

Get Back

I know you won't believe me, nobody will, but I want you to remember I was the first to reveal the truth, the first to correctly identify Jack the Ripper. When his name is finally headlined across the world, I want you to say "Didn't John Drake claim that years back?"

"How did he know before the others?" You'll ask.

Simple. I knew because I saw him, saw him use his hammer in an attempted murder.

Now you think I'm off my head, another one of those fantasists. But that's because you don't understand simulated time travel. I've been present at a Ripper crime scene. The past is always with us if you know where to find it. Life is a stream of data that exists forever, you just need to get it back. But I won't bore you with the science. I'll just tell you what I saw and how I saw it.

I'm retired and my hobby is family history. I'm researching my grandfather, Joseph Drake, who died over forty years ago. He was the oldest relative I met as a child and his memory defines my family. I only saw him as an old man and I want to find out more about his early life. From Ancestry.com, I have obtained his birth certificate and his census records.

I never knew he'd been born in Whitechapel and was living there in 1888 at the time of the Ripper murders. He was a great storyteller but I don't remember him talking about that time. I can't help wondering why.

I try to imagine what it must have been like then. I've visited the street where he lived but his house has gone, replaced by modern flats, so there's nothing tangible to link to him. I've read a lot about the period but it's all facts and it doesn't satisfy me. Somehow, I want to walk his East End streets, to hear and smell them as he did, and to know how it felt when Jack the Ripper terrorised Whitechapel.

So I'm paying to find out if the claims of the Advanced Technology History Centre are true. I've booked an hour of their Virtual Reality Experience. Ray, the Centre Manager, was very convincing on the phone. He told me they could build a 3D simulation of any historic environment. They access the millions of picture libraries and archives now on the web and their software designers create live scenes that you can walk through.

My visit to the past is about to start. I was expecting to just be wearing goggles but I'm inside a large dome. It's dimly lit by a single red light. I can't see the sides. It reminds me of a planetarium. There's a helmet-like device hanging from the ceiling, and a circular platform about twenty feet in diameter in the centre of the floor. I stand on the platform and put on the helmet. The door to the dome closes and I can feel the electronics in the helmet activating.

"Welcome to Whitechapel 1888. Enjoy." Ray's voice booms in the helmet.

The dome comes alive. I can hardly believe it. The whole area is filled with sights, sounds and, almost unbelievably, smells. The helmet must be able to stimulate the part of my brain that interprets smell. Buildings and people appear around me. They have depth. I am not watching a scene. I am in it.

The stench is almost unbearable, the worst drains stink ever. I find it difficult to breathe. I recognise the location despite the time gap - it's Whitechapel High Street. All across the roadway, horse dung steams in the midday sun. Flies are swarming everywhere, and the loud clatter of horses' hooves and carts on the cobbled road makes it difficult to think.

I'm standing on a wide pavement filled with the stalls and street vendors of a market. There's a crowd of shoppers. I feel them brush past me, I hear them talking, and I look into their faces. Mostly they're speaking English but there are accents, here some Irish and then Scottish and then Cockney. I can hear Yiddish and perhaps some Russian as a group of orthodox Jews passes me. Hats are everywhere - flat caps, peaked caps, top hats, skull caps, bonnets.

I seem taller than most and worry that my clothes are different but no one seems to notice. Then I remember this is virtual reality time travel not teleporting. But the people look so real. Where on the web did the data come from to create them?

I move on the platform and start to walk through the market. I stop and twist around. I can go in any direction. I choose left and work my way through the crowds. I walk up to a vegetable stall and watch from behind as a customer selects some apples. I go round the stall and I can see her face. I reach out to take an orange. I see it in my hand but I can't feel it. There's a group of young women talking nearby.

"Do you have protection?" says one.

"Yes, I've got a knife," says another. "But I'm not going with anyone I don't know."

"How do you know the Ripper's not someone you know?" says the first woman.

A man selling newspapers walks towards me. He's shouting "Ripper Latest". I get close and read the date on *The Star* newspaper: Saturday the fifteenth of September 1888. I remember the Ripper killed two women in the past two weeks, one each weekend.

What's happening? The simulation has stopped. The dome reverts to darkness and I can't see a thing. I've only been in here for 15 minutes and I want more. I'm expecting Ray to open the door. I can't see to find it myself.

"Just loading a more active version." Ray reassures me through my headphones.

Now, I'm deafened again by the cacophony of street noises. I'm back where I was, standing in the market across the road from the London Hospital. Everything looks the same but I feel different. Am I sitting down? Before, I could see over the heads of most of the people but now they're taller.

