷ Callum McDonald and Jan Kaplan, *Prague in the Shadow of the Swastika: a History of the German Occupation 1939-1945* (London 1995) p.137.

⁸⁸ George Zenaty, personal communication 15 Jun 1996, author's files.

⁸⁹ McDonald & Kaplan, op.cit. p.137.

⁹⁰ See Michael Goss, *The Halifax Slasher: An Urban Terror in the North of England* (Forteian Times Occasional Paper no.3, London 1986). Goss's work details a protracted scare in the north Yorkshire town during which nearly a dozen people claimed to have been attacked and wounded by the mysterious 'Slasher'. A police investigation eventually showed that the Slasher had never existed and that all the wounds were self-inflicted.

⁹¹ *Baltimore Sun* 25 Jul 1951; Michael Shoemaker, personal communication 23 Apr 1996, author's files.

his shoes, leading the Germans a merry dance through the darkened streets of the city⁹². The figure of *Pérák*, the Prague Spring Man, also features in a later satire by the noted short story writer Jan Weiss⁹³.

Similar rumours haunted the East German provinces of Saxony and Thuringia during the early 1950s; given the proximity of the area to Prague it may even be that the German terror was inspired by stories that had been circulating in Czechoslovakia. According to Dietrich Kuhn's *Sagen und Legenden aus Sachsen*, so-called 'hippemannchen' or 'spiralhopper'⁹⁴ appeared throughout the region. They were thought to be both numerous and short in stature. When *Fortean Times*'s German correspondent Ulrich Magin contacted the author, Kuhn responded with further information which suggested that the German leapers wore Spring-heeled Jack's ghostly white:

'The *Hippemannchen* and *Spiralhopper* in Saxony were reported 1950-1951 and considerably disquieted people. There are no written reports from that time. I remember this mass hysteria from being a youth at that time. In Erfurt, for example, a chef of a famous hotel was almost beaten one night because he returned home in his working dress to save time. It cost him quite some effort to convince the excited masses that he was not one of the *Hippemannchen*. I know of no-one who could really claim a personal sighting of one of the mannequins... [they were] a nearly contemporary manifestation of mass hysteria.'⁹⁵

Jack's preternatural agility and leaping ability, which is central to his legend, also has its parallels elsewhere. The most recent case occurred in India, where the deaths of around 20 children in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (apparently caused by wolves) were blamed by some local people on 'creatures that walk like dogs, have faces like pigs, eyes like bulbs and springs on their feet', which were capable of leaping up to 20 feet (some said 80 feet) in a single bound. Rumour had it that the creatures were driving around in

⁹² Channel 4 press office, 'Animation on 4: Press notes', April 1992, author's files. The cartoon was broadcast by Channel 4 on 22 July 1992. Shoemaker kindly forwarded the scant information on the 'Spring Man' I had collected to the International Fortean Organisation's Czech correspondent, Stanislav Babicek, 'Almost everyone [in Prague] has heard about him, but hardly more than you have written in your letter,' Babicek replied, after contacting several Czech journalists on my behalf.

⁹³ See 'Pérový muz' in *Bianka Braselli, Dáma se Dvema Hlavami* (Prague: Československý Spisovatel, 1961). The book's title translates as *Bianka Braselli, A Two-Headed Lady*; in the story in question, Weiss meets the Spring Man in a lunatic asylum. The author suggests that the inspiration for stories about *Pérák* came from Hitler's own propaganda.

⁹⁴ Literally 'hopping mannequins' and 'spiral hoppers'. Dietrich Kuhn, *Sagen und Legenden aus Sachsen* ['Folktales and Legends of Saxony'] (Weimar and Jena 1994) p.273. Thanks to Ulrich Magin for drawing this account to my attention and providing a translation.

⁹⁵ Quoted by Ulrich Magin, personal communications 12+29 Mar 1996, author's files.

white Maruti vans ‘which can fly over any obstruction in the road’. Tales attributing the attacks to werewolves, Pakistani spies and traders in human organs were also current at the same time⁹⁶. In the Dominican Republic, meanwhile, some Voodoo initiates claim the ability to make spectacular leaps⁹⁷. In China, practitioners of *quigong* have made similar claims⁹⁸. Finally, it has been alleged that ‘certain people of the Basque country had a special way of binding or padding their feet which enabled them to spring or leap to a considerable height’⁹⁹.

The fakelore of Spring-heeled Jack

Having shown that Spring-heeled Jack may be viewed in a broader context than hitherto, it is necessary to pause briefly to dispose of a number of undocumented episodes, which have attached themselves to his legend.

Polly Adams

Proceeding chronologically, the first significant problem we encounter is an alleged assault on the serving girl Polly Adams in the autumn of 1837. So far as I can tell, this incident was first mentioned by Peter Haining, the author of the only full-length work on Spring-heeled Jack. It forms an important part of his story and indeed Haining opens his book with it, devoting the first eight and a half pages to an obviously heavily fictionalised description of attractive Polly (‘a pretty, dark-haired girl endowed with a good figure and a twinkle in her hazel eyes’¹⁰⁰) and her awful experience on 11 October, the evening of Blackheath Fair. The main significance of the account, besides the suggestion that Jack was employing what was to become his established *modus operandi* (complete with fire-breathing and tremendous leaps), at a date when contemporary sources have him still switching between the guises of ghost, bear and devil, is Haining’s categorical assertion that Polly was able to identify her assailant as a pop-eyed, laughing nobleman who had propositioned her earlier in the day:

⁹⁶ ‘Spring-heeled Jack in India’, *Fortean Times* 91 (October 1996) p.20, citing *The Pioneer* (India) 25 Jun + UPI wire 26 Jun 1996; ‘Fears of a Spring-heeled Jack in India’, *Fortean Times* 92 (November 1996) p.15, citing *Asian Age*, Jul 1996; *Time* 15 Jul + *The Times* 14 Aug 1996.

⁹⁷ Cited in an article by Dagmar Morenova in the Czech magazine *Tydenik KVETY*, according to Stanislav Babicek. Michael Shoemaker, personal communication 5 Jun 1996, author’s files.

⁹⁸ Steve Moore, ‘Who needs you, Isaac Newton?’, *INFO Journal* 19 (Vol.5 no.3), Sept 1976, pp.2-5.

⁹⁹ Letter from Miss JD Losach, *Flying Saucer Review* v7n4, Jun-Jul 1961.

¹⁰⁰ Haining op.cit. pp.1-9, 53-73.

‘The figure, appearing gigantic in the shadows, bounded towards her on legs that covered such distances with each stride that they scarcely seemed human. Behind it swirled a cloak, which billowed and flapped noisily. But above this cloak, it was the face which caught and held Polly’s attention: a face that glowed like coals and a mouth which spat flashes of blue fire: a face from the very depths of hell... A laugh rang out from the creature. A peculiar, ringing laughter, a laugh which, as she was to recall later, she had heard before that evening. The eyes flashed again and she saw they were distended from their sockets, protruding to such a degree that she could see the white of the iris around the dark, menacing spots of the pupils. These eyes, too, she had seen not so long ago...’

With this account, Haining begins to set up the theory – first suggested by late nineteenth century sources – that Spring-heeled Jack was Henry, Marquis of Waterford, who as he adequately demonstrates, was one of the principal ‘bloods’ of the late Regency and early Victorian period, a noted sportsman, boxer, equestrian and practical joker. Unfortunately, Haining gives no source for his account of Adams’s experience and it is nowhere mentioned in any contemporary source I have been able to discover in several weeks spent poring over the close-printed columns of every available newspaper for the period. If a source does exist¹⁰¹, it is hard to believe it can be as detailed as Haining’s own account. For this reason it seems prudent to dismiss the Adams case from consideration¹⁰².

The filigree ‘W’

¹⁰¹ Haining himself is unable to resolve the problem. Responding to a letter asking if he could identify his sources, he wrote: ‘I am afraid that all my research material for the book was (ill-advisedly as it has transpired) loaned to a scriptwriter who was planning a film around the character. This was some years ago and all my efforts to trace him subsequently have proved as elusive [*sic*] as the subject of the story himself!’ Peter Haining, personal communication 8 Aug 1996, author’s files.

¹⁰² Haining enlivens and embroiders other accounts with circumstantial detail that was nowhere reported at the time and which he cannot possibly know is accurate. Writing of Spring-heeled Jack’s attack on Lucy Scales he suggests that ‘Lucy had walked purposefully up the street with Margaret skipping behind playing hopscotch... [she] brushed some strands of her long blonde hair out of her eyes and took a few steps forward...’ [Haining pp.47-8], where Scales’s own account to the Lambeth-street magistrates is less elaborate: ‘She and her sister were returning from the house of their brother, and while passing along Green Dragon-alley, they observed some person standing at an angle in the passage. She was in advance of her sister at the time...’ [*The Morning Post* 7 Mar 1838]. There is no assertion of purposefulness, no mention of hopscotch, and we are given no idea of the colour of Lucy’s hair. There are dozens of other instances of embroidery in the book, none of which would much matter – we can allow for Haining’s need to be a storyteller, after all – were it not for the fact that the author laces his embroidery with outright invention which is nowhere admitted to, and which has passed into the Fortean literature without being questioned. We are never told the name of Lucy’s sister, to give one example – but in Haining’s hands she becomes ‘Margaret Scales’.

A second but equally dubious detail that Haining believes lends credence to the identification of Waterford with Spring-heeled Jack appears in a brief discussion of Jack's appearance at 2 Turner Street on 25 February 1838. According to this account¹⁰³,
'it was the first time he had presented what looked like a real clue to his identity. For under cross-examination the following day, the servant boy swore that on the folds of the man's cloak, just above the corner which he clutched to his face with his claw-like hand, he had seen *an ornate crest of some kind – and below it, in gold filigree, the initial 'W'*¹⁰⁴.'

Once again, no source is given for this assertion, and despite a careful search of every London newspaper published between 1 January and 30 April 1838, I found only *one* 80-word mention of the Turner Street incident¹⁰⁵. This makes no mention of a cloak, much less of any filigree lettering, and so once again it seems sensible to set Haining's assertion to one side to await possible verification at a later date.

