

# Margaret Verrall

Margaret Verrall, née Merrifield (1857–1916), was a leading member of the Society for Psychical Research, notable in particular for her study of automatic writing, which she herself learned to practise.

## Life and Education

Margaret de Gaudrion Merrifield was born on 21 December 1857 in Brighton, UK.<sup>[1]</sup> Her father Frederic Merrifield was a clerk working for the county councils of East and West Sussex, and her mother, Maria Angélique de Gaudrion was the daughter of Colonel VPJ de Gaudrion, member of an old French family. Margaret was the elder of two daughters.

Margaret studied classics at Cambridge University's Newnham Hall (later Newnham College). The school had become an informal centre of psychical research, having been founded by [Henry Sidgwick](#), co-founder and first president of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), and later headed by his wife [Eleanor Sidgwick](#), who was also a central figure in the Society.<sup>[2]</sup> Margaret graduated with honours in 1880 and was immediately appointed lecturer in classics at Newnham, a position she held almost up to her death. Together with fellow Newnham alumna Jane Harrison<sup>[3]</sup> she published a comprehensive book entitled *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens* in 1890.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1882 Margaret married Arthur Woollgar Verrall, a well-known classical scholar who was briefly the first Edward VII Professor of English Literature before his death in June 1912. The couple had two daughters: [Helen Woollgar de Gaudrion Verrall](#), born in 1883,<sup>[5]</sup> and Phoebe, born in 1888, who died in infancy.

Politically liberal, the Verralls were nonetheless well-accepted in the conservative-leaning Cambridge community. Margaret was active in organizations and movements, including local political councils, the women's suffrage movement, and a group that aided refugee Belgian students in continuing their studies during World War I.

Margaret Verrall joined the SPR in 1889 as an active researcher<sup>[6]</sup> and served on its governing council from 1901 until her death. The family home at 5 Selwyn Gardens in Cambridge became a venue for sittings with [mediums](#) and experiments with such phenomena as [crystal gazing](#), [table turning](#),<sup>[7]</sup> thought-transference (telepathy), and card-guessing (clairvoyance). Psychical research became Verrall's main intellectual interest. For the rest of her life she investigated and experimented with both her own psychic experiences and those of others, sometimes collaborating with her daughter Helen, who herself became both an accomplished researcher and an automatist.

Margaret Verrall died of cancer in Cambridge on 2 July 1916, aged 59.

## Psychical Research

## Thought-Transference/Card Guessing and Crystal Gazing

Verrall's first formal account, published anonymously but known to have been authored by her, appeared in the March 1889 *Journal* of the SPR. This reported thought-transference experiments using card-guessing that she carried out with Helen, then four years and seven months old. She also included three earlier incidences of apparent spontaneous telepathy between her and her daughter when the child was too young to speak clearly.<sup>[8]</sup> Verrall's next publication was an account of her own experiments with crystal-gazing using various reflective surfaces, carried out from 1889 to 1892 at the request of SPR co-founder [Frederic WH Myers](#), and generating some positive results.<sup>[9]</sup>

In 1895, Verrall published her first formal paper, a thorough report on her own experiments over the previous few years with card-guessing (attempting to identify playing cards without seeing them), which included attempts to test all possible explanations other than clairvoyance. Again, she reported a measure of success.<sup>[10]</sup> Later she gave a short account of hearing clock-like ticking prior to a life-threatening mishap that befell an associate – an apparent occurrence of [precognition](#) or [presentiment](#) – and other similar experiences.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Automatic Writing

Despite Verrall's many psychical experiences, her early attempts at automatic writing and table-tilting failed. Eleanor Sidgwick later commented that this was likely to have been a disappointment to Myers, who was particularly interested in such phenomena.<sup>[12]</sup> But after Myers's death in 1901 she increased her efforts and soon obtained an apparently successful result. According to her own account, this happened after daily attempts between 19 January and 2 February, and three more futile tries in February and March. Then on 5 March, 'on a strong impulse' she altered her grip such that the pen was held between thumb and forefinger instead of between the first two fingers, as had been her habit for some years to relieve writer's cramp. Suddenly she found her hand rapidly writing in Latin. The first page of script she could not make sense of, but through almost-daily sessions for the rest of the month she began to produce Latin passages that had clear meanings. The first English writing appeared on 31 March.<sup>[13]</sup> From then on until a week or two before her death, she produced hundreds of automatic-written scripts.

