**Moot Hall’s self-opening door.**

Access from Moot Hall’s reception area to the downstairs exhibition room is via an oak door. The door is fitted with a cast iron drop-latch and, being a fire door it also has a pneumatic closer fitted, which shuts the door in the event of the fire alarm going off.

The door is also wired into the intruder alarm system in such a way that, when leaving the building, one has to ensure that this door is properly shut – otherwise, when one exits the building’s main door, the intruder alarm will be set off.

One windy night, sometime in the 2000s (sadly, I never thought to record the date!) Moot Hall’s alarm went off at 1am. As I live right next door, I was able to get there within about a minute. I unlocked Moot’s main entrance door, went into the reception room and immediately saw why the alarm had gone off – the door to the exhibition room was ajar. (Note; This had happened a few times before on windy days.)

I went to the alarm control, cancelled the fault, reset the alarm and left the building, making sure that the exhibition door was firmly closed. When I closed the main entrance door, the alarm indeed played the little jingle which told me the alarm was now set and all was well. I went back to bed.

At 2am – on the dot - the Moot Hall alarm went off again. When I went into the building, I was very puzzled to find the door to the exhibition room ajar. I again cancelled the alarm, reset it, went into reception, closed the door to the exhibition room but, this time, I then grasped the door handle and rattled the door, to double-check that it was securely closed. I went out of the main entrance, closed that door, and the ‘all ok’ alarm jingle played.

At exactly 3am, the Moot Hall alarm went off again. On entering the reception room, I was astonished to find the door to the exhibition room was, again, ajar. I cancelled the fault on the alarm but did not turn the alarm back on, as I was getting fed up of being woken up!

The next day, I went to investigate - perhaps there was some fault with the drop-latch? I found nothing wrong with it; when the door was closed, the latch dropped properly and securely into the keep on the frame.

Thinking that perhaps the door’s apparent self opening might have something to do with the wind, I tried shutting the door with the latch only just engaged in the top of the keep. I then gently vibrated the door, as might happen if air currents inside the building were causing a draft and/or suction on the door’s surface. Result – the latch dropped down deeper into the keep. I tried vibrating the door more energetically and, again, the latch just dropped down deep into the keep. Nothing I could do to the door would make the latch move upwards, let alone out of the keep.

It was still very windy outside but I realised that there was actually *no* draught anywhere near this door.

A number of weeks later, the alarm went off on a windy day. Again, when I entered the building, I found this same door ajar.

I could not think of any rational explanation – it could not be that the last person who left the building failed to shut this door properly, otherwise the intruder alarm would have been activated as soon as they left the building – because shutting the main door is the final alarm-setting trigger.

It clearly had nothing to do with drafts, as there were none in the vicinity of that door.

It could not be that the drop-latch had not been properly engaged because the latch is heavy and it’s default is to drop deep into its keep. Even if it hadn’t been fully engaged to start with, any movement of the door causes the latch to drop.

I found no way to cause the latch to move upwards and out of its keep, other than by using the thumb-press designed for that purpose.

I wondered whether some small animal could be causing the latch to be operated – we knew that we had bats in the building. So I measured just how much weight needs to be exerted on the thumb-press in order to lift the latch out of its keep. It required 1.25kg. The bats in Moot Hall are Pipistrelles, which (depending on the exact species) weigh only 4 – 16 grams. So it couldn’t be the bats opening the latch. A field mouse, climbing up the door, perhaps? But field mice only weigh about 19 grams. We had never found any evidence of rodents being in the building but could perhaps a rat be getting in somewhere? But even if that were the case, the biggest UK rats are black rats and they weigh a maximum of 340 grams – still far to light to exert the required 1.25kg of pressure on the latch. A *giant* rat, perhaps? That might indeed be heavy enough but it would need a sizeable hole to get into the building and no such holes have ever been found. But anyway - a giant rat that climbs up the same door and operates the latch at 1am, 2am and 3am - the idea is absurd.

Plus, there is one other curious factor. The door is fitted with a pneumatic closer. So, even when one manually opens the drop-latch, unless one pushes the door, it stays where it is, it does not swing ajar.

Totally baffled, and tired of being disturbed by the alarm on windy days, I fitted a small brass bolt to the reception room side of the offending door and instructed all staff to ensure that they engaged the bolt before exiting the building. We have had no intruder alarm activations triggered by that door since then.

We were then approached by a Southern Paranormal Investigation group, asking if they could carry out an investigation at Moot Hall. We decided to permit this. Members of the PI group were not told where they would be investigating – they travelled from all over southern England and met up with their group’s secretary at Toddington Services on the M1 in Bedfordshire. From there, they followed the organiser, in the dark, to Elstow and Moot Hall. (Note. I had not yet told the organiser anything about our unexplained door openings.) As soon as one of the members of the PI group entered through the door into the exhibition room, she declared ‘You have a little boy in here.’ I was sceptical but intrigued. Later in the evening, she said she had sensed a name for the boy – Thomas Cox.

There were so many things that the Southern Paranormal group detected that night which tied in with the known history of the place (plus with one bit of history that I’d previously known nothing about) that I was intrigued enough to carry out some follow-up research of my own. The next day, I checked the Elstow Parish registers, looking for anyone named Thomas Cox.

I found that, for hundreds of years, there were no families in Elstow with the surname Cox. Then, in the 1700s, two men, who may well have been brothers, moved to Elstow. One was named Thomas, one named John. Both men appear as members of the ‘homeage’ (or ‘jury’) on the Elstow Manor Court roll of 1736.

On 19th May 1736, Thomas Cox baptised a son, who he and his wife Elizabeth called Thomas. The boy died four years later and was buried at Elstow on 8th April 1740.

John Cox also had a wife named Elizabeth, and they also had a son named Thomas. This boy may have been already alive when the family moved to Elstow, as there is no Elstow baptism record for him. Or he may have been baptised elsewhere. That boy Thomas also died in childhood and was buried at Elstow on 5th June 1752. In the absence of a baptismal record, we do not know how old he was. Is this all just co-incidence?

During two different Paranormal Investigations in 2018, a boy communicated with the investigators. He told them that his name was Thomas Cox and that he was 5 years old.

Clive Arnold,

Curator Moot Hall

