



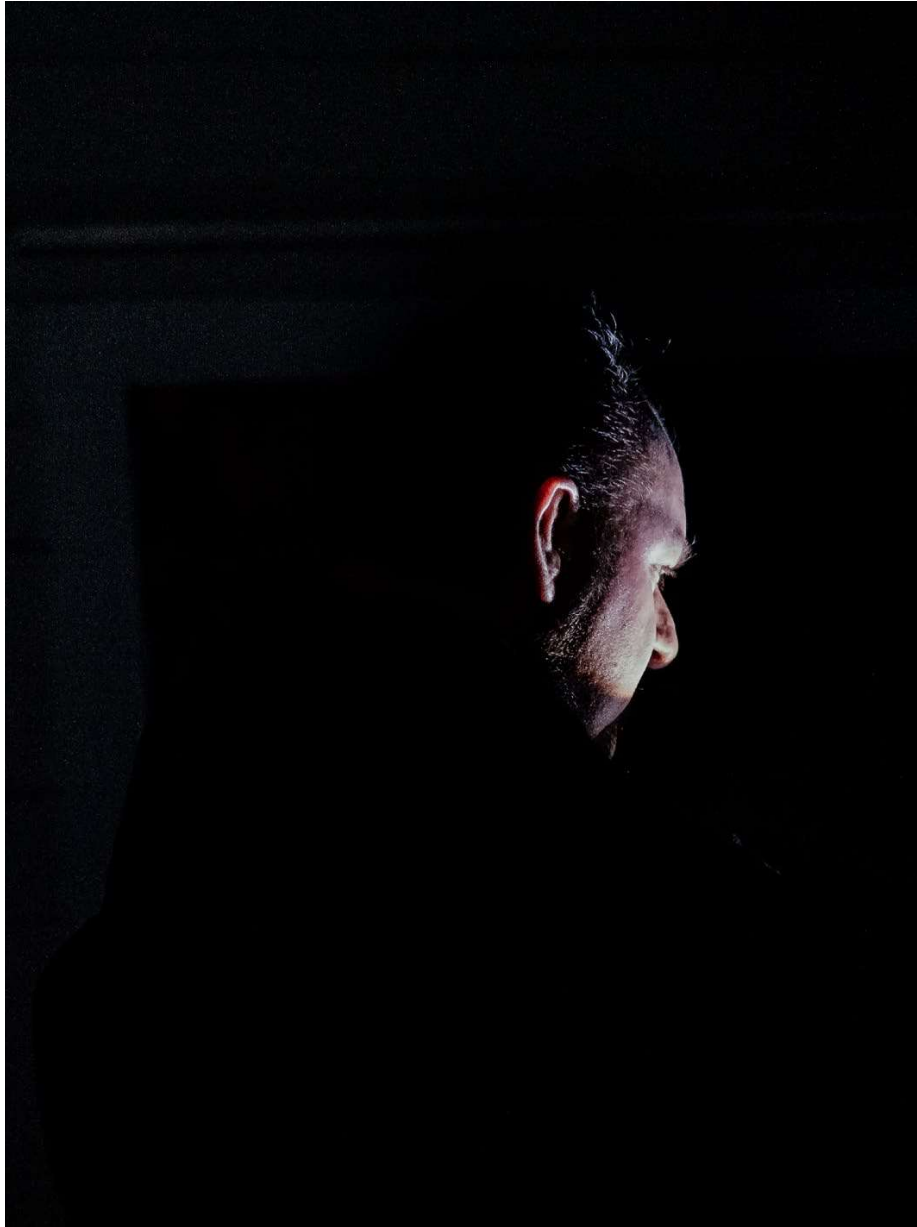
# WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

A night with Haunted  
Auckland, the city's most  
prominent ghostbusters.

