

## **WHAT ARE HALLUCINATIONS?**

After the shock of losing one's sight the brain, lacking information, tries to create pictures. We know these images as hallucinations. In the absence of input from the eyes, the picture is formed by one part of the brain and transmitted to another part which either fits in with the surroundings or it may take the place of the surroundings, dominating whatever is behind it. My colours are generally limited to various shades of brown, white and black but the result is realistic and it's all in high definition. All my pictures have been invented by the brain as opposed to having any origin in the memory.

All my hallucinations have been at least good and often exciting and a pleasant way to pass the time when there is nothing else to do. But there are some people who have had really bad experiences with hallucinations and this is an important point. Examples are spiders and snakes.

Hallucinations may cease after a few weeks or may persist in various forms for something like eighteen months.

Hallucinations may occur to people after losing their sight or most of it. There may be other causes. When I was told by my consultant that the loss of sight would almost certainly be permanent I was not told that I might be one of the few who do experience hallucinations, even though it is known that this may happen to a small proportion of people after losing their sight.

## **FIRST EXPERIENCES**

On a bright April morning my daughter was driving my wife and me on the M40. Suddenly a tree appeared above the opposite carriageway. It was distorted by being gnarled with age. and twisted like a curly willow. It grew larger and larger until it disappeared over the roof of the car. A few minutes later, the same tree appeared and disappeared, this happened several times.

Later, driving in the same direction but down country lanes, there were hedges on both sides of the road. Above the left hedge I soon noticed a line of three large ornate houses, built in brick, about a quarter of a mile away. They stayed just above the horizon for a few minutes and then got lost in the hedge.

I realised that these buildings and the gnarled trees were hallucinations. I had heard of the word 'hallucinations', but previously I had no understanding of what it meant.

## **A PANORAMIC VIEW**

One hallucination has been with me for many months. This comes when sitting comfortably in the conservatory, it starts facing north-west and heading southwards, doing a U turn on this imaginary railway. It feels like a journey on a rail track on a carriage moving from right to left.

The foreground of my vision is occupied by a vast crater. The view beyond the crater is of Victorian style, brick built buildings, 100 years or more old. Their colour is a dark red, they are three to four stories high and the windows have fancy surrounds. There is a pile of rocks down the slope of the crater. When I watched one day a flock of jackdaws flew into these rocks and landed with their black feathers contrasting against the background of rocks.

Looking to the left there is a long street of five to six story houses, each one having a small shop window. One day a large double-decker bus emerged from that street and was driven slowly down the road in the crater. The bus had been utterly smashed at the front by vandals and plastered with mud. It was once coloured cream and blue.

Above at that point there is a large building which might be the town hall, leading right up to the railway line. We are now looking westwards. The panoramic movement could have been achieved by swinging the chair I am sitting in, but in fact on many occasions the whole scene was on the move while I sat still.

Behind the large building we come to an open space full of people with their backs to us, because this is a market and they are looking at stalls. There are also two of the cream and blue buses, parked at the side of the road; they are not in any way damaged by the vandals. The colour of all these buildings ranges from dark red to light grey.

Looking south west there is a long row of modern houses with cream pebble-dash fronts. Behind them there is a cluster of mature trees, about a quarter of a mile away.

We swing round a little further to look south. We see some fairly modern houses of three stories, built at the meeting point of two streets. There is no movement of people so we swing further to look south east. There is a modern box-like building, painted cream, looking like a block of flats three floors high. It is quite close to our carriage and as we roll on we realise that we are approaching a tunnel and everything goes black.

The whole of this panoramic scene remained the same, almost exactly the same from day to day, for about five months - whenever I looked up at the starting point. Then this first view changed to a group of trees which were much higher than real trees. The distinction between them was that the imagined trees were bare, while the real trees were completely clothed with

their leaves. This hallucination continued for several months, until the real trees dropped their leaves and were no different from their imaginary neighbours.

## **DEVASTATION AND DELIGHT**

My journeys by car to hospitals in Coventry and Warwick produced several new types of hallucination. Miles of open road were supplemented by the sudden creation of recently built rows of suburban houses; vehicles appeared ahead of us, travelling slower than our car. As we approached them we almost hit them before they disappeared. I said nothing to the driver.

At Coventry hospital the car was parked in an area where major work was being done and excavated. This perhaps triggered a hallucination of vast craters on each side of our road and also building work which included a very large pillar. Our car headed straight for that pillar until the image evaporated.

In the spacious entrance hall the hospital was teeming with people. Most of them were in a hurry and it was very noticeable that people who were walking fast adopted a gliding motion when they passed me. Once a nurse demonstrated that glide but came to a standstill for a few seconds. She bent down to pick up something but her imaginary body stayed upright.

On leaving the hospital on another day I was surrounded by beautiful enormous valleys, typical of Austria, and right in front of me there was an enormous glacier.

This scene accented my forlorn hope to be able to capture my hallucinations by camera.

## **LOCAL SCENES**

As my wife and I walked along our pavement we saw that a dozen or more cars were parked for the day. What I noticed vividly was that every car was liberally plastered with masses of thick mud; and as I turned to look at the houses with their small gardens I was amused to see that the carefully tended gardens had been utterly trashed and the soil piled up against the front windows, as if by some crazy vandal on a bulldozer.

