

There is something about Adelaide that really intensifies energies

talking about that, footsteps started on the top of the gangtry and we could literally hear the click of the heel and squeak of the leather boots and it came right to the top of the stairs and I'm going: 'Whoa, that's great.'

"Then it came down the stairs. The two film-makers just stepped aside to let it through, because it felt like an authoritative figure was coming through and they needed to step aside.

"If you've ever rubbed a balloon against your arm and it's made all your hairs stand up on end and it tingles, that was what it felt like when it went by; it was just like a static breeze going by."

Oborn, who also runs Haunted Horizons Ghost Tours, will even come into private houses with her team to see whether peoples' homes are haunted – sometimes strange things are definitely going on. Other times, it's "New House Syndrome" when someone is not used to their home's noises, and other times it can be high levels of electro-magnetic fields generated by leaking electrical equipment... it can give you an eerie feeling. Some say an eerie feeling is also generated by low frequency noise levels known as infrasound.

South Australian pubs are also huge ghost hot spots: The Old Spot Hotel at Gawler, Waymouth St's Union Hotel, Willunga's Alma Hotel, the Grand Hotel at Millicent, the Ambassadors Hotel on King William St and the Colonist Tavern at Norwood are only a handful that are rumoured to be haunted.

"Pubs seem to be big for ghosts," the 48-year-old ghost hunter says. "We joke – well, where else would you want to be after you died?"

But exactly what are ghosts? Oborn and Dettman were interviewed on different days, but when asked that question – what are ghosts? – both said exactly the same thing: "That's the million dollar question".

"One idea is that if something traumatic happens, that emotion is thick enough to be photographed if you like, into the memory of the room," Dettman says. "So, sometimes what you're seeing could be like a psychic photograph."

Oborn expands on the theories: "Ghosts could be the energies of dead people that have been left behind. Another theory is that it is a little slip in time – that we're seeing snippets from time shift. Einstein himself said time is not linear. Then another theory is that we're creating them ourselves from our own beliefs and in our own mind. I'm still trying to find the answer to that question."

Oborn is on a quest to definitively answer this question and that's while you'll often find her – black hair flowing behind – striding through the Old Adelaide Gaol or the pioneer village at Tailem Town with tools in hand. Electromagnetic field meters, voice recorders, wind and ambience meters, security cameras and infrared sensors – they are all tools of her ghost hunting trade.

And she hopes one day, she will find a crucial piece of evidence to prove the paranormal.

Five years ago, while investigating inside the Old Adelaide Gaol, Oborn was possibly walked through by a ghostly being.

"It was a hot night and we'd finished up doing an investigation and it was about 4am," she recalls. "I was standing against one of the walls. We weren't even talking about ghosts; we weren't even thinking paranormal. Then, you know that

little shudder you get when someone's walked over your grave? It's something we all get; it's a normal human body thing – but if you multiply that by about 15 times, that's what happened to me. It was so violent my head just went *whack* backwards against the wall.

"And then every bone literally just turned to ice. I just froze and it was like: Yuck. I felt unclean and cold. I had to sit on the steps and it took me 20 minutes to thaw out. I don't know what it was – was it something to do with my brain? I hadn't had it before and I haven't had it since, so I'm not prone to that. But I haven't stood next to that door since either."

But from Dettman's point of view, all the infrared cameras and ghost hunting equipment in the world couldn't prove or disprove the paranormal.

"To put absolutely everything under a microscope and be able to use one of the five sense – to see, hear, smell, touch, taste – that's fine if you're a really left-brain person, but, for me, it sucks the beauty and mystery and imagination out of life."

Nigel Dobson-Keeffe is a sceptic. His life is based on the five senses – show him something he can see, hear, smell, touch or taste and he'll believe. He is still waiting for evidence to prove the existence of ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night.

As a member of South Australia's Thinkers and Drinkers – a group of about 160 sceptics who meet once a month to discuss anything from big cat theories to balance bracelets and, of course, ghosts – he has given a lot of thought to why people believe in spirits.

The research scientist says ghosts exist because of agency – a philosophical concept referring to the capacity of an agent to act in the world.

"Before humans had the tools to investigate what was going on in the world in any really clever way, we developed a way to put agency on inanimate objects. The early Egyptians wondered: 'Why does the sun rise?'"

"Today we know it's because the planets rotate. Back then...they put an agency towards it where there was a chariot driven by one of their gods that dragged the sun across the sky."

So, Dobson-Keeffe says, humans can project their own capabilities on to other things, and these "things" behave how a human would and thus we developed the concept of something that survives beyond death – spirits.

Of course, you'd think with all the scientific material we have gathered – after all, we have proven that the world is not flat and the planets do rotate – that ghosts too would have disappeared. Not so. If anything, the concept of ghosts has thrived.

The reason for this, Dobson-Keeffe says is because humans *want* to believe in ghosts. "Humans just want to believe in a life after death and a continuation of existence when you die, simply because it makes them feel better," he says. "It's a coping mechanism for the uncertainties of life."

He also asserts that the social nature of human beings makes for fertile ground for believers.

"We like talking to people who have the same values as us and believe the same things," he says.

And of course, he says, we as human beings also love a good story.

"An interesting ghost story about someone

1. Image of a ghostly apparition said to have appeared at the Old Spot Hotel, Gawler. **Picture:** Scott Pearson.

2. Ghost buster: Paranormal investigator Alison Oborn at the Old Adelaide Gaol. **Picture:** Simon Cross

3. Ghost whisperer: Rebecca Dettmann of Psyched in Stilettoes. **Picture:** Simon Cross

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who got murdered years ago, compared with talking about how bread gets made - yes, bread's important, but jeez, it's pretty dull."

Dettman, however, says everyone – sceptics included – have the ability to sense a ghost or spirit.

"Your sixth sense is like a muscle," she explains. "If you go to the gym and keep building it up and keep working on it, it will get bigger...and there are lots of workshops and exercises that people can do to become more clairvoyant."

But sceptics will remain sceptical. While ghost stories continue to thrive, despite all the recording equipment, infrared cameras and other technological advances, no ghost hunter has been able to definitively prove that ghosts do exist.

This does not bother Dettman.

"Throughout history there have always been people in both camps and maybe that says something about our human nature – I just think what a boring world it would be if we just backhandedly dismissed absolutely everything all the time, because there's something to be said for magic and mystic and wonder."

Oborn agrees: "We all love a good mystery and I think we'd be very disappointed if we lost that mystery. If we ever proved the Yowie or the Loch Ness Monster existed, all of a sudden it would lose its appeal and what made it so enchanting."

So perhaps whether our Anzac Highway phantom hitchhiker exists or not, isn't the point. Perhaps the story's real charm is that one night, you might just drive past her. That lost, aimless soul. And if you do, will you stop to pick her up?

