When I was a child I had a vision of fourth dimensional time; of paths trod by my own ghosts, past and future. My parents and my grandparents lived six houses apart on the same suburban South Liverpool street. In front of my parents’ house (where they still reside) is a square of turf for kids to play on which we call “the grass patch”. A journey from one house to the other could be made one of three ways: diagonally across the grass patch; via the strip of pavement which runs round its front closest to the road; or on the pavement round its back, past the front fences of numbers 50, 48, 46, and 44, and then at a right-angle up the far side, past the garage at number 42. I was on my way home from Gran’s at the age of perhaps seven or eight when I was suddenly struck by the thought that I must already have made the journey a hundred times, and that I would make it thou-
sands more. I crossed over on to the opposite side of the road so I could get a better look at that strip of land where, I realised with a weird dizzy feeling, I had already spent a good chunk of my young life. I saw – imagined, I suppose, but with absolute clarity – at first just a handful, but gradually a crowd. The diagonal route across the grass was the most heavily populated, in spite of all those warnings about muddy shoes. There I was at the age of three, four, five, and as I stared longer, there I was at ten, at seventeen, at twenty, at thirty; infant, child, adolescent, and adult overlaid in a blur of bodies, limbs and faces. An entire lifetime of journeys between those two fixed points in a single image – an image I can still recall perfectly to this day. My younger selves dominate the picture, not because of nostalgia, but because I would walk the walk five or six or more times a day when I was a child, the frequency growing less and less beyond the age of ten. Gran died in 2010, Grandad followed her the next year, and their house – the house my mum was born in – was sold soon after. I couldn't have known that then, yet still there were (and are) very few, if any, versions of myself in that strange multi-exposure vision much past the age of thirty. For a long, long time after that mid-80s day, every time I made the journey I knew I was walking among, and with, and through all those other versions of myself. Versions which remain frozen there to this day – not just in my head, but in some very real sense. I’ve never discussed any of this with anyone – never even thought about it in any terms other than those which my younger self knew to be true – and in fact, I had all but forgotten about it up until just a few days ago.

How can I best define the concept of “Spirits of Place”? It sounds good, but what do I even mean by the phrase? These are some of the questions I was asking myself last week. You might well think I should already have answered them quite a while ago; before commissioning the twelve pieces for this book, or indeed organising the conference/ritual mash-up thing which led to its creation. But no. At least, not exactly. It’s easy enough to give people a rough idea of what you mean about something, especially if you’re trying to give them just enough to spin their own ideas out of it. So, let’s backtrack a little here. Not as far back as the 1980s, but to the first quarter of this year.

Spirits of Place was the name I chose for a one day event I organised and put on here in Liverpool in April, 2016. The idea came about when I saw that there was a conference space available for hire in the former Manor House in Calderstones Park; a park which I’ve been visiting on a regular basis for most of my life. There you’ll find a playground, the duck and goose crowded mini-lake, a café, an ice-cream parlour, ornamental gardens, a miniature railway, and the remains of a Neolithic chambered tomb.

The tomb stood just outside the boundaries of the park between 3000 BCE (give or take a few centuries) and 1804 CE, when it was pulled apart to make way for a house being built. All that survived of the tomb were six stones, each covered with curious spirals, circles, and other ancient engravings. These Calderstones – the origin of the name long lost now – were re-arranged into a rough stone circle under orders of lead shot manufacturer Joseph Need Walker in 1845. Standing at the South East entrance to Walker’s estate – mere metres from the tomb’s original position – the stones soon drew the interest of several 19th century antiquarians believing it to be their original “Druidic” location and configuration. There they remained until 1954 when they were removed under orders of Liverpool Corporation. Covered with more than a century’s worth of moss and soot, the stones were cleaned and latex impressions taken, revealing details of carving which had previously been all but invisible to the naked eye. The first thorough survey of the stones...
I became more fascinated than ever with the Calderstones and their history. How these man-made objects had been a permanent feature of the local landscape since mammoths walked the earth. Key elements of a tomb built before the Egyptian pyramids, marked with symbols which pre-date written language in this part of the world; their original meanings and purpose lost in the mists of time. In December 2014 I had one of these magical marks – a thumbprint-like spiral pattern from the Calderstone that Forde-Johnson designated as Stone E – tattooed in black ink on my right forearm. Although I have no way of knowing what it meant when it was carved, I know what it represents now. It is a connection between myself and the landscape; between the people who lived and died and left the mark here five millennia ago, and the life myself and my family live here now. A five-thousand-year 4D snapshot of that crucial not-quite-a-mile of South Liverpool parkland would show the Calderstones as the only constant feature – the spiral patterns graven upon their surfaces an almost perfect map of their glacial, stop-motion meanderings around its narrow environs. The Calderstones physically anchor Calderstones Park to England's ancient past. They are the proverbial heavy ball-bearing on the rubber-sheet of Time; creating a pocket of deep history into which stories, and spirits, are drawn in ever-decreasing orbits. And that is why I decided that putting on an event in the park would be a good idea. An attempt at harnessing that energy, and raising those spirits; the Spirits of Place.

The core concept of the symposium became that of this book: stories are embedded in the world around us – in metal, in brick, in concrete, and in wood. In the very earth beneath our feet. Our history surrounds us and the tales we tell, true or otherwise, are always rooted in what has gone before. The event was structured like a spiral: the Calderstones as its centre, with nine...
incredible speakers spinning their talks out of that single point in ever broadening arcs. I wanted to make it almost like a kind of happening, or a ritual, crossed with a regular conference; a magical experience in a very real sense. And, it worked. Perhaps too well.

