

A grizzly end for a brutal killer



All old pubs tend to have a colourful history, but when Belinda Hart, 34, took over the medieval Cat Inn, she found the past was far from dead and buried



The ghostly Cat Inn in West Hoathly, Sussex

Hanged man's revenge

Yawning, I looked around the empty bar. It was midnight and the place was all locked up. It was the end of my first week as the live-in manageress of The Cat Inn, a medieval pub in the village of West Hoathly, Sussex.

My partner Sam was the chef and, together with my two-year-old son Morgan, we hoped the pub would

soon feel like home. But as I climbed upstairs to bed, a shiver went down my spine. I could feel someone's eyes boring into my back. 'Don't be silly,' I told myself. I knew I'd been alone in the bar. But as I hurried upstairs it felt like I was being chased.

I thought I'd made it safely to the top, but something pushed down on my chest. My throat was tight, and I could barely breathe. Wheezing and choking, I managed to get to the bedroom. Immediately the feeling

stopped. My heart was thudding and my hands were shaking. One thing was for sure – there was something terribly wrong.

The first time I laid eyes on The Cat Inn, it had been a dark, stormy, wintery afternoon. I just knew there was something eerie about the place.

The fact that the pub was opposite an old church and cemetery didn't help. Feeling uncomfortable, I'd quickly driven off.

But something made me pluck up the courage to go back and meet the new owner, Alistair.

The bar area smelt musty and badly needed painting. But I loved the low, oak-beamed ceilings and huge fireplace. Sam fell in love with it, too, so I ignored my gut instincts and accepted the job.

But from the very first day it felt like someone was spying on us. 'It's as if we're not alone,' said Sam.

What happened on the stairs had freaked me out,

but I knew I just had to get on with it.

The pub was repainted and the carpets replaced. It soon began to feel much more homely.

But then even more weird things started to happen to us. Sam and I would be woken up at night by the sound of crashing glass.

Fearing burglars, we'd go downstairs to find glasses and decorative plates smashed to pieces on the bar floor.

No matter how high up or how carefully we'd placed them, they still crashed down. We were beginning to think that this was the work of something inhuman.

And sure enough, not long afterwards we started hearing the rumours...

'In the 18th century, there was a brutal murder at The Royal Oak pub, 15 miles away,' a customer started to explain. 'The poor landlady and her husband were viciously hacked to death.' The murderer had fled to our pub on the run from the police.

But the customers were horrified and turned him in. He was eventually sentenced and hanged for the murders.

'It's said by some that he's still angry at anyone linked to this pub and wants retribution,' she finished. My blood ran cold. Could this be more than an old wives' tale?

My only consolation was that Morgan seemed to have settled in OK. Then one day our babysitter took me to one side. 'Morgan was about to use the toilet but said he

Wivelsfield, Sussex, and heard Miles boast of rising profits. It sparked his plan for the murderous robbery.

Laden with valuables stolen from The Oak, Harris fled, only stopping to rest once he'd reached The Cat Inn, some 15 miles away. But as he drank, a posse descended. Harris managed to slip up the chimney, but unluckily, the fire was lit and his choking alerted his pursuers. It was lit innocently, but Harris may have thought one of The Cat's punters had betrayed him. Harris was hanged soon afterwards. His chained, rotting body was left dangling outside The Oak – a grisly warning to others with murder in mind.

With help from the West Sussex County Library Service.

Harris's hideout



Historical facts

Fate & Fortune decided to investigate the tale of the vengeful killer lurking at The Cat Inn. Here's what we found

On 26 May 1734, a horrified passer-by found landlord Richard Miles lying by The Royal Oak's stable with his throat sliced. His wife was found in bed and her throat had been slashed, too. The third victim was an unnamed maid, who had rushed to her boss's aid. The pub had been ransacked.

Before he died Miles muttered the name of his attacker: Jacob Harris, a local pedlar. Harris had spent the previous night at The Royal Oak in

couldn't because a lady was already there. But I couldn't see anyone,' she told me.

My stomach tightened. Had Morgan seen a ghost? Over the next months we felt these eerie presences more and more, especially near the fireplace. Often, as soon as the last punter left the pub each night, it turned icy cold. Sam and I would rush upstairs as soon as we could.

Whenever we discussed the goings-on, we felt like someone was listening to us and only felt right talking outside.

It was the same whenever we kissed or cuddled. We had this strong sense of dread as if someone begrudged us showing the slightest affection.

But the place really turned into a madhouse when builders started renovating the storage room next to the bathroom. At night we started hearing sinister scraping sounds coming from the room – scratch, scratch, scratch, like something trying to scabble its way out of a closed space.

I hid under the duvet as Sam went to investigate. But as soon as he looked, the

noises stopped, only to start again just minutes later.

After four sleepless nights, I'd reached breaking point. 'I can't live here any more,' I told Sam. But the owner urged us to stay, and I loved my job, so we decided to get a medium in as a last-chance solution. What did we have to lose?

Someone recommended a lady called Pat Putt. She wasn't local, so knew nothing of the inn's history. As she was looking round she had heart palpitations near the fireplace.

'I can see a man of big build, about six feet tall. He's full of anger, has an axe and committed murder. He was alive around 1725,' she said.

'The killing didn't take place here, but nearby. This is where he fled to and was captured. He wants revenge.'

I gasped. It had to be the murderer of The Royal Oak's owners she was tuning into. Yet we hadn't told Pat a thing!

We listened transfixed as she revealed he had tried to hide in our fireplace to escape the hangman's noose. It explained everything.

On Pat's advice we kept a bible in our bedroom and put a picture of Christ in Morgan's bedroom. The atmosphere upstairs did seem to improve and the noises stopped.

But two months later, I was woken by a shadowy figure in the bedroom doorway. It was a man about six feet tall,

wearing a long cape. I was scared witless, but he vanished as quickly as he'd appeared. Petrified, I shook Sam awake. He was as scared as me when I described what I'd seen.

Not long after, Paul, a musician friend, was punched in the stomach while sitting in the bar. There was nobody near him when it happened.

And a few months ago, Morgan even told me that the storage room was full of skeletons and there was a man hanging from the ceiling!

Pat has recently returned and exorcised the place, so I'm hoping things will settle down now. I know most people would move out but I love my job, Morgan's happy, and none of us have been physically harmed.

I don't think the anger Pat feels in the house is directed at us, so we'll be staying as long as its inhabitant will have us.

I can see why the murderer's spirit would be angry that the pub regulars turned him in. I just hope he understands we're from the 21st century and want to live in peace.

My night at The Cat Inn

Would you stay at the spooky Cat Inn? We sent our reporter Jean Jollands to see if she could survive a night in the haunted pub



The challenge is for medium Pat and me to spend the night next to the fireplace where the murderer sought refuge. But as last orders are called and customers file out, I wish I could leave, too.

The temperature drops as landlady Belinda hurriedly retires upstairs and Pat and I huddle into sleeping bags. Suddenly I hear a banging sound. Like the dull thud of fists against a wall. It's just the boiler, I tell myself. But then I feel it. Hands clawing desperately at my legs. 'Save me Pat!' I shriek, terrified. It's

only then I feel the swish of a fluffy tail. My ghostly pursuer turns out to be the family cat, Toulouse. Luckily, Pat sees the funny side.

I sleep fitfully, but Pat says in the thick of night, the vengeful killer appeared. Next to him, sitting in a chair, were the mummified remains of a woman.

Belinda seems relieved we're both still in one piece. But I can't wait to leave. One night here was one too many.

You can contact Pat Putt on 01268-784082 or visit www.ankhara.com