

# JG Piddington

John George Piddington (1869-1952) was a successful British businessman who played a leading role in the Society for Psychical Research, notably in the investigation of mental mediumship.

## Life and Career

John George Piddington was born in 1869 as John George Smith, later taking his mother's family name.

Piddington joined the SPR in 1890 and served as a council member, secretary, treasurer and president. In 1901 he helped establish a research endowment fund to finance a full-time researcher. In 1905 he visited America, putting his organizational talents to use in helping restructure the [American Society for Psychical Research](#).<sup>[1]</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s he shared a house in Woking with [Eleanor Sidgwick](#) and Gerald Balfour, helping to provide a strong central direction for the SPR.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Researches

Piddington reported early telepathy experiments carried out by the SPR's hypnosis committee in 1898, writing as JG Smith.<sup>[3]</sup> He also introduced accounts of French experiments published in the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques*.<sup>[4]</sup> An article the following year compared an experience described in the newly published diary of Victor Hugo and one reported by his SPR colleague [Margaret Verrall](#).<sup>[5]</sup>

Piddington continued to contribute new cases,<sup>[6]</sup> but his attention gradually focused on the mental medium Rosalie Thompson, who was the subject of an extensive 1901 report by Oliver Lodge, Richard Hodgson, Margaret Verrall and others. As well as describing sittings of his own<sup>[7]</sup> Piddington authored a second major report,<sup>[8]</sup> in which he reviewed the collected material to comment on features such as the personalities and behaviour of Thompson's 'controls', the nature of the trance, and automatic writing, and engaging robustly with critics who held different ideas.<sup>[9]</sup> In common with some other investigators, Piddington was impressed by the most convincing of Thompson's utterances but was made sceptical by the obvious falsity of others, eventually admitting that he vacillated between two extremes.<sup>[10]</sup> A later commentator, [Alan Gauld](#), considered that Piddington was convinced that Thompson possessed paranormal powers, but that he was 'unable to come to any positive conclusions as to their nature'.<sup>[11]</sup>

Piddington played a large part in the investigation of the so-called 'cross-correspondences', which absorbed much of the SPR's attention over the following two decades. This was the phenomenon, first noticed after the death of [Frederic Myers](#) in 1901, of apparent links between trance statements made by one medium or automatist and those made by another, giving the appearance that Myers, and later other deceased researchers, were trying to demonstrate their survival of death. Together with Eleanor Sidgwick, [Oliver Lodge](#) and [Alice Johnson](#), Piddington

spent much time analysing well-over three thousand scripts,<sup>[12]</sup> undertaking the work of indexing them,<sup>[13]</sup> as well as uncovering new specimens. (See here for details of the cross-correspondences and Piddington's contribution.)

## Archive

A large quantity of original documents and correspondence by Piddington is held in the [SPR archive](#) in Cambridge University Library.

## Selected Publications

Review (1898) *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts* by A. Lang. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 13, 616-18.

Review (1902). *Le Temple Enseveli* by M. Maeterlinck. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 411-16.

Review (1902). *Une Sorcière au XVIII Siècle, Marie-Anne de la Ville, 1680-1725* by Ch. de Coynart. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 416-21.

Case of double misrecognition (1902). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 10, 303-4.

On the types of phenomena displayed in Mrs Thompson's trance (1904). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 18, 104-307.

Correspondence (1904). On the types of phenomena displayed in Mrs Thompson's trance. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 255-60.

Review of Dr Head's Goulstonian Lectures (1905). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 19, 267-341.

Richard Hodgson: In memoriam (1907). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 19, 362-67.

A series of concordant automatisms (1908). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 22, 19-416.

A case of hallucination (1909). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 14, 136-43.

Note on Mrs Piper's Hodgson-control in England in 1906-7 (1909, with Mrs Sidgwick). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 23, 122-26.

Supplementary notes on 'A series of concordant automatisms' (1910). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 11-30.

Three incidents from the sittings: Lethe; the Sibyl; the Horace Ode question (1910). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 86-169.

Postscript to the Lethe incident (1910). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 327-28.

A discussion of cross-correspondences (1910). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 14, 400-402.

Note on Mrs Hude's paper (1912). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 26, 171-73.

A hitherto unsuspected answer to the Horace Ode question (1912). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 26, 174-220.

Cross-correspondences of a Gallic type (1916). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 1-45.

Fresh light on the 'one horse dawn' experiment (1918). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 30, 175-229.

Forecasts in scripts concerning the war (1923). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 33, 439-605.

Presidential address (1924). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 34, 131-52.

'One crowded hour of glorious life' (1926). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 345-75.

The master builder (1927). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 477-505.

Correspondence (1928). Re 'The master builder'. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 175-77.

Melvyn Willin

## **Literature**

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Gauld, A. (1968). *The Founders of Psychical Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hamilton, T. (2017). The Cross-Correspondences. *Psi Encyclopedia*. London: Society for Psychical Research.

Haynes, R. (1972). *The Society for Psychical Research 1882-1982. A History*. London: Macdonald & Co.

Piddington, J.G. (1902a). Case of double misrecognition. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 10, 303-304.

Piddington, J.G. (1902b, with J.O. Wilson). A record of two sittings with Mrs Thomson. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 116-37.

Piddington, J.G. (1904a). On the types of phenomena displayed in Mrs Thompson's trance. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 18, 104-307.

Piddington, J.G. (1904b). Correspondence: On the types of phenomena displayed in Mrs Thompson's trance. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 255-60.

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Smith [Piddington], J.G. (1898). General meeting. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 8, 226; 248-49.

Smith [Piddington], J.G. (1898). Reviews. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 14, 115-28.

Smith [Piddington], J.G. (1900). Case. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 9, 195-97.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

1. ^ Blum (2007), 277.
2. ^ Salter (1952), 709.
3. ^ Smith (Piddington) (1898), 226.
4. ^ Smith (Piddington) (1898), 248-49, 115-28.
5. ^ Smith (Piddington) (1900), 195-97.
6. ^ For instance, Piddington (1902a), 303-304.
7. ^ For instance, Piddington (1902b), 116-37.
8. ^ Piddington (1904a), 104-307.
9. ^ For instance, Piddington (1904b), 260.
10. ^ Piddington (1904a), 111.
11. ^ Gauld (1968), 273.
12. ^ For a full description see Hamilton (2017).
13. ^ Salter (1952), 712.