Verrall began to apparently write messages from the deceased Myers, though the first test of this – messages that purported to reveal the contents of a sealed envelope left by Myers – proved a failure.<sup>[14]</sup> However she forged ahead undiscouraged, despite a native scepticism about her work that Sidgwick considered somewhat excessive.<sup>[15]</sup> In 1906 she published a book-length description in the SPR's *Proceedings* of all her automatic writing experiences.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Leonora Piper

Earlier in 1889, Myers, having been impressed by Verrall's combination of sharp observation and psychic power, asked her to join investigative sittings with the American medium [Leonora Piper](#).

Piper's visits to England then and again in 1907-8 generated several discussions in papers by Verrall of Piper's automatic writing, which contained many allusions to classical literature despite a lack of classical education. This suggested to her the likelihood that communications appearing to originate from the deceased Myers, and from [Richard Hodgson](#) (another recently deceased psychical researcher who was well-versed in classics), were genuine.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Cross-Correspondences

Margaret Verrall's automatic writings played a large part in the discovery by [Alice Johnson](#) of patterns across the writings of several automatists, which appeared to show that deceased psychical researchers were purposely combining partial messages to different automatists to prove their existence. These patterns, referred to as the [Cross-Correspondences](#), were a major focus of study in the first part of the twentieth century. (See [Cross-Correspondences](#) for details including Verrall's contributions.

## Later Studies

Verrall's automatic writing work continued to draw attention decades later. In a 1958 paper, her son-in-law [William Salter](#) described how literary references in her scripts convinced her and others that the discarnate Myers was alluding to the message inside the sealed envelope he had left.<sup>[18]</sup>

In 1964, parapsychologist [Guy Lambert](#) attempted to verify the existence of one Ralph Neville, who claimed in automatic writing by Verrall to have died near the end of the seventeenth century. Lambert did indeed find historical records of a man of that era who matched the name and details. He followed this up with several more analytical works on putative communicators and details suggesting input from deceased psychical researchers including Myers, Henry Sidgwick, who had died in 1900, and [Edmund Gurney](#), who had died in 1888 (see references in the above-linked article). Lambert published his 'concluding reflections' on Verrall's automatism in 1971.

## After-Death Communications

In 1930, Helen Verrall published an account of sittings in which she witnessed her deceased mother and father apparently communicating through the medium [Gladys Osborne Leonard](#).<sup>[19]</sup>

## Legacy

As a researcher who also contributed raw research material, Verrall was rare in parapsychology. [Oliver Lodge](#), a scientist and SPR colleague, considered her 'one of the sanest and acutest of our own investigators, fortunately endowed with ... some power of acting as translator or interpreter between the psychical and the physical worlds'.<sup>[20]</sup> Sidgwick wrote of her as 'a person who could be applied to for sympathy and help by all who felt indications in themselves of automatic powers worth cultivating ; and to her wise sympathy we undoubtedly owe much of the evidence

accumulated'.<sup>[21]</sup> Anyone wishing to attempt automatic writing will do well to consult her writings on its techniques and psychology.

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## Select Works

[Some recent experiments in automatic writing. \[Private meeting for members and associates\]](#) (1902). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 10, 291-95.

[A further account of experiments in automatic writing](#) (1903). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 71-74.

[On a series of automatic writings](#) (1906). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 20, 1-432.

[Classical and literature allusions in Mrs Piper's trance](#) (1910). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 39-85.

