

The Talking Glass

by William J Eyre

Mention of the word 'ouija' in many quarters brings a response that the phenomenon should not be touched with a barge pole and that it produces nothing but problems. Whilst this is indeed sometimes true, this article is intended to show that when treated seriously, the ouija does offer scope for some reasonably constructive research.

Background

A small team of researchers comprising members of ASSAP and CPSG (Chesterfield Psychic Study Group) had, over a period of some months, been attempting to experiment with table tilting. With the exception of one séance, there had been a notable lack of success and so it was decided to try experimenting with the ouija, as it was thought that it would be easier to produce results and as communicators may be able to provide the team with advice on how to increase the chances of success with table tilting. As will be seen, it was indeed easier to obtain results but no encouragement to return to, or advice on how to improve, the table tilting was forthcoming and so it was decided to concentrate on researching the ouija phenomenon itself. Despite information being easily available on the WWW (World Wide Web) regarding the basics, history and sale of ouija boards, there seems to be a dearth of literature on researching *how* the ouija phenomenon functions.

Objectives

The team decided to explore

- the mechanics of how the glass moves
- whether telepathy and precognition are possible via this method
- the possible sources of the information communicated
- the geographic and chronologic spread of communicators
- communicators' views on spiritual matters

via a series of regular experimental seances.

Modus Operandi

To simulate a ouija board large enough for several experimenters to participate, a small table was used, with a sheet of hardboard placed on top (smooth side uppermost), a small glass placed in the middle and lettered cards representing the letters of the alphabet, "Yes", "No", "Goodbye" and "Don't know" placed around the outside of the board, as shown in fig. 1.



Figure 1

Typically four researchers would sit around the table with their fingers lightly placed upon the glass, with a fifth researcher sitting at a separate table, taking notes. As the glass moved to each letter, a sitter would call the letter out loud, for the scribe to write it down. A tape recorder ran throughout each séance.

The actual composition of the team involved in this research changed slightly over time. The author and ASSAP member Mike Rush were involved throughout and the following were involved during various periods: CPSG members Erni and Betty Maycock, Clive Ellis, Debbie Martindale, John Lavender and Brian Royce-Dexter and ASSAP members Simon, Philip and Nicola Royce-Dexter.

Knowing that addiction and subsequent mental health problems [1], frightening messages and after séance RSPK had been reported as effects arising from the use of the ouija, care was taken to

- ensure that everyone who participated had the right motivation in mind, i.e. to be seriously trying to understand more about the workings of the ouija and related phenomena
- articulate out loud at the beginning of each experiment the purpose of the séance
- use closed questions, followed by very specific open questions, followed by carefully worded requests for messages with each new communicator, in line with the rapport being achieved with the communicator
- avoid asking questions about sitters' personal futures.

As a result of taking such precautions, none of the problems mentioned above arose over the three years that this research took place.

After the first three experimental séances, it became clear that it was worth devising a 'script' of standard questions to be asked of each communicator, as it was found to be difficult to quickly devise sensible questions 'on the fly' when momentum had been built up. This script queried such matters as the gender and name of the communicator, together with the time period and location of his/her Earth life, etc.

Results

At the first séance, it took 50 mins. before the glass started moving. At subsequent séances, the glass moved sooner and sooner and by the end of the research period, it typically took just a few seconds before it started to move. At the first two séances, the combinations of letters spelled out were largely nonsensical but as the research continued, the communications generally became more and more articulate. A parallel can be drawn here with the typical scribbblings, gradually turning into meaningful communications, obtained by automatic writing mediums.

After working through the standard script, on a number of occasions, the team would then proceed to concentrate on attempting to throw light on a specific aspect of this research, via particular tests or questions. Thus, at certain séances, the team attempted to research the mechanism of the glass movement. When asked, communicators indicated that they moved the glass by controlling the finger (and not the mind) of one particular sitter, giving Simon as an example. This hypothesis was tested empirically and found to be true, by placing different combinations of sitters' fingers on the glass. For example, when only the fingers of the author, John and Nicola were on the glass, no movement occurred. Thus it became clear that the finger of certain persons could be used to produce a movement but not the finger of other persons. For the purpose of this article, the term 'medium' will be used to denote a person whose finger can be used (without conscious effort) to move the glass.

