

# Seaford Poltergeist

The Seaford 'poltergeist' was an episode of unexplained disturbances reported by a family in Seaford, Long Island, New York, in 1958. The incidents, which were widely publicized, included bottles losing their tops and spilling contents, and household objects and furniture moving with no apparent cause. Investigating parapsychologists attributed the cause to psychokinesis centering on a 12-year-old boy, while sceptics offered explanations in terms of trickery.

## Disturbances

The family consisted of James and Lucille Herrmann and their children Lucille, aged thirteen, and James, aged twelve.<sup>1</sup> The first unusual incident occurred on 3 February 1958 when James came home from school to find a ceramic doll and a ship model lying broken on his dresser, as if the doll had crashed into the ship. Mrs Herrmann found a small holy-water bottle on her dresser on its side with its cap removed and contents spilled. During the next 45 minutes, noises were heard as bottles opened and spilled in various rooms. In one incident, a half-gallon bottle of bleach that had been on a shelf in a cardboard box smashed on the floor about six feet in front of where James and his mother were standing.

Similar incidents involving bottles of liquid continued for around five weeks, causing fear and confusion. The escaping contents included starch, medications, wine, ammonia, shampoo, antacid medicine, paint thinner, perfume, and ink.

Around 13 February, the disturbances extended to other objects such as porcelain and plastic figurines, which moved, collided and flew as if flung with great force, sometimes smashing to pieces. Larger objects included lamps, a night table, a phonograph, a dresser, a coffee table and a bookcase that was turned upside-down. Some objects were repeatedly targeted: a glass centrepiece was moved several times, and a desk was damaged by figurines being flung into it at different times.

Noises were noted: rumbles throughout the house sounded 'like the walls were caving in,' as Lucille described it. The last recorded incident occurred on 10 March: a bleach bottle was de-capped and moved with a loud thump.

The disturbances were so violent that on four occasions the family moved out, staying with friends and relatives for a total of six nights.

A total of 67 separate anomalous incidents were recorded by investigators (see below).

## Witnesses

Mr Herrmann initially suspected tricks by James, but altered his view when, standing in the bathroom doorway while James was brushing his teeth, he saw a shampoo bottle and a medicine bottle slide at once across a surface, simultaneously and in different directions. In his police statement he said

At *about* 10:30 a.m. I was standing in the doorway of the bathroom. All of a sudden two bottles which had been placed on the top of the vanity table were seen to move. One moved straight ahead, slowly, while the second spun to the right for a 45° angle. The first one fell into the sink. The second one crashed to the floor. Both bottles moved at the same time.

Both bottles had become unscrewed while they were in the cabinet under the sink. They had been placed on the vanity top while the cabinet was being cleaned.<sup>2</sup>

In response to further incidents, Mrs Herrmann called the police on 9 February. Patrolman J Hughes was in the living room with the entire family when noises were heard coming from the bathroom. Hughes went with the family members to investigate and found a bottle on its side. Hughes later stated to the investigators that he had inspected the bathroom prior to this occurrence.

It had at that time already been cleaned up after the last disturbance (when the shampoo had crashed on the floor and the Kaopectate bottle had fallen into the sink) and he was convinced that the bottle was not then lying down (“I can swear to that!”). When further questioned, Hughes said he could not exclude the possibility that someone had turned the bottle over after he had first seen the bathroom, but in this event he could not account for the noise.<sup>3</sup>

From 11 February, detective Joseph Tozzi of the Nassau Country Police was assigned to full-time duty on the case. He interviewed all those who were in the house at the time of disturbances, including those that had happened prior to his arrival, and produced a thorough record.<sup>4</sup>

On 15 February, a visiting cousin, Marie Murtha, was sitting in the living room with the two children when she witnessed a figurine begin to ‘wiggle’, in her words, then fly rapidly about two feet towards the family’s television set, falling just two inches short with such a loud noise that she was surprised it did not break.<sup>5</sup> Questioned by Tozzi, she insisted that neither she nor the two children who were present had been close enough to the figurine to be able to touch it.