TEXT BY  
Chris Schulz

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
Jinki Cambronero





"Is there anybody up here with us?" Mark Wallbank's voice echoes down the hallway. Wallbank is 52 and solidly built, but he's barely visible as he sits in the shadows. He's on the second storey of the Lake House Arts Centre in Takapuna. Surrounding him are seven cameras, three electromagnetic field (EMF) meters and temperature gauges, and four members of Wallbank's Haunted Auckland team. A photographer and I are following them through the building. Like Wallbank, we've got questions.

Sam Collier picks up the one-sided conversation. "Maybe you can tell us your name," he calls into the darkness. "Did you live in this house?" The 38-year-old is holding a digital recorder, one he rewinds and plays back every five minutes or so, listening intently for signs of interference. But his questions receive no replies. "Let us know that you're here by making a sound, or talking into one of our devices," Collier says. The eerie quiet is interrupted by a subdued bubbling sound, but it's not a ghost. "My stomach just gurgled," confesses Wallbank.

Aimee Peterken, a 41-year-old teacher and the most recent addition to Haunted Auckland's eight-strong team, has been quiet until now. Last time Haunted Auckland were staking out this building, Peterken believes she met a resident ghost called Patty. Using a light meter to interact, she learnt the ghost's name and other personal details. "She's about nine [years old] ... she lived here ... she has an older brother ... she quite likes school ... there was an older man with her," Peterken remembers. Wallbank reminds her: "We also heard shuffling in that room over there." Their one-hour interaction ended with a game of dominoes. Patty won.

Tonight, so far, there hasn't been a peep out of Patty, or any of the other spirits rumoured to be haunting this building. Reports of scary sights from those who work in the 125-year-old complex date back many years. A woman in white is regularly seen in the reflections of artworks. The shadow of a man holding hands with small children is seen walking around outside. Another woman sitting in the corner of the ceiling sent a visitor screaming out of a ground-floor room. Then there's the footage: security cameras have caught multiple images of hovering, glowing balls of light (called "orbs" by the ghost-hunters), the shadowy figure of a woman floating around the ground floor and, in one instance, the front doors flying open in the middle of the night.

To investigate further, five members of the Haunted Auckland team arrived at the Lake House at 8 o'clock this evening, setting up camp in the ground-floor kitchenette. A table is covered with black bags full of ghost-hunting gear, accompanied by multiple snack options. Working at night, in the dark, attempting to catch evidence of the supernatural, is hungry work. Open packets of marshmallows and biscuits litter the table. The remains of a Burger King combo belong to Wallbank; the 500ml Monster energy drink is Collier's. "I have one in the car for the morning," he says between sips. He's due at work at 4am for his job at Baxter Healthcare, where he administers

fluids for people on dialysis. "I'll go home, have an hour's sleep, then go back to work."

Haunted Auckland do these investigations, in buildings across Auckland, on a regular basis. For the past 10 years, Wallbank has led his crew — a changeable lineup of spectral believers — through some of the creepiest scenarios they can find. By day, Wallbank works for a North Shore printing company. By night, he and his team search for suspicious, ghost-like activity — some would say proof — at places like Kingseat Hospital, Carrington Hospital and The PumpHouse Theatre. The Lake House is a favourite: they have keys, and come and go as they please. They've spent several nights here this year, camping out in sleeping bags.

Wallbank dedicates all of his spare time to paranormal research. "It's my life," he says. Yet he's not convinced. Despite facing things that would make many melt into a puddle, he's still sceptical about the existence of ghosts. "I have never, ever said a location is haunted," he says.

"To make such a statement you need to have information to back it up. Just having a feeling isn't enough." Wallbank's been doing it so long, he doesn't get scared, and isn't worried about being hurt. "I want to be picked up and slammed against a wall," he says. "I say, 'Bring it on!'"

