

## WHO WAS JACK? *By Alan Fleming*

This is not a story about the infamous Jack The Ripper but another Jack who caused havoc in London and other places in England. This character plagued the streets of London in Victorian times. One of the earliest sightings of him was on Barnes Common, which at the time was an eerie, isolated piece of country on the south of the Thames. It wasn't a safe place at the best of times as thieves flourished there; it was a place to avoid. Many travellers reckless enough to cross the common during the hours of darkness were often attacked and robbed.

One evening in September, 1837, a man was on his way home from work, deciding to risk a short cut across the common. As he passed the railings of the cemetery, a figure suddenly jumped over the railings as if thrust from a launch pad and landed in front of him. The man shook with fright when he saw that the mysterious figure had pointed ears, glowing eyes, and a large pointed nose. He didn't hang about and ran away as fast as his legs would carry him. This creature became known as Spring Heeled Jack because of the great heights he is said to have been able to leap. A couple of nights after that, three girls bumped into the same sinister figure. Again, he made his appearance by jumping high over the railings of the cemetery, but on this occasion, he displayed an element of violent behaviour. One of the girls had her coat ripped by him, but managed to flee, followed by one of her screaming companions. The remaining member of the trio tried to scream as the unearthly looking creature grabbed at her breasts, then began to tear her clothes off. The victim was later found unconscious at the site of the attack by a policeman. During the following month the leaping horror struck again - this time he appeared in Cut-Throat Lane, Clapham Common.

A young servant girl named Mary Stevens had been visiting her parents in Battersea and was on her way back to her employer's home on Lavender Hill. As she walked through the entrance of Cut-Throat Lane, a tall figure dressed in black jumped out of the darkness and threw his arms around her, holding her in a vice-like embrace. Before she could scream, the stranger kissed her face, grabbed her breasts, he then let out a blood curdling laugh. The girl managed to scream and he released her and ran off into the darkness. A number of men hurried to the distressed girl, and after calming her down, they listened to her account of the attack. The men then immediately searched the neighbourhood for the strange attacker, but without success. The girl was simply dismissed as having an overactive imagination. But on the following night, the attacker appeared again, not a stone's throw from the house where the girl worked. That night, her demonic attacker jumped out of the darkness and into the path of a carriage. The horses pulling the carriage bolted in fright and a crash ensued injuring the coachman. It is said the attacker seemed to defy gravity as he jumped easily over a nine-foot-high wall.

In February 1838, 18-year-old Lucy Scales and her sister Margaret were on their way home at 8.30 p.m. after a visit to their brother's house in the Lime House. Lucy, being the bigger of the two, impatiently marched ahead of her dawdling sister as they passed the entrance leading to Green Dragon Alley. Suddenly, the figure of Spring-Heeled Jack leapt out of the darkness and exhaled a jet of blue flames from his mouth that blasted Lucy's face. The young girl screamed and fell to the floor, unable to see, and had a fit. Jack jumped high over his victim and her sister and landed on the roof of a house. From there he disappeared into the night.

A pattern was emerging as Jack seemed to like molesting and terrifying young girls. His next attack took place two days after the last one and was also on an 18-year-old girl. Her name was Jane Alsop. Jane's house was situated in Bear Hind Lane, a quiet back street in Bow, where she lived with her father and two sisters. She was spending the evening reading, when suddenly, just before nine o'clock, the door bell sounded. Jane answered the door and outside in the shadows stood a caped man. He said he was a policeman. "Have you got a light," he said, "We've caught Spring-Heeled Jack in the lane."

Jane went for a candle and gave it to the man; she then

realised her mistake. The light from the candle illuminated the face of the man purporting to be an officer of the law. It was Jack, and he grinned as he studied the girl's shocked look. Before she could make a move he pursed his lips and spurted out a cone of phosphorescent gas which partially blinded the teenager, then grabbed the girl and started to tear at her clothes. Jane punched his big nose and managed to give him the slip. But the furious Jack ran after her and stopped her from getting back in the house by clutching her hair. His claw like hands sadistically scraped her face and neck. Jane's screams alerted her sisters, who came running out of the house. The sisters managed to drag Jane from the caped attacker. The three sisters retreated indoors with Jack in pursuit a couple of feet behind them. In the nick of time the door was slammed in Jack's face.

When Jane was quizzed by the police about the assailant's appearance, she described a very unusual person. She said: "He wore a large helmet, and a tight-fitting costume that felt like oilskin. But the cape was just like the ones worn by policemen. His hands were as cold as ice, and like powerful claws. But the most frightening thing about him was his eyes. They shone like balls of fire." Jack's exploits were frightening the people and they decided to organise vigilante patrols. Even the 70 year old Duke of Wellington read of Jack's string of attacks in The Times and decided to enter the hunt. Armed with two pistols, he mounted his horse and rode off into the night to track down the leaping villain. However he was not successful and gave up the chase.

A week after the attack on Jane Alsop, Jack called at a house in Turner Street, off Commercial Road. A servant boy answered the door, and Jack, shielding half of his face with his cloak as he stood in the shadows, asked the boy in a gruff voice if he could talk to the master of the house. The youngster was turning, about to call for the master, a Mr Ashworth, when Jack made the mistake of moving out of the shade into the lamplight. The boy recoiled in horror when he saw that the caller had bright orange eyes. As he stood there in a state of shock, the boy noticed two other details about the mysterious caller; he had claws for hands, and under his cloak, an intricate embroidered design that resembled a coat of arms, and below this design, the letter 'W' was also embroidered in gold. The boy had heard all the spine-chilling rumours of Jack's eyes of Hell. He let out a terrific scream, and within seconds, every one was out onto the street. Jack waved his fist at the boy, then rocketed over the roofs of Commercial Road.

