

Society for Psychical Research

The Society for Psychical Research was founded in London in 1882, the first organization ever to be established for the scientific investigation of claims of psychic phenomena. Its researchers soon concluded that telepathy genuinely occurred. They also argued for the paranormality of some apparitions and visions, but were less certain about the evidence for hauntings. Many were sceptical about séance mediums, having been disillusioned both by discoveries of fraud and by a growing awareness of the unreliability of witness testimony, although successful results were reported by some investigators. By contrast, most were impressed by psychic phenomena appearing in trance states and automatic writing, including some mediums, and these became a focus of interest until the early 1930s. The Society has continued to carry out field investigations and fund experimental research until the present day.

From the outset, researchers sought first to eliminate non-paranormal explanations such as fakery, poor observation and misperception; a few believed that most, or even all the phenomena could be accounted for in this way. However, the predominant view has been that forces and entities as yet unknown to science are present in at least some cases. The main area of disagreement lies between those who believe that psi phenomena indicate the survival of mind after the death of the body, and those who argue that the appearance of survival can adequately be explained in terms of telepathy and other psi functions.

Origins

The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882 as a non-profit-making enterprise, in order to investigate 'that large group of debateable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical and Spiritualistic'. It was launched at a time when intellectuals were struggling to reconcile the materialistic features of contemporary scientific philosophy with traditional religious views of human purpose and destiny. Exploration of psychic phenomena offered a prospect of revealing a hidden and more hopeful reality.

A precursor was the Ghost Society of Cambridge, founded by EW Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury. One of its members was Benson's cousin and later brother-in-law, [Henry Sidgwick](#) (1838-1900), a Fellow of Trinity College and a lecturer, and subsequently professor, of moral philosophy.^[1] ^[2] (Cambridge University's Sidgwick Site, which accommodates several important faculties, is named after him.) Sidgwick was to become the first President of the SPR.

Another member of the Ghost Society, [Frederic WH Myers](#) (1843-1901), also a Fellow of Trinity College, and a distinguished classical scholar and poet, became a pupil of Sidgwick. They developed a firm friendship – surprising in view of Myers's emotional and impulsive disposition, which contrasted with Sidgwick's more cool-headed and cautious character. The pair shared a belief in the importance of investigating the paranormal, and during previous decade had tried to test mediums who produced mysterious physical effects in darkened rooms. Although

they were dismayed by so much apparent fraud they found reason to continue, and both pursued the subject for the rest of their lives, Myers becoming an especially prolific researcher and theorist in the field.

Purpose

The aim of the Society was and remains 'to approach these various problems [in] the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned inquiry as has enabled science to solve so many problems, once not less obscure nor less debated'. It was expressly stated that membership does not imply 'the acceptance of any particular explanation of the phenomena investigated nor any belief [in] forces other than those recognised by physical science'.^[3] This meant the Society would impose no veto on a researcher's opinion. Its published observations and debates would be offered as worthy of consideration, but they would be the responsibility of the authors.

Membership of the Society was open to the public. Subscribers were not required to have any particular qualification and so could not use membership as evidence of expertise.

Formation

Occasional attempts to investigate psychic claims were made in the 1870s, notably by scientists such as [William Crookes](#) in England, Johann Zollner in Germany and [Robert Hare](#) in America. In 1871, a report by the London Dialectical Society, a rationalists' debating club, recommended on the basis of its own investigations that serious inquiry be carried out into mediums and their phenomena.

In 1882, Sir [William F Barrett](#) (1844-1925), a professor of experimental physics at the Royal College of Science in Ireland, called a conference of concerned scholars in order to promote action. Influenced by his experiences with mediums, Barrett had become a believer in survival after death. The SPR was duly constituted in February 1882, with Henry Sidgwick as its first president and a governing body or council of some twenty members, the majority of them spiritualists. Barrett went on to help establish a psychical research society in America in 1885, in which the Harvard psychologist [William James](#) took a leading part, and which survives today as the [American Society for Psychical Research](#).

In its early years, the SPR's research was pursued by active members of its council, mainly by the non-spiritualist members. The spiritualists soon became dissatisfied with the researchers' sceptical views, and many resigned, leaving the Sidgwick group in charge. Prominent among the latter was [Edmund Gurney](#) (1847-1888), a friend of Myers (also a Fellow of Trinity College) and an expert on hypnosis. Sidgwick's wife, born [Eleanor](#) Mildred Balfour (1845-1936), whose brother Arthur would later serve as prime minister and foreign secretary, took an active part in SPR affairs for many years, while pursuing a successful career as a mathematician and later Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. Her personal assistant [Alice Johnson](#) (1860-1940) served as the SPR's secretary. Another active early worker was [Frank Podmore](#) (1856-1910) an Oxford graduate and expert on the history of

spiritualism,^[4] who became a trenchant sceptic of the reality of most psychic claims.