A streak of mischief was lurking in my brain.

Opposite the Post Office there are several trees growing, planted together down to the river. My bulldozer got busy one dark night and piled the soil up steeply to bury several trees half way up their trunks. A similar process had obviously happened in the grounds of Coventry hospital; as I looked out of the parked ambulance door the nearby trees were half buried by a mountain of soil deposited by my bulldozer.

On another day I was waiting for my wife outside the bakery and watching the traffic going past. To my dismay a double-decker bus drove across the road to the wrong side to face oncoming traffic. Fortunately the bus evaporated before the imminent crash could occur!

Another village scene occurs when cyclists ride on the upper deck of double-decker bicycles.

## **INDOOR OBSERVATIONS**

At home we have a living flame gas fire. This was not in use during the summer, but my imagination contributed friendly glows amongst the black coals.

In the early months I had a collection of distinctive hallucinations. My brain seemed to be saying that it did not like to see a plain coloured or white surface. A smooth white surface was given a bold, pale grey leaf pattern, and a plain piece of mushroom coloured carpet was given a pale grey pattern of large leaves like spinach leaves. This was an interesting phenomenon but could be hazardous when walking around the house. After nine months of sight loss I still see a pattern of bricks above our fireplace. In reality the chimney breast has a plain white wall. The ornaments and framed pictures on the wall all remain in position, but their plain white background has been replaced in my mind by bricks the same size as those in the fire surround.

## **ABOMINATIONS**

When our volunteer taxi pulled into the car park at Warwick Hospital recently I was surprised to see that the familiar hospital buildings had disappeared behind a complete fence of massive advertising hoardings. Here was a new phenomenon for me.

On the way home the whole of Warwick was plastered with these hoardings, and subsequent hospital visits have been exactly the same. This was the most disturbing and disappointing experience of all my hallucinations.

## **BEAUTIFUL THINGS**

Early in my experience of hallucinations any bed of small blue flowers would produce a wonderful sparkle. No other colour had this effect, which has now ceased, but I am reminded of it by the sparkling of the fibre optic Christmas tree.

## **ON THE MOVE**

For the last nine months I have been 'blessed' with various kinds of hallucination. As soon as a journey starts, the hallucinations start. The images are so different from reality that I am completely disoriented for the whole journey.

Outside our village there are several miles of open country roads, but my creative brain thinks that there should be some modern houses on each side of these roads. When we reach a town the buildings I see are entirely different from reality.

When we are in a line of traffic we often appear to catch up with motor vehicles, and almost run into them but the imminent crash never happens. I dare not tell the driver what I have seen!

We have driven down narrow winding town streets at breakneck speed where the car is penetrating thick walls and comes through undamaged.

One journey appeared to be through massive excavations, which my daughter later told me were not real. On the open road we rapidly approached an enormous square pillar and I was truly relieved when the threatened impact never happened. I soon became accustomed to such exciting escapades.

## **PERIPHERAL VISION**

A person who is registered blind may still have some peripheral vision. This can be extremely useful. It may be sufficient to eat food on a plate and walk around - but not good enough to recognise people, or see approaching traffic at 20 yards. An important use for peripheral vision is to look away slightly from the object you wish to see. For instance I can only see whether a light is switched on by not looking directly at it, but looking a few degrees to its left. Similarly when watching TV the centre of the screen is useless until I look at the top left corner of the screen. Then two or three people may be seen near the centre of the screen. In the same way, I cannot see whether the gas fire is on until I look away from its centre. When applying this method to reading, identifying characters, the difficulty is to put them together to make a word. I find this almost impossible.

## **RESEARCH**

A large amount of research has been done in recent years in the UK and USA and is still continuing. In London the Macular Disease Society has to date invested over £1.4 million for Dr. Dominic ffytche of the Institute of Psychiatry. There are over 100,000 cases of sight loss in the U his research into Charles

Bonnet Syndrome in a 40 minute lecture found on the internet. This describes in detail how the images are created. It has been found that only about a tenth of hallucination sufferers are willing to tell their families and carers because the common reaction to that news is to say that people are going mad, or suffering from dementia. The medical profession and carers need to be alerted to this fallacy.

## **PS**

As I have not met another Charles Bonnet sufferer I have no idea how other people have experienced hallucinations. So I must add my background.

In 2002 I had a slight stroke which took the sight of my right eye. except for slight peripheral vision. My left eye had some macular degeneration and a cataract. The cataract was operated on with great success. As I had been unable to drive the car for several months I took the 1AM (Institute of Advanced Motorists) examination and passed the test. This not only improved my driving, but satisfied the family that I could successfully drive on one good eye. This served me well until April 2012 when a blood clot stopped oxygen reaching the cells of the left eye retina. This left me with a moderate amount of peripheral vision in the left eye and half as much in the right eye. I am registered as severely sight impaired (blind). I can eat well but my balance is poor. With care I can safely walk around indoors (and out of doors with a stick), although everything is dark. The computer screen is useless.

- a personal story by **Graham Stephens**