SAMPLE

The Dark Mysteries of Ballygally Castle

Northern Ireland's Haunted Hotel and the Locked Room of Lady Isobel

Aiden Nightfall

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The Dark Mysteries

This free sample contains the Introduction and Chapter 1. The complete book contains the full contents above.

Introduction

Ballygally Castle stands on the Antrim coast of Northern Ireland, at the head of Ballygally Bay, overlooking the Irish Sea. It is a seventeenth-century fortified house built in the Scottish style — steep roof, high walls five feet thick, corner turrets, and narrow slits for muskets. It was constructed in 1625 by James Shaw, a Scotsman from Greenock who had come to Ireland in 1606 to seek his fortune. He rented the land from Randal MacDonnell, the Catholic Earl of Antrim, for twenty-four pounds a year, and built a castle that would serve as a refuge for Protestants during the turbulent years of the Plantation of Ulster and the civil wars that followed. An inscription over the main entrance, still visible today, reads "Godis Providens is my Inheritans" — God's providence is my inheritance — in the Scots language of its builder.

Ballygally Castle is the only seventeenth-century building in Northern Ireland that is still in residence today. It has survived rebellion, capture, the decline of the Shaw family, changes of ownership, and conversion from a private fortress to a hotel. It has also earned a reputation as one of the most haunted places in Ireland — a reputation that, unlike many haunted locations, is embraced rather than denied by its current owners. The castle's hotel website acknowledges the ghosts. The Ghost Room, the locked chamber at the top of the castle where Lady Isobel Shaw was allegedly imprisoned, is preserved as a feature of the building rather than renovated away.

The most famous ghost at Ballygally is Lady Isobel Shaw, also referred to as Isabella Brisbane, the wife of James Shaw. According to the legend, James Shaw married Isabella only to produce an heir. When their son was born, he took the child and locked Isabella in a room at the top of the castle. In a desperate attempt to escape, she climbed out the window and fell — or jumped, or was pushed — to her death on the rocks below. Her ghost is said to wander the corridors of the castle, knocking on doors and appearing to guests. She is described as a friendly ghost — one that does not threaten or frighten but simply lets her presence be known.

The castle is also associated with other reported ghosts, including the spirit of a young girl named Harriet, the ghosts of children, and unexplained phenomena that have been experienced by guests and staff over decades of operation as a hotel. The consistency of the reports — from different witnesses, across different decades — gives the haunting a weight that few hotel ghost stories possess.

Ballygally Castle is one of the haunted and historically significant locations examined by the Dark Mysteries series around the world. Ballygally Castle

earns its place through sheer persistence: a haunted hotel whose guests and staff have reported the same unexplained phenomena from different witnesses across different decades. As throughout the series, this volume documents what is known, presents the evidence, explores the explanations, and acknowledges what remains unexplained. What follows is an attempt to separate what we know from what we believe, what is documented from what is imagined, and what can be explained from what — so far — cannot. The story of Ballygally Castle is a story about a building that has been continuously occupied for four hundred years, and about the ghosts that four centuries of habitation have left behind.

The castle's story is inseparable from the history of the Plantation of Ulster — the early seventeenth-century colonization of northern Ireland by Scottish and

English settlers, who built fortified houses like Ballygally to defend themselves against the dispossessed Irish population. The castle was attacked during the 1641 rebellion, when Irish Catholics rose up against the settlers, and not all of its inhabitants survived. This history of conflict and violence is embedded in the castle's thick stone walls, and it provides the broader context for the haunting — the ghosts of Ballygally may be the ghosts of the Plantation itself, the spirits of a turbulent period whose consequences continue to shape life in Northern Ireland four hundred years later.

What makes Ballygally Castle unusual among haunted hotels is the openness with which the haunting is acknowledged. The hotel's own website describes the ghosts. The Ghost Room is preserved and displayed. Staff members speak openly about their experiences. This is not a hotel that tolerates its ghosts reluctantly — it is a hotel that has made its ghosts part of its identity. Whether this reflects genuine belief, commercial calculation, or a combination of both, the result is a location where the haunting is not hidden but woven into the fabric of the place.