The pioneering years produced a remarkable output of innovative research, the effect of a close-knit and elitist leadership. The researchers were hugely committed to the enquiry, and benefited from private wealth and experience in different spheres of public life. They developed for the first time a pragmatic and critical approach to claims for the paranormal. Through the years this tradition has attracted some famous persons to join the SPR, among them John Ruskin, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), [Mark Twain](#), Aldous Huxley, [JB Priestley](#) and Sigmund Freud, together with many distinguished scientists, including a dozen Nobel prize-winners.

The SPR became an incorporated society under the Companies Acts in 1895 and is a registered charity. It publishes Proceedings for major contributions, of which there are so far 60 volumes, and since 1885 has published a journal, now quarterly, reaching volume 86. In 1992, a more discursive, popular magazine was launched, initially called *Psi Researcher*, followed by the *Paranormal Review* and currently the *Magazine*. The organization has assembled an important specialist library and an archive of documents relating to reports of the paranormal. The latter, and most of the valuable historic books, are housed at Cambridge University Library; an audio-visual library is housed near Norwich, Norfolk.

In 1902, a research fund was established, and a year later this received a bequest of £3,800 from AN Aksakov, a psychical researcher who had been an advisor to the Russian Tsar. The fund was for a time used to support a succession of salaried research officers: Alice Johnson, [Eric Dingwall](#), [Theodore Besterman](#), CVC Herbert (later Earl of Powis), and [Donald West](#). Due to funding limitations, and disagreement about the roles of incumbents, no further such appointments have been made since 1949.

Pioneering Phase

At the founding of the organization, six committees were appointed to research specific areas: Reichenbach Experiments, Mesmerism, Thought Transference, Apparitions and Haunts, Literary Committee and Physical Phenomena (of the séance room).

Reichenbach Experiments

Baron Carl von Reichenbach (1788-1869) had developed a theory about paranormal forces, based on claims that sensitive people could detect lights coming from magnets. Using a strong electro-magnet in a darkened room, the SPR Committee could not themselves detect any lights. However, a young hypnotist, GA Smith, and one of his subjects, both appeared able to do so. The magnet was turned on and off at irregular intervals by an inaudible switch in an adjacent room. Most times they could tell when this occurred. Although ostensibly a physical phenomenon, this might have been attributed to extra-sensory perception. Reichenbach's ideas were not further pursued, and the issue of possible physiological effects of strong magnetic fields on humans has passed to the domain of conventional science.

Mesmerism

The Committee on Mesmerism found it could reproduce in some subjects many of the phenomena previously reported, including immunity to painful stimuli, the induction of hallucinations and false memories, and amnesia for what had happened while in the hypnotised state. Edmund Gurney contributed many such observations to the SPR Proceedings. Having once aroused scepticism and derision, these phenomena are now considered normal psychological reactions to strong suggestion, the business of medical authorities and professional psychotherapists.

Hypnosis remains of interest to psychical researchers as a possible facilitator of ESP. In normalizing these phenomena, psychical researchers could be said to have accomplished their mission. However, the continuation of challenging hypnotic phenomena, such as the production of blisters by suggestion, the control of dental bleeding and the cure of skin disease,^[5] suggests a need of more research by physiologists.^[6]

Thought-Transference

The Thought-Transference Committee initiated tests of telepathy (as it was later called), forerunners of the methodologically superior modern research. An 'agent' would be given a target picture or subject to concentrate upon while a percipient, screened from sight or in a different room, would attempt to draw or describe it. Without modern statistical methods, the likelihood of a resemblance between target and response being more than coincidence could not be quantified. If the targets were not selected by some random process, correspondences might occur through agent and percipient having similar trains of thought. Successful performers were exceptional, leading to suspicion of dishonesty, covert signals or prearranged conspiracy. The set-ups were often far from what would now be considered adequate. Nevertheless, the target-response resemblances were difficult to imagine occurring by chance, and the checks in force in some of the successful sessions were of a standard to satisfy a court of law. The levels of accuracy achieved, however, are hardly ever reported today.

The Committee carried out successful telepathy tests with the children of Rev AM Creery as agents and percipients.^[7] When their powers started to wane they were caught in crude signalling, and confessed to having occasionally cheated previously.^[8] Although it was difficult to see how all the positive results could be explained by fraud, the research was discredited.

