

“Dracula is a Yorkshireman and always will be”



The above is a quote from Kevin Barrand, Resort Officer for the Borough of Whitby in an article featured in *The Whitby Gazette* of 11th September 2001. The occasion which prompted this bold claim? It was in response to a challenge

from the Scottish Tourist Board, who had levelled accusations at the Yorkshire authorities “of luring tourists to Whitby with “blatant lies” about [Whitby] being Dracula’s home town.”¹ It was an accusation which sparked outrage in the North Yorkshire community, and led to a row being broadcast on a Big Breakfast TV debate, with the audience invited to choose between the most likely literary location for the Count: Whitby or Aberdeen.

Conversely, it was only around the time of the mid-80s when Whitby tourism began to exploit its literary connection with the famous novel. In Keighley’s 1957

¹ Atkins, Duncan, “Staking a Claim to Be at the Heart of a Vampire Legend” in *Whitby Gazette*, 11th September 2001, p. 6

*Whitby Writers: Writers of Whitby and District 1867-1949*², Keighley dedicated three-and-a-half pages of panegyric to local (and now largely forgotten) author Mary Linskill, whilst only crediting Stoker's entry with a brief fourteen line entry in her text. The details she provided on Stoker, it should be noted, mainly concentrated on the local folkloric inspiration featured in the novel, reducing Stoker's classic text to the appellation of "a weird story"³

As recently as 1993, local author White notes in his *A History of Whitby*⁴:

A few years ago Bram Stoker was largely forgotten. His classic horror story *Dracula*, though still in print, was little considered and in Whitby hardly anyone had heard of it. However, a remake of the film and the recognition that vampires are good for tourism led to the opening of 'The Dracula Experience' in 1986 on Marine Parade,...⁵

² Keighley, Marion, *Whitby Writers: Writers of Whitby and District, 1867-1949* (Whitby: Horne & Son Limited, 1957)

³ *Ibid.*, p. 194

⁴ White, Andrew, *A History of Whitby* (Chichester, West Sussex: Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 2nd edition, 2004)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163

A good hunt through the archives in the town's public library local history section revealed the earliest mention of Dracula as a famous visitor to the town in a 1977 article from local paper, the *Evening Gazette*⁶. To be fair, however, the article only referred to the vampire in passing, as an introduction to a tale of ghostly goings-on at a local residence.

There was a photograph featured in a different article of the man who claimed to be the “first Dracula”⁷. By this, he meant “the first man to dress up as Dracula and stand looking brooding in front of the ruins of the Abbey”. Geoffrey Beresford, of Hammersmith, London, visited in 1977 with the Dracula Society and



Commemorative Stoker Portrait and plaque presented by the Dracula Society to The Royal Hotel, Whitby, on the occasion of their visit in 1977

⁶ Anon., “Where Dracula Once Stood...” in *Evening Gazette*, October 22nd 1977, pp. 1-2

⁷ Anon., “Gothic Horror Fans Flock Here” in *Whitby Gazette*, 8th November 2005, p. 12

states “he thinks he can safely lay claim to have unwittingly been the very first goth in the town.”⁸

It was interesting to note that the local reference library had originally filed everything pertaining to Dracula under the generic heading of “ghosts” before determining at some point towards the end of the nineties, that Dracula had reached such a height of popularity in the town, that it merited a reference section all of its own.



“The Baron” of Whitby

Nowadays, it’s difficult to imagine Whitby without the macabre reputation which Stoker’s novel endows it with. The shops are full of Dracula related merchandise. There is a Dracula tour around the key localities