The Dark Mysteries series has examined haunted locations across the world, from the Amityville Horror in America to the Tower of London in Britain. Ballygally Castle occupies a distinctive place in this series because it is a haunted location that is still operating as a hotel — a place where ordinary people can stay the night, sleep in a room that may be haunted, and wake up to breakfast in a dining room where guests have reported seeing ghosts. This accessibility makes Ballygally Castle one of the most directly experienced hauntings in the series.

Chapter 1: What Happened Here?

Ballygally Castle is located in the village of Ballygally, County Antrim, on the northeast coast of Northern Ireland. It sits at the head of Ballygally Bay, nearly on the shore, with panoramic views across the Irish Sea. The Antrim coast is one of the most dramatic landscapes in Ireland — a stretch of cliffs, beaches, and headlands that includes the Giant's Causeway, the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, and the ruins of Dunluce Castle. The area is steeped in folklore and mythology, from the giant Fionn mac Cumhaill, who is said to have built the Causeway, to the Tuatha Dé Danann, the supernatural race of Irish mythology. In modern times, the area has become known as a filming location for Game of Thrones, adding another layer of narrative to an already story-rich landscape.

The castle itself is a striking structure. It was built in 1625 in the style of a

French château, with a Scottish architectural influence that reflects the origins of its builder. The building is rectangular, with steeply pitched roofs, corner turrets, dormer windows, and walls five feet thick. The walls are studded with narrow vertical slits — loopholes — through which muskets could be fired at advancing enemies. The construction reflects the turbulent period in which it was built: the Plantation of Ulster, during which English and Scottish settlers were given land confiscated from Irish chieftains, and the resulting conflict made fortified housing a necessity rather than a luxury.

An inscription over the main entrance, carved in stone, reads "Godis Providens is my Inheritans" — God's providence is my inheritance — in the Scots language. The inscription survives to this day, a direct link to the man who built the castle and the faith that sustained him. The stones used in the construction are themselves part of the castle's story: according to legend, some were taken from the ruins of Cairn Castle, a nearby ancient structure where the King of Antrim was said to have imprisoned his daughter Claovala to prevent her from marrying an unwelcome suitor. The legend says Claovala escaped — the first in a line of imprisoned women associated with the stones of Ballygally.

The pairing of the two women is also the oldest thing in the castle's story, and it deserves to be read as a unit. Claovala, the legendary daughter of the King of Antrim, escaped her prison; Isobel, the legendary wife of the builder, did not. Two imprisonments, two women, one set of stones, and opposite endings — the material of the building is the constant, the outcome is the variable. Whatever the factual status of either legend, the pairing tells us something about how the castle has been imagined for centuries: as a place where women are confined.

The Claovala story is a template that predates the castle itself — a folktale that was, in a sense, delivered with the building materials. A structure that arrives carrying a story about an imprisoned woman does not need to generate a new one; it needs only an occupant. Whether the Isobel legend grew from real events or grew to fit a vacancy the stones had already prepared, the castle has held the same myth in two hands for four hundred years, and no period of its history is without a version of it.

James Shaw was born in Greenock, Scotland, in approximately 1595. He came to Ireland in 1606, at the age of about eleven, seeking his fortune in the newly opened lands of the Plantation of Ulster. The Plantation was a systematic colonization of the province of Ulster, initiated by King James I, in which land confiscated from rebellious Irish chieftains was granted to English and Scottish settlers. Shaw received a sub-grant of land from the Earl of Antrim in 1613, and on this land he built Ballygally Castle twelve years later.

Shaw married Isabella Brisbane, a woman from Ayrshire in Scotland, and together they built the castle as a family home and a refuge. The castle's military features — the thick walls, the musket slits, the turrets — reflect the reality of life in seventeenth-century Ulster, where settlers lived under constant threat of attack from dispossessed Irish chieftains and their supporters. The castle served its intended purpose: during the 1641 rebellion, in which Irish Catholics rose up against the Protestant settlers, Ballygally Castle was captured by the "Tories" of Londonderry — a group of dispossessed Irish chieftains — but the inhabitants held their ground, though not all survived the bloody uprising.