Telepathy tests were carried out with GA Smith and his hypnotized subjects, often with Smith as percipient and one of his subjects as agent, both in the same room, but the agent in silent contemplation of the target. There was striking success with imagined objects and with two-digit numbers as targets. The results were thought convincing, although they were hardly more than chance when agent and percipient were in separate rooms. Use of an undetected code was thought unlikely, as this would have implicated Smith, whom the researchers considered to be a colleague.

However in 1908, a friend of Smith's, a journalist named Douglas Blackburn, who years earlier had acted as a particularly successful unpaid participant, published a statement to the effect that he and Smith had used a code. Smith vehemently denied the allegation, and good grounds were found for believing him.^[9] The affair drew attention to the need for both experimenters and subjects to protect themselves from accusations of fraud. (See [Smith and Blackburn](#))

Apparitions and Haunts

The Apparitions and Haunts Committee recorded first-hand accounts of unexplained noises and phantoms in premises said to be haunted, but reached no conclusions. The Literary Committee went further: Gurney, Myers and Podmore interviewed numerous individuals who reported an exceptional experience of hearing voices or seeing apparitions. They were struck by the relative frequency of cases of the 'death wraith' variety, when the experience heralded unexpected news of the death of the person in the vision, usually someone close to the percipient. They sought corroboration, by verifying the time and circumstances of the death and by finding persons whom the percipient had described the experience to, before hearing of the death. They then formulated a three-part theory. First, the experiences are a form of hallucination: phantoms leave no physical traces such as opened doors or displaced furniture, and usually occur when the percipient is alone, often in bed at night. Second, they are *veridical*, that is, they carry reference to something not otherwise knowable that cannot be explained as mere coincidence. Third, the phenomenon is one of resonance - what would later be dubbed 'telepathy' - between the minds of the percipient and the dying person.^[10]

Many such cases were published first in the Proceedings and later as a collection in a large book titled *Phantasms of the Living*.^[11]

The response was mixed. Critics noted the absence of accounts of impressions written down before their fulfilment,^[12] a deficiency still evident in modern cases. This may be due to a number of things: lack of motivation, the personal nature of the experience, fear of being ridicule, and now a lost habit of writing letters and preserving notes.

An ambitious Census of Hallucinations followed.^[13] Volunteer collectors gave friends and acquaintances written questions. The first asked if they had ever had 'a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression ... was not due to any external physical cause...' More questions followed if the response was 'Yes'. To counter bias from volunteers seeking out likely positive responses, some whole groups were questioned, such as all the members of a household including the servants, or all members of a committee unconnected with psychical research. After answers suggestive of dreaming and suchlike had been eliminated, it was found that 9.9% out of 17,000 replies were affirmative. Similar figures have been obtained in later SPR surveys,^[14] and in medical population surveys.^[15]

The researchers were interested in corroborated veridical cases of hallucinations coinciding within twelve hours of the death of the person seen or felt. After making allowances for uncertainty of timing, and for non-coincidental cases having been

forgotten, they calculated that this eventuality occurred significantly more often than could be accounted for solely by chance.

The Census brought to light two other types of occurrence: coincidences unrelated to serious crisis, and cases of phantasms of persons long dead. The latter might suggest survival of deceased minds, although reported visions seemed seldom to extend beyond what the percipients might imagine. Another section deals with collectively perceived apparitions, those seen at the same time by more than one person. Here, it was often found that an apparition might be seen by only one person of several who were present, and in cases where two or more claimed to have seen it, it was hard to determine how similar their impressions had actually been.

Physical Phenomena

The Physical Phenomena Committee reported that they found nothing of evidential value. Some years later the SPR became interested in the medium William Eglinton, who produced 'spirit' messages on enclosed slates in the presence of those for whom they were intended. Researchers concluded that this could be explained in terms of conjuring and distraction.^[16]

On this topic, the SPR also attempted to evaluate reports from the past. The medium [DD Home](#) had been credited with effects more dramatic, and better attested, than anything available to the SPR, then or since. Particularly impressive were accounts by William Crookes of experiments in which, in good light, he had measured a force exerted by Home on a balanced plank, shielded from touch.^[17] Crookes contributed original notes of his experiments with Home to the Proceedings,^[18] as also did Earl Dunraven, a young aristocrat who had befriended Home.^[19] Home mixed in elevated circles and many noteworthy persons and famous scientists witnessed phenomena in varied venues and conditions of lighting, such as accordion playing with no one touching the keys and objects moving on their own; he was also seen to handle glowing coals, and apparently cause heavy furniture to levitate. First-hand accounts can be found in the SPR archives, also notes by Home's widow.

