

Any witch way

AUTHOR Bryony Allen has always found the world close to hand a fertile breeding ground for ideas. Her years as a teacher spawned *Mystery, Deceit and a School Inspector* in 2009. It was set in a

fictional school that received a scathing inspection verdict – and then discovered a dead Ofsted official in the staff room. Last year came *OTOLI* – on the outside looking in – about a social outcast bullied at school. The writer knew a lot about such things: from her work in classrooms, corridors and playgrounds; as a mother, and even from her own childhood.

New book *The Assembly Room*, out this week, has its genesis in the Suffolk witch trial of 1645 that saw 18 people hanged in one day at Bury St Edmunds late in August. It was the largest single witch trial in England. The driving force was self-styled Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins, a vicar's son from Great Wenham, south-west of Ipswich, who earned considerable sums from towns and villages for rooting out those

allegedly in league with the devil. All but two of those executed were women – one of the men being John Lowes, vicar of Brandeston, near Framlingham. They came from across the county, including

A haunted-looking building and the Suffolk witch trials of 1645 were more than enough to send writer Bryony Allen's imagination into overdrive, as STEVEN RUSSELL discovers

Chattisham, Yoxford, Halesworth, Combs, Copdock, Glemham, Mendham and Westleton.

Those events provided the historical seed for Bryony's story. Then a Gothic building, an old meeting room in the past, added the atmosphere and proved a perfect visual hook for the book.

"The place it's based on is near Bildeston. It's on the way to where my mum lives. It's now a storage building, but it looks so creepy. It's one of those places you walk past and think 'I'd love to spend a night there . . . or not.' It really does look amazingly creepy and the children would always say 'Bet it's haunted.'"

There are very few records about the property, she says, but it looked the part and is on the cover, albeit somewhat stylised. A derelict house behind the building also finds a place in the tale, aimed primarily at the young adult market.

In the story, the ghosts of *The Assembly Room* have been waiting for someone to unlock their secrets. Enter 14-year-old Meryn Stearne, who moves to a new home in the glorious Suffolk countryside (with its gorgeous boy-next-door).

All should be fine and dandy . . . if only the past would stop intruding. The teenager dreams of medieval trials, and there's a curse to be lifted. She and neighbour Jamie uncover the truth about her ancestor's part in the Suffolk witch hunts of 1645.

"I have absolutely no idea why I got into the witch thing," says the author. "Probably going to Moyses Hall Museum [in Bury St Edmunds] and seeing the cat that had been buried in a wall to keep witches away. I don't know . . . But I became fascinated and did as much research as I could on what happened in the area and found out two witches had been tried from Hitcham, and seven from Stowmarket [where she lives]."

That era of witch-hunts, during the anxious years of the English Civil War, often saw accusers settle old scores and slightly eccentric or even bad-tempered folk blamed for causing misfortune through supernatural powers. Religious viewpoints – such as unbending Puritanism – widespread superstition and a genuine belief in witches were also in play.

"It's very much like what we call a witch-hunt now. One of the reasons why women were accused was because they had monobrows! [Where the eye-brows are effectively joined to make one brow.] You know what it's like even now in schools; they pick on kids because there's something slightly different about them. It was the same thing: when a person didn't like someone, they'd go after them and target them. It's like now: you target someone until the rumours build up and then they're 'stupid.'"

Bullying, of one form or another, runs through her books. Does she consciously recognise it? "It's something I've got to exorcise!" she

laughs. "The one I've finished writing and done the first redraft of is probably even darker still, but there's the bullying element in that, too."

That's about a haunted house in Needham Market. Bryony knew the owner and was given a tour. "Lovely – apart from one room. You walk in and – it sounds corny – it was freezing. It was a beautiful house. I did say if I ever won the lottery I would buy it." Really? "Oh yeah!"

The trouble is, real life means writing time is scarce. With her own children and a job in teaching – last year she was working four days a week – it's always been hard squeezing in fiction. Now, Bryony is full-time at Combs Middle School – teaching English, in the main, and responsible for co-ordinating the special needs side.

She's got three children at home – Kim is 17 in December, Michaela's 15 and Charlie 10, while George, 23, lives not far away – and a couple of dogs to walk.

Something had to give, and it's writing. "I don't have the time. This book [*The Assembly Room*] was written about a year and a half ago, and I started finishing it off this time last year." The first draft of the haunted house is done, awaiting fine-tuning. "It's just a case of finding time."

Bet she misses fuller-on writing. "Definitely. I still read a lot. I swore I'd never have a Kindle, but I won't live without it now."

Nothing stops her own ideas forming, though, despite the lack of time.

"I've still got the paupers' graveyard in Stowmarket. That would be great for a story. The last burial was 1953, so it's very recent. It's technically in Onehouse, at the back of Chilton Fields. There used to be the workhouse. They used to bury them there, in quicklime and blankets; and numbered, rather than named. I used to walk the dogs there when we were initially in Stowmarket, and didn't realise."

Any plans for another adult book, to follow *School Inspector*? "I have got an idea for one, but it won't be very clean! It won't be like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, because I couldn't do anything like that. But I've got an idea for murdering a referee at a football match! – a whodunnit, but very tongue in cheek. My plan is to sell it as a Kindle, and donate the proceeds to cancer research. My uncle died from cancer last year. It will have to be based on Ipswich winning, because we need that at the moment!" She's a loyal Blues fan, having become hooked after George got interested. "Things are bad, but they're still my team."

Back in 2009, Bryony's fanciful dream was to win the lottery, stay at home and write full-time. She's still waiting to scoop a life-changing sum.

"We've got a syndicate at school. We get £10 every week or so, but it doesn't go very far between 25 of us!"

■ *The Assembly Room* is published through Pneuma Springs at £7.99. Web link: www.bryonyallen.co.uk

Bryony basics

- Born Enfield in 1968, but spent most of her youth near Hartlepool
- Got a degree in English and drama at Roehampton University
- Was offered a job at the East Anglian Daily Times as a junior reporter, but had to turn it down because of personal circumstances
- Later got a PGCE teaching qualification from Homerton College, Cambridge

- Worked in Stowmarket and met husband-to-be John there – at Jokers nightclub!
- He was based at Wattisham airfield
- John left the forces more than a decade ago for computer engineering
- Bryony has now been a teacher for about 20 years
- Her favourite authors include Ian Rankin, Ruth Rendell and Daphne du Maurier