The five members of Haunted Auckland investigating at the Lake House tonight have the same attitude. They all want proof. They also want to socialise, because it's Friday night. So, at 8pm, Wallbank, Collier and Peterken, along with Natasha Kristoffersen-Tuck and Barbara Armstrong, gather in the kitchenette and spend an hour catching up. They haven't seen each other for a while. "It's quite hard getting everyone together," admits Wallbank. Peterken and Kristoffersen-Tuck drove up from Hamilton after work, but Armstrong has the most impressive reason for being here. Her regular job is dressing up as a zombie and scaring the bejesus out of guests at South Auckland scare factory Spookers. "I chase people with chainsaws," she says. Friday is Spookers' biggest night, yet, tonight, she wants to find real ghosts. "I'll let the boss know. She knows. She'll go, 'Are you doing ghosty things?'"

Finally, the chit-chat's over, and the team gets down to business. "All right, let's go and set up some stuff, shall we?" says Peterken. "What's the time?" asks Wallbank. "9pm," responds Collier.

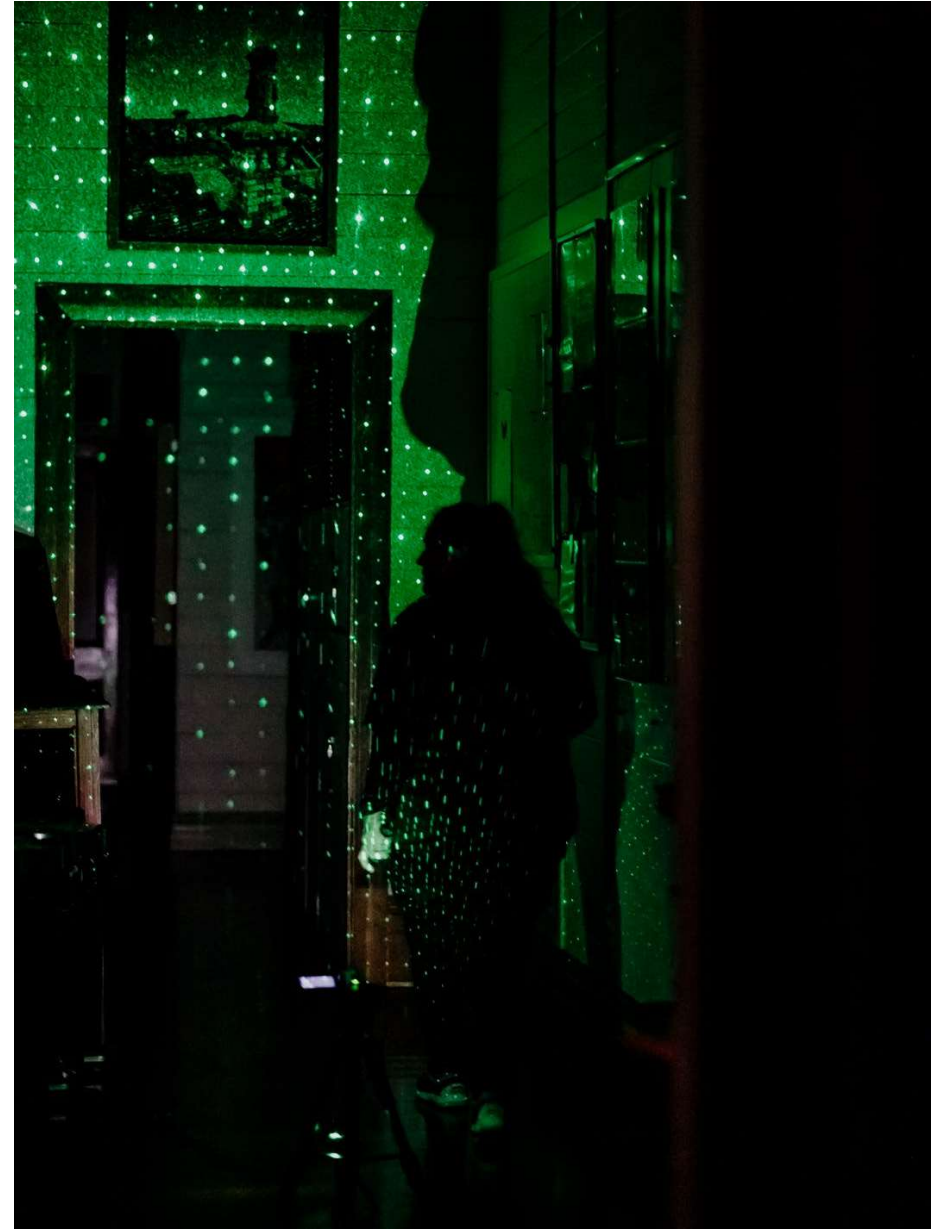
There's a sudden flurry of action. Tripods are erected. Cameras are prepped. Buttons are pushed. A laser grid of green dots scans around a ground-floor foyer, making it look like a tiny disco. Down the hallway, equipment is focused on an ageing staircase where the woman in white has been seen the most. Everyone grabs a seat. The lights are turned off. Silence washes over the room. "We have to sit and get used to the sounds the building makes," says Wallbank. "It makes its own creaks and bangs and things."

