

# Borley Rectory

Until its destruction by fire in 1939, Borley Rectory, a Victorian building in Essex in southern England, was the focus of persistent claims of [poltergeist](#) and haunting phenomena. The claims were publicized during the 1940s in books and articles by [Harry Price](#), a British paranormal investigator, notably *The Most Haunted House in England* (1940) and *The End of Borley Rectory* (1946). After Price's death in 1948, his claims about Borley were challenged by members of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR). Much of the phenomena he reported are consistent with better attested claims; however, most parapsychologists now consider the Borley research unreliable as evidence of paranormal phenomena. The episode remains significant as a historical case study, highlighting the challenges involved in investigating high-profile cases.

## Background: Origins, Legends, Occupants

Borley Rectory was built in 1863 by Borley's first rector, Rev Henry Dawson Ellis Bull (1833–1892). It was a two-storey red brick building with twenty-three rooms and three staircases in grounds of nearly four acres. It was located opposite Borley Church, on the Essex side of the Essex-Suffolk border. Nearby was a cottage, part of the original stable block, and a variety of smaller buildings. The rectory was badly damaged by fire on 27 February 1939 and was demolished in 1944.

A local legend told of a monk being beheaded after having eloped with a nun, and of the periodic appearance of a phantom coach and horses with a headless driver. However, claims that the rectory occupied the site of a former monastery were never substantiated, while those of a nunnery having once existed in the nearby village of Bures were discredited.<sup>1</sup>

Essays published in the 1940s explored a second local legend, that a former French Roman Catholic nun, who married into the Waldegrave family of Borley, was in 1667 strangled by her husband in a building that had occupied the site of Borley Rectory and buried beneath the cellar floor.<sup>2</sup> The Rev Canon WJ Phythian-Adams investigated the case and concluded that a French woman known as 'Marie Lairre' may have been the victim.

After Henry Bull's death in 1892 the building passed to his son Henry Foyster Bull, known as Harry. The rectory remained empty for eighteen months after his death in 1927. A new rector, Rev Guy Eric Smith, moved in with his wife in 1928 but left the following year. In 1930, Rev Lionel Algernon Foyster (1878–1945), a first cousin of the Bulls, moved into the rectory with his wife Marianne (1899–1992) and their adopted daughter Adelaide aged two and a half.

Foyster suffered from chronic illness and retired in 1935. He was replaced by the Rev Alfred Clifford Henning in 1936, who lived at nearby Liston. His successor Rev Lanfranc Mathias also lived at Liston from 1955 when he was appointed rector until his resignation in 1967, when he was replaced by Canon Leslie Pennell, by which time the rectory was no longer standing. The only other people to have lived in the

rectory had been Captain William Hart Gregson who had lived there with his sons from 1938 for a few months and a number of different observers between 1937 and 1938, during which time the psychic investigator Harry Price rented the premises to investigate alleged paranormal activity there.

The stables of the rectory were converted into servants' accommodation. The cottage, as it became known, was not damaged by the fire, and was used by a number of people involved in the Borley investigations, including Francois d'Arles (real name Frank Pearless) during the Foyster incumbency, Mr and Mrs Arbon who were tenants before and during the Price investigations, James Turner from 1947 to 1950, and Mr and Mrs Bacon until 1972. The latter sold off much of the grounds in the 1960s to allow four bungalows to be built.

## Claims of Paranormal Activity

Borley Rectory had a reputation for haunting phenomena at least from the time of the Bull's incumbency in the late nineteenth century:

- A servant of the Bulls, Mrs E Byford, claimed to have heard footsteps when no other living person was present.
- Mr P Shaw Jeffrey, a future headmaster of Colchester Royal Grammar School, stayed at the rectory at various times in 1885 and 1886 and described 'lots of small adventures; stones falling from nowhere, objects moving by themselves...' He also claimed that he 'saw the nun several times and often heard the coach go clattering by'.<sup>3</sup>
- On the afternoon of 28 July 1900, four of the Bull sisters (Ethel, Freda, Mabel and Dodie) witnessed a spectral nun in the garden.<sup>4</sup> Later appearances of the nun were witnessed by a number of people including Edward Cooper, the rectory gardener; Fred Cartwright, a local carpenter; a village girl and a reporter.<sup>5</sup>
- An apparition of Harry Bull and other deceased individuals were said to have been seen on several occasions.<sup>6</sup>
- The phenomena seemed to increase during the incumbency of the Smiths in 1928. They had known nothing of the rectory's reputation, but experienced incidents such as the servants' bells ringing on their own, shadowy figures and whispered words.