Several incidents occurred on 20 February, of which two are described in the police record as follows:

On the above date at about 2145 hours [9:45 p.m.] Mrs. Herrmann was on the phone in the dining room, James was right next to her, and Lucille was in the bedroom. James was putting his books away and there was a bottle of ink on the south side of the table. A very loud pop was heard and the ink bottle lost its screw top and the bottle left the table in a northeasterly direction. The bottle landed in the living room and the ink spilled on the chair, floor and on the wallpaper on the north side of the front door. Mrs. Herrmann immediately hung up and called the writer, who had left the house about 10 minutes prior to this occurrence.

When the writer arrived it was learned that as soon as Mrs. Herrmann called, she had taken the two children with her into the hallway to await the arrival of the writer. At about 2150 hours [9:50 p.m.] while the children were with her a

loud noise was again heard in the living room. All three of them went into the room and found the male figurine had again left the end table and had again flown through the air for about 10 feet and again hit the desk about six inches to the east of where it had hit the first time. On this occurrence the only noise heard was when the figurine hit the desk and at this time it broke into many pieces and fell to the floor. At this time the only appliance running was the oil burner and no one was again in the room. [6](#)

Each of the three people later corroborated their movements during this period to the investigators:

The three were standing in the end of the hall near the bathroom out of sight of the contents of the living room when the loud crash sounded. Mrs. Herrmann was standing with her back to the linen closet and James and Lucille were standing in front of the bathroom door. They were all facing one another. [7](#)

Journalists from *Newsday*, *Time* magazine, the *New York Times* and the *London Evening News* visited the house. Dave Kahn, from *Newsday*, was allowed to sleep there overnight and witnessed multiple disturbances on 23, 24 and 25 February. These included the noise of a dresser falling over (breaking a bottle of hair tonic that he had placed on it), and the noise of a lamp being overturned in Mrs Herrmann's room (also heard by an investigator and police sergeant B McConnell).

John Gold of the *London Evening News*, visiting on 4 March, saw and heard several similar incidents at times when other members of the family were in different rooms. [8](#)

A physicist, Robert E Zider, who was present on 24 February heard the noise of James's bookcase being turned upside down and was present when a picture was later found to have fallen off his bedroom wall. [9](#)

Friends and other visitors also witnessed incidents. [10](#)

## Investigation

Newspaper reports of the incidents came to the attention of the Parapsychology Laboratory of Duke University (now the [Rhine Research Center](#)), which assigned [J. Gaither Pratt](#) and [William G Roll](#) to investigate.

Pratt visited on 5 February, hoping to witness disturbances. Two occurred in the first half hour: the same lamp upset heard by Sgt McConnell and a plate of bread that fell from a table to the floor. Nothing then occurred for some time, and Pratt left on 1 March. The disturbances having resumed the following day, Pratt and Roll made a second (unpublicized) week-long visit starting 7 March, during which they both saw and heard a few incidents: two loud thumps from James's room on 9 March, and a final disturbance involving a bleach bottle on 10 March.

## Theories

A 45-page report by Pratt and Roll was published in the *Journal of Parapsychology* in June 1958, comprehensively logging and categorizing the incidents, and describing the actions and statements of the people involved. It goes on to discuss physical causes, fraud and paranormal 'psychological aberrations' as potential explanations.