Collier starts things off, calling out: "If there's anybody here, can you make a knock on the wall for us." The building's ghosts seem reluctant, staying silent, out of sight. "As you can see," warns Kristoffersen-Tuck,



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"we spend a lot of time in the dark talking to ourselves." There's no response. After half an hour of this, they move everything up to the building's second floor. It's getting late, and everyone sits down, or slumps against something. Peterken takes charge. "Hey, Patty. We'd love to hear from you, sweetheart," she calls. "We think you're here but we're not sure. Could you give us a sign first, make something light up, change some of the numbers, something like that?" There's a creak, but again, it's no ghost. This time it's *Metro's* fault. "That's Chris — he just leaned on the bannister," says Kristoffersen-Tuck.

On a chair in a corner sits Brandon, a teddy bear with a huge antenna poking out of his head. It was Peterken's idea to rip out the stuffing and put a proximity meter inside, and she's found it works well. Something has to come incredibly close, almost touching the tip of the antenna, to set it off. So far tonight, like all the temperature readings and EMF meters, it's been quiet. Sensing flagging enthusiasm, Wallbank launches into a dark joke involving receiving an email later that night from this *Metro* writer, telling him we couldn't make it to the Lake House after all. "So, just who are you, 'Chris'?" he asks, mockingly. As I prepare a retort, the teddy bear perched on the chair erupts in a high-pitched squeal.

"Howdy," says Kristoffersen-Tuck, a smile appearing on her face. "There's your friend, Aimee." It's Patty, and it looks like she wants to talk.

When he was 10 years old, Mark Wallbank set up his first haunted house in the basement under his parents' Howick home. "I started hanging up cobwebs, spooky ghosts," he says. He sold tickets for 50 cents. "A couple of neighbours felt sorry for me and came down. That was nice." By then, he'd already spent half his life obsessing about ghosts. "I was very independent at an early age," he says. "I grew up quite fast. I spent a lot of time by myself." He remembers, as far back as the age of five, wanting to know about everything otherworldly that he could find. "I started looking at pictures and getting into movies and comics, UFOs, aliens. I loved all that."

School bored him because teachers couldn't answer his very specific questions. "I gravitated towards the more unusual," he says. "I'd be throwing questions at the teachers to the point that I became annoying. They couldn't answer them because they were just telling me what they were being taught." So Wallbank started wandering. His home was surrounded by farmland. Every free moment, he'd venture out to explore old buildings dotted around the landscape. He'd disappear for the entire day. "I'd go down there and spend time just sitting in these old homes," he says. "I liked the feeling that each house had a ghost in it. I could tell these places were old and I could see remnants of the people who used to live there left behind. I liked the idea that something was left from that time."

That's where Wallbank developed the techniques he uses today. "I saved up my pocket money and bought a camera, a flash cube, and took a few photos," he says.