## Harry Price's First Investigation (1929)

Finding that local people were reluctant to visit the rectory because of its menacing reputation, the Smiths asked the national newspaper *Daily Mirror* to put them in touch with someone who might provide assistance. The newspaper contacted Price, then director of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research and a leading investigator of paranormal claims possessing competent amateur conjuring skills,<sup>7</sup> (an essential aid to uncovering fakery). Price, accompanied by his secretary Lucy Kaye, joined *Daily Mirror* reporter Vernon Wall at the rectory on 12 June 1929, and interviewed everyone present.<sup>8</sup> They include:

- the incumbents the Rev Guy Eric Smith and his wife Mabel

- Mary Pearson, the rectory maid
- the Bull sisters (daughters of the rectory's builder Henry Bull)
- sisters of Harry Bull (another incumbent)
- Edward Cooper, the rectory gardener and his wife
- Fred Cartwright, a carpenter who worked at the rectory
- Rev Lionel Foyster and his wife Marianne
- Lady Whitehouse and Dom Richard Whitehouse, acquaintances of the Foysters
- Rev Alfred Clifford Henning, Rector of Borley and Liston
- local inhabitants Charles Browne and Rosemary M Williams

During that night and early the next day, Price reported, poltergeist-type phenomena occurred: a glass roof was broken; a red glass candlestick was smashed; pebbles were thrown. 'Spirit' raps were communicated from a séance held in the 'Blue Room' via the wooden frame of a mirror, he said.<sup>9</sup>

Following Price's visit, the Smiths decamped to nearby Long Melford to escape the attentions of sensation-seekers, maintaining parish duties from there; Smith resigned altogether as rector the following year. Price, however, continued to have access to the rectory and conducted further investigations there with Lord Charles Hope, a member of the SPR and Council Member of Price's National Laboratory of Psychical Research, and journalist Charles Sutton, a reporter from the *Daily Mail*.

## The Foysters

In October 1930, the Foyster family moved into the rectory. Phenomena of a poltergeist-like nature immediately started to occur, growing in intensity between 1931 and 1932. During this time Price claimed that at least 2000 inexplicable phenomena took place,<sup>10</sup> including:

- sounds: footsteps, whispers, bells, raps and knocks
- scents of perfume and incense
- stones, bottles, soap and other objects thrown
- locking and unlocking of doors
- windows shattered
- furniture overturned
- spontaneous fires
- spontaneous writing on walls and paper
- Marianne Foyster thrown from her bed<sup>11</sup>

Price was inclined to believe the Foysters, since some of the phenomena could not have been produced by them fraudulently and there were many positive eyewitness accounts. However, he cast doubt on Marianne's role during one of the disturbances, suggesting that she might be responsible for the phenomena they witnessed on that occasion (5 October 1931). In 1931, Sir George and Lady Whitehouse told Price they witnessed stone-throwing and bell-ringing, which was especially prevalent during visits by their nephew Edwin Whitehouse (later Dom Richard Whitehouse).

In the same year [William Salter](#), a member of the SPR,[12](#) visited the Foysters and advised them to beware of Price's penchant for publicity.

The phenomena increased considerably, seemingly with a focus on Marianne Foyster, as recorded by Lionel Foyster in a *Diary of Occurrences*.[13](#) The events occurred as follows:

- wine was turned into ink
- Marianne appeared to faint and was helped to bed by Mrs Goldney (SPR investigator)
- a wine bottle was thrown down the stairs
- bell ringing was heard
- a phantom hand was seen
- Marianne was locked in her room[14](#)

In 1932, the Marks Tey Spiritualist Circle visited along with a medium, Guy L'Estrange, in an attempt to 'cleanse' the rectory, following which the phenomena became less prevalent.

During the next few years Marianne was away in London for much of the time and Lionel was increasingly ill. The Foysters departed from Borley in 1935 and the rectory was left vacant.

## **Investigations by Harry Price from 1937**

From May 1937 to 1938, Price rented the rectory in order to carry out a detailed investigation. Following an appeal for helpers in *The Times* on 25 May, 1937 he created a team of 48 'official observers', including an army colonel, a doctor and an engineer, Sidney Herbert Glanville, who stayed at the rectory on many occasions and wrote up his experiences.[15](#) Price provided guidance for the investigation[16](#), however no official log of events was kept.