My own opening talk that day was entitled “Invoking the Spirits of Place” and served not just as a preamble, but as an explicit calling. My closing paragraph read as follows:

Today we call upon the spirits of this place; the spirits of those pre-English ancestors who moved and marked stones and mounded earth with their bare hands, not just to honour their dead, but so that we might know something of what they believed and knew. Upon the hidden race of fairies and elves which they later became in popular folklore and imagination. Vertumnos – god of growth and fruit and seasons, Ceres – goddess of agriculture, grain, fertility and motherhood, Hercules – strong and powerful man-god protector of this parkland’s gateway. The kodarna, the canoti, the wood sprites, boggarts, goblins, and pooka. We call upon the Lady of the Forest, upon the spirit of the ancient Allerton Oak. All of these spirits we invoke, and we ask them to show us, to teach us. To share with us their knowledge of this place – this small suburban green-space which is all green-space, which is everything. A slice of the natural world which we kid ourselves we have altered and mastered and tamed but which, in reality, is merely a fraction, a sliver of the true order of things. A tiny piece of the ancient green-land which waits impatiently for the moment when it might reclaim what is rightfully its. All across South Liverpool centuries-old roots ripple through tarmac, absorb railings and bow walls. Stop-motion brambles wind cunningly around fallen sandstone slabs, spider-walk through skullocket knotholes, cascade over weather-worn fence-panel and post in a prickled, black-fruit foamed spray. The thin veneer of civilisation can be seen, almost heard, crumbling one driveway-fracturing dandelion at a time. This place does not belong to us alone, here our ancestors, our history, our folklore are all alive and waiting to be rediscovered. To reclaim and re-enchant this earthly realm.

So, I bid you welcome. Welcome to South Liverpool, to Calderstones Park, and to Spirits of Place.

On that day, standing there in Joseph Need Walker’s Manor House in the heart of the park, speaking those words felt truly powerful, truly magical. A spell was cast, and though I had intended as much, I hadn’t anticipated it to work in such a literal sense. If I had expected it, I would surely have thought to lay the ghosts – to release the spirits – at the end of the day. But I didn’t. There was no dismissal, no formal farewell to the host of ancestors, thought-forms, and deities myself, guests, and attendees had spent six or so hours talking and thinking, remembering and imagining into life.

I’d made an attempt at recording the day’s talks and that evening managed a very quick listen through to check the quality. It wasn’t great, which I had pretty much expected. I only had two mics set up and most people were moving around a lot giving their talks. It was no big thing; it would have been nice if it worked out but didn’t really matter that it hadn’t. The only part that sounded okay was the last talk of the day which had been a sit down interview with Ramsey Campbell about his use
of Merseyside, Liverpool, and even Calderstones Park itself in his fiction. I cringed, as many people do, at the sound of my own voice asking the questions, but otherwise it was fine. Exhausted then, I passed up the kind offer of speakers Cat Vincent, David Southwell, and Gary Budden to join them for a pint or three, and instead opted for a rare early night.

In my dream that night I was wearing my headphones, listening to my own voice on the recorder. It wasn’t the interview with Ramsey this time though, it was my own opening invocation. The quality was better than I’d thought. Only, now I didn’t recognise the words. I couldn’t remember saying any of this. And then, as one does in dreams, I knew that it wasn’t me I could hear; it was something else using my recorded voice to speak. I asked out loud who it was, and my voice answered with an electric hiss “the spirits in the wires”. It was the kind of nightmare that doesn’t really make sense if you try to explain it, but those whispered words had me wide awake, heart pounding, drenched in sweat that night.

Night terrors notwithstanding, Spirits of Place was a success. Out of that success came the entirely unexpected offer from Daily Grail Publishing to put together a book based on the same idea. Almost immediately though, I realised a book would need to be handled very differently. The event was about being in that specific physical place on that specific day – about shared experience rooted, one way or another, in that landscape. The book needed to tap into more universal themes and ideas about the relationships between landscape, history, story, art, magic, and humanity. Once I realised this, I knew I had to look further afield than the U.K., and beyond those who might be thought of as “the usual suspects” when it came to this kind of writing. Well okay, maybe some of those usual suspects are here, but you may note that London and Northampton are barely mentioned, let alone visited, within these pages.

While its geographic spectrum may be broader than other books dealing with the topic of place, there is a huge amount of commonality between the essays within Spirits of Place. The way our identities and beliefs are embedded in our surroundings; the places we grow up, or live, or come from. Equally, how we interpret and re-interpret ourselves in certain places. How language can sometimes fail us when we try to express the dichotomy of personal experience and shared reality; of things we know to be true and things which we can prove, or explain to others. Things embedded in our culture, often at a hyperlocal level. This island, this town, this village, this dirt track, this house, this room; every one has its spirits. A blur of people, of experiences, of lives lived, dreams dreamed, of gods birthed, of loves lost, of deaths died, of journeys across the grass patch.

Stick the push-pins in the map, connect the dots with winding twine like every good movie detective knows you should. A pattern emerges. It is not a pentagram, not a star-sign or constellation, not an arrow or X marking the spot. It is a spiral.