"I didn't know what to look for at that time. I was just snapping photos. At age 10, I was expecting a full-blown ghost [to appear] right in front of me, which there never was."

Wallbank found comfort in solitude. "I'd be sitting there ... by myself in a dark room, with my little torch, just talking to myself." To this day, that's his method. He says anyone can do it, and he teaches it to his team. He's done it in buildings all over Auckland, all around New Zealand, and when he goes overseas, too. Yes, even Wallbank's holidays involve ghost-hunting.

It's led to some incredibly creepy experiences. In one Titirangi house, Wallbank says, he saw what might have been the ghost of a small boy down a hallway, one that then touched him on the shoulder. "It was a 10-year-old boy called Jonathan Lockley." During an investigation at Kingseat Hospital, he uncovered identifying features of a former nurse called Alexis Jackson. "She was 29, she apparently was pregnant, had a baby ... She worked there back in the 60s." He combed through historical data, but couldn't find people by those names.

He's built up a library of hours of unexplained footage and audio. "You put your recorder down, play it back, and sometimes you'd get little interactions," he says. "They'd be imprinted on to the tape. You start thinking: Maybe there's something to this."

Wallbank's been running various versions of Haunted Auckland, attracting like-minded spook addicts, since the 1980s. They used to do house calls, but stopped because too many people with mental-health issues wanted confirmation of hauntings. "We're not qualified to deal with that," he says. "Most of the people who call us up, they want validation. They want confirmation. They want us to agree with what is going on. They don't like it when we can't do that." One night, they were invited to ghost-hunt in an allegedly haunted home and arrived to find a woman hosting a dinner party for friends. "It was like we were the night's entertainment," laughs Wallbank.

These days, Haunted Auckland stick to familiar spots. They've found the more they visit the same places, the more information they get. If he's running low on members, Wallbank puts a call out on Facebook. Kristoffersen-Tuck joined after losing her job last year during lockdown. Peterken signed up with glee a few months ago after years of attending events and commenting on the group's Facebook posts. Wallbank knows instantly when someone's not cut out to be a paranormal investigator. "Usually you can weed someone out from their initial email," he says. "They say, 'I see ghosts all the time.' When they start talking about angels ... and demons ... you switch off." Mostly, Wallbank's looking for dedication. No one in Haunted Auckland gets paid, and being a member is not cheap: the EMF meters alone cost \$400 each. They give up their spare time, and family time, to do this. The best investigators, says Wallbank, are ready to "put off other things in their life to come and do this".

Wallbank's got stories — and he's also got rare collectibles. In the North Shore home he shares with his wife



is a room dedicated to his hobby. Wallbank's become so well known that people send him items they believe to be haunted. "I've got 20 Ouija boards now," he says. "I'm a 52-year-old guy and I've got a doll collection." He admits it's weird, but he can't help himself. He's obsessed. "The room is jammed full of stuff." He's hoping to open a small museum one day. Yet nothing in there creeps him out. "I have cameras set up 24 hours [a day], atmospheric detectors, if anything happens." Stuff keeps arriving. "People want it out of the house. I get contacted all the time: 'Mark, I've got this doll, we think it's evil, we're going to burn it, do you want it?'" His answer is always: "Yes." Right now, he's waiting for a painting of a child to arrive from the South Island. The owner believes it's cursed.

None of this frightens him. If the EMF meters light up, or the proximity alarm goes off, as one does upstairs at the Lake House, Wallbank doesn't instantly think it's paranormal activity. "You think, 'Well, this is neat, but it doesn't mean it's a ghost.' You start looking at things around us [for causes]." He sniffs at YouTubers and over-excitable ghostbusting squads who go berserk at any little noise. "You get some paranormal teams ... they're really gullible. They're all believers. They're told it's haunted [and] every sound they hear is going to be a ghost. They haven't done any research. They're so desperate to have 'an experience' that anything will be an experience."