The murder of Maria Davis

The last dramatic addition Haining makes to the legend of Spring-heeled Jack is his account of the murder of the prostitute Maria Davis on Jacob's Island on 12 November 1845. This too does not seem to rate a mention in any earlier sources, nor in the contemporary papers, and I can find no mention of a Maria Davis in the available coroners' records for the relevant period. While it is true that the death of one young girl in such a fabled den of iniquity would probably not be considered worthy of newspaper coverage, there is another reason for once again doubting Haining's account. This is the contemporary woodcut showing two men negotiating a ditch on the island in a punt. One of the men bends over an object in the water; the illustration is captioned: 'Recovering the body of the prostitute Maria Davis from Folly Ditch'¹⁰⁶. No source is given for the illustration in Haining's book, but it was republished in an article on Spring-heeled Jack that appeared in the partwork *The Unexplained* in 1981¹⁰⁷. Here the illustration was

¹⁰³ Ibid. p.52.

¹⁰⁴ Italics in the original.

¹⁰⁵ *The Morning Herald* 27 Feb 1838. I am unable to offer any explanation as to how the Turner Street report ever found its way into the secondary literature. Leaving aside the original source itself, the earliest reference I have discovered to the incident is Vyner's 1961 contribution to *Flying Saucer Review*. There is no indication that Vyner did any archival research before writing his article, and the solitary 1838 report is so obscure and so easily missed that I can only assume he or some other authority he consulted had access to another, almost certainly contemporary, published account of Jack's early activities that has otherwise been lost.

¹⁰⁶ Haining, op.cit. p.85.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Begg, 'The terror of London', *The Unexplained* 39, 1981, pp.770-3.

credited to what is now the Hulton Getty Picture Collection. A librarian at the Collection was kind enough to track down the woodcut for me and confirmed it has nothing to do with the murder of Maria Davis. The caption stuck to the back of the Hulton Getty's print does state that it shows Folly Ditch, but adds simply: 'This was an open sewer (once a stream) and only source of free water for drinking and all other purposes in the area'¹⁰⁸. Close inspection of a larger version of the print sent to me by the Collection suggests that the crouching figure in the punt is gathering water in some sort of pan and not hauling the body of a murdered prostitute from the mud, as Haining suggests.

Stripped of the back-up of an authenticated contemporary illustration, the alleged murder of Maria Davis must also be set to one side, to await possible reinvestigation by someone with a substantial amount of free time to spend among the coroner's records and in Somerset House.

Private Regan and Spring-heeled Jack

Peter Haining is not the only author to publish unreferenced and uncheckable statements about Spring-heeled Jack. In an article which appeared in *Everybody's Magazine*¹⁰⁹, the writer and radio personality Valentine Dyll¹¹⁰ introduces the name of John Regan as one of the sentries terrified by Jack during his visits to Aldershot.

Dyll, who incorrectly dates Jack's appearances to the summer of 1877, gives the following lurid version of events:

'a tall, thin figure in a tight-fitting suit and huge, gleaming helmet of fantastic design... lunged forward, rising from the ground with the ease of a bird. As it swooped over Regan's head a stream of thin blue flame spurted from its mouth...'

It need only be said that none of these details appear in any older sources, and that the names of all the regiments stationed at Aldershot in the relevant months are available for anyone with the necessary energy to check the muster rolls for a Private Regan. I have not been able to spare the time.

¹⁰⁸ Hulton Getty Picture Collection, personal communication August 1996, author's files. The caption adds that the original source of the illustration was a book titled *Old and New London*.

¹⁰⁹ Valentine Dyll, 'Spring-heeled Jack – the leaping terror', *Everybody's* 20 Feb 1954 pp.12-13, 38-39. The letter column of *Everybody's* for 6 Mar 1954 featured several communications from readers: C Demoya of Torquay theorised that Jack was a lunatic circus acrobat, Inman Race of Sheffield that he was an visitor from a high-gravity planet (the first suggestion of an alien Jack that I have been able to discover) and J Morris of Wealdstone (on the authority of his father) that the Aldershot incidents were caused by an eagle, and the Liverpool sightings by a kangaroo.

¹¹⁰ He was well known for presenting mysteries and thrillers under the pseudonym 'The Man in Black'.

An alien menace

One mystery for which neither Haining nor Dyall bear responsibility is the problem of how contemporary accounts which portrayed Spring-heeled Jack as a pretend ghost, a bogeyman or a Robin Hood – but always as a human being – mutated into the specifically inhuman figure, either a demon or a UFO occupant, of the secondary ufological Fortean literature.

The following description, taken from Jerome Clark's valuable *UFO Encyclopedia*¹¹¹, may be taken as representative of the informed modern portrait of Jack:

‘According to his victims Jack was, if human, a decidedly odd-looking member of the race. He was tall and thin, with a prominent nose and eyes that were – almost literally – fiery. His fingers felt almost like claws, and he had enormous strength. His ears were pointed. He wore a flowing cloak, a helmet that appeared to me made of metal, and close-fitting, glittering garments. A lamp was strapped to his chest.’

This Spring-heeled Jack might not have been recognisable to Jack's Victorian contemporaries, to the reasonably well-read generalist of the turn of the century¹¹² or even to the reader of Elliott O'Donnell's first 'modern' accounts of the mystery, published in 1932 and 1948¹¹³. We know from contemporary sources that Jack was indeed tall and thin, had claw-like fingers and wore a cloak, and also that – at least when he 'cheated' by holding a light under his chin – his eyes appeared 'like balls of fire'¹¹⁴. We also know that he wore some sort of headgear, though the Scales sisters described it as a 'bonnet' rather than a helmet¹¹⁵. But the other details – the prominent nose and eyes, cropped ears, glittering garments and lamp – do not feature in the contemporary reports.

¹¹¹ Jerome Clark, *The Emergence of a Phenomenon: UFOs from the Beginning Through 1959 – the UFO Encyclopedia Volume 2* (Detroit 1992) pp.318-20.

¹¹² A series of letters about the mystery published in *Notes & Queries* make it clear that by 1907 Jack's original appearances in 1838 had been all but forgotten, though the Aldershot scare was well-remembered and several contributors had recollections of the folklore that had grown up around Spring-heeled Jack by the mid-nineteenth century. *N&Q* 10S, VII, 206, 256, 374-5, 496 + 10S, VIII, 251, 455.

¹¹³ Elliott O'Donnell, *Ghosts of London* (London 1932) pp.146-9 and *Haunted Britain* (London 1948) pp.73-6.

¹¹⁴ *The Times* 22 Feb 1838.

¹¹⁵ *The Morning Post* 7 Mar 1838.

Most of these anomalous descriptions appear to have been introduced to the literature in Vyner's 1961 article for *Flying Saucer Review*¹¹⁶. This highly influential contribution was written in response to an earlier editorial request for evidence of alien visitors to earth prior to the beginning of the UFO age in 1947¹¹⁷, and its general thrust was to portray Jack as an alien stranded on earth by some accident involving his spacecraft. The various 'assaults' which occurred in London in 1837-38, Vyner suggested, arose from Jack's attempts to find a 'safe house' and an 'agent' who could put him 'on the path home'.

It is not entirely surprising, then, that Vyner's description of Spring-heeled Jack was suitably alien, providing the basis for Clark's later summary of the case:

'The intruder was tall, thin and powerful. He had a prominent nose, and bony fingers of immense power that resembled claws. He was incredibly agile. He wore a long, flowing cloak, of the sort affected by opera goers, soldiers and strolling actors. On his head was a tall, metallic-seeming helmet. Beneath the cloak were closefitting garments of some glittering material like oilskin or metal mesh. There was a lamp strapped to his chest. Oddest of all: the creature's ears were cropped or pointed like those of an animal.'

Writing of the Alsop assault, Vyner adds:

'Jack... cast aside his cloak to reveal close-fitting, shining garments and a flashing lamp at his breast. His eyes resembled red balls of fire!'

In the absence of any source referencing in the article, and of contemporary evidence to back up any of Vyner's claims, the notion of an alien Spring-heeled Jack at the very least requires further confirmation. Is there anything undeniably supernatural or alien in Jack's bizarre actions and behaviour?

Anomalies associated with Spring-heeled Jack

The conventional identification of Jack as an alien or supernatural being depends – or at least ought to depend – on the presumption that the remarkable abilities his contemporaries credited him with were accurately reported and could not, either singly or together, have been duplicated – even by a gang of rich noblemen. If it can be shown that

¹¹⁶ Vyner, op.cit.

¹¹⁷ Clark op.cit. p.320, citing *Flying Saucer Review* v6n6, Nov-Dec 1960.

our descriptions of Jack are inaccurate or exaggerated, or that his feats could have been matched by contemporary criminals, then the initial presumption should be that Spring-heeled Jack was a human being and not a ghost, a demon or a UFO occupant.

Five separate anomalies are associated with Jack in the majority of the secondary sources.

Generally accepted anomalies associated with Spring-heeled Jack

<i>Authority</i>	<i>Leaps</i>	<i>Fiery Gas-breath gun</i>	<i>Talons</i>	<i>Impervious to bullets</i>
O'Donnell (1948)	Y	Y	N	Y
Dyall (1954)	Y	Y	N	N
Vyner (1961)	Y	N	Y	Y
Reader's Digest (1975)	Y	Y	N	Y
Haining (1977)	Y	Y	N*	Y
Clark (1992)	Y	Y	Y	Y

* Haining refers to this feature only in quoting sceptically direct from Vyner

Inhuman leaps

Spring-heeled Jack took his name, and gained his renown, from the great agility and preternatural leaping ability he is supposed to have exhibited from his very first appearances to the moment he vanished from the face of the earth. Indeed, inhuman leaps are the only feat consistently attributed to him in his various 'incarnations'. They were reported in London in 1837-8¹¹⁸, from Peckham in 1872¹¹⁹, from Aldershot in 1877¹²⁰, and again when Jack appeared in Liverpool in 1904¹²¹.