When the boy regained his senses, he was questioned by the police about his hair-raising encounter. The police wondered what the significance of the embroidered 'W' was, and some speculated that the letter was the initial of the Marquis of Waterford. He was a notorious prankster of the time and a good athlete but could not jump 20 feet in the air like Jack. However, the Marquis died in 1859 and the sightings still poured in. It was in August 1877, forty years after his debut on Barnes Common, Jumping Jack turned up unexpectedly one moonlit night at an army camp in Aldershot for what would be the most daring feat in his infamous career.

On that night, Private John Reagan was standing in his sentry box, guarding the powder magazine, when he heard what he later described as "the shrill scraping sound of something metallic" being dragged down the nearby road. Reagan cocked his rifle and stepped from his box towards the source of the sound. There was nobody to be seen on the road and he returned to his post. As he reached the sentry box, he felt the clammy ice-cold touch of a hand on his cheek. He screamed with fright, and the other sentry left his box and came charging over to Reagan, toting his rifle. As the sentries met, Spring-Heeled Jack suddenly appeared.

His helmet glinted in the moonlight. He jumped into the air, clearing the heads of the soldiers by ten feet. He landed behind them, and stood there, sneering, waiting for the soldiers to make the next move. Reagan's rifle was still cocked. He raised it at the creature and challenged it in a nervous voice, saying, "Who goes there?" After a nerve-wracking pause of silence, Jack hurdled towards the soldiers. Reagan opened fire, but his rifle was only loaded

with blanks, instead of scaring Jack off, it only angered him. Jack blew a blast of blue flames at the sentry, dazzling him, then sprang twenty feet into the air, laughing. The two sentries quite understandably ran off and deserted their posts.

Soon after that incident, Jack turned up in Lincolnshire one evening, where he shattered the peace of villagers by leaping over thatched cottages wearing a sheepskin. A mob of yokels confronted the laughing Jack and blasted him with shotguns at point-blank range, but their firepower had no effect on him whatsoever. When the buckshot hit Jack, it sounded as if it was hitting a metal bucket. In January 1879, a man was driving his cart home from Woodcote, in Shropshire, at night. As he crossed a bridge on the Birmingham and Liverpool Canal, a black, hideous looking creature with large luminous eyes leapt out of a tree and landed on the horse's back. The man tried to knock the creature off the horse with his whip, but the creature managed to hold on to the frightened animal, which broke into a mad gallop. When the man got the cart back under control the black bug-eyed 'thing' darted into the air and disappeared into the trees.

In September 1904, the Jumping Jack turned up in Liverpool, where he was seen hurtling down from the top of a water tank. It was in the Everton district of Liverpool where Jack gave a characteristic performance. One night he was seen clinging to the steeple of St Francis Xavier's in Salisbury Street and crowds soon gathered to watch him. Jack jumped from the steeple and landed somewhere behind a row of houses. The mob ran to see where he had landed and a rumour spread that he had killed himself. The people were then startled when a helmeted figure in white suddenly ran down the street towards them. As several women in the crowd screamed, Jack lifted his arms and flew over William Henry Street. After that night, Jack made himself scarce for 16 years.

His next appearance was late one evening in 1920. A man dressed in a 'radiant-white costume' was seen by scores of witnesses in Warrington's Horse Market Street. He was jumping back and forth from the pavements to the rooftops. He finally cleared the town's Central Railway Station in one mighty leap and was never seen in the north of England again. In 1948, the last recorded sighting of a sinister leaping figure took place at Monmouth, South Wales. Locals who saw a 'strange looking man' leaping over a stream near Watery Lane surmised that he was the ghost of a man who had drowned in the stream. But those who were later unfortunate enough to encounter the demon at close quarters swore he was too solid to be a phantom.

Who or What was Spring-Heeled Jack? Many strange theories have been advanced to answer this question. Some said he was an insane acrobatic fire eater, while others believed him to be a dressed-up kangaroo, or a mad inventor who had built an anti-gravity device. The descriptions of Spring-Heeled Jack's fiery gaze seem to indicate that he had retro-reflective eyes, similar to a cat's, which would suggest that he was ideally suited to a nocturnal environment. His fire-breathing isn't easily explained. Perhaps what Jack really breathed into his victim's eyes was not real fire (for none of those attacked suffered burns, nor did the 'fire' ever singe a single hair), but a type of odorous phosphor. This isn't as far-fetched as it seems. Many species of insect and marine life are endowed with bioluminescence, which means that they can radiate light through the action of certain compounds in their metabolism. One example that comes to mind is the glow worm, and another the Fire Fly. Whatever he was, he was certainly around for a long time, in fact over a period of 111 years. Is he still around perhaps we will never know but one thing for sure be very wary if you are asked to go to Clapham, Barnes, Bow or Lime House late at night.

Alan Fleming is a founder member of Taxi Drivers & Owners Legal Protection Ltd. He says: "If you are looking for the best legal representation in the trade, perhaps you may consider joining our new legal insurance scheme, which is run by me and Dave Cohen. Dave can be contacted on 07956 894 701, I can be contacted on 07831 092 123."