Having thus determined which experimenters were ouija mediums and which were not, on certain occasions, when Simon was the only person with a finger on the glass who was a medium, he was blindfolded. The result was that sensible answers to questions were still spelled out but with more spelling mistakes than usual.

When asked how communicators knew which house to come to (to communicate via this method), a typical response would be "YOU CALLED I CAME".

An experiment was attempted to obtain movement of the glass with no fingers in contact with it. Had this attempt been successful, it would, of course, have demonstrated a PK effect; however, no movement ensued.

At one séance, the author consciously (i.e. mentally) tried to influence the glass to spell out 'Kevin' when one communicator was asked his name. However, the name 'Billy' was spelled out, implying that thoughts in the conscious minds of the sitters do not lie behind the information conveyed.

Experiments were undertaken in which a particular experimenter would write down a question (hidden from the other experimenters) and then concentrate on it, the intention being to see whether the controlling intelligence of the glass movement could telepathically pick up the question and answer it. However, these attempts were unsuccessful, the answers being unrelated to the questions.

On further occasions, the team homed in on exploring the nature of time. Communicators indicated that time existed in the Spirit World but not in the measurable way that it does on Earth. When requested to provide predictions of

significant World events, some communicators declined to do so but in August 2003, 'Cathy' offered "AMERICA SORROW AND UPSET". One could perhaps interpret this as being a reference to the Hurricane Katrina disaster of August 2005. However, it has to be admitted that the message is rather vague and that a more specifically worded prediction would be needed to provide concrete evidence of precognition via the ouija.

The aspect of this research which potentially offered most scope for testing hypotheses was the source of the information conveyed. The most obvious possible explanations for the information source were considered to be:-

- the conscious mind of the medium (via deliberate pushing of the glass)
- the unconscious mind of the medium (via unconscious pushing of the glass)
- super ESP
- 'bona fide' spirits of the deceased (i.e. spirits who were who they claimed to be)
- 'incognito' spirits of the deceased (i.e. spirits whose identities were different from those provided).

On one occasion, the team experimented with one or other of the known mediums deliberately moving the glass to spell out a word. Even when the other sitters were not aware of the word being spelled, words were still successfully spelled. However, to achieve this, it was noticed that the glass swivelled in a manner different from that occurring during the seances and both mediums reported the need to apply much more force to the glass than during a séance. Such observations, coupled with the experimenters' personal knowledge of the extent to which the mediums take the whole subject of psychical research seriously, make the possibility of deliberate, i.e. fraudulent, movement of the glass during seances unlikely.

Various surnames, names of roads and pieces of historical information were communicated of which the experimenters had no prior knowledge. For example, at one séance, a 'Sarah Bord' came through, claiming to have lived in the Shetlands. The experimenters had not heard of the name Bord but follow-up research on the WWW revealed that Bord was a name used in the Shetlands for a plank or board, that it had other meanings in Gaelic, that it is used as a surname even today, that a Sarah Bord had died in America and that there had been at least two people by the name of Bord in the Shetlands. At other séances, addresses previously unknown to the communicators of 3 Norton Terrace, Huddersfield (see fig. 3), of Kirkdale Drive, Oldham (see fig. 4) and of a road beginning with 'Royal Park' in Leeds were given. The name 'Belk' (see fig. 5) and the name 'Prest' and its association with Tyneside (see fig. 2) were given, despite the experimenters not having heard of these names. Information concerning the 1st (Royal) Dragoons being stationed in India in 1904 and the British Army fighting the Indians at that time was similarly unknown until the relevant information was looked up.

At one séance, a communicator by the name of 'Claude' claimed to have been the German Captain of a ship. The author therefore asked several questions in German, to which sensible answers were received, despite the fact that the only mediums in contact with the glass were Simon and Debbie and Simon had no knowledge of German and Debbie had insufficient knowledge of the language to understand some of the questions.