## **Physical Aberrations**

Pratt and Roll note that a variety of tests carried out by experts during the occurrences ruled out physical causes:[11](#)

- high-frequency radio waves (a neighbour with a radio transmitter was found not to have used it for several years, and tests showed no unusual radio waves)
- unusual ground movements (an oscillograph detected nothing remarkable during the three disturbances that happened while it was present)
- foreign matter in the de-capped bottles (police lab tests found none)
- electrical malfunction (all equipment was checked by electrical experts and found to be in good order)
- other malfunctions (Tozzi found no connection between the electrical system and appliances function and the disturbances)
- downdrafts from a chimney (installing a chimney cap did not stop the occurrences)
- problems with air circulation (storm windows in the cellar were removed to no avail)
- change in groundwater levels (a well near the house was checked and there had been no change in the previous five years, and maps showed the house had not been built over water)
- structural problems (an inspection by the town showed the house was structurally sound)
- vibrations from aeroplanes at a nearby airport (flight times did not correlate with disturbances)
- vibration in the plumbing (inspection showed it was slight compared with a neighbour's house where no disturbances had occurred)

## **Fraud**

Pratt and Roll concede that many of the logged incidents could in theory have been faked by James or Lucille, either when they were alone in the house; when James was alone in the room where the occurrences took place; when his whereabouts could not be confirmed by anyone else; when the effect could have been staged jointly with Lucille or by himself alone; or when the incident consisted only of a noise.

More difficult to account for, in their opinion, were occurrences that were observed by a third person when neither child was in contact with the object, although these too, they suggest, could have been carried out by an 'audacious trickster' assuming that the third person had been distracted.[12](#) However, they argue that none of these objections apply to seventeen of the incidents, in which the position of the children 'was known to some other person to be such that they definitely could not have thrown, pushed, or similarly upset the object in question.'[13](#) They note that James

was harshly grilled by both his father and Tozzi, but stood firm in denying it throughout the entire period of the disturbances, even when distressed to the point of tears.

The authors agree that some incidents that appear difficult to explain might have been achieved through the employment of skillful conjuring. On the other hand, they point out that James had never displayed an interest in magic tricks, and they consider it unlikely that an illusionist could hurl objects with such force undetected. On the 'remote' assumption that he had learned magic in secret, they investigated the possibility that the 23 bottle-poppings might have been achieved by someone with a basic knowledge of chemistry, by creating gas pressure sufficient to blow the screw cap off. Their experiments showed that the pressure created by an appropriate chemical agent placed in a screw-top container does not cause the top to unscrew but escapes from around the lid or bursts the container.[14](#)

The idea that the series of disturbances was a story invented by the family would not account for incidents witnessed by non-family members, Pratt and Roll argue, and raises the question of why the family would have involved the police. They further note that the two reporters who witnessed incidents – and who appeared to them to be 'cautious and alert observers ... skeptical about a parapsychological interpretation' – were apparently convinced, and that no other person involved with the case unearthed anything suspicious.

Following their departure, Pratt and Roll wrote to encourage the family to sit for lie-detector tests, arguing this would be in their best interests and would also help the investigation. However, the suggestion was declined, apparently because of the parents' reluctance to subject the children to it.[15](#)

## **Psychokinesis**

The investigators' favoured (although not conclusive) explanation is what they term *recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis* (RSPK) on the part of the boy, a hypothesized repressed psychological force that expresses itself in the unconscious performance of violent physical acts.[16](#) They argue that this is supported by the incidents focusing mainly on 12-year-old James and the pattern of incidents suggesting motivation on his part but difficult to interpret in terms of trickery.

Elaborating on this in a 2003 paper,[17](#) Roll observes that most of the disturbed objects belonged to the parents or happened in their spaces, and that psychological studies showed that James had strong feelings of anger toward his father; the fact that the bottles were mostly of products used by Mrs Herrmann further indicates that the boy had unmet dependency needs, Roll suggests. Roll also notes that measurements showed a decline in the number of movements correlating with distance from James, an effect that he found other similar cases, three of which he himself investigated. For Roll, this supports a proposal by parapsychologist William Joines[18](#) that RSPK manifests in the form of waves, producing a decline in effects due to distance.