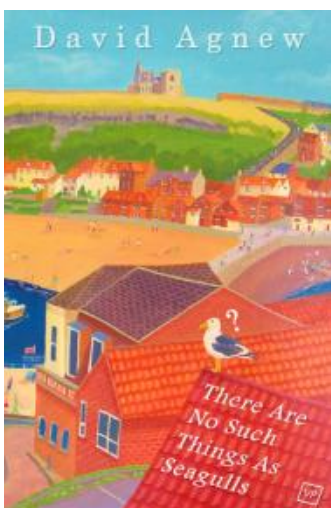
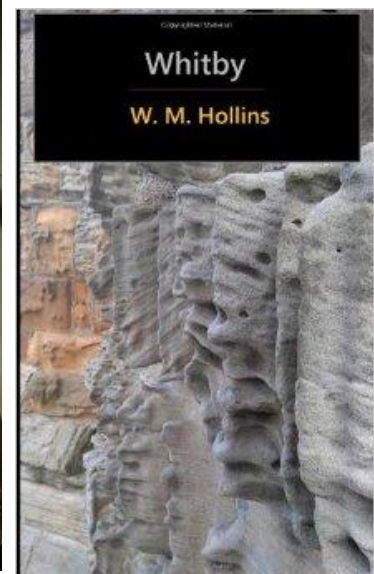
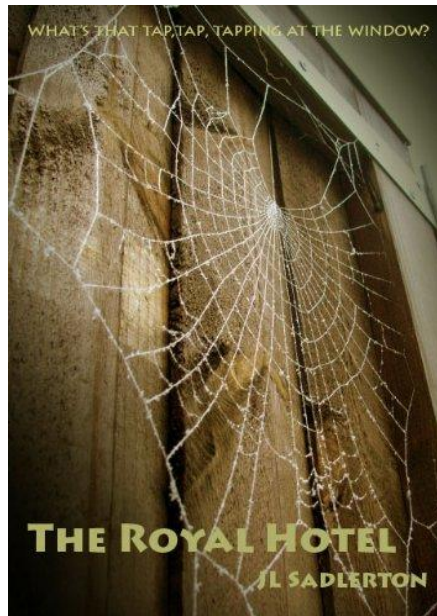
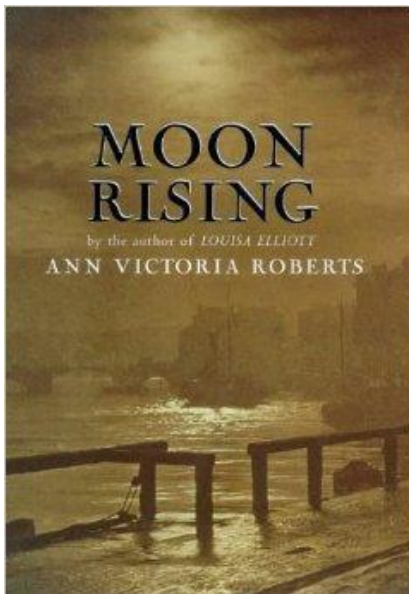
featured in the novel, led by a man who names himself “The Baron”, and dresses up in gothic clothing; in addition to “The Dracula Experience” aimed at terrifying the hapless tourist.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12