The foregoing observations make it difficult to see how the information could have been sourced from the unconscious minds of the sitters.

Date of Séance	12 th May 2003
Information Communicated	William Prest, latterly, but not originally, from Tyneside, Staff Sergeant in Royal Dragoons, shot in battle with Indians in India in 1904.
Research Source	Finding
Regimental records	1st (Royal) Dragoons 1902 England: Shorncliffe 1904 India: Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh) 1909 Muttra 1911 South Africa
1901 Census	Men living in the Tyneside area but not born in that area and about the right age for a soldier in 1904:- William Prest, aged 23, born Sessar (Yorkshire), living in Longbenton (Northumberland), clerk. William Prest, aged 26, born Middlesborough (Yorkshire), living in Chirton (Northumberland), painter's labourer. Prest observed to be quite a common name around Co. Durham and North Yorkshire.
www.ancestry.com	2 Prests found in Tyneside – 1 in Northumberland, 1 in Co. Durham.
World Book [5]	In the 1890's, a section of the Indian National Congress known as Extremists became critical of the moderate programme followed by the Congress. The leaders urged agitational politics and sought to mobilize the people. This led to a group of young revolutionaries in Bengal, Maharashtra and Punjab launching terrorist attacks against British officials and Indians working for the British. The British responded to terrorist attacks by firm police and military action. However, the demand by Indians for power-sharing and constitutional changes convinced British politicians that urgent changes were needed, which led in 1909 to the setting up of a new electoral (voting) system.
Regimental Description Books (1 st Dragoons, up to 1857) [2]	Much of the content indecipherable, owing to restricted quality of microfilming, but no mention of a William Prest could be found. Regimental Description Books for the later period, when he was more likely to have been in the Army, are not extant.
Casualty Book (1 st Dragoons, c. 1850 –1910) [3]	No mention of a William Prest.

Figure 2

Date of Séance	14 th July 2003
Information Communicated	Jay Porter was born in 1921 and lived at 3 Norton Terrace, Huddersfield prior to her death in 1983/84.
Research Source	Finding
IGI [6]	No Jay / Jayne / Jane Porter found.
Huddersfield street map	Norton Terrace showed as being part of Stocks Moor Road in Stocksmoor, part of Kirkburton, on the edge of Huddersfield.
Electoral registers	Norton Terrace listed as being under Kirkburton – Thurstonland & Farnley Tyas No. 2, Kirklees Ward No. 23, area 'BC', with the area changed to '3KI' later. If born in 1921, Miss Porter would have become of voting age in 1942. Because of the War, no electoral registers exist until 1945 and no Norton Terrace appeared to show between then and 1955, possibly because it may have been outside the Borough of Huddersfield in those days. No mention of a Jay Porter at 3 Norton Terrace in the registers from 1955 to 1984. All registers from 1973 to 1984 showed the occupants as being Tom and Frances M Bury.
GRO Register of Births	Showed no Jay Porter born in 1921. Nearest match: Jane Porter, born July - Sept 1921 at Garstang (Lancs), mother's maiden name Redman.
GRO Register of Deaths	Showed no Jay Porter dying in 1983/4. Nearest match: Jane Anne Porter, born on the 26 th Jan 1890, died at Garstang.

Figure 3

Date of Séance	13 th December 2004
Information Communicated	June Bagshaw was born in 1910/11 and lived at 42 Kirkdale (Road?), Oldham, prior to her death in 1989.
Research Source	Finding
Royal Mail website [7]	There is a Kirkdale Drive in Oldham; however, the highest house no. is 27, i.e. there is no no. 42.
www.ancestry.com www.mytrees.com	No trace of a Bagshaw in Oldham
GRO Register of Deaths	Nearest match: Joan Bagshaw, born on 2 nd Oct 1928 and died in Sheffield in 1989.
IGI	No mention of a June Bagshaw