Wallbank remains a sceptic. Ask him if he believes in

ghosts and he chooses his words carefully. "There was a time when, if anybody asked me, 'Do you believe that ghosts exist?' I would say, 'I don't really know.' Now I say, 'Yes, they do exist, but I don't know what they are.' The next step of my journey is to find out what they are, who they are and maybe try to interact with them. If a ghost does exist, I want to meet them. I want to learn from them."

Grae Burton was in hospital — his wife was in labour — when his phone buzzed. Burton couldn't help himself; he had to check it. As the Lake House's kaiwhakahaere, or operations manager, he'd been hearing ghost stories about the place for months. He'd had multiple strange experiences there himself. Sometimes, he would walk out of a room and feel extreme vertigo. "It felt like someone coming past, through me," he says. Another time, he arrived late to turn off some lights. As soon as he hit the switch, he heard a group of children laughing. "I just made a beeline to the exit. It really freaked me out."

So, at the beginning of 2018, Burton had security cameras installed around the complex. They recorded everything that moved, both inside and out. As his wife prepared to give birth to their second son, his phone pinged with an alert. It was the first after-hours footage he'd received. Burton couldn't believe what he was seeing. "It was from the gallery," he says. "As my wife's going through contractions, I'm watching an orb fly out of the



floor and into the space." She wasn't impressed. "I'm showing her and she's saying, 'I don't give a rat's arse.'" It's hard to blame her: she was about to have her own out-of-body experience.

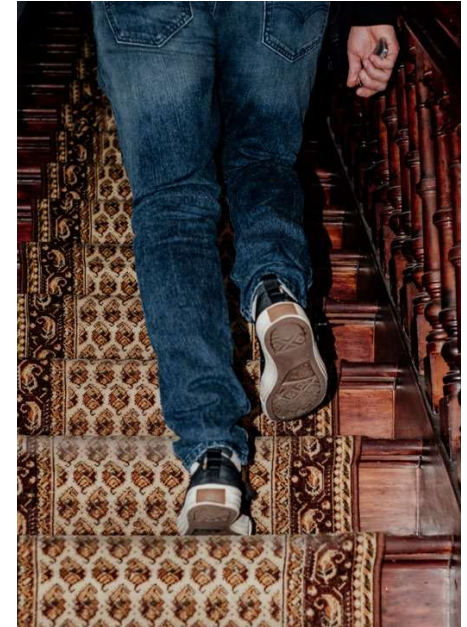
That video was recorded on 11 January 2018. For months, Burton's phone kept pinging, sometimes sending him several videos from the same night. "We had more and more of these orbs flying through various spaces," he says. He numbered them, and posted them on YouTube. By April, things had escalated. "One night, there was quite an incident where the front door slammed open for no reason. An orb flew through."

This time, instead of sorting it out himself, Burton sent security guards to lock up the building. A few days later, he was eating breakfast and watching the footage for 13 April (yes, Friday the 13th) when he got what he considers "definitive proof" of a resident Lake House ghost. Across a 30-minute video, a person seems to make themselves visible. "You see a full-bodied white spectre rising up through the floor, looking at one of the pictures and floating down the hallway and around the room," he says. Burton believes it's real. "We can't work out how this could have been faked. I didn't fake it. There's no way to get lights

suspended in space [like that]. It's really pretty convincing footage. That's our lady in white, I think."

*Metro* has combed through the footage (as well as many of the dozens of other Lake House "ghost" videos) and it's definitely eerie. The shape of what appears to be a tall woman in a long white gown seems to float around the area at the bottom of the stairs — right where Wallbank, Haunted Auckland and *Metro* gather the night we are there. It's hard to find alternative answers for what those shapes might be. But Burton says there's footage that's even more convincing. "An elderly man and two children appear out of nowhere, walk on the footpath around the house, disappear and reappear on the other side, with no cuts in the video ... it's just crazy." He had it on his phone, but somehow it went missing. "I lost that video. I must have overdubbed it or deleted it off my phone."