The reports collated by Price included séance information discovered by Glanville's daughter Helen, concerning claims by a 'spirit communicator' identifying herself as a French nun Marie Lairre, that she had been murdered at Borley and buried there.[17](#)

After Price's departure the rectory was bought by William Hart Gregson, who took possession in December 1938. The building was badly damaged by a fire started by the overturning of an oil lamp on the night of 27 February, 1939. However this did not stop further investigations taking place before the rectory's demolition in 1944. Twenty-five vigils were held in the ruins, arranged by Andrew JB Robertson, a lecturer at St John's College, Cambridge, with the help of university students. Some inexplicable sounds were heard and strange temperature changes were recorded, but apparent instances of hoaxing were also reported.[18](#)

Excavation work was carried out in 1943 under Price's supervision in the church and the rectory cellars, leading to the discovery of a female human jaw bone, medallions and other articles. Price believed these lent authenticity to the events reported to have occurred in the rectory, because of their age and relevance to the

manifestations. However, their origin was later disputed, queries arising about their precise dating along with the possibility of them having been placed there more recently than suggested.[19](#)

During the rectory's demolition in April 1944, Price visited the site with Cynthia Ledsham, a reporter for *Life* magazine, and photographer David Scherman. During this visit, Scherman took a photo said by Price to be a brick levitating, but the circumstances of the event are not clear.[20](#)

Following the demolition of the rectory, poltergeist activity decreased, appearing mainly in the church. However, Price maintained his interest, lamenting that '... some university department, or the Royal Society, did not *officially* [his emphasis] take the Rectory under its wing, investigate the phenomena independently, and issue an official report on its findings.'[21](#) He added that he would have liked to have visited Le Havre and study any records there that might have provided evidence for the identity of 'Marie Lairre'. He was still visiting the church as late as 1947 – the year before he died – and gave a fund-raising slide lecture about the rectory in nearby Sudbury. A possible motivation for his prolonged interest in Borley was the hope that it would secure his fame as a psychical researcher.

## Controversy and Scepticism

### Acusations Against the Foysters

Many claims and counter-claims of fraud were made against Marianne Foyster. After a particularly dramatic evening in October, Price departed on bad terms with the couple, having suggested that Marianne was responsible for the phenomena. In subsequent critiques, Marianne was accused of faking some of the incidents, for her own amusement or to cover up clandestine affairs (she ran a flower shop in London with Francois d'Arles and married Robert Vincent O'Neil shortly after the death of her husband in April 1945).

Foyster gave interviews in 1958 to an American private investigator Robert Swanson, and in 1977 to the psychic investigator Iris Owen.[22](#) She told Owen that Price knew the *Diary of Occurrences* was fictitious and that Lionel Foyster intended to turn the diary into a best-seller, similar to the 'Amherst poltergeist' best-seller.[23](#) She further charged her husband with having faked some of the phenomena himself, in order to observe people's reactions. However, she insisted that sometimes neither of them were responsible for incidents.

### SPR Investigation

Following Price's death in 1948, the SPR initiated an investigation into Price's activities. Its report, authored by [Eric Dingwall](#), [Mollie Goldney](#) and [Trevor Hall](#), was published in its *Proceedings* in 1956. The investigators found little reason to trust the veracity of Price, or the genuineness of the phenomena, which they concluded could have normal explanations:[24](#)

- The apparitions could have been illusions or hallucinations.

- The sounds could have been caused by rodents, outside activity or unknown movement within the rectory.
- The scent of incense is hardly anomalous in the environment of a church and can linger for a longer period than one might expect.
- Physical phenomena could be explained in terms of coincidence or accidental movement.
- All other occurrences could be attributed to mistaken or distorted memory as to their actual circumstances.
- Equally, some might be attributed to outright deception, to alleviate boredom or for commercial gain.

The report concluded:

The question as to whether Price presented a deliberately distorted account of the Borley affair in his books is not, we think, now in doubt.[25](#)

We cannot now determine with certainty the extent of Price's belief, if any, in the paranormality of the events he described so graphically. It is certain, we think, that he did not believe in many of the phenomena ... As we have seen, if the material lacked sensational elements it would seem that he was prepared at times to provide these himself ... his work is wanting from the point of view of serious research and that, by his love of publicity and his temperamental deficiencies, he failed to achieve lasting results such as few can have had the luck and responsibility of approaching.[26](#)

### **More Accusations Against Price**

Price's credibility was further damaged when, shortly after his death in 1948, a *Daily Mail* journalist Charles Sutton accused him of having faked phenomena during one of his early visits to the rectory (for instance by throwing pebbles).

