

# ANOMALY

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by Phil Walton

# THE BORLEY PHENOMENON

by Tony Wells

**Though the famous Borley case took place some 50 years ago, it continues to engender phenomenal interest. Perhaps it is because the Borley case is often one of the first encountered by newcomers to our subject when they read the literature. Tony Wells has been studying the case for many years and presents some of his thoughts on this most celebrated example of haunting.**

## Introduction

About a year ago the editor of Anomaly asked me if I could write something on the subject of Borley Rectory. Borley has become a well-known part of haunted folklore, ranking with the Tower of London, the Marie Celeste, and the Flying Dutchman. Styled 'The Most Haunted House in England', it is probably also the most written-about haunted house in Britain.

It is also one of the most debatable hauntings and intimately connected with the story of Harry Price, probably the most charismatic, and controversial, psychic investigator this century. The two best source books on the Rectory are both by Harry Price: *The Most Haunted House in England*, and *The End of Borley Rectory*. His style is very readable, and his books, particularly *The End of Borley Rectory*, provide a wealth of information on paranormal happenings. Since his death there have been claims and counterclaims concerning Price's character and the accuracy of his recordings.

A complete discussion of the subject would fit into a large book, so any Anomaly article will at best be a summary. Even so there is too much material to go into one Anomaly article, so I have tried to structure the piece into three parts. Part one is an introduction to the Rectory, 'key players' and the alleged 'nun'. Part two is an introduction to the 'sceptics'' view of Borley. Part three is my personal analysis of the events and some conclusions. Please bear in mind that at the time of writing part one, I have no firm opinion whether Borley was the most haunted house in England. By the time I get to part three I will probably still be undecided!

Like most other subjects covered in Anomaly, there is always room for discussion and clarification - so if anyone reading this piece wants to query, confirm or correct my statements, please feel free to do so. I welcome personal letters or calls, and would be pleased to have an open debate in the letters page.

## **Borley Rectory Part I - The 'Harry Price View' of the Hauntings**

### **The History of the Owners**

This short introduction to the subject deals with one aspect of the Rectory phenomena, the supposed 'nun' which figured so much in the folklore and reports of the case.

As one can infer from the title of Price's second book on the subject, Borley Rectory no longer exists. On the former site there now stands a row of houses. There is a constant 'psychic pilgrimage' of people to the place, and the locals are unwilling and unlikely to discuss anything of the site's former history. Borley church, however, still stands, and there are things to report about that building - but that is for a later Anomaly article....

The Rectory was built in 1863 by the Reverend Henry F Bull, on the site of a much older building. He added a wing in 1875/76 to accommodate a growing family. His son, Harry Bull, upon the death of his father in 1892, succeeded him as Rector. Harry eventually died in 1927 with no new Rector to take his place.

According to Harry Price in *The End of Borley Rectory*, the building was a 'monstrosity' with few amenities. This, added to its 'reputation', explains why it took 18 months to find a replacement incumbent. The Rev. G Eric Smith and his wife moved in in the autumn of 1928, and moved out nine months later. It was not just the lack of amenities that drove them out.

The next to move in was the Rev. L A Foyster who arrived in 1930, six months after the Smiths moved out. The Foysters were tougher - they stayed for five years. Foyster wrote an (unpublished) book about his experiences, entitled: *Fifteen Months in a Haunted House*. He also kept a diary, some of which is quoted in Price's *The End of Borley Rectory*.

After the Foysters, the owners decided to sell the rectory and offered it to Harry Price himself. He was tempted, for what investigator would refuse an offer to buy 'the most haunted house in England'? In the end he decided to rent it for a year. It was eventually purchased by Captain W H Gordon; in 1939 it was burnt so badly it became uninhabitable.

## **The Harry Price Connection**

Harry Price visited the house for the first time in 1929 during the occupancy of the Rev. Smith. Smith had appealed to a newspaper for help with the phenomena there. Bells were ringing by themselves; an apparition of a 'nun' had been sighted; footsteps were heard from a room that was unoccupied; a maidservant had left his service after two days. The replacement maid apparently saw an old-style stage-coach appear and vanish into thin air, and also saw the 'nun'.

On the day of his first visit, Price himself experienced a range of poltergeist effects. A brick crashed the roof of a glass-topped veranda showering him and his companion with splinters. They were also pelted with mothballs, pebbles and bits of slate.

## **The 'Nun'**

According to legend, in the 13th century a beautiful novice from a local nunnery in Bures fell in love with one of the lay brothers from Borley Monastery. They eloped in a coach. They were chased by their respective superiors who dispatched rather unchristian punishment. He was hanged, and she was bricked up alive in her convent.

The legend has some flaws. According to Price, no monastery is thought to have existed in or near Borley and there is little evidence in favour of a nunnery at Bures.

Despite the lack of evidence to substantiate the legend, sightings of the 'nun' were well attested. Apparently she had been seen many times, by people in groups. Her main route was outdoors, following a long path that skirted the lawn. The path was known as the 'Nun's Walk'. Her route was so 'well-worn' that the first rector, Henry Bull built a summer house in order to watch her. He also bricked up the

main window of the dining room because she would apparently stare at them from outside while they were eating.

Price notes that the 'nun' had definitely been seen, or her 'presence' felt, since 1886. The reported chronology of sightings is as follows.

1886: Mrs E Byford (nursemaid) leaves her position on account of persistent 'ghostly footsteps'.

1900: Four daughters of Henry Bull see the 'nun' in sunlight on their lawn on July 28.

1916-1919: Mr & Mrs Cooper, living over the stables see the 'nun' almost every night. They also see a dog running around their room, a coach and horses sweep through the grounds and vanish, as well as a 'black shape' in their bedroom.

1927: Fred Cartwright, a local, reports seeing the 'nun' standing by the gate of the Rectory.

Further, more anecdotal, evidence indicates that there may have been sightings of the 'nun' before the 1886 incident, dating back to when a previous rectory stood on the site.

## **The Leasing**

Price, when offered the lease for a