My movements are controlled. I am led up to a butcher's shop; inside a man is chopping a carcass. The market is reflected in the window and a face stares back at me, a boy, about ten. I recognise him. It's me, but as a child. No, not quite me, but he looks like me. I guess it's a simulation trick. He's supposed to be my grandfather. They've modelled him on me and I'm in his body.

I've become the boy and run as him.. I am made to dodge in and out of the shoppers, kicking discarded vegetables, snatching potatoes from stalls and running away. I turn into a passageway off the high road. It smells of piss. I run past a couple of drunks who are staggering and groping the wall. I go over a bridge. It shakes and smoke fills the air as a train passes below.

The first street I pass on the left is barricaded. My God, it leads to Bucks Row. Mary Nichols was killed there. And on the right, I recognise the name of my grandfather's street. He lived so close to the murder scene but he never talked about it. What did he see? What did he know?

His street is narrow, with slum houses pressed together on both sides. Lots of doors are open. There are small children playing in the street. I wonder if any of them are Drakes? There's a standpipe and several women are waiting with buckets. I run past a small child sitting in the gutter. There are streaks of black snot smeared across his face. I go into no. 24 and hand the potatoes to the woman inside.

This must be my grandfather's home, and the woman is his mother. It's dark in the house so I can't see her clearly, but I notice her red dress. There's just one room. I can make out three young children crawling around on the floor and an old woman sits in the corner. I walk through to a small yard at the back of the house. A man is chopping wood. He turns and I see another version of my face, probably my great grandfather, and then the simulation stops.

The door to the dome opens and Ray enters smiling.

"I hope you enjoyed that," he says. "It was as much as we could simulate given the preparation time. I hope you liked the visit to your family house. It's possible to create some very sophisticated interactive sessions with this software. Of course, the images of your relatives weren't real. We couldn't find any archive pictures so we created them using morphing technology and an analysis of your own features. This probably isn't too far from the truth though."

"This is unbelievable," I keep hearing myself say.

“Yes, it’s impressive,” says Ray. “But this was just a taster. In this session, you were only an observer. We can add more interactivity. You can talk with the people. We can feed in anecdotes about your ancestors, develop a personality for them, and then use this to predict their responses.”

I am just beginning to grasp the potential of this when Ray moves the goalposts again.

“But we can do even more. The helmet technology can recognise all brain activities. So we can analyse your memories and recreate scenes and people as you remember them. You will have to give us permission to do a brain scan and, if you can get them to come here, we can add the memories of other people who might have known your relatives.”

I agree to the scan, just half an hour, but decide not to involve anyone else yet. Ray tells me to come back in week for his so-called “ultimate simulation.”

I am excited and apprehensive when I return to the Virtual Reality Transporter.

This time Ray’s given me a pair of gloves, wearing these I will be able to touch and feel things.

I’m back in Whitechapel. This time it’s night. I can’t stop coughing. There’s pungent fog all around me and I can’t see far. I’m not sure where I am but it’s a back street. Here and there I can make out buildings in the yellow gaslight. I think I’ve walked into a dead end alley. I can’t find a way round the wall in front. Is there someone else there?

There’s a piercing scream. I’m shaking and sweating. The fog is swirling. I make out a man and woman fighting at the end of the alley. I’ve got to help.

“Stop! Murderer! Help! Help!” I run forward shouting.

The man has a hammer; he’s swinging it at the woman. He’s hit her once and she’s falling. He’s trying to hit her while she’s on the ground but I’m there. I’m grappling with him, punching him, fighting like an animal. We’re swearing and spitting. Now I can hear others shouting behind me. The man breaks free and runs off into the fog.

I bend down and help up the woman. There’s a gash on her shoulder. Blood runs onto her red dress. I’ve seen her before.

Everything goes black. My shoulders drop, and I’m relieved as Ray enters.

“Was that supposed to be the Ripper?”

“Yes,” says Ray. “Obviously we don’t know whether the Ripper attacked your great grandmother, but she was a Whitechapel prostitute so it’s a possibility.”

“What do you mean she was a prostitute? Surely you’ve invented that to spice up the simulation for me?”

“I’m afraid not. Our researchers found her listed in the local police records. Also, your great grandfather was charged with pimping for her on several occasions.”

I guess I’ll never know the truth of the attack. But this scene has affected me in a more significant way. I recognised the attacker. I have seen pictures of him over the years. Was his face created by the simulation or do I somehow have a memory of something my grandfather said when I was very young and I have linked it to that face? I think it’s too late to involve my aged father, as suffering from Alzheimer’s, he is unlikely to add to the simulation.

So I’ll tell you now who I recognised. The Jack the Ripper I saw was [REDACTED] See if I am right when the truth is finally revealed.

Under the Official Secrets Act 1989, this testimony has been redacted for reasons of national security as no verifiable evidence is provided for the claimed identification given.