James Shaw's personal life is less well documented than the construction of his castle. According to the legend that has been passed down through generations, Shaw married Isabella only to produce an heir. When their son was born, he took the child from Isabella and locked her in a room at the top of the castle — the room that is now known as the Ghost Room. The story of what happened next is the founding legend of the Ballygally haunting.

Ballygally Castle has been associated with ghostly phenomena for as long as it has been occupied. The first reports came from the Shaw family and their servants — the people who lived and worked in the castle and who experienced things they could not explain. These reports described unexplained sounds, visual apparitions, and the persistent sense of a presence in the upper rooms of the castle. The most specific and enduring of these reports concerned the ghost of a woman — Lady Isobel Shaw — who was said to walk the corridors and knock on the doors of guest rooms.

When the castle was converted into a hotel in the 1950s by the textile

millionaire Cyril Lord, the haunting became a public phenomenon. Guests who had no knowledge of the castle's history began reporting the same experiences as the family and servants who had lived there before. The knocking on doors, the footsteps in empty corridors, the apparition of a woman in the upper rooms — these reports continued, and the castle's reputation as one of the most haunted hotels in Ireland grew.

The current hotel management embraces the haunting rather than suppressing it. The Ghost Room is preserved and can be viewed by guests. The hotel's website and promotional materials acknowledge the ghosts. This openness is unusual — most hotels with ghost stories either ignore them or treat them as a minor curiosity. Ballygally Castle treats its ghosts as part of its identity, and this has contributed to the castle's reputation as a destination for those interested in the paranormal.

The Antrim coast setting also contributes to the castle's atmospheric character. The landscape is one of dramatic contrasts — cliffs and beaches, headlands and bays, ancient ruins and modern villages. The weather on the Antrim coast is famously changeable, with sudden storms, thick fog, and strong winds that can transform a calm seascape into a raging turmoil in minutes. The castle, sitting at the head of Ballygally Bay with the Irish Sea stretching out before it, is fully exposed to this weather. In winter, when the days are short and the nights are long, the castle must have felt — and may still feel — like a remote outpost at the edge of the world. The isolation and exposure of the site contribute to the psychological conditions in which the haunting is most often experienced.

The use of stones from the nearby Cairn Castle ruins in the construction of Ballygally is a detail that adds another layer to the castle's story. According to legend, Cairn Castle was built by the King of Antrim to confine his daughter Claovala from an unwelcome suitor. The daughter escaped, but the stones of her prison were reused to build Ballygally Castle, where another woman — Lady Isobel — would allegedly be confined. The coincidence — if it is a coincidence — gives the Ballygally story a mythic quality, as though the stones themselves carry the curse of imprisoned women from one generation to the next.

Whether the legend of Claovala is true or not, the reuse of stones from one building in the construction of another was a common practice in seventeenth-century Ireland, and the connection between the two stories of imprisonment — Claovala and Isobel — adds depth and resonance to the Ballygally haunting.

The conversion of Ballygally Castle from a private residence to a hotel in the 1950s was a turning point in the history of the haunting. Before the

conversion, the ghost stories were private — known to the families who lived in the castle and their servants, but not to the wider world. After the conversion, the stories became public, experienced by guests from all over the world and amplified by media coverage. The conversion also changed the physical character of the building — modern amenities were added, rooms were refurbished, and the castle became a more comfortable place to stay. But the oldest part of the castle, where the most intense paranormal experiences are reported, was preserved, and the Ghost Room was kept in its original state.

The decision to preserve the oldest parts while modernizing the rest created a contrast within the building — modern comfort alongside ancient stone — that mirrors the contrast between the ordinary and the paranormal that defines the Ballygally experience.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aiden Nightfall writes at the intersection of horror, mystery, and history. His Dark Mysteries series investigates supernatural folklore across cultures -- from the water spirits of Morocco to the haunted fortresses of Eastern Europe -- asking not whether the stories are true, but why they persist.

Each book combines archival research, on-the-ground reporting, and psychological analysis to separate the myth from the mechanism without losing the atmosphere that makes the stories worth telling. His editorial standard is historical accuracy: dates verified, sources cross-referenced, nothing embellished.

He writes in the hours after midnight, when the research feels closer.