One not untypical account appeared in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*¹²² during the 1873 flap in that city:

'[The 'Ghost'] was described as tall, gaunt and of unearthly aspect... 'skimming' over the ground with supernatural swiftness, and as making bounds into the air

¹¹⁸ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

¹¹⁹ *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 9 Nov 1872. Spring-heeled Jack was reported to have jumped a six foot fence to escape a party of pursuing navvies.

¹²⁰ *Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette* 17 Mar 1877; *The World* 11 Apr 1877; *The Times* 28 Apr 1877.

¹²¹ *News of the World* 25 Sep 1904.

¹²² *Sheffield Daily telegraph* 31 May 1873.

compared with which the ‘forty feet and three’ of the goblin page of Lord Cranstoun was a mere skip.... One veracious eye witness affirmed that he had seen the apparition clear a wall at a bound, said wall on subsequent measurement proving to be 14ft 3in in height.’

The legend of Spring-heeled Jack is generally rather more vague as to the precise heights and distances that were covered, but leaves no doubt they appeared to be considerably beyond a normal man. Peter Haining has Jack ravishing a victim before ‘speeding away with huge, bounding leaps into the night’¹²³, attacking another after leaping over a stile ‘with a single bound’¹²⁴ and, most incredibly, springing a good 25 feet from street level onto a rooftop, and from that roof over another street onto the eaves of a house opposite¹²⁵. According to Elliott O’Donnell, Jack could jump over high hedges, walls and haystacks [113]. The ufologist J. Vyner has him soaring over the heads of the sentries at Aldershot barracks and landing noiselessly beside them¹²⁶.

There is, however, no evidence of Jack’s leaping prowess in the few first-hand reports that have survived. In the Alsop case, the family gathered at an upper window to watch Jane’s assailant escape by ‘scampering across the fields’¹²⁷, while in Green-dragon-alley, Jack concluded his attack on Lucy Scales by ‘walking away’¹²⁸. In the autumn of 1837 he was supposedly seen climbing, rather than leaping, the walls of Kensington Palace¹²⁹.

The author Elizabeth Villiers, who wrote a short chapter about Jack in *Stand & Deliver*¹³⁰, a book about highwaymen, stated that she had interviewed a female eyewitness who might have become a victim of Jack’s one night on Tooting Bec Common had she not been protected by an escort of gypsies. Villiers tells her story thus:

‘The lady saw him clearly in spite of the mist, as he went across the open common, jumping over good-sized furze bushes and clumps of grass with no apparent effort, though she came to the conclusion that any greater leap would

¹²³ Haining op.cit. p.9.

¹²⁴ Ibid p.37.

¹²⁵ Ibid p.144.

¹²⁶ Vyner op.cit.

¹²⁷ *The Times* 22 Feb 1838.

¹²⁸ *The Morning Post* 7 Mar 1838.

¹²⁹ *County Herald & Weekly Advertiser* 20 Jan 1838.

¹³⁰ Elizabeth Villiers, *Stand & Deliver* (London 1928) pp.238-52.

have been impossible¹³¹. He was doing far more than an ordinary man could have accomplished without mechanical aid, but nothing resembling the exploits with which he had been credited by rumour.

‘Had a good horse been near, he could have been overtaken, but as it was he escaped, the mist and gathering night helping him.’

Roman Golicz, meanwhile, in a generally original and well-researched booklet on Jack’s appearances at Aldershot, asserts that the agile criminal jumped the Basingstoke canal ‘on at least four occasions’ in 1877, a remarkable achievement – given that the canal ‘is over 15 paces wide’ – if supported by eyewitness evidence¹³². Careful reading of the contemporary sources, however, shows that the first reference to this alleged feat did not appear until 1907, some 30 years after the event¹³³, and though Jack certainly did appear on both sides of the canal in 1877, no eye-witness saw him cross it. Maps show that the three-mile stretch that passed through the camp was spanned by at least four bridges at this time, and newspaper accounts dating to the time of the flap simply credit Jack with unusual speed and agility – ‘dodging about in a fantastic fashion’, according to an Aldershot source¹³⁴, making off ‘with astonishing bounds’ according to *The Times*¹³⁵, and ‘hopping and bounding in to the mist’, in the words of the *Illustrated Police News*¹³⁶ – without making any claims for specific feats.

There is one modern (1986) eyewitness account which credits Spring-heeled Jack with more, but it is suspect¹³⁷. Otherwise it is only when we move to second-hand accounts that Jack’s leaps become more impressive; when the reports are third or fourth hand, they become truly spectacular. This pattern is precisely what one would expect were Jack an unusually agile man whose reputation depended largely on terror and the fearful imaginations of his victims.

Nevertheless, if we assume that Spring-heeled Jack’s ability to make inhuman leaps has been greatly exaggerated we are still left with two puzzles: how did he get his name, and did he really wear spring-heeled boots, as his contemporaries seem to have believed?

¹³¹ Meaning obscure. Judging from the context of the description, though, the witness’s intention appears to have been to imply not that Jack’s agility was beyond compare, but that any attempt to make more ambitious leaps would have caused him to injure himself.

¹³² Roman Golicz, *Spring-heeled Jack: A Victorian Visitation at Aldershot* (Farnham: Don Namor Press, 2004) pp.2-3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 14.

¹³³ Ibid; ‘Spring-heeled Jack’, *Notes & Queries* 22 Jun 1907, 10S, VII p.496

¹³⁴ *Sheldrake’s Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette* 17 Mar 1877.

¹³⁵ *The Times* 28 Apr 1877.

¹³⁶ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep 1877.

¹³⁷ *Haunted Scotland* 1, Jul 1996; *Fortean Studies* 3 (1996) p.112n.

From the few remaining sources available to us, it appears that the name ‘Spring Jack’ was in use by January 1838¹³⁸, and the full ‘Spring-heeled Jack’¹³⁹ by the end of February at the very latest. By then it was in sufficiently general use for Jack himself to be aware of it¹⁴⁰. All of this suggests the notion of great agility must have been attached to him in the earliest days of his career, even though the descriptions we have of his rumoured appearances as, variously, ghost, bear and devil neither reflect it nor refer to it.

One guess might be to suppose that Spring-heeled Jack’s name and abilities may have been suggested by the well-known fairy tale of the man with the seven-league boots, but there is no evidence to support this contention, and the mystery of how he got his name remains unsolved.

The idea that Jack wore spring-heeled boots is also an ancient one. The *Morning Chronicle* of 10 January 1838 attributes him with ‘spring shoes’¹⁴¹, the *Camberwell & Peckham Times* of 9 November 1872 with ‘spring-heeled or india-rubber sole boots’¹⁴², and the *Illustrated Police News* of 3 November 1877 with ‘springs to his boots’¹⁴³. Harleigh Severne, whose children’s book *Chums* was allegedly based partly on the author’s own encounter with an imitator of Jack’s in Worcester in 1845, has his villain don spring-heeled leather knee boots which made him capable of leaping over donkeys¹⁴⁴. There is also an unconfirmed report that a costume comprising a red, shaggy hide and a pair of jackboots fitted with springs in the heels was found in west Norfolk some time during the nineteenth century¹⁴⁵.

Yet there is some reason to doubt that the idea of spring-heeled boots is a practicable one. Vyner states, on no known authority, that in 1938 the German army experimented with the idea during the Second World War, supplying its paratroops with such footwear. The result was an alleged 85% incidence of broken ankles¹⁴⁶. Even setting this dubious – but not entirely incredible – statistic aside, it seem clear both that the iron springs Jack was said to use could not reasonably have been expected to propel him over high walls, let alone houses, and that there would have been considerable problems of control (Elizabeth Villiers concedes as much in the passage quoted above). Moreover, spring-heeled shoes or boots would have been of little use on anything other than smooth,

¹³⁸ *Greenwich, Woolwich & Deptford Gazette* 13 Jan 1838.

¹³⁹ *The Times* 22 Feb 1838.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

¹⁴² *Camberwell & Peckham Times* 9 Nov 1872.

¹⁴³ *Illustrated Police News* 3 Nov 1877.

¹⁴⁴ Harleigh Severne, *Chums: A Tale for the Youngsters* (London 1878), cited in Haining op.cit. pp.98-9.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Springs in his boots’, *Reader’s Digest Almanac of the Uncanny* (Sydney, 1995) pp.286-7.

¹⁴⁶ Vyner, op.cit.

firm ground, yet the majority of Jack's recorded appearances occurred in rough terrain: country lanes in early Victorian London, wasteground at Aldershot, fields in Peckham, park-land in Sheffield. Any attempt to use springs in such locations would surely have caused problems of such a magnitude that the whole idea would have been swiftly abandoned by any reasonable perpetrator. In summary, I would concede that, should any credible first-hand accounts emerge of Jack making spectacular leaps, the reports might well prove hard to explain.

Fire-breathing

Perhaps the most terrifying of Jack's strange talents was his ability to breath fire into the faces of his victims. Yet contrary to the impression given by several secondary authorities, there are only three direct references to Jack's fire-breathing, and all come from 1838.

On 20 February 1838, Spring-heeled Jack called on the Alsop family in Bearbinder Lane and assaulted Jane Alsop, who later told the magistrate at Lambeth-street police office that she had brought out a candle at the request of the supposed policeman and

‘the instant she had done so... he threw off his outer garment, and applying the lighted candle to his breast, presented a most hideous appearance, and vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flames from his mouth.’¹⁴⁷

A few days later, during the assault in Green-dragon-alley, Jack stood waiting for Lucy Scales and ‘spurted a quantity of blue flame right in her face.’ Another witness, Scales's sister, added a little more detail, telling the Lambeth-street magistrate:

‘On her sister, who was a little before her, coming up to the person, he threw open his cloak, exhibited [a] lamp, and puffed a quantity of flame from his mouth into the face of her sister.’¹⁴⁸

While there is one earlier, second-hand report suggesting that Jack was indulging in fire-breathing – involving the appearance, at Dulwich, of a figure ‘enveloped in a white sheet and blue fire’¹⁴⁹ and two further mentions of similar behaviour in the vicinity of Old

¹⁴⁷ *The Times*, 22 Feb 1838.