Figure 4

Date of Séance	22 nd August 2005
Information Communicated	Clarrisa Belk lived at Riverside Farm, Newark (Nottinghamshire) prior to her death in 1901
Research Source	Finding
www.ancestry.com	Three Clarissa Belks in the Notts area 1800-1900. Riverside Rd exists but no trace of a Riverside Farm. It is possible the farm is no longer there or has changed either its name or its role. (Found a Riverside guesthouse and Riverside kennel / cattery).
1901 census	No Clarissa / Clarrisa Belk found. There was a Jeanette C Belk and a Mary C Belk but they lived in Gloucestershire, not Newark. Clarissa could have died earlier in 1901 than the date of the census.
1891 census	No Clarissa / Clarrisa Belk found. There was a Frances C Belk, who lived in Yorkshire at the time.
GRO Register of Deaths	The surname 'Belk' exists but no Belk died in 1901.

Figure 5

There were indications that the information was probably not produced by Super ESP. Questions were sometimes answered by questions, e.g. when 'Muksar' was asked whether he would be willing to try to move the glass with no fingers on it, his reply was "WHY" and when 'Cathy' (who claimed to have died as an old lady) was asked how old she looked to other people in the Spirit World, her reply was "HOW OLD WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO LOOK". If Super ESP consists of a mechanistic process of psychically accessing a 'cosmic database' of all information ever to have been amassed by living people, one would imagine that either the database would provide an answer to the question asked or an acknowledgement that the answer is not known: the concept of answering a question with another question (especially a rhetorical question, as in the second example quoted) does not seem to fit with the idea of a mechanistic process.

Another indication was the incorporation of humour into some of the communications. For example, when 'Adam' indicated that he designed wings for flying machines and Mike asked what the flying machines were used for, he replied "FLYING" and when asked what the cause of his passing was, he replied "DEAD"! Similarly, a facetious remark by Simon resulting from the habit of 'Olive' of addressing different sitters with the endearments 'dear' and 'love' produced a response of "STOP MOANING" and a later comment from Simon, as a result of the particularly strong rapport that built up between this communicator and the sitters, that he would like to take 'Olive' home with him, produced a response of "WELL YOU CANT SO THERE". Humour is surely a characteristic of the human personality, thus implying that a personality was more likely to be behind the communications than a mere mechanistic process.

All the communicators claimed to be the spirits of the deceased. Many of them helpfully provided personal details which offered the opportunity of post-séance research using demographic records. The author is appreciative of the assistance given with this task by Simon and John. Typically, initial research using genealogical websites and street maps would indicate that someone of the given name could have lived at the relevant period in time and that such an address existed. An example is 'James Tufnell' of 32 St George's Road, Hull, who came through in September 2005, claiming to have died in 1906. However, in nearly every case, more detailed probing using GRO registers of births and deaths [4], Army records and electoral registers showed no precise match of name, year of birth, year of death and address. Typical findings are detailed in figures 2, 3, 4 and 5. Why, for example, did 'Jay Porter' apparently helpfully volunteer all the information asked of her, including her occupation as an Anglican nun, her views on the inaccuracy of the Bible in relation to what she found the Spirit World to be like, her year of birth, her age at death and her final address, when the electoral registers showed her not to have been resident at that address?

Invariably, the communicators came across as being genuine, well meaning personalities. As an indication of this, when asked for a helpful, constructive message, the typical response would be something along the lines of "KEEP SMILING" or "SIMON TRUST IN YOURSELF". However, were the information to have come from the spirits that the communicators claimed to be, one would have expected their personal details to match those in the demographic records. Possible explanations for this anomaly are

- that most communicators were ‘incognito’ spirits
- that they were ‘bona fide’ spirits who were too confused in their after-life state to be able to accurately memorise such details as their year of death or exact address

or

- that the personalities had incarnated more than once and had confused details of one life with those of another.

The latter explanation was given in trance when Simon’s Spirit Guide, Adam, was asked (see ‘Developments’ below).