Despite the strong scepticism of the SPR's leaders regarding the claims of physical mediums, the organization agreed to carry out an investigation of the Neapolitan medium [Eusapia Palladino](#), a figure who had been endorsed in investigations by scientists in other European countries. The series of séances, carried out in Cambridge in 1895, revealed a strong tendency by Palladino to cheat when the controls were poor. In 1908, this impression was largely reversed by a second SPR investigation carried out in Naples by three experienced - and initially sceptical - investigators: [Everard Feilding](#), Hereward Carrington and WW Baggally. The three produced a detailed and frank report in which they explained how they had reached the conviction of having witnessed genuinely paranormal phenomena.^[20]

Other developments tended to confirm the views of SPR sceptics. In 1914, a distinguished German psychiatrist, Baron von Schrenck-Nötzing, published a lengthy illustrated book on materializations by the medium [Marthe Béraud](#) (known in the literature as Eva C).^[21] These 'ectoplasmic' extrusions took the form of human

faces draped around her head, images that demonstrably matched photographs in published magazines. When Beraud was later tested by SPR investigators the findings were inconclusive.^[22]

Mental Mediums

‘Mental’ mediums give information, verbally or through ‘automatic’ writing, about their sitters’ intimate affairs, usually in the guise of messages from deceased relatives. Some mediums go into a preliminary, self-induced trance and on awakening recall nothing of what they may have said or written. The SPR began researching such mediums in the last decade of the nineteenth century and this continued to be its predominant activity until the 1930s.

The Boston medium [Leonora Piper](#), who had been discovered by William James, was paid by the SPR to come to England in 1889, staying first with [Oliver Lodge](#) in Liverpool and then in Cambridge. Kept under surveillance and presented with anonymous strangers, she had surprising successes in many of her sittings.^[23] This was the start of a long collaboration between the medium and the SPR.

When in trance, Piper spoke with the voice of one or other ‘spirit control’ who staged-managed the proceedings. The researchers satisfied themselves after numerous tests that the trance state was genuine, and that Piper was in a genuine altered state of consciousness or ‘dissociation’.^[24] But they equally found the controls’ claimed identities to be improbable and considered them rather to be unconscious constructs of the medium’s imagination.

Reports followed of sittings with various gifted mediums. To counter the possibility that sitters might unknowingly give away clues, sessions were held with a proxy who was ignorant of the absent client’s circumstances.^[25] Well-attested examples of veridical ‘communications’ became so prevalent they were often seen by investigators as impossible to explain by other than one of two paranormal alternatives, as communications with the surviving spirits of the deceased, or as an extended form of telepathy-clairvoyance among the living.

SRR researchers were interested in trance phenomena that occurred in other contexts. Edmund Gurney’s studies of hypnotic trance demonstrated how suggestion could send sensitive subjects into a hallucinatory world in which they would assume alien identity and behaviour, with no recollection of having done deceased, or as an extended form of telepathy-clairvoyance among the living, e so when aroused. Closer to mediumistic phenomena were cases of what in the twentieth century was referred to as multiple personality and is now termed dissociative mental disorder.^[26] Following psychotherapeutic probing, or as consequence of psychological trauma, some people radically longer periods, and the changes are more than could result from mere play acting. In rare cases where a medium fails to emerge from ‘control’ by a communicator, she becomes temporarily or even permanently ‘possessed’.^[27] The classic case of Sally Beauchamp, studied by the American psychiatrist Morton Prince,^[28] has been frequently cited in SPR publications.^[29]

Frederic Myers

Frederic Myers became the Society's most prolific thinker. He first published a series of major articles on 'borderland' mental phenomena that he saw as acting as a bridge between normal and paranormal. He went on to develop a theory of a 'subliminal mind' that possessed wide-reaching powers of memory and imagination, enabling contact with reality independent of the physical senses. This model of brain activity transcends the dominant mechanical model, and makes conceivable the survival of some form of mentation after death. A compilation of Myers's observations and theories was published posthumously as *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*.^[30] Myers's thought was neglected throughout most of the twentieth century but has been winning new advocates in the fields of psychology, neuroscience and the philosophy of mind. It was recently revisited and updated in *Irreducible Mind*, a presentation of the evidence for non-local consciousness.^[51]

The Cross-Correspondences

The cross-correspondences, a unique development in mediumistic research, was the work of a group of 'automatic' writers - mostly associates of SPR founding members - including Margaret Verrall, a classics teacher from Newnham College, Cambridge; her daughter [Helen](#), later married to [WH Salter](#), the SPR's Hon. Secretary; and Winifred Coombe-Tennant, a politician connected to the Balfours and married to Myers' brother-in-law. Their productions were supposedly guided by the deceased Myers and other deceased researchers and associates. Typically, references to the same topic appeared coincidentally in scripts written independently by different automatists. This was thought to indicate constructive activity by the spirits, motivated to provide evidence of their having survived that could not easily be explained in terms of telepathy among the living.