Mrs Smith – wife of the incumbent rector G Eric Smith – wrote to Goldney and the *Daily Mail* (26 May 1949) condemning Price's *The Most Haunted House in England*.[27](#) However, this was surprising, since she seemed to have believed in the genuineness of the manifestations during their early days. It was suggested (by Alfred Henning) that she might have been disappointed that her own plans to write a book about Borley were frustrated by Price's bestseller.[28](#)

### **Vindication of Price**

A report by Robert Hastings, published by the SPR, sought to vindicate Price.[29](#) Hastings re-examined much of the evidence in detail – including the testimonies of Charles Sutton and Mrs Smith, the excavated materials, the 'flying brick' incident, the Foysters' writings, the graffiti, and other allegations of Price's manipulation – concluding that the critics' aspersions against his personal integrity were largely unfounded. Hastings further argued that the originators of the SPR's 'Borley Report' had their own agenda: to destroy Price's reputation and to demonstrate that no paranormal events could possibly have happened at Borley. Later attacks by Trevor Hall, one of the three, on other psychic investigators (notably [Edmund](#)

[Gurney](#) and [William Crookes](#)) have been criticized as tendentious and imaginative speculation.

## Later Activity

After the rectory was demolished in 1944, paranormal activity allegedly transferred to the church opposite.

Paranormal incidents are said to have continued during the latter half of the twentieth century: reports were made by James Turner, a resident of the cottage until 1951, and following his departure the Bacon family.

Rev Henning maintained his interest in the phenomena, especially in the church, and wrote a booklet about his experiences at Borley.<sup>30</sup>

In 1954 and 1955, author Philip Paul carried out digs on the site to try to learn whether the Catholic Waldegrave family might have built an underground hiding place or escape route for priests in their care. (The discovery of a secret tunnel might have given clues about anomalous activity in the rectory.) Halstead Rural District Council found a tunnel in 1957 when undertaking water mains works.<sup>31</sup>

Alleged paranormal activity in the church, a subject of much comment by witnesses during the rectory investigations, increased during the 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

Geoffrey Croom-Hollingsworth, an amateur psychic investigator, visited the church frequently in the 1970s along with colleagues from the Enfield Parapsychical Research Group, and made audio recordings of sounds said to be inexplicable.

The area's notoriety as a 'haunted location' has attracted growing numbers of rowdy visitors to the church building and graveyard, necessitating the installation of closed-circuit television and other security measures.

Poltergeist activity is still reported, with investigation disseminated mainly via the Internet. Vincent O'Neil, Marianne Foyster's adopted son, administrates [the official Borley Rectory website](#). Paul Adams and Eddie Brazil established a [website dedicated to Harry Price](#) in 2004, where information about the case is published.

Books, articles<sup>33</sup> and television programmes<sup>34</sup> about Borley Rectory have variously described, defended or criticised the claims and investigations. YouTube hosts full and partial documentaries.<sup>35</sup> Carrion Films started casting in May 2014 for a film based on Borley Rectory.

Melvyn Willin

## Literature

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## **Lexscien**

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Some recent Investigations in the Borley Rectory Case (1943-46). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 33, 107-10. An update on Harry Price's book *The Most Haunted House In England* giving the results of investigations to 1939. Gives an outline of noises ('footsteps, knockings, tappings, hammerings, thuds, bangs, cracks, rumblings, the padding of feet, the stamping of horses' hooves, and whistlings' (109)), visual impressions, and apparitions accompanied by cold breezes. The apparition of a nun faked by students was not noticed by the investigators, although they were impressed by the hoaxers' poltergeist phenomena and knockings (109-10). Correspondence (1947-48). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 34, 177-82.