The use of a standard script, together with retention of the transcripts of the seances, enabled various analyses of the background of the communicators to be produced. Of course, all the analyses are only meaningful if the communicators are actually the spirits of the deceased and are providing truthful information. The communicators were roughly equally split between male and female. A geographic analysis of the communicators’ claimed Earth lives is given by the pie chart in fig. 6, where ‘local’ is arbitrarily defined as Yorkshire / Derbyshire / Nottinghamshire (being the area surrounding where the seances took place). It will be seen that the great majority of communicators claimed to be the spirits of people who lived in England.

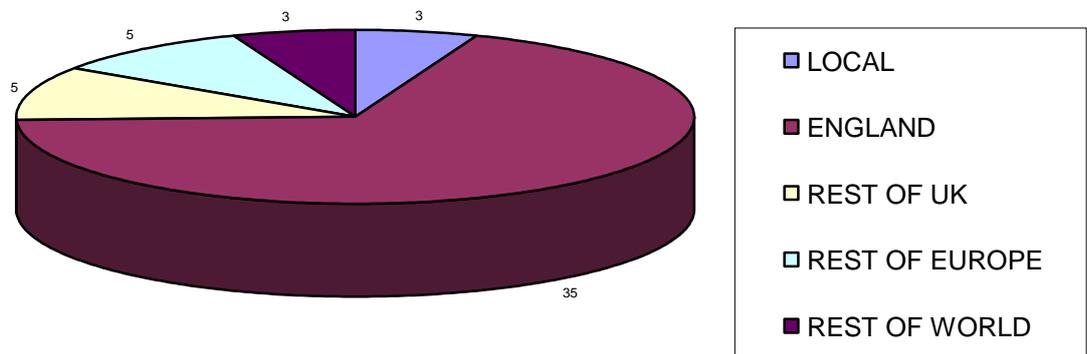


Figure 6

A chronologic analysis of the communicators' Earth lives is given at fig. 7, based on the claimed year of death. It will be seen that the majority of communicators claimed to be the spirits of people who lived in the 20th century.

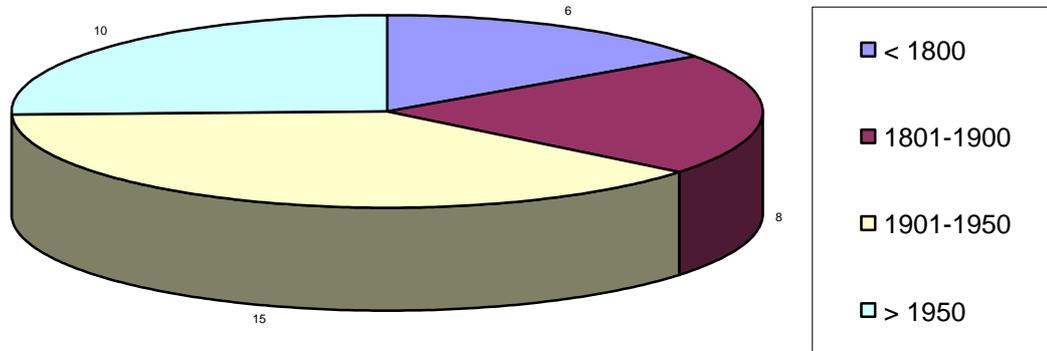


Figure 7

An analysis of the communicators' claimed causes of death is given in fig. 8, 'violence' being murder or death in battle, 'medical' being premature death through illness or in childbirth. No claim is being made here for mathematical accuracy, as in strict scientific terms, all deaths commonly ascribed to 'old age' are actually due to a medical condition and so in some cases it would be a matter of opinion on the part of a communicator as to whether his death was perceived to be due to old age or due to illness. However, as only 32% of the communicators specified that they had died of old age and as something in the order of 70% of people in developed countries died over the age of 65 during the early 1990s [8], it can be observed, by way of a generalisation, that a far higher proportion of communicators who came through during these ouija seances died prematurely than one would expect in a random population sample, even allowing for higher mortality rates amongst younger people in years gone by.