The coincidences in the scripts are mostly allusions to a word or phrase, often derived from the poems and classic literature with which the communicators, and some of the automatists, were very familiar. Few matches are at all straightforward. From the enormous quantity of scripts produced over the years (filling nineteen printed volumes), one might expect to find apparently meaningful correspondences occurring by pure chance, and indeed, critics have suggested that the act of randomly matching passages from literature can produce similar coincidences.^[32] The simpler examples are the most striking, summarized at the time in a popular book.^[33] To help place the phenomenon on a surer foundation, Piper was again brought to England to sit with some of the automatists, in the hope that this would encourage the communicators - the putative Myers and other SPR founders - to cooperate in the creation of a puzzle that would be soluble only after material from several different automatists had been assembled. The result, named the Hope, Star, Browning case,^[34] was particularly complex, and has been held by some students of psychical research to be persuasive of survival.

Testing of Psychics

In the first decades of the 20th century, [Eugene Osty](#) (1874-1938) and other researchers attached to the Paris Institut Métapsychique tested 'clairvoyants', psychics who did not attribute their powers to spirits. [Stefan Ossowiecki](#) (1877-1944), a Russian born businessman living in Poland, was twice tested by SPR investigators and proved to be an outstanding subject. On a visit to Warsaw in 1923, EJ Dingwall brought a rough sketch of a bottle inside a rectangle, that had been enclosed in multiple opaque envelopes with a tamper-proof seal. In front of an audience, the envelope was handed to Ossowiecki, who drew what he thought it contained and returned it unopened. Ossowiecki's sketch was found to be an exact reproduction of the original drawing. Dingwall concluded: 'The supernormal character of the incident seems to me quite clear and decisive.'^[35] Thomas Besterman^[36] prepared a secure package, enclosing an outline drawing of a jar and lid with the words SWAN and INK to its left and right. The package was later handed to Ossowiecki, again in front of a large audience, and he drew a sketch of the drawing inside. This proved to be an almost photographic reproduction of Besterman's drawing, even including the words SWAN and INK. Besterman was confident there had been no tampering with his seals.

At the time, these were the most convincing public demonstrations ever recorded, and Ossowiecki made a number of others over many years. A well-documented history of this clairvoyant's life and demonstrations authored by senior SPR members was published in 2005.^[37]

Statistical Experiments

By the 1930s, researchers' attention on both sides of the Atlantic was shifting to statistical methods of testing telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition, phenomena that were often found together and hence came to be known as extrasensory perception, or ESP. Statistics were also used to study the possibility of psychokinesis, the influence of mind over matter, now referred to as PK. The term *psi*, first proposed by [Robert Thouless](#), a British psychologist, has since been adopted for all four effects. These new experimental approaches in what was now generally referred to as 'parapsychology' were pioneered by [JB Rhine](#) at Duke University.

The SPR published descriptions of such tests, of which Whately Carington's 'distance tests' using target drawings were the most ambitious.^[38] Significant resemblances between responses and targets spilled over to the targets displayed immediately before or after the actual target, an early sign of the 'displacement' effect that has become a well-known phenomenon within parapsychology. However, Carington's methods were laborious and have not been repeated.

GNM Tyrrell used a mechanical device for 'forced choice' guessing tests.^[39] Five keys were linked to five boxes. Pressing a key by an 'agent' caused a light to go on inside the corresponding box. The subject, out of sight behind a screen, would open the box she believed was illuminated within. Several subjects gave substantial above-chance scores. Critics argued that the outcome might have been skewed by the agents choosing the targets freely (the use of a mechanized target selection system having proved impractical), as this commonly results in too few repetitions of the

same target; pre-existing similarities between the subject's and agent's habits can give spurious results.

Attempts within the SPR to repeat the high-scoring card-guessing experiments carried out by Rhine and his associates in the US met with limited success. SPR research officers Herbert and West failed to find any positive effects, while the mathematician [SG Soal](#), who had obtained nothing after many attempts at telepathy testing,^[40] joined Rhine's many critics, arguing that his experiments were inadequately secured against normal sensory clues and lacked independent observers checking of scores. This was true of Rhine's early endeavours; however these deficiencies were gradually eliminated in response to criticisms.