Dingwall, E.J., Goldney, K.M., & Hall, T.H. (1955). The haunting of Borley Rectory: A critical survey of the evidence, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 51, 1-180 (*index*). A sceptical examination of a supposed haunting investigated and publicized over many years by the independent psychical researcher and journalist Harry Price. Detailed scrutiny of the events convinces the authors that the case, far from being the outstanding example of psychic phenomena that Price claimed in his books, was a concoction of suggestion, rumour and outright fraud. A chronology and abstract is given: the establishment of the rectory in 1863; the reporting of apparitions and other phenomena; the invitation by new occupants in 1929, via a national newspaper, to a psychical research society to quell rumours of hauntings; the ensuing publicity and appearance of Harry Price, followed immediately by poltergeist disturbances; the arrival in 1930 of new incumbents and frequent reports by them of poltergeist phenomena; their departure in 1935 and Price's renting of the building in 1937 for research purposes; planchette communications concerning a murdered nun; reports of phenomena by new owners; the destruction of the rectory by fire in 1939; continuing national interest following the publication of books by Price; the excavation of human bones; doubts and accusations by some of those involved. Chapters 1-3 deal with the facade of suggestion put up by Price (1); the building of the rectory (9); and its history to 1929 (18). The involvement of Price is then considered (29), with comparisons of Price's own claims against the expressed doubts of others tending to show that he may have manufactured the 'phenomena', and/or that they were caused by local pranksters. Phenomena following the arrival of new occupants in 1930 are analysed (75), including the appearance of supposedly paranormal wall graffiti, and are suspected of being manufactured by the young wife to attract attention. Price's tenancy in 1937-8 is described (124) and the phenomena supposedly witnessed by investigators hired by him is attributed largely to suggestion. A final period following the building's destruction is found to be characterised by exaggerated publicity, credulity and possible hoaxing (143); this includes a much-discussed incident where a brick in mid-air, captured by a press photographer and claimed as paranormal evidence by Price, may have had a quite prosaic explanation (162). In their conclusions the authors speculate on Price's personality and motives (167).

Coleman, M. et al. (1955-56). The Borley Report: Some criticisms and comments, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 249-64. Draws attention to weaknesses in the report, and in view of the seriousness of the allegations of cheating by Harry Price expresses surprise at the lack of unequivocal evidence. The authors of the report briefly reply. Correction (1959-60). *Journal of the Society for*

*Psychical Research* 40, 194. Comment and Correspondence (1966-72). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 55, 65-175; (1969-70). 45, 183. 115-24, 230-37, 315-6.

Owen, I.M. & Mitchell, P. (1979-80). The alleged haunting of Borley Rectory. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 50, 149-62. Marianne Foyster, an occupant of the Rectory criticized by Harry Price in his book, here gives her version of the events. Correspondence (1994-95). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 60, 414-15.

Coleman, M.H. (1996-97). The flying bricks of Borley. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 61, 388-91. Throws doubt on particular claims of paranormal activity made by the researcher Harry Price.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) Cited in Downes (1993).
- [2.](#) Cited in Dingwall et al. (1956); Price (1946), 179-94, 212-14, 260-67.
- [3.](#) Cited in Adams, Brazil, & Underwood (2009), 15-16.
- [4.](#) Price (1940), 44-45.
- [5.](#) Price (1936), 29-30.
- [6.](#) Dingwall, Goldney, & Hall (1956).
- [7.](#) For details of Harry Price see 'The Harry Price Archive', Senate House Library, University of London.
- [8.](#) An extended list of observers and interviewees can be found in Price (1940), 244-245.
- [9.](#) Tabori & Underwood (1973).
- [10.](#) Dingwall et al. (1956). For a detailed list see Price (1940).
- [11.](#) For full details see Adams et al. (2009).
- [12.](#) Founded in 1882 for the serious study of various alleged paranormal phenomena.
- [13.](#) Dingwall et al. (1956).
- [14.](#) Cited in Adams et al. (2009), 339.
- [15.](#) Glanville (1951).
- [16.](#) Price (1940).
- [17.](#) See Price (1946) for full details of séances.
- [18.](#) Babbs (2003).
- [19.](#) Dingwall et al. (1956).
- [20.](#) Coleman (1996-67).
- [21.](#) Price (1946), 334.
- [22.](#) Owen & Mitchell (1979), 149-62.
- [23.](#) Hubbell (1882).
- [24.](#) Hastie (2002).
- [25.](#) Dingwall, Goldney and Hall (1956), 167.
- [26.](#) Dingwall, Goldney, & Hall (1956), 175.

- [27](#). See SPR archives: 'The Borley File': Mrs Smith's Correspondence. Cambridge University Library.
- [28](#). Cited in Adams et al. (2009), 281.
- [29](#). Hastings (1969).
- [30](#). Henning (1949).
- [31](#). Adams et al. (2009).
- [32](#). See, for instance, Hastie (2002); Tabori and Underwood (1973); Adams et al. (2009).
- [33](#). For an early comprehensive list, see Price (1946) and for more recent works Adams et al. (2009).
- [34](#). For instance, *Strange but True*, first shown 1995.
- [35](#). For instance, *Haunted Earth*. C. Halton. *The Ghosts and Hauntings of Borley Church*; and *The Ghosts of Essex*, R. Felix.