Roll further notes a theory proposed by parapsychologist Harold Puthoff that an object may be freed from gravity/inertia if the RSPK agent affects the universal

proliferation of random electromagnetic fluctuations (zero-point energy, ZPE).<sup>19</sup> If PK waves convert to some other kind of energy while penetrating the ZPE, analogous to sunlight converting to heat as it passes through water, 'psi wave' energy could convert to kinetic energy, Roll argues, causing objects freed from gravity/inertia to move. Roll also suggests testing for the involvement of electromagnetism and the quantum-mechanical concept of observer participancy.<sup>20</sup>

## Sceptics

The Seaford case is one of several of the poltergeist type to be considered by Milbourne Christopher, an American stage magician, in his book *Seers, Psychics and ESP* (1970).<sup>21</sup> Christopher writes that he offered to help the family get to the bottom of the disturbances, but was turned down by Herrmann, who 'said in no uncertain terms that he did not want a magician in the house'.<sup>22</sup> He also notes the refusal of the family to sit for lie-detector tests.

Christopher, contacted by reporters and photographers, later demonstrated how the events might be faked by conjuring tricks and misdirection, and repeated the tricks for Pratt, who he claims was unable to see how they were done. In one instance, with visitors present, he created the effect of bottles opening and spilling their liquid by having his wife, unseen, simulate popping noises having moments earlier overturned the bottles in the bathroom. He also describes how a thread can be used to make bottles appear to fall without anyone nearby.<sup>23</sup>

Sceptic ghost hunter Joe Nickell expands on the trickery theme in his 2012 book *The Science of Ghosts*. Having obtained access to the 60-page police file, he notes that the events mostly happened when James was nearby, and not when James was away, either in the house or in the other location. He notes also that the perpetrator appeared keen to avoid being observed; for instance, objects that the detectives dusted with a powder that would later show up under ultraviolet light were not disturbed. He further claims that witnesses might have been mistaken or distracted, and that his analysis of each movement of objects suggests in each case 'simple trickery such as a boy could effect'.<sup>24</sup>

## Legacy

According to Christopher, the Seaford incident was 'the most discussed poltergeist case of the twentieth century', publicized in 'countless newspaper stories, radio and television broadcasts, and innumerable magazine articles in many languages'.<sup>25</sup>

The publicity led to renewed interest in such cases among parapsychologists. Pratt and Roll investigated a similar reported phenomenon in 1971, in which souvenir objects appeared to propel themselves off shelves in a [Miami warehouse](#), and Roll was also present in a widely publicized case in [Columbus, Ohio](#) in 1984.

The public interest aroused by the media coverage is said to have been a factor in the making of Stephen Spielberg's Academy-Award-winning 1982 movie [Poltergeist](#).<sup>26</sup>

## Literature

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1](#). The main source is Pratt & Roll (1958). Figs. 1 & 2 (86-87) give maps of the main floor and basement of the house, and locations of all 67 disturbances.
- [2](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 88.
- [3](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 93.
- [4](#). Tests showed a bottle would not naturally move on the surface even after it was lubricated with soapy water (Pratt & Roll (1958), 88).
- [5](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 89.
- [6](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 93-94.
- [7](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 94.
- [8](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 121-22.
- [9](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 120.
- [10](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 121.
- [11](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 110-12.
- [12](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 104.
- [13](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 104.
- [14](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 102-7. The authors note, 'Millions of housewives who have done pressure canning in glass jars know that pressure escapes from firmly closed lids without causing them to unscrew' (105 n3).
- [15](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 124.
- [16](#). Pratt & Roll (1958), 110-13.
- [17](#). Roll (2003), 75-6.

- [18.](#) Joines (1975).
- [19.](#) Roll notes that ZPE has been detected in the lab, citing Chan et al. (2001) as an example.
- [20.](#) Roll (2003), 78-84.
- [21.](#) Christopher (1970), 142-63.
- [22.](#) Christopher (1970), 155.
- [23.](#) Christopher (1970), 159.
- [24.](#) Nickell (2012), 333-41.
- [25.](#) Christopher (1970), 150.
- [26.](#) Romain (2020).

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