In 1934, Rhine tested a visiting gambler who believed he could influence the fall of a die by willpower. This was the start of numerous PK experiments in which throwing dice, by hand or machine, often yielded a statistical excess of the subject's chosen face. Positive dice-throwing effects were at first not found by SPR workers. Then Fisk reported consistent scoring by a gifted subject, Jessie Blundun, who did not know which target face Fisk had selected when she made her throws.^[41] Blundun's powers dwindled after a period of illness, however.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the former sceptic SG Soal was the only British experimenter obtaining results with card guessing. In 1940, after Carington urged him to search for 'displacement' effects in his data, Soal identified two successful subjects he had earlier dismissed as unproductive. Assisted by KM [Goldney](#), Soal carried out a long series of apparently fraud-proof tests with Basil Shackleton.^[42] However he was reluctant to allow independent testing of Shackleton by other experimenters, while critics pointed out suspicious peculiarities in his data. In 1978, some years after Soal's death, fraud was confirmed when [Betty Markwick](#), a statistician, showed that within some repeated sequences Soal had made changes to individual digits in order to create false hits.^[43]

Soal carried out similar work with a second subject, Gloria Stewart.^[44] Some sixty years later, Markwick, assisted by West, examined the score sheets and target sheets from the Stewart experiments that had been deposited in the SPR archives. Many proved to be fake replicas he had amended in order to conceal detectable changes made during the experimental sessions. A microfiche of the collection contained, by mistake, two copies of one score sheet, one the imperfect original, the other a doctored replica. This physical evidence of calculated forgery has reinforced the earlier exposé.

[Borley Rectory](#)

This well known case^[45] was first publicized by the paranormal investigator [Harry Price](#), who had been a SPR member before founding a rival organization, the National Laboratory of Psychical Research, in 1926. Responding to Price's books and articles^[46] the SPR began its own investigation in 1949, the year following Price's death; this was begun by Eric Dingwall and Kathleen Goldney, who were later joined by [Trevor Hall](#). Their report, published in 1956, attacked Price and questioned the reality of the Borley phenomena, claiming that Price had presented

a distorted account in his books'.^[47] Many of the authors' accusations were rebutted in a later report by Robert Hastings, also published by the SPR.^[48]

The SPR archives contain many hundreds of documents appertaining to Borley and numerous lectures^[49] have been given to the Society about the case, which continues to be disputed within the SPR.^[50]

Poltergeist Cases

Enfield Poltergeist

The investigation of the Enfield poltergeist, one of the best known cases of its type in Britain in recent times, was carried out by SPR members beginning in 1977. The disturbance in a north London house first came to the notice of the SPR when the organization was contacted by a *Daily Mirror* reporter. Retired inventor [Maurice Grosse](#), a member who had previously expressed an interest in investigating paranormal phenomena, was asked to look into it. He and journalists witnessed what they believed to be paranormal activity, and realizing the likely demands of the investigation, Grosse invited [Guy Lyon Playfair](#), an author and veteran paranormal researcher, to join him. The pair observed the phenomena over a period of two years, and Playfair subsequently wrote a detailed account in his bestselling book *This House is Haunted*.

The reactions of other SPR members who visited the location were mixed: some argued the disturbances might have been faked. In response, an SPR committee carried out a meticulous retrospective investigation, interviewing key individuals; it concluded there was good evidence for paranormal phenomena described by credible informants, while reserving judgement on incidents that could not have been clearly observed, or where the witnesses' reliability was questionable.

Matthew Manning

As a boy, Matthew Manning was the focus of poltergeist disturbances both at his school and at his family's home, a historic villa in Linton, near Cambridge. In later manifestations, that occurred in 1970 when he was fourteen, signatures in archaic handwriting started to appear all over the walls of rooms when nobody was present; they were the names of the Webbe family, who had occupied the house in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When Matthew engaged in automatic writing the result was a flow of messages from historical characters in various different hands. He also began producing high-quality drawings in the styles of famous artists, despite a lack of artistic skills. An SPR study carried out twenty years later extensively appraised the manifestations from the standpoint of handwriting and content, finding them extremely difficult to account for in terms of anything Matthew might have achieved.^[51]

Matthew Manning subsequently declined invitations by the SPR to get involved in experimental testing. Following Uri Geller's popularisation of paranormal metal bending, he took up this up himself and gave demonstrations in many different countries, convincing, among others, [ARG Owen](#), then in Canada. Finally, in 1982, SPR members [Anita Gregory](#) and electronic engineering expert [Arthur Ellison](#) and

several others, carried out various tests, including a repetition of the ‘occultation’ of an infra-red beam, on the lines of the work with Rudi Schneider. Due to imperfections in the apparatus the result was not considered a complete success.^[52]

Other Activity

[AD Cornell](#), a persistent investigator, tried in vain to secure a film record of poltergeist activity by leaving instruments in rooms where this had occurred, that would be activated by movements.^[53] ARG Owen analysed the records of poltergeists ancient and modern, finding that in some cases eye-witnesses could be considered truly independent and authoritative.^[54] A report of great potential significance, authored by investigator Barrie Colvin, was based on an acoustic analysis of sound recordings of rapping and knocking noises from various poltergeist cases, that found that these differed markedly from recordings of any ordinarily produced knocking.^[55]