¹⁴⁸ *The Morning Post* 7 Mar 1838.

¹⁴⁹ *The Sun* 20 Jan 1838.

Ford¹⁵⁰, and the idea of a fiery ghost proved so exciting that one imitator made a specific attempt to mimic the effect by employing a mask with blue glazed paper stuck to the mouth¹⁵¹, there is no contemporary evidence that Jack breathed flames again after February 1838. Haining has him doing so in the Home Counties around 1843¹⁵² and Vyner suggests he did so at Aldershot¹⁵³, but neither on any discernable authority.

It must also be admitted that while both Jane Alsop nor Lucy Scales were plainly terrified by the flames, neither appears to have been injured by them. There is no mention of burns in the surgeon's report on Scales, nor in Alsop's testimony; nor does the court-reporter comment on them. On the contrary, one witness, Richardson, specifically stated that Jane Alsop's account of the assault on the night it occurred did not 'impress him with the idea that it had been so furious as he subsequently saw it described in the newspapers'¹⁵⁴. Indeed Richardson and his fellow witness, Smith, who testified that they were within a few yards of Bearbinder Cottage when the attack took place, were both certain that there had been no balls of fire:

'Mr Harwick (to Richardson) – You have stated that you distinctly saw a lighted candle brought from the home of Mr. Alsop immediately after you heard the violent ringing at the bell and before you heard the screams of the female.

'Richardson – I did, Sir.

'Mr Hardwick – Now, from the position you were in at the time, can you take it on you to say that if a greater light than that produced by a candle had been exhibited in the garden of Mr. Alsop you must have seen it?

'Richardson – I certainly must.

'Mr Harwick (to Smith) – And are you of the same opinion?

'Smith – I am sir; I saw no light but that of a candle.'¹⁵⁵

This exchange caused the Lambeth-street magistrates some problems. They were plainly unwilling to doubt Jane Alsop, who had struck them as a believable witness and one who had evidently been traumatised by what had occurred; on the other hand, Richardson and Smith were quite adamant that she must have been mistaken. Hardwick continued to

¹⁵⁰ *The Times* 3 Mar 1838.

¹⁵¹ *The Morning Post* 20 Mar 1838; *The Examiner* 25 Mar 1838.

¹⁵² Haining, op.cit. p.77.

¹⁵³ Vyner, op.cit.

¹⁵⁴ *The Times* 3 Mar 1838.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

grapple with the problem to the end, eventually inclining himself to believe Jane's testimony. As the court report went on¹⁵⁶:

'Mr Hardwick admitted that there might be a little exaggeration, but it was quite impossible he could get rid of the solemn and repeated assertions of these respectable individuals on oath, and that, too, without any earthly assignable motive, and assume at such a conclusion as that expressed. He felt bound to give credence to the testimony of the Misses Alsop, as the violence of which they complained would be in itself sufficiently alarming when committed by a ruffian without the addition of artificial lights. But, besides, there were other circumstances which went in corroboration of their statement. It would be recollected that a very intelligent girl, and in whose probity her mother and mistress had placed the utmost reliance, had on the last examination given an accurate and detailed description of a person dressed in pantomimic costume, that she had seen not very far from this neighbourhood and who appeared to vomit forth similar lights to those spoken of¹⁵⁷. There was another female, he understood, who had witnessed something similar, but who was not now present, close to the residence of Mr Alsop. So that the case of the Misses Alsop was not a solitary instance of such practices.'

Presuming that the flames did exist, what might they have been? If Jane's blue-and-white balls of fire and Lucy Scales's blue sheet of flame were essentially the same thing, the obvious solution is that Jack was using an alcohol-based liquid to effect his fire-breathing. This was a possibility which did not escape contemporary investigators, who directed some questions to various members of the theatrical profession. Mr Farrell, the proprietor of the Pavilion Theatre, was called as a witness at Lambeth-street and explained 'that the dropping of certain strong acids on a sponge charged with spirits of wine would produce such appearances as those described, and that the colour of the flame emitted would depend on the peculiar quality or description of acid.' Officer Lea of the Lambeth-street office reached a similar conclusion, having watched staff at the London Hospital produce an effect similar to Jack's 'by blowing through a tube in which spirits of wine, sulphur, and another ingredient were deposited and ignited.'¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Frustratingly, this testimony appears nowhere in the published newspaper accounts of the case.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid; for Lea's experiences, see *The Times* 3 Mar 1838.

This is an important point only insofar as there has been a general presumption in many secondary sources that there was something definitely supernatural about Jack's fiery breath. In his recently-published *The Unexplained*, Karl Shuker concludes¹⁵⁹:

‘Comparing his flame-spitting talent with that of fire-eaters is futile too, because fire-eaters cannot generate fire inside their mouths in the way that Jack did.’

The truth is that the fairly precise descriptions we have of Spring-heeled Jack's actions in Bearbinder Land and Green-dragon-alley form some of the best evidence we have that he was definitely human. In particular, it is at once apparent that, far from being some sort of demon, Jack needed a naked flame to effect his trick. In the Alsop case he specifically requested a candle, postponing his attack and increasing the risk of detection by doing so; when one was brought, he held it at chest level and then began to breathe his blue-and-white flames. Similarly in Green-dragon-alley he lifted a lantern to the same height just before attacking Lucy Scales¹⁶⁰. This behaviour is highly reminiscent of that of a carnival fire breather.

There are two problems with the assumption that Spring-heeled Jack's ability to vomit flame was no more than a circus trick. The first is that one would assume the lantern used in Green-dragon-alley would have been enclosed, to prevent the flame blowing out, yet there is no suggestion in the account of either witness that Jack paused to open the lantern and expose the flame before shooting his blue fire into Lucy's eyes. The second is the danger of breathing fire in an uncontrolled exterior environment.

Carnival people call Jack's fire breathing trick the ‘human volcano’ or ‘fountain of fire’. It involves spitting a jet of inflammable liquid into a blazing torch, and since it is probably the most dangerous part of a fire-eater's repertoire, and is normally performed either indoors or in a dead calm. The consequences of getting it wrong can be very serious, as Dan Mannix, himself a former professional, notes in the opening pages of his autobiographical *Memoirs of a Sword-Swallower*¹⁶¹:

‘I probably never would have become America's leading fire-eater if Flamo the Great hadn't happened to explode that night in front of Krinko's Great Combined Carnival Side Shows... Taking care to hold [his] lighted torch well away from his

¹⁵⁹ Karl Shuker, *The Unexplained: an Illustrated Guide to the World's Natural and Paranormal Mysteries* (London 1996)p.36.

¹⁶⁰ *The Times* 22 Feb 1838; *the Morning Post* 7 Mar 1838.

¹⁶¹ Daniel Mannix, *Memoirs of a Sword-Swallower* (London 1951) pp.1-3.

body, he filled a drinking glass half full of petrol from a scarlet tin marked DANGEROUS... I'd seen fire-eaters work before, so I guessed that Flamo was going to do the Fountain of Fire. I'd never seen a fire-eater do the stunt except in a dead calm. He took a mouthful of petrol and stood waiting for the wind to die down. Suddenly a little trickle of petrol leaked from the corner of his mouth and ran down his chin. Instantly a tiny flash of fire from the torch leaped towards it, running through the air like an invisible fuse as it ignited the petrol vapour. The tiny trickle blazed up and his whole mouthful of petrol exploded. I was blinded for a second by the flash. The fire-eater's whole face was burning and he threw himself off the platform and rolled on the ground...'

William Lindsay Gresham makes a similar point in *Monster Midway*, his history of carnival life¹⁶²:

'The great enemy of the fire-eater is wind. A sudden backdraft... or a shift of the wind... can send the flames of the torch right across his face.'

From such accounts, it would appear that Spring-heeled Jack would have been taking a considerable risk in 'performing' the Fountain of Fire outdoors, even though the evening of 20 February appears to have been a very calm one¹⁶³.

Perhaps that ever-present danger explains why Jack never subsequently exhibited his fire-breathing elsewhere. At the very least, it certainly suggests that the Spring-heeled Jack of 1838 was not the Spring-heeled Jack of 1877 or 1904, a finding that reinforces the conclusion that Jack was a human prankster-criminal rather than an alien super-being.

Gas-guns

There is another way of interpreting Spring-heeled Jack's fire-breathing, which was first suggested in Vyner's 1961 article. It has been repeated several times in other UFO and Fortean books, and seems to support the theory that Jack was an extra-terrestrial.

The relevant passages of Vyner's article concern the Alsop and Scales assaults and read as follows¹⁶⁴:

¹⁶² William Lindsay Gresham, *Monster Midway* (London 1954) p.198.

¹⁶³ Jane could hardly have handed Jack a lighted candle if the night had been blustery; and we can be sure that the light she provided was not a lantern, since officer Lea reported that he had found 'the candle and candlestick which she had handed to the man' lying outside the gate. [*Essex & Sussex Times* 2 Mar 1838.]

¹⁶⁴ Vyner, op.cit.

‘Springheel Jack... cast aside his cloak to reveal close-fitting, shining garments and a flashing lamp at his breast... Jack at once spurted balls of fire into the girl’s face and fled.’

‘[Lucy Scales’s] sister came up in time to see his long cloak flung aside and a lantern flashing on the startled girl. There was no time to scream; Jack’s weird blue flame spurted into his victim’s face.’

Vyner offers a novel interpretation of these incidents:

‘Is the blue fire a stupefying gas? Or is it the visible product of a magnetic effect transmitted along a beam of polarised light from Jack’s mysterious lantern? Intense magnetic fields produce effects comparable to those experienced by Jack’s victims – and by those who have ventured too near grounded saucers.’

He concludes: ‘If he were an impostor, then he was at least a super-impostor, who carried a super-weapon – a raygun.’