These days, Burton doesn't bother posting ghost videos to YouTube. Unexplained activity happens often at the Lake House, almost daily. "We could probably go there this afternoon ... check through everything and find one or two orbs flying through the space," he says. In short, even if Wallbank and his Haunted Auckland team won't say so, the Lake House sounds like it most definitely is haunted.



"Did anyone open this door?" calls Armstrong down the hallway, "because I closed it."

She's wandered away from the group, down to the ground floor and past the laser grid, to check out a weird noise coming from the kitchenette. The door was closed, but now it's swinging wide open. "It takes some force to open it," says Armstrong, stating the obvious. Wallbank's pleased at this news. "We like that," he says. Kristoffersen-Tuck agrees: "That's what we want to hear."

Along with the proximity meter going off in Brandon the teddy bear, the door opening on its own is yet another example of strange goings-on in the Lake House. Haunted Auckland will add it to their growing collection of evidence. Collier's got his own strange experience in the Lake House. Earlier this year, he was walking up a small stairwell when he felt a shove in the chest. He stopped and watched, astounded, as the spotlight on top of his video camera turned around to shine straight in his face. "It felt like ... something was pushing it," he says. Collier can't explain it. "Like, what the hell? How do you react to something like that? It's not normal. It's very bizarre. There was actual force ... a complete 180."

Do Lake House ghosts exist? Despite all the hours they've spent staking out the building, Haunted Auckland don't have a definitive answer. Ask Wallbank and his team and they all reply: "We don't know." After three hours spent in the gloom, *Metro's* none the wiser, either. We'd like to know who opened that door, and why Brandon's antenna erupted in noise. If it was Patty, she didn't interact with us afterwards. But firm answers are hard to come by in this business. After tonight, there's still much work to be done: audio to transcribe, footage to comb through. "The more cameras we have set up, the more work we have ahead of us in reviewing all that footage," admits Wallbank. It may reveal more clues. It may not.

Close to midnight, the tired Haunted Auckland team pack up their gear. They're due at midnight to appear as guests on an Australian radio show, where they'll exchange ghost stories. "A quiet night," says Wallbank. As we're about to leave, Collier calls up footage on his phone, almost by way of apology. From a few years ago, it shows a camera trained on the stairs in Puhinui Homestead, at the Howick Historical Village. Wallbank was asleep in a downstairs bedroom. No one else was in the house. As the clock struck 3am, he was woken by a torch he'd placed on a chair on the building's second floor. It seemed to be thrown, not once, but twice, down the stairs towards him.

It's among the most conclusive evidence of paranormal activity Wallbank has collected over his years of ghostbusting. Even then, he won't say it's proof. "We don't know what happened," he says. When he posted the footage to YouTube, a journalist from Stuff got in touch, wanting to write a story. Wallbank was interviewed for two hours, but was disappointed to see the story run with the headline "Skeptics refute claimed video evidence that historic Auckland homestead is haunted by ghost". The story contains quotes from Craig Shearer, then secretary of the

New Zealand Skeptics society, who said: "There's a huge leap to make from it being an unexplained occurrence to it being a ghost. The idea of ghosts brings in all sorts of things that go against known science."

In Wallbank's mind, he's already sceptical. He never said it was a ghost. He just said it was weird. So, afterwards, he contacted Shearer. He wanted to know his thoughts, why he thought the torch moved so far. "It's a flat torch that can't roll," Wallbank says, sounding like someone who's a little more convinced of paranormal activity than he'd previously let on. "It had to come off the chair, along the ground, then down some stairs. The footage [contains] all this banging, footsteps, scraping, sliding. I said to the Skeptics, 'Give me one explanation — one!'"

Like the questions that echoed off the walls of the Lake House tonight, Wallbank never got a reply.