The Scole Report

The Scole Report,^[56] published in the Proceedings of 1999, is a lengthy account of a mediumistic group that met regularly in the Norfolk village of Scole. The group professed its absolute conviction in the spirit origin of phenomena that occurred at séances, which included moving lights, hand touches, apports (small objects of unknown origin found on the séance room table), and regular communications from ‘spirits’ via the voice of one or other of the entranced mediums. SPR researchers were especially intrigued by the images that seemed to appear spontaneously on undeveloped film that had been previously placed inside a secure box. During the investigatory sessions of 1995-1997, a great variety of phenomena were recorded. However, the investigators faced various restrictions, which were apparently insisted on by the ‘spirit communicators’, notably an insistence on total darkness and a prohibition on any kind of infra-red filming. Questions emerged regarding the security of the box shielding undeveloped film, the origins and manufacture of the images, and the origin of the information purportedly communicated from deceased SPR figures. The three investigators who attended the most sittings and authored the report were personally convinced of the paranormality of the phenomena. Other SPR members were less convinced; their criticisms are attached in the form of appendices.

Later Work With Mental Mediums

The early emphasis of the SPR’s work on mediums was not continued in its later years. However, there has been some activity in this area. In 1971, [Alan Gauld](#), a psychologist at the University of Nottingham, investigated communicators who appeared in Ouija board sessions whom he termed ‘Drop-ins’, as they had no personal connection with anyone present,^[57] while being able to provide convincing evidence of having once lived.

In 1994, an organization named PRISM (Psychical Research Involving Selected Mediums) was founded jointly by the SPR and the National Spiritualists’ Union, meeting at Stansted Hall in Essex. SPR members included Arthur Ellison, [David](#)

[Fontana](#), [Montague Keen](#), [Ralph Noyes](#) and Maurice Grosse; Robin Foy was a leading representative of the Spiritualists. The object of the liaison was to dispel the perceived animosity between psychical researchers and mediums that had existed since the nineteenth century. This led to an investigation by Archie Roy and Tricia Robertson as to whether mediums' statements to sitters are so general they might equally be accepted as true by other people.^[58]

In 2004, Roy and Robertson critically examined the claim that the impression of accuracy given by mediums can be accounted for by information leakage or confirmation bias on the part of sitters. They achieved this by gradually introducing a complete separation of sitter and medium, and by requiring sitters to score statements blindly, on the reading intended for themselves and also on some intended for other participants. Even with complete separation, a statistically significant difference remained between acceptance scores by the sitters on their own compared to others sitters' readings.^[59] The statistics and scoring system were complex and open to some criticism^[60], however arguably not to the extent of demolishing the main conclusion.

Subsequent attempts to provide objective statistical evaluations to data from mediums separated from sitters have produced much critical commentary,^[61] but a successful and near-perfect example has been published by Emily Kelly.^[62]

Changes in the SPR

The SPR's original mission statement remains as relevant today as when it was first written in 1882. However, it is a long while since the organization led the field in ground-breaking investigations and publications. Psychical researchers – or parapsychologists or psi researchers, as they more often call themselves – are now scattered over the whole of Western societies. Key English-language publications include the *Journal of Parapsychology*, the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* and the *European Journal of Parapsychology*. Experimental research has become increasingly complex, the business of professionals trained in methodology, statistics and computer technology, or of academic psychologists pursuing experimental parapsychology as a branch of their university work. Psychic phenomena themselves continue to be experienced, reported and investigated as in the late nineteenth century, and new phenomena are being studied: children's memories of having lived a previous life is a particularly fertile area for researchers. Specialized topics such as conscious experiences during apparent brain death, or distant mental influences on healing, require access medical facilities, and have their own publications such as *Explore* and the *Journal of Near Death Experiences*.

Amateurs outside the academic establishment still contribute to research, particularly in the documentation of spontaneous experiences; ghost-hunting groups are particularly active. However, the cost in terms of time and money is appreciable, and funding is increasingly problematic. The SPR may appear comfortably endowed from past legacies, but the cost of maintaining an office base in London with minimal staffing has escalated. Up to the mid-1950s, the Society could maintain a six story mansion in Tavistock Square with a resident caretaker. Now, administration costs leave no surplus to help preserve the purchasing power

of the Research Fund. Enthusiastic, self-funding, and virtually full-time investigators no longer exist. Living wages for researchers, plus the university charges for accommodating them, and expenses incurred in carrying out projects, have grown beyond the resources of a private society.

