

WILLOW Court at New Norfolk has the sinister reputation of being one of the most haunted and paranormally active places in Tasmania.

There are stories of staff at the former psychiatric hospital being attacked by invisible hands. Even today there are regular reports of doors slamming closed on their own and electronic equipment refusing to work.

High fences and heavy locks are in place to deter trespassers who try to steal scrap metal and vandalise the historic site.

With its earliest section, the Barracks, predating Port Arthur, **Willow Court** was Australia's oldest mental hospital complex.

It's closure in November 2000 was heralded as the end of institutionalised mental health care in Tasmania, but the imposing buildings remain.

Some sections -- such as Ward C, which housed violent male patients -- feature exercise yards enclosed by high, thick concrete walls with inward-curving tops to prevent those inside from climbing out.

With its thick, steel-framed wooden cell doors and pale green linoleum, Ward C has a lingering atmosphere of sadness, desolation and malice.

Investigators from Research and Investigate the Paranormal (RIP) Australia recently spent an afternoon and a night inside **Willow Court**, recording a number of unusual occurrences as they filmed for a TV documentary. During the daylight investigation, two team members entered Ward C to set up a video camera and recording equipment.

But when they tried to leave the building, the ghosts reportedly decided to play. The one door into the ward had mysteriously locked.

Investigators on either side of the door took turns pushing, pulling and rattling the door, but it refused to move.

After phoning Valley Vision project manager Ian Brown for assistance, documentary producer Jo Jumper half-jokingly passed on Mr Brown's message that the trapped ghost-hunters would soon get their ``Governor's pardon" when the keys arrived.

As soon as Ms Jumper uttered those words, the door unlocked and swung open to reveal the pale faces of the investigators inside.

Later that afternoon, three team members were sitting in one of the cells speaking to the empty building.

They asked if there was any entity present that wanted to make itself known.

At that precise moment, captured on an audio tape of the session, the hinges of one of the heavy cell doors from the corridor just outside can be heard squealing before the door slams closed.

Mr Brown said slamming doors were a regular manifestation of the strange goings on within **Willow Court** and he often had to chase down people who were spooked during tours through the site.

``People regularly report rooms suddenly feeling very cold, doors slamming, otherwise reliable cameras not functioning and then starting again quite happily as soon as they leave," he said.

``In general, women seem to be much more responsive to those stimuli than men are for some reason."

The Sunday Tasmanian's photographer even had an unusual experience while taking the photos for this page.

She photographed the interior of Ward C extensively and checked her shots before leaving but once outside she found the camera's data card to be completely blank.

She had to head back inside and take more photos.

Hobart paranormal researcher and Society of Anomalous Research Australia president Hannah Jenkins said she had little doubt that people genuinely experienced strange phenomena at **Willow Court**. However, she was reluctant to blame spirits of the dead.

``Being a place used for so many years as a mental institution, sometimes for violent patients, there would be a lot of angst and emotion associated with that particular area," Dr Jenkins said.

``According to what is known as the Stone Tape Theory, intense emotions can sometimes be captured in the environment and researchers like (Brit) T. C. Lethbridge have done a lot of research in the field of how particular places are more conducive to absorbing those emotions." According to the theory, particularly sensitive people can sometimes be affected by the trapped or lingering emotions attached to a physical location, producing the experience of a haunting.

**Caption:** WHO'S THERE?: Ian Brown in the exercise yard at Willow Court.

**Illus:** Photo

**IllusBy:** NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

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