The suggestion that some sort of alien technology was involved was made more specifically by Jerome Clark and Loren Coleman in a 1972 issue of *Fate*: Jack, they wrote, ‘knocked his victims unconscious with a burst of ‘blue fire’, which he shot from a strange gun’¹⁶⁵. Yet there is absolutely nothing in the contemporary sources to support the idea that Jack wore a lamp strapped to his chest, much less that the fire he spat came from anywhere but his mouth. The suggestion that he was equipped with some sort of gas-gun is based entirely on Vyner’s misreading of his scant sources, which has been repeated by other authors ever since without being checked against contemporary material.

Talons

There seems, on the other hand, to be no reason to disbelieve reports that Spring-heeled Jack was equipped with talons or claws, rather than fingers, which he used to tear at his victims’ clothes and hair.

The suggestion was first made our the very earliest known source, *The Times* of 9 January 1838, which notes: ‘Servant girls about Kensington, and Hammersmith, and Ealing, told dreadful stories of a ghost, or devil, who, on one occasion, was said to have beaten a blacksmith, and torn his flesh with iron claws, and in others to tear clothes from

¹⁶⁵ Jerome Clark and Loren Coleman, ‘The mad gasser of Mattoon’, *Fate*, February 1972 pp.38-47.

the backs of females.’¹⁶⁶ *The Morning Herald* observed the next day that Jack wore ‘large claw gloves’ to effect his crimes¹⁶⁷, and Jane Alsop, who had a first-hand experience of just such an attack, told the magistrate at Lambeth-street police office that ‘without uttering a sentence, he darted at her, and catching her partly by her dress and the back part of her neck, commenced tearing her gown with his claws, which she was certain were of some metallic substance.’¹⁶⁸

Jack’s claws do not appear to have been unsheathed again, although at Aldershot he is said to have ‘slapped’ a soldier ‘several times in the face’¹⁶⁹ and (less reliably, by the *Illustrated Police News*) ‘passed his hand (which is arranged to feel as cold and clammy as that of a corpse) over the face of the sentinel.’¹⁷⁰ It might be thought that both these actions would have been difficult to execute with a taloned hand without leaving scratches on the victim, and that these might have been mentioned in a press report.

In fact, there is nothing in the evidence to suggest that Spring-heeled Jack’s claws or talons were anything other than specially adapted gloves, as was suggested in the press in 1838. There is certainly no need to see anything supernatural or alien in them, though it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that they were designed to complement Jack’s demonic appearance, as well as being dangerous and effective weapons. Finally, the fact that Jack seems to have worn claws only in 1838 is further evidence that the original Spring-heeled Jack was not the same person (or being) as the Jack who bounded through the rest of the Victorian period – and that the original was considerably more sophisticated and better equipped than his successors.

The bullet-proof bogey

The secondary authorities tend to make much of the assumption that Spring-heeled Jack was supernaturally impervious to bullets. During the Aldershot scare, according to Jerome Clark, ‘one guard fired on Jack but – so he claimed in subsequent testimony – the bullet went through him without effect’¹⁷¹. Peter Haining, from whom Clark seems to have drawn his details, adds that two soldiers ‘took aim at him but when their bullets seemed not to have the slightest effect, they turned on their heels and fled’¹⁷².

¹⁶⁶ *The Times* 9 Jan 1838.

¹⁶⁷ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

¹⁶⁸ *The Times* 22 Feb 1838.

¹⁶⁹ *The Times* 28 Apr 1877.

¹⁷⁰ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep 1877.

¹⁷¹ Clark, op.cit. p.319.

¹⁷² Haining, op.cit. p.90.

In fact, as the original sources make clear, Jack's invulnerability to bullets probably owed more to a combination of poor shooting and blank rounds. Nowhere in the available contemporary material is there any suggestion that bullets passed straight through the leaping terror.

On one occasion in April 1877, a sentry did load and fire at Jack 'but without any effect'¹⁷³. The *Times* added a little more detail in its report on the same incident¹⁷⁴:

'[A] soldier, in his excitement, loaded his rifle and fired, but missed his aim. From here the ghost went towards the military cemetery and in a similar manner attempted to frighten a private in the 100th Regiment, who was on guard by a powder magazine; and was again fired at, but without being hit.'

Some time later, Jack appears to have escaped injury at Aldershot when a sentry fired a blank warning shot at him¹⁷⁵.

At Newport Arch, if the *Illustrated Police News* is to be believed, two more shots either missed or failed to penetrate the animal hide Jack wore¹⁷⁶. But the most interesting comment on Jack's supposed invulnerability to bullets appears in the *Police News*'s coverage of the Aldershot scare¹⁷⁷:

'The sentries had lately been ordered to fire on the ghost, and were loaded with ball, but this precaution had lately been given up [and] 'Jack' pursued his old tactics on Friday last...'

If correctly reported, this suggests not only that the reason why Jack waited from April until August to renew his activities around the barracks may have been an actual fear of being shot, but also that he was in a position to know when the order to load with live ammunition had been rescinded. The implication is that the Aldershot Spring-heeled Jack was – as many contemporaries supposed – himself a member of the garrison.

Parallel cases in the Fortean and ufological literature

¹⁷³ *Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette* 17 Mar 1877.

¹⁷⁴ *The Times* 28 Apr 1877.

¹⁷⁵ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep 1877.

¹⁷⁶ *Illustrated Police News* 3 Nov 1877.

¹⁷⁷ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep 1877.

Before we can set aside the suggestion that Spring-heeled Jack was a paranormal entity of some sort, one argument remains to be dealt with: the existence of what appear to be parallel cases in the Fortean and ufological literature.

Vyner lists the following apparent parallels¹⁷⁸:

‘Seen June 18, 1953, at Houston, Texas, sitting in a pecan tree. Seen Louisville, Kentucky, 28 July 1880. Seen October 3, 1883, at Warwick. Seen over the Aegean Sea, October 1954; at Chehalis, Washington, USA, on January 6 1948.’

Where these reports can be traced – using Eberhart’s *Geo-Bibliography of Anomalies*, for instance – they generally transpire to have little in common with the legend of Spring-heeled Jack. The Louisville and the Chehalis cases feature ‘flying humanoids’, one a man ‘with modified frog’s legs’¹⁷⁹. The one parallel cited by Vyner that does feature an entity with some similarities to Jack is the so-called Houston ‘bat man’ case of 1953¹⁸⁰. Jerome Clark summarises this peculiar incident as follows¹⁸¹:

‘At 2.30am on June 18 1953, three persons seeking to escape the heat by sitting on the front porch of a Houston apartment house saw, one of them related, ‘a huge shadow cross the lawn. I thought at first it was the magnified reflection of a big moth caught in a nearby street light.’ Then the shadow seemed to bounce upward into a pecan tree. The three of them saw the ‘figure of a man... dressed in gray or black tight-fitting clothes... [there was] a dim gray light all around him. He was about six and a half feet tall, looked like a white man, and was wearing a black cape, skin-tight pants and quarter-length boots.’ So far this sounds like an excellent description of Jack, but witness Hilda Walker adds this un-Jack-like detail: ‘I could see him plain and could see he had big wings folded at his shoulders’ (Gross, 1989¹⁸²) Fifteen minutes later the figure just ‘melted away’. The witnesses then heard a ‘loud swoosh’ across the street and saw a rocket-shaped object shoot upward trailing white smoke. Moments later they and a fourth witness who was arriving observed a ‘flying paintbrush’ with a fiery tail as it flew along the north-eastern horizon. Police officers and reporters who interviewed the witnesses noted they seemed sincere and ‘obviously upset’.

¹⁷⁸ Vyner, op.cit.

¹⁷⁹ George Eberhart, *A Geo-Bibliography of Anomalies* (Westport 1980) pp.44, 509.

¹⁸⁰ Originally reported by William Thompson, ‘Houston bat man’, *Fate* v6n10 (October 1953) pp.26-7.

¹⁸¹ Clark, op.cit. p.319.

¹⁸² Loren Gross, *UFOs: A History. 1953: March-July* (Freemont 1989)

All that can be added is that it would have been helpful to have more detail of just how much light was available on this Houston street at 2.30 in the morning. The amount of detail the witnesses thought they could make out seems remarkable, even presuming normal street lighting and a moonlit night, and the phrase ‘the shadow seemed to bounce upward into a pecan tree’ does imply that a certain amount of imagination may have been involved. The notion of a winged ‘Jack’ is in any event unique to this case, and the description of the ‘bat man’ would fit any number of stage villains as well as Spring-heeled Jack.

The other case often linked to Jack’s is that of the ‘phantom anaesthetist’ who haunted Mattoon, Illinois in the early autumn of 1944¹⁸³. Descriptions of this bizarre prowler – who was on at least one occasion suspected of being a woman – slightly resemble those of Jack¹⁸⁴, but there is no suggestion that the ‘Mad Gasser’ was unnaturally agile or able to breathe fire, and Jack’s distinctive *modus operandi* was conspicuously different to that of the stealthy Gasser, who never confronted his – or her – victims face to face. The connection, as Jerome Clark admits, ‘is mostly the gas’¹⁸⁵. Since we have seen the notion Spring-heeled Jack was equipped with some sort of gas gun is a misapprehension, there is in fact no reason to connect him with the Mattoon case.

The anatomy of a suburban ghost

Spring-heeled Jack may have his antecedents, his parallels and his successors – yt, with his bizarre looks, his fearful agility and his strange abilities, he remains a uniquely strange and terrifyingly-realised bogeyman. Where did he come from? Was there ever a ‘real’ Jack, or did wild rumour attract imitators who gave him flesh?