Government funding for research that lacks obvious economic benefit is increasingly hard to secure. Fortunately, a few private funds give grants for psychical research. One is the Perrott Warrick fund administered by Trinity College, Cambridge, named after the two members of the SPR who bequeathed the money. (All too often, when money has been given to universities it gradually gets diverted away from psychical research, although not in this instance: the administrators appointed by the college have always included at least one prominent SPR member, in every case a prominent Cambridge University academic.) Another is Portugal's [Bial Foundation](#), which supports scientific studies of humans from both physical and spiritual perspectives.

As a charity, the SPR has an educational role. Its website gives news of SPR conferences, lectures and other events. Since 2003, an online library housed by Lexscien (Library of Exploratory Science) has provided members with access to digital copies of the SPR's Journals and Proceedings from 1882, also to the archives of other similar organizations. The library also includes an Abstracts Catalogue, a comprehensive description of the contents of SPR Journals and Proceedings.

In 2014, work began on new publications project funded by a bequest donated by [Nigel Buckmaster](#), who joined the SPR in the 1960s after himself experiencing a paranormal event. One of the first fruits of the project is the Psi Encyclopedia, whose purpose is to provide objective and factual information about the history, purpose and achievements of psi research.

Donald West

Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Myers (1902), 449-64.
2. ^ A.S. and E.M.S. (1907).
3. ^ *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (1882/ 83), 1, 2-5.
4. ^ Podmore (1902).
5. ^ Nash and Barnier (2008), 401-2; Mason (1952), 422-33.
6. ^ Gauld (1992).
7. ^ *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (1882-3), 1, 19-30, 37-42, 4-46, 71-78, 167-71.
8. ^ *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (1882-3), 1, 259-60.
9. ^ Gauld (1968), 179-81.
10. ^ *Theory of Apparitions* (1884), 157-86.
11. ^ Gurney, Myers, F.W.H. and Podmore (1886).
12. ^ Innes (1887).
13. ^ *Report on the Census of Hallucinations* (1894), 25-422.
14. ^ West (1948), 187-96; West (1990), 163-207.

15. ^ Tien (1991), 287-92.
16. ^ Massey et al (1886), 75-110; Davey (1887), 405-95.
17. ^ Crookes (1974).
18. ^ Crookes (1889), 98-127.
19. ^ Dunraven (1924), 1-288.
20. ^ Feilding, Baggally and Carrington (1809), 306-569.
21. ^ Schrenck-Nötzing (1914).
22. ^ Report on a series of sittings with Eva C. (1922), 209-343.
23. ^ Myers, Leaf, Lodge et al (1890), 436-659.
24. ^ Sidgwick (1915), 1-657.
25. ^ Allison (1934), 104-45; Drayton-Thomas (1935), 439-508.
26. ^ Cleere (2012), 497-538.
27. ^ Mitchell (1912), 257-85.
28. ^ Prince (1906).
29. ^ McDougall (1907), 410-31.
30. ^ Myers (1903).
31. ^ Kelly et al (2007).
32. ^ Moreman (2003), 225-42.
33. ^ Saltmarsh (1938).
34. ^ Piddington (1908), 59-77; 312-416.
35. ^ Dingwall (1924), 259-63.
36. ^ Besterman (1933), 345-51.
37. ^ Barrington et al (2005).
38. ^ Carington (1940), 34-151.
39. ^ Tyrrell (1936), 99-168.
40. ^ Soal (1932), 165-362.
41. ^ Fisk and West (1958), 277-87.
42. ^ Soal and Goldney (1943), 21-150.
43. ^ Markwick (1978), 250-81.
44. ^ Soal and Batman (1954).
45. ^ For instance, Adams, Brazil and Underwood (2009).
46. ^ For instance, Price (1940).
47. ^ Dingwall, Goldney and Hall (1956), 51, 167.
48. ^ Hastings (1969), 201.
49. ^ For instance, tape nos. 106, 134, 494 and 1103.
50. ^ Hastie (2002), 18-24.
51. ^ Harrison (1994), 3-103.
52. ^ Gregory (1982), 283-365.
53. ^ Gauld and Cornell (1979); Cornell (2002).
54. ^ Owen (1964).
55. ^ Colvin (2010), 65-93.
56. ^ Keen, Ellison and Fontana (1999), 150-452.
57. ^ Gauld (1971), 273-340.
58. ^ Robertson and Roy (2001), 91-106.
59. ^ Robertson and Roy (2004), 18-34.
60. ^ Markwick (2007), 258-59.
61. ^ Bem (2005), 173-83.
62. ^ Kelly and Arcangel (2011), 11-17.