[A new group of experimenters](#) (1910). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 264-318.

[Notes on Mrs Willett's scripts of February 1910](#) (1911). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 25, 176-89.

[A month's record of automatisms](#) (1912-13). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 26, 24-56.

Further works can be found in the Literature section below.

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## Literature

Anonymous [Verrall, M.] (March 1889). [Experiments in thought-transference](#). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 4, 33-37.

Anonymous (1905-6). [Opening of an envelope containing a posthumous note left by Mr Myers](#). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 12, 11-13.

Fodor, N. (n.d./1934). [Mrs A.W. Verrall 1859-1918](#). [Online excerpt from *An Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* published (with minor modifications) on survivalafterdeath.org.uk, preserved at archive.org.]

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

Harrison, J. (1918). [Supplement VII: In Memoriam—Mrs. A.W. Verrall](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 376-85.

Johnson, A. (1908). [On the automatic writing of Mrs Holland](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 21 (June), 166-391.

Lambert, G.W. (1963-64) Studies in the automatic writing of Mrs. Verrall, I: Who was Ralph Nevile? *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 42, 389-99.

Lambert, G.W. (1971-72). Studies in the automatic writing of Mrs. Verrall: Concluding reflections. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 46, 217-22.

Piddington, J.G. (1908). [A series of concordant automatisms](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 22, 19-416.

Salter, W.H. (1958-60). F.W.H. Myers's posthumous message. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 52, 32.

Salter, H. [Helen Verrall] (1930-31). [Some incidents occurring at sittings with Mrs. Leonard which may throw light on their 'modus operandi'](#) *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 306-32.

Sidgwick, E.M. (1918). [Obituary Notice : Mrs. A.W. Verrall](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 170-76.

Smirle, C. (2012). [Profile: Helen Verrall](#). [Web page on Psychology's Feminist Voices, preserved at archive.org.]

Tullberg, R.M. (2007). [Oxford DNB Article: Verrall, Margaret de Gaudrion](#). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (online ed.)*. Oxford University Press. [Subscription or [UK public library membership](#) required.]

Verrall, M. (1892). [Experiments in crystal-gazing and kindred phenomena](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 8, 473-78, 480-82.

Verrall, M. (1895). [Some experiments in the supernormal acquisition of knowledge](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 174-97.

Verrall, M. (1906). [On a series of automatic writings](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 20, 1-432.

Verrall, M. (1910). [Classical and literary allusions in Mrs Piper's trance](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 39-85.

Verrall, M. (1918). [A Series of Experiments in "Guessing."](#) *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 67-110.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

1. ^ Sidgwick (1918); Tullberg (2007). All information in this section is drawn from these sources except when otherwise noted.
2. ^ Smirle (2012).
3. ^ A memorial article by Harrison gives a personal and engaging view of Verrall's life and character: Harrison (1918).
4. ^ Verrall & Harrison (1890).
5. ^ Smirle (2012).

6. ^ Sidgwick (1918), 171.
7. ^ Hamilton (2017), section 'Psychical Research'.
8. ^ Anon. [Verrall, M.] (March 1889). *For the early spontaneous incidents, see pages 36-7.*
9. ^ Verrall (1892).
10. ^ Verrall (1895).
11. ^ Anon. (1899-1900).
12. ^ Sidgwick (1918), 172.
13. ^ Verrall (1906), 8-10. See the Appendix on page 340 for the scripts themselves.
14. ^ Anon. (1905-6).
15. ^ Sidgwick (1918), 174.
16. ^ Verrall (1906).
17. ^ Verrall (1910). For more on after-death communications by Hodgson, see [here](#).
18. ^ Salter (1958-60).
19. ^ Salter, H. [Helen Verrall] (1930-31).
20. ^ Excerpt from *The Survival of Man* cited in Fodor (n.d./1934).
21. ^ Sidgwick (1918), 174.