When he first appeared, the London authorities, and contemporary journalists, did not think there was anything supernatural about Spring-heeled Jack, even though the earliest reports invariably refer to him as a ‘ghost’¹⁸⁶. Far from implying that he was

¹⁸³ Donald Johnson, ‘The ‘phantom anaesthetist of Mattoon: a field study of mass hysteria’, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 40 (1945) pp.175-86; Willy Smith, ‘Mattoon revisited’, *Magonia* 48 (January 1994) pp.3-6; Robert E. Bartholomew, *Little Green Men, Meowing Nuns and Head-Hunting Panics: A Study of Mass Psychogenic Illness and Social Delusion* (Jefferson, NC, 2001) pp.95-121. A recent reinvestigation of the case by Scott Maruna, *The Mad Gasser of Mattoon: Dispelling the Hysteria* (Swamp Gas Book Co., 2003) persuasively suggests that the Gasser was actually an eccentric local amateur chemist named Farley Llewellyn, aided and abetted by his sisters.

¹⁸⁴ Clark, op.cit. p.320 also cites the description ‘tall, dressed in dark clothing, and wearing a tight-fitting cap’.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ *The Times* 9+11 Jan 1838; *The Morning Chronicle* 10+11 Jan 1838; *The Morning Herald* 10 Jan 1838; *Greenwich, Woolwich & Deptford Gazette* 13 Jan 1838; *The Observer* 14 Jan 1838; *The Sun* 20 Jan 1838; *Country Herald & Weekly Advertiser* 20 Jan 1838.

thought to be a spirit of the dead, the term was employed to suggest elusiveness and incorporeality. To the educated reader – the only sort of reader the papers had, in the days before the abolition of the stamp tax and the advent of the popular press¹⁸⁷ – the implication would have been clear: Spring-heeled Jack was a nonsense, a folktale, the sort of thing only a servant could believe in.

Investigation into the earliest reports did little to dispel this notion. We have noted that both the police and the newspapermen who attempted to track the early rumours to their source found themselves as frustrated as any modern folklorist attempting to unravel the origin of an urban legend. The *Morning Herald*¹⁸⁸ wrote:

‘A reporter... adopted every means for obtaining information on the subject, and personally visited many of the places above-mentioned, where he found that, although the stories were in everybody’s mouth, no person who had actually seen the ghost could be found. He was directed to many persons who were named as having been injured by this alleged ghost, but, on his speaking to them, they immediately denied all knowledge of it, but directed him to other persons whom they had heard, had been ill-treated, but with them he met with no better success; and the police of the T division, who extend as far as Brentford End, declare that, although they have made every inquiry into the matter, they cannot find one individual hardy enough to assert a personal knowledge on the subject.’

This certainly suggests that the Spring-heeled Jack of 1838 emerged from a welter of extraordinary rumour – a good example, in fact, of an ‘urban terror’. But if the first reports of Jack had little foundation, how did the extraordinary descriptions of his appearance evolve?

To the inhabitants of London, in the first months of Victoria’s reign, Jack was actually several different monsters – ‘a ghost, a bear and a devil’¹⁸⁹. The earliest rumours say Jack first appeared to be a bull and a bear, and also as ‘an unearthly warrior, clad in armour of polished brass’¹⁹⁰. Variations on these themes were also reported; for example on one occasion Spring-heeled Jack was described as ‘a figure clad in a bear’s skin,

¹⁸⁷ A good sale for a local newspaper at the time was 1,000 to 2,000 copies. The London dailies would have fared better, but not that much better.

¹⁸⁸ *The Morning Herald* 10 Jan 1838.

¹⁸⁹ *The Sun* 20 Jan 1838.

¹⁹⁰ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

which being drawn aside, exhibited a human body in a suit of mail, and with a long horn, the emblem of the king of hell himself.’¹⁹¹

To a twentieth century reader, this variety of guises seems incredible and perhaps incomprehensible, but there is a clue in that final description which points to a tradition, dating at least to the Reformation, that evil spirits may try to hide their true appearance by appearing as animals. In his cultural history of apparitions¹⁹², the historian RC Finucane quotes the Capuchin monk Taillepied’s *A Treatise of Ghosts* (1588) to show both that the Devil was commonly believed to disguise himself as a ghost and that ‘evil spirits may appear as a lion, bear, black dog, toad, serpent or cat’. This reading of the initial reports would suggest that, in the popular imagination at least, Jack-the-demon was always the ‘real’ Spring-heeled Jack, and Jack-the-bear, Jack-the-bull and Jack-the-ghost simply disguises. It would therefore seem unsurprising that it was the leaping, fire-breathing devil-figure that emerged from the welter of early rumour as the definitive Jack.

Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly more to Spring-heeled Jack’s outlandish garb than this. Animal hides, particularly the skins of bull and bullocks, are also potent fertility symbols and there can be little doubt that – at least to some of his imitators – assuming the guise of Spring-heeled Jack was tantamount to acquiring a licence for sexual assault.

It remains debatable whether the assuredly-real Jack of February 1838 was sexually motivated. Taken in isolation, his attack on Jane Alsop, in which the young girl’s dress was partially torn from her body, certainly appears sexual in nature. Yet it must be remembered that Spring-heeled Jack is also reported to have ‘beaten a blacksmith, and torn his flesh with iron claws’¹⁹³, on another occasion to have attacked a carpenter named Jones, with the result that ‘Jones’s clothes were torn into ribbons’¹⁹⁴, and later to have beaten a wandering muffin man and torn his clothes from his back¹⁹⁵. If true, these reports casts doubt on the sexual theory, and though Jack was generally supposed to choose women as his victims, this may have been because they presented a lesser threat.

There is, nevertheless, little doubt that some of Spring-heeled Jack’s early imitators sexually assaulted their victims. The Southend ‘Jack’ of April 1838 threw a women walking along the cliffs to the ground and stuffed grass in her mouth in what

¹⁹¹ *The Morning Chronicle* 11 Jan 1838.

¹⁹² RC Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (London 1982) pp.100-02.

¹⁹³ *The Times* 9 Jan 1838.

¹⁹⁴ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

appears to have been an attempt to humiliate her rather than to wound¹⁹⁶. Even more telling is the strange case of ‘Louisa Herd versus Spring Heel Jack’, heard at Teignmouth magistrates’ court in the spring of 1847. Herd, a serving-girl, alleged that an elderly and well-regarded local gentleman named Captain Finch had clad himself as Spring-heeled Jack by donning ‘a dress resembling a bullock’s hide’, in which guise he ‘used the insinuating term ‘My pretty little dear’... [and] did also, three times, assault her in a private road’. Although he strongly (and not entirely unconvincingly) protested his innocence, the gallant captain was found guilty of the assaults and fined a total of £5¹⁹⁷.

All this said, it would, however, be too easy to dismiss the evidence for Jack’s activities prior to February 1838 as folklore, and assume that the assailant who attacked Jane Alsop and Lucy Scales was an imitator hoping to exploit the terror to his own ends. Some of the descriptions of the Spring-heeled Jack who haunted the villages around the metropolis strongly recall Jane’s account of the Jack who appeared in Bearbinder Lane and, in particular, it seems unlikely that an imitator would be able to duplicate Jack’s fire-breathing tricks which, as we have seen, were reported at least once prior to the assault in Old Ford¹⁹⁸. At the same time, it is worth recalling that we have already noted discrepancies in the descriptions of the leaping terror which suggest that the Spring-heeled Jack of 1838 was not the same person as the Jack of later years.

This leaves us with the problem of who might actually have carried out Jack’s various attacks. There is little enough evidence to guide us, and in only two cases – the 1837-38 London ‘flap’ and the 1877 Aldershot barracks assaults – is it even possible to hazard a guess as to who the true culprits might have been.

The names of two possible suspects have already arisen during our discussion of the London ‘flap’, and it is to the first of these that we now turn. There can be no doubt that from the earliest days of the scare a rumour circulated the villages outside the metropolis that ‘Spring-heeled Jack’ was the work of a group of young nobleman, undertaken to settle a bizarre bet. The suggestion that Jack, in all his guises, was the work of a group of this sort certainly deserves consideration, not least because it appears at such an early date and seems to have been taken seriously by the authorities, including the Lord Mayor¹⁹⁹.

If we make the assumption that some, at least, of the 1837-38 reports had some basis in fact, the ‘noble’ theory would neatly explain both the distribution and the sheer

¹⁹⁶ *County Herald & Weekly Advertiser* 24 Apr 1838.

¹⁹⁷ *Woolmer’s Exeter & Plymouth Gazette* 27 Mar 1847.

¹⁹⁸ *The Sun* 20 Jan 1838.

¹⁹⁹ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838; *County Herald & Weekly Advertiser* 20 Jan 1838.

fecundity of reports. Such a relatively well-funded group would undoubtedly have had the means to travel from the far west of London to the East End, which in the days before public transport would have been a significant problem for the less well off. (According to one letter writer, ‘It is stated that some individual (‘gentleman’ he has been designated) drives about with a livery servant in a cab, and, throwing off a cloak, appears in these frightful forms’²⁰⁰.) They would also had the time and the motivation to make many appearances, in many different guises. A party of aristocrats might also be assumed to have access to the coat of mail and the bearskin Jack was rumoured to appear in, which any poorer imitators probably would not. Furthermore there are a couple of reports which suggest that Jack did not act alone, and was able to call on the assistance of some like-minded colleagues to carry out his assaults²⁰¹, which ties in neatly enough with the notion of a group of wild young men out to settle a wager. The disappearance of the original ‘Jack’ in February 1838 might be explained either by the fulfilment of the terms of the bet, or by its abandonment in the face of increased police activity.

There is no direct evidence as to the identity of the ‘noblemen’ supposed to be concerned with the assaults. Nevertheless, the name of one particular suspect – Henry de la Poer Beresford, Marquis of Waterford²⁰² – has been associated with the case since the second half of the nineteenth century. The author H Barton Baker, for example, wrote²⁰³:

‘It is more than suspected that the marquis, assisted by some of his companions, is the notorious ‘Spring-heeled Jack’ who for months has kept the town in almost as much terror as did the Mohocks [187] in the previous century... but no proof has ever been discovered to confirm the suspicion.’

In the absence of Peter Haining’s additional ‘proofs’ – the identification of Polly Adams’s attacker as a nobleman with ‘protuberant eyes’ (supposedly one of Waterford’s characteristics) and of Spring-heeled Jack’s cloak as adorned with a filigree letter ‘W’ – there is little more that can be said at present about Waterford as a suspect, other than that his known character certainly suggests he would have been capable of the assaults, and that he may have been in London at the time the assaults began²⁰⁴.

²⁰⁰ *The Times* 11 Jan 1838.

²⁰¹ *The Morning Chronicle* 10 Jan 1838; *The Times* 22 Feb 1838.

²⁰² Lived 1811-1859. A scion of the Anglo-Irish nobility, born into one of the wealthiest families in Britain. Haining, op.cit. pp.53-73, gives full details.

²⁰³ H Barton Baker, *Stories of the Streets of London* (London 1899) pp.420-1.

²⁰⁴ According to the *Surrey & Middlesex Standard*, 23 Dec 1837, he was touring Norway as of 1 September, the month in which Jack’s appearances are supposed to have begun. Nevertheless it would certainly have been possible for him to have returned to London by the end of the month.

What of our second suspect, Millbank, the man interrogated at Lambeth-street police office in connection with Jack's assault on Jane Alsop? Lea, the private officer of Lambeth-street, strongly suspected him of being Jane's assailant, on the grounds that he had been in Bearbinder Lane at the correct time and was wearing a white overcoat and white hat, which could certainly have been mistaken for Jack's outfit of 'white oilskin'. The devastating – but disputed – evidence of James Smith, who claimed to have heard Millbank admit to carrying out the assault, also counts heavily against him. Furthermore, there is some suggestion that the fiend of the East End may have been a local man – there is a reasonable suspicion that he knew the Alsop family lived in the cottage²⁰⁵ and, a few days later, Jack also asked for the owner of the house at 2 Turner Street, Mr Ashworth, by name²⁰⁶. If Lea's informants were correct, Jack may have been in the Old Ford area for up to a month before carrying out his assault on Jane Alsop²⁰⁷.

Millbank himself was hardly in a position to convincingly deny the charge, since he confessed to being so inebriated on the evening in question that he had no recollection of what had occurred²⁰⁸. In his defence, there are, however, several significant problems with his identification as Spring-heeled Jack. He was a local man, who lived opposite the Morgan's Arms public house on the Coborn-road²⁰⁹, a street which led onto Bearbinder Lane, and he was actually known to the Alsop family²¹⁰. But if, as seems probable, the Jack who assaulted Jane Alsop really was the same as the being who had exhibited himself in Teddington, Kingston, Hammersmith and all those other villages, it makes no sense to assume that Millbank would go to all the effort of travelling miles across country to carry out an assault well away from his home, and then risk everything by attacking a family who lived practically next door to him. Jane Alsop is not recorded as giving any sign that she recognised Millbank (whom we are told was older, shorter and stouter than Jane described Spring-heeled Jack²¹¹) when confronted by him at the police office, and she was strongly of the opinion that the man who had attacked her was sober, not drunk²¹². In addition, as we have seen, it would have been dangerous and foolhardy in the extreme for anyone to have attempted a display of firebreathing in the open air whilst inebriated.

²⁰⁵ *The Morning Herald* 23 Feb 1838.

²⁰⁶ *The Times* 2 Mar 1838.

²⁰⁷ *The Morning Herald* 23 Feb 1838.

²⁰⁸ *The Times* 2 Mar 1838

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *The Times* 3 Mar 1838.

²¹² *The Times* 2 Mar 1838.

On balance, I am reasonably convinced that the Spring-heeled Jack who attacked Jane Alsop was not Millbank, though this still leaves us with the problem of why James Smith – who had no obvious motive to lie – so vehemently asserted that he had heard him confess that he was²¹³.

Finally, there are a couple of clues as to the identity of the Spring-heeled Jack who haunted Aldershot to be considered. As we have seen, *The Times*²¹⁴ reported that

‘a tall gentleman, carrying a carpet bag, was met by some provosts about 10 o'clock going into camp. He was stopped, but on stating he was an officer they allowed him to proceed. It is hardly probable, however, that an officer would be walking into Camp at that hour, there being no late train, or that he would have been carrying a carpet bag. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that had the provosts followed the person in question the Aldershot ghost mystery would have been solved.’

This need not necessarily imply that the ‘gentleman’ in question was not an army officer – perhaps he had been into town. Furthermore, the implication that Jack resumed his activities in the late summer of 1877 at just the time that the Aldershot sentries had been ordered to load with blanks rather than ball once more²¹⁵ certainly suggests that the perpetrator was either an officer or a civilian with associates in the camp.

Three decades later, a senior army officer, Colonel Alfred Welby, recorded that those in the camp had had their suspicions about this Jack’s identity²¹⁶:

‘More than 30 years ago jumping pranks were played many nights on the sentry over the magazine by the canal near the South Camp at Aldershot. It was a lonely spot at some distance from the guard-room. Jack used to spring across the canal while the sentry, pacing his beat, was walking away from it, and then on to the man’s shoulders, sorely frightening him, and usually disarming him by carrying off his rifle. The pranks were popularly attributed to a lively officer of the Rifles; he certainly was not convicted of them, and I do not know that he ever acknowledged himself to be Spring-heeled Jack.’

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ *The Times* 28 Apr 1877.

²¹⁵ *Illustrated Police News* 8 Sep 1877

²¹⁶ ‘Spring-heeled Jack’, *Notes & Queries* 22 Jun 1907, 10S, VII p.496. Welby is not identified as an officer in *N&Q*, but a check reveals that his name appears in the relevant *Army List*.

According to at least two contemporary army officers, the name of the principal suspect was Lieutenant Allfrey, of the 60th Rifles, ‘a very big and powerful man, but extraordinarily active’²¹⁷. Allfrey, however, never confessed. And that, I fear, is the closest we can now get to the identity of Aldershot’s bounding visitor.

The legacy of Spring-heeled Jack

Throughout the 1840s and beyond, Spring-heeled Jack was more than just a phantom attacker. He became a full-fledged bogeyman, a figure who appeared in many a nightmare and was employed to scare young children into obedience.

Writing in *Notes and Queries* some six decades later, Thomas Ratcliffe of Worksop recalled²¹⁸:

‘He was a bugbear into and past the fifties, for at various spots in the midlands this nimble-heeled gentleman had played his jumping pranks, frightening people out of their wits – an easy matter enough with some; in fact, ‘Jack’ jumped and was seen in the imaginations of many folk. About the end of the forties I had, I may say, a wholesome dread of meeting ‘Jumping Jack’ and seeing him bound.’

This recollection prompted Harry Hems, of Exeter, to contribute his own memories of the period²¹⁹:

‘My maternal grandmother, who died at an advanced age, was accustomed to tell me, when I was a little lad, uncanny stories about ‘Spring-heeled Jack’, who, she asserted, was the Marquis of Waterford. The monster was credited with hiding at night in dark and lonely places, and when some chance pedestrian came along (by preference a solitary female), ‘Spring-heeled Jack’ would suddenly jump out at one bound, and pin his unlucky victim to the ground.’

Yet there was another side to the Victorian perception of demonic Jack. During the nineteenth century, he featured in more than one of the then-popular ‘penny bloods’ –

²¹⁷ Lord Ernest Hamilton, *40 Years On* (London 1922) pp.162–4; Major General Sir John Adye *Soldiers and Others I Have Known* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1925) pp.25–6.

²¹⁸ ‘Spring-heeled Jack’, *Notes & Queries* 18 May 1907, 10S, VII pp.374-5.

²¹⁹ Marquis of Waterford as Spring-heeled Jack’, *Notes & Queries* 7 Dec 1907, 10S, VIII p.455.

lurid tales of adventure and romance that sold well among the newly-literate working classes – as a peculiar sort of supernatural hero²²⁰. In Thomas Ratcliffe's recollection²²¹,

‘his jumps were intended to frighten evil-doers, and to frustrate their intentions. He was looked upon as a sort of Robin Hood.’

Even today, the all-but-forgotten figure of Spring-heeled Jack emerges occasionally from the shadows. The phrase ‘spring-heeled’ is sometimes applied to the agile and the adept, though most users can have little idea of how the term originated, and the evocative power of Jack's name is still exploited. In the early 1980s, a short-lived British heavy metal group adopted the name, and in the last couple of years it has also been used by a considerably more successful partnership of two British musicians and producers working in the drum'n'bass style of dance music. In 1995 an independent British production company was seeking finance to produce a movie about a violent, murderous Jack's reappearance in contemporary London; through one of those literary coincidences beloved of Fortean, I was shown a script, shortly before the project collapsed, by a friend who had been approached to scout locations for the film.

And Spring-heeled Jack lives on, of course, in the literature of the bizarre and the unexplained – usually in the form of an invincible alien whose remarkable powers were far beyond the comprehension of Victorian England. If this paper has any influence, I hope it will be to force a reassessment of this increasingly pervasive, but misleading and unjustifiable image.

Conclusions

The general result of new research in the newspaper archives has been to allow a radical reassessment the existing accounts of Spring-heeled Jack in the Fortean and ufological literature.

Specific conclusions include:

1] Jack's strange apparel, fire-breathing and talons could all be produced using materials and skills available in 1838. His alleged inhuman leaps, while intriguing, are not well evidenced. There is therefore no case for supposing Spring-heeled Jack was a supernatural being.

²²⁰ Peter Haining deals with this aspect of Spring-heeled Jack at some length. Haining op.cit. pp.111-39. At least one serial was probably written by George Sala, one of the leading authors of the genre.

²²¹ ‘Spring-heeled Jack’, *Notes & Queries* 22 Jun 1907, 10S, VII p.496.

2] There is no reason to link Spring-heeled Jack to UFOs, UFO occupants or ‘mad gassers’. He is more properly classified alongside ghosts, mystery assailants, and indeed urban legends.

3] While there is no evidence, other than contemporary rumour, that the Spring-heeled Jack of 1838 was the Marquis of Waterford, the identification is a plausible one. Nevertheless, in the majority of the post-1838 cases known to us, Jack could not have been the Marquis of Waterford.