“The Dracula Experience”,
Marine Parade, Whitby

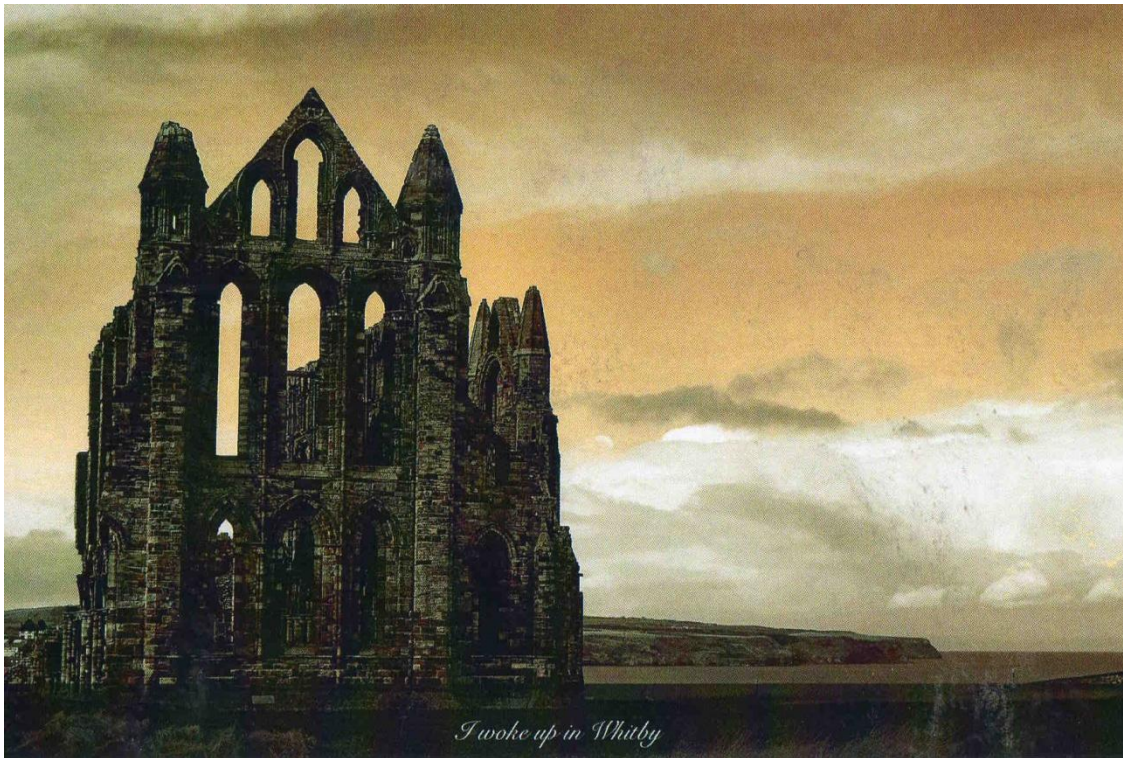
There has been a host of Dracula-inspired literature, including plays, collections of poetry, novels, crime thrillers and a very strange travelogue-cum-fantasy, which didn't seem to know quite what it was trying to be.



*A selection of just some of the Dracula-
inspired texts currently available, including*

Agnew's poetry collection (Left):

*“I can still climb the steps
to Whitby Abbey.
I suspect Count Dracula
led a less than healthy lifestyle;
if he could do it, so can I” (From “199 Steps”)*



Postcard sold popularly in the town

Yet, Whitby might be a contender for the “as-yet-uncreated accolade of Unesco Halloween Town”⁹, and the town is clearly quite willing to capitalise on its links with the famous vampire; however, there is a certain section of the community who seem to feel slightly embarrassed about the connection. When questioned in the local Whitby Literary & Philosophical Society library, the helpful assistant pulled a face and directed me away from what is arguably Whitby’s most famous work of literature towards the works of an obscure local playwright. Her argument was, “you can read about Dracula anywhere”.

⁹ Barnett, David, “In Praise of Whitby: Britain’s Spookiest Town” in *The Guardian*, 30th October 2008 (<http://www.guardian.com/booksblog/2009/oct/29/whitby-britains-spookiest-town.html> (accessed: 8th April 2015))

It's an interesting paradox and one which recalls the roots of Gothic literature itself. Traditionally a low-brow form of entertainment, offering a cheap thrill to the masses, the bi-annual influx of Goths into the town, celebrating all things Dracula-related must seem of questionable credibility to those learned types at the Lit & Phil Society. However, there's no arguing with the economic advantages the goths bring; and it's a "bonus"¹⁰ (their description of "Goth Weekend") the town isn't prepared to give up easily. With this in view, perhaps one had better not mention the outcome of the TV debate in response to the Scottish Tourist Board's accusations against the town of Whitby. When invited to vote on which town was the most likely literary location for the Count, Whitby or Aberdeen, "the Scots landed a shock victory."¹¹ In terms of North Yorkshire tourism, the less said about that the better.

Val Derbyshire

¹⁰ Anon., "Gothic Horror Fans Flock Here" in *Whitby Gazette*, 8th November 2005, p. 12

¹¹ Atkins, p. 6