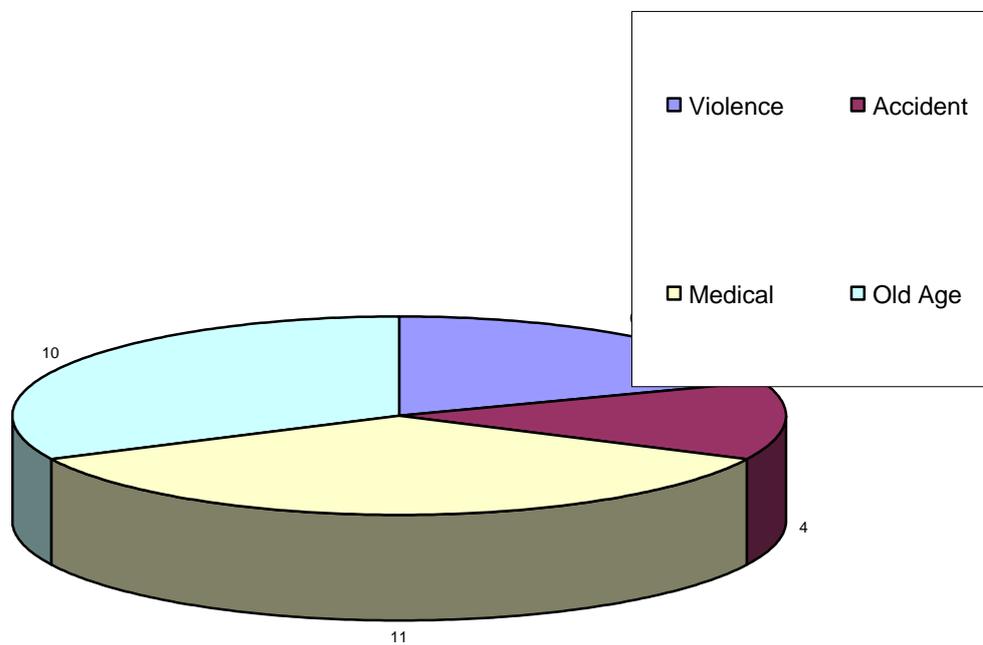


Figure 8

Whilst gaining the communicators' views on spiritual matters was not strictly a research task, as there was no way of corroborating the results, it was nevertheless felt to be worthwhile for general interest purposes. In summary, all the communicators asked claimed that reincarnation did take place and that the nature of God and the Spirit World was rather more aligned to the general understanding of these matters within Spiritualism than to the teachings of orthodox religion.

Conclusions

This piece of research has led the experimenters to conclude

- that the ouija really is a paranormal phenomenon
- that only certain people have the ability to act as a ouija medium
- that there are indications that this type of communication is not explained by the Super ESP theory or by an unconscious transference of information from the sitters' minds
- that it is difficult to obtain objective proof that the communications come from the minds of particular people who once lived on Earth.

In short, it has been easier to obtain evidence of which hypotheses are not true than to obtain evidence of which hypothesis is true.

Developments

To the surprise of the experimenters, part way through this research project, Simon began spontaneously going into trance in the middle of each séance, with the result that the later seances began with the ouija and ended with trance mediumship. However, the trance aspects are beyond the scope of this article.

References

- [1] *The Door Marked Summer*, M Bentine, 1981
- [2] *Regimental Description Books*, held on microfilm at the Public Records Office, Kew
- [3] *Casualty Book for 1st Dragoons*, held at the Public Records Office, Kew
- [4] *GRO Registers of Births and Deaths*, maintained by the General Register Office (St Catherine's House) and held on microfilm / microfiche at County record offices
- [5] *IBM World Book 1999 Encyclopedia, version 12.0*, held on CD-ROM
- [6] *International Genealogical Index*, located at www.familysearch.org
- [7] *Royal Mail website*, located at www.royalmail.com
- [8] *Lewisham Community Network News, April 2003, issue 4*, as reproduced in graphical form at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/communitysupport/5097stad.htm> .