4] There were possibly several ‘Spring-heeled Jacks’ at large in 1837-38, some of them working in pairs or as part of larger gangs, but the person(s) responsible for the two best-known assaults – those on Jane Alsop and Lucy Scales – was probably the same as the person(s) whose activities in 1837 inspired the Spring-heeled Jack scare.

5] By spring 1838, the image of Spring-heeled Jack had become sufficiently familiar to attract imitators who took on the guise of Jack either as a prank or, more rarely, in order to commit sexual assaults. Together with the adoption of Spring-heeled Jack as a popular character in Penny Dreadful fiction and as bogey-figure in the nation’s nurseries, these imitators were responsible for keeping the legend of Spring-heeled Jack alive between 1838 and 1904.

6] By the 1870s, Spring-heeled Jack had been partly forgotten, and by the early years of the twentieth century few knew of him or remembered him; his origins in the early years of Victoria’s reign had been lost. By the 1920s, incidents which in earlier years would almost certainly have been attributed to him were once again being classified as the work of anonymous ‘ghosts’. The last known panic concerning Jack occurred in Glasgow in the 1930s.

7] Of the individual assaults generally attributed to Spring-heeled Jack,

a] that on Polly Adams (October 1837) appears to be fictional.

b] that on Jane Alsop was probably carried out by the original Spring-heeled Jack, but may possibly have been perpetrated by an East End imitator of the original Jack.

c] that on Lucy Scales was almost certainly carried out by the person(s) responsible for [b].

d] that on Mr Ashworth’s servant may have been carried out by the person(s) responsible for [b] and [c], though there is no evidence to prove that it was, and it could equally have been the work of a lesser imitator.

e] that on Maria Davis (November 1845) appears to be fictional.

f] those that took place in Camberwell in 1872 were probably the work of a local hoaxer pretending to be a ghost.

g] those that occurred in Sheffield in 1873 were also probably the work of a local hoaxer pretending to be a ghost.

h] those that occurred in Aldershot in 1877 were probably pranks perpetrated by a young army officer.

i] that at Lincoln Arch in 1877 cannot be stated with complete certainty to have occurred, and it seems likely that the familiar account of it is coloured, at least. Other alleged appearances by Jack in the Lincoln/Caistor area in 1877 cannot be verified in the contemporary sources.

j] those that are supposed to have occurred in Liverpool in 1888 cannot be verified in contemporary sources.

k] those that are supposed to have occurred in Liverpool in 1904 appear to be tall tales that sprang up during an apparent poltergeist infestation in the area

Contemporary sources consulted

No contemporary manuscript sources concerning Spring-heeled Jack have yet been uncovered. Any unpublished correspondence addressed to the Lord Mayor at the beginning of the scare, in 1838, does not seem to have survived.

Lambeth-street police office appeared to be another possible source of first-hand reporting. Unfortunately, enquiries revealed that contemporary police offices were under no legal obligation to keep records in 1838, that very few police office records survive for the period before 1870, and that the Lambeth-street records do not appear to be among them. That this loss is less important than it might have been is thanks to the court reporters of newspapers such as *The Times*, who attended each daily session and took copious shorthand notes. Nevertheless, some minor parts of the evidence heard may well have gone unrecorded, as is suggested by the occasional discovery in other papers of short passages from the original court reports excised by the sub-editors on the principal London dailies.

Finally, a preliminary trawl was made at what was then the Public Records Office (now the National Archives) for Metropolitan Police records from 1838 and War Office papers from 1877. Several classes were searched without success. The PRO's holdings are immense, however, and this is not to say that such papers do not exist in some less-than-obvious file somewhere.

My principal research efforts were therefore devoted to searching contemporary papers at the British Newspaper Library, Colindale. In addition, David Clarke generously

contributed his impressive collection of Sheffield sources and Mike Shoemaker of the International Fortean Organisation very kindly undertook American newspaper research on my behalf at the Library of Congress.

Most of the newspapers checked were singularly devoid of relevant material, but I do not pretend that my search was in any way exhaustive – nor that tired eyes, minuscule print and the near-total absence of headlines in the nineteenth century press may not have caused me to miss some stories that did find their way into print. Certainly, I remain convinced that there are still dozens, probably hundreds, of contemporary sources to be uncovered, and I would encourage future researchers to continue this work. In order to spare them the pain of duplicating my own research, I append a list of newspapers that have already been consulted by me or by one of my correspondents:

Baltimore News-Post 2 Jul-10 Aug 1951 [researched by Michael Shoemaker]
Baltimore Sun, 1 Jul-13 Aug 1951 [researched by Michael Shoemaker]
Berkshire Chronicle, Jan–3 Mar 1838
Berrow's Worcester Journal, 25 Oct-27 Nov 1845
Boston Evening Transcript, 24 Oct-14 Nov 1938 [researched by Michael Shoemaker]
Boston Post, 24 Oct-14 Nov 1938 [researched by Michael Shoemaker]
Bradford Daily Telegraph 14 Sept-21 Sept 1926
Camberwell & Peckham Times, Sept-Dec 1872
Camberwell, Peckham & Dulwich Express, 19 Oct-30 Nov 1872
Chelmsford Chronicle, Jan-Apr 1838
Chelmsford Essex Herald, Jan-Apr 1838
Chelmsford Essex Standard, Jan-Apr 1838
Cheshire Observer 5 Oct-19 Oct 1929
Chester Guardian 1 Oct-19 Oct 1929
Colchester Essex Times, Jan-Apr 1838
County Chronicle & Weekly Advertiser Jan-May 1838
Eastern Counties Herald 18 Sept-2 Oct 1845
Essex & Suffolk Times Jan-Apr 1838
The Examiner, Jan-May 1838
Greenwich, Woolwich & Deptford Gazette, Sept 1837-Apr 1838
Greenwich, Woolwich & Deptford Patriot, Sept 1837-Apr 1838
Illustrated London News, Sept 1845
Illustrated Police News, 1872; Feb-May 1877; Sept-Dec 1877

Ipswich Express and Essex & Suffolk Mercury, Sept 1845
Ipswich Journal, Sept-Oct 1845
Lincolnshire Echo, Oct-Dec 1877
Lincoln Gazette & Lincolnshire Times, Sept-Dec 1877
Liverpool Echo, 3-30 Sept 1888; 6-21 Nov 1888; Sept 1904; May 1967
Liverpool Mercury, 12-24 Sept 1904
Liverpool Post, 19-24 Sept 1904
Manchester Evening News, Jan-Mar 1886 [researched by Dave Clarke]
Manchester Guardian, Jan-Mar 1886 [researched by Dave Clarke]
Morning Chronicle, 23 Dec 1837-30 Apr 1838
Morning Herald, Jan-Apr 1838; 13-20 Nov 1845
Morning Post, 12-19 October 1837; Jan-Apr 1838; 19 Oct 1929
News of the World, Sept-Nov 1872; Sept 1904
North Devon Journal, 1 Apr 1847
Notes & Queries (all indexes)
The Observer, Jan-May 1838
Palmer's Index to The Times, October 1803-March 1804; 1837-1838; 1844-1846; 1877
Reading Mercury & Oxford Gazette, Jan-Apr 1838
St James's Chronicle, 30 Dec 1837-10 Mar 1838
Sheldrake's Aldershot & Sandhurst Military Gazette, Mar-Dec 1877
Springfield (Mass.) Daily Republican 24 Oct-14 Nov 1938
The Standard, Jan-Apr 1838
The Sun, Jan-Apr 1838
Surrey & Middlesex Standard, 16 Sept 1837-5 May 1838
The Times, Jan 1804, Dec 1837-May 1838, Sept 1877
Trewman's Exeter Flying Post, 13 Mar-10 Apr 1847
West Kent Guardian, Oct 1837-5 May 1838
Western Luminary, Mar-Apr 1847
Windsor & Eton Express, Sept 1837-10 Mar 1838
Woolmer's Exeter & Plymouth Gazette, 27 Feb-31 July 1847
The World, Apr 1877
Worcestershire Chronicle, Nov 1845
Worcestershire Guardian, Nov 1845
Worcestershire Herald 18 Oct-6 Dec 1845
Yorkshire Observer 14 Sept-21 Sept 1926

In addition to the above research, attempts were also made to locate relevant material at the Corporation of London Records Office, Tower Hamlets Local History Library, the Guildhall Library, the Greater London History Library, the Greater London Record Office and the London Library. With the exception of background material on a few of those who played minor roles in the story of Spring-heeled Jack, these archives yielded little fruitful information; again, however, I cannot pretend to have consulted every possible document in each. The following *were* searched:

Corporation of London Records Office

Common Hall minute book, Jan–May 1838

Court of Common Council minutes, 18 Jan–11 May 1838

Court of Aldermen minutes book, 8 Jan–8 May 1838

Tower Hamlets Local History Library

Bow Poor Book, 1851

(which shows John Alsop still resident at 1 Bearbinder Lane)

Cuttings files

Pamphlets

Street Directories

British Library

Catalogues

Greater London History Library

Catalogues

Shelved printed works under crime and police

Greater London Record Office

Name index under Alsop

Subject index under crime, police courts, Old Ford, coroners' records

Book and pamphlet catalogue under crime and police

Guildhall Library

Catalogue

Street Directories (on microfilm)

I have made several attempts over the years to locate three pamphlets concerning Spring-heeled Jack published in London in the first months of 1838. Copies of these pamphlets were at one time preserved in the British Library, but all three were destroyed by bombing during the Blitz. Enquiries both here in the UK and in the United States have so far failed to locate any collection holding duplicates. No other UK copyright library holds copies; nor are the pamphlets held in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, the John Rylands Library, Manchester, the Guildhall Library, or in any of the American locations listed in the National Union Catalogue.

Heather Creaton (ed), *A Bibliography of Printed Works on London History to 1939* (London, 1994), contributed nothing of interest, though of course some references to Jack contained in more general works probably lie concealed within its pages.

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Mike Dash, London, 2 April 2005