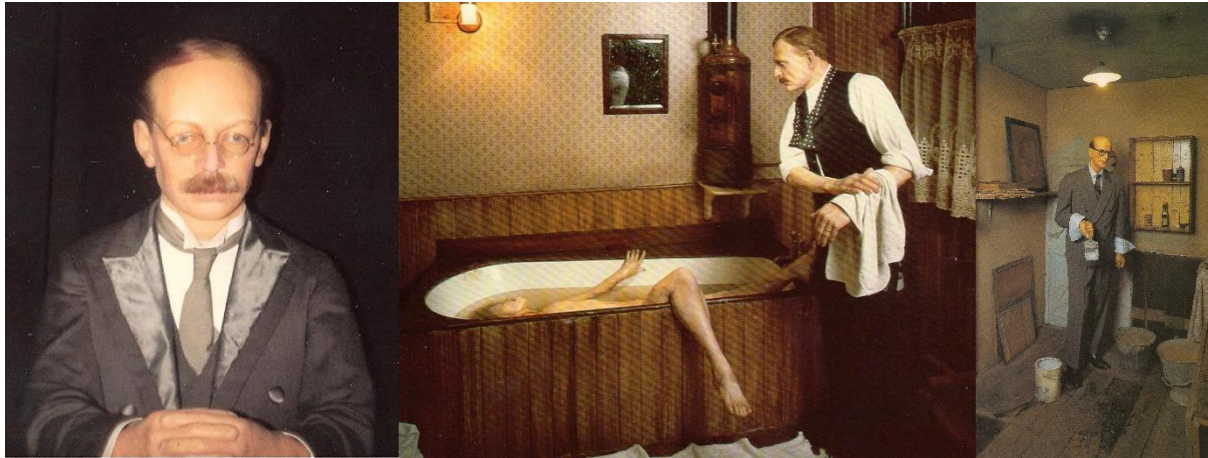


Reminiscing on the Creepiness of Waxworks Museums

Shôn Ellerton, January 2, 2020

From the Chamber of Horrors to the London Dungeon, not much can beat the eeriness and spookiness of waxworks museums, but their heydays are gone.



Some years ago, I went back to London to re-visit some of my old haunts I frequented as a young lad back in the 80s. On one of those days, I planned to visit the two most infamous and macabre museums in London, at least, that I know of; the [London Dungeon](#), and the [Chamber of Horrors](#) at Madame Tussauds. They are both wax museums and, if you've ever been to a wax museum before, you may recall the eeriness of what it's like to be in one. Sadly, they have both turned into Disneyesque, overcrowded, over-marketed and commercialised tourist attractions having lost that dark mystique which they once had.

The Chamber of Horrors

[Madame Tussauds](#) is known to produce the finest waxworks effigies of world famous (and infamous) characters in our history. Many are very real-looking indeed, some of those looking indistinguishable from a real person. Some are 'not quite right' which make them even more creepy, a phenomenon known as the [uncanny valley](#). But the star attraction at Madame Tussauds has always been the Chamber of Horrors, an underground section where notorious murderers and villains resided. There were ample warnings posted on the outside for those with young children or those of a nervous disposition who could bypass the section.

I remember my father taking me through the Chamber of Horrors during the early 1980s. It was a very quiet day at Madame Tussauds which made the trip in the Chamber of Horrors that much scarier. I remember a labyrinth of exhibits, many enclosed like actual rooms you can see into; for example, living rooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms. What made the Chamber of Horrors palpably terrifying was the calm composure of the serial killers within each of the rooms. I still remember vividly the way an effigy of [George Joseph Smith](#) calmly looked at his dead wife in the bathtub after drowning her. Dr Crippen looked decidedly evil much like the image of Anthony Hopkins playing [Hannibal Lecter](#) in the movie, [Silence of the Lambs](#), when the camera pans across into his cell in the basement of the asylum. The exhibit of [John Reginald Christie](#) stuck in my mind the way he was holding a paintbrush in his hand after just burying one of his many victims under the floorboards of the house looking very satisfied with the work he did. Yes, there were guillotines and other famous characters like Vlad the Impaler and Hitler. There were a few bloody ones as well although many of the real vile exhibits were shipped to other waxworks across the nation including one in Southend on a fake pirate ship. I remember seeing that one in Southend, where one of the exhibits included a man impaled on a hanging hook in screaming agony and another, a moving 'death by pendulum' exhibit. Very unpleasant. But what really got to me in the Chamber of Horrors were the calm-looking serial murderers in their rooms, which were very realistically done up with all the fine details.

My last visit was totally different. Gone were the old exhibits but replaced by a mock-up of a London street during the [Black Death](#), an executioner's firing squad, an electric chair automated demonstration which, to be fair, was pretty good, and a few of the mainstream killers like Jack the Ripper (yawn) ... But no way was it even close to what it was. Only recently did I find out that the Chamber of Horrors permanently close its doors in 2016 having been replaced by the more family-friendly Sherlock Holmes Experience, which I might remind some of our viewers is based on a *fictional* character.

The London Dungeon

The London Dungeon in Tooley Street during the early 1980s was clearly one of the most disturbing attractions. It was vastly less popular than it is now and, having been more than once as a kid, it was often void of any people. It was situated under the London Bridge viaduct railway line and one could hear the

deep rumblings of the trains rolling overhead amongst the damp, mouldy gloomy brick archway caverns under low interior light. If anything, one felt like they were really in a genuine dungeon, and this dungeon was no ordinary one either. It was fitted out with a vast array of waxwork effigies suffering under a variety of torture devices. Cramped cages (Little Ease), fingernail torture, being sawn in half, Catherine wheels, lead boots, and many more. You name it, it had it all. The effigies weren't quite to the same standard as Tussaud's but, damn it, they were frightening. Not unlike the original Chamber of Horrors, what made this even more frightful is that this stuff *really* did happen. It was not fictional.

I did manage to revisit the London Dungeon in the mid-90s with some university mates but the eeriness and creepiness was gone having been replaced by more mainstream exhibits like Jack the Ripper (again!), the Great Fire of London, Sweeny Todd (more yawns) and the Gunpowder Plot to destroy the Houses of Parliament (boring). Worse still, they introduced technology and theatre into the place including Disney-style rides, virtual reality and lots of shows. It was also crowded drawing lots of young children and families. I didn't bother to re-visit the London Dungeon, but I understand that it is no longer housed within the dark arches of the Tooley Street railway viaduct.

Conclusion

It's interesting that such museums have been 'toned down' to cater for the masses. Complaints by various individuals, knowing full well that there was a warning sign to the entrance of the Chamber of Horrors, proclaiming that the chamber should be closed down as it could cause 'psychological disturbance' seems to be the sign of the times. Introducing *fictional* and very famous characters (like Jack the Ripper, Hitler or Sweeny Todd) in place of non-fictional serial-killer characters changes the game completely. It removes most of the sinister undertones of the experience.

I always felt that waxwork museums have a certain 'chill factor' to them, even those containing effigies which are not macabre-based or infamous. Much in the way of fiction has been written based on waxworks museums from a [Twilight Zone episode](#) where a man was convinced that some of the effigies moved when he was alone in the museum and a short story in [Lovecraftian](#) style where an owner of a waxwork museum housing [Cthulhu](#)-type creatures dared someone to stay overnight there, alone. There are, no doubt, genuinely scary waxworks museums still left in the world, but they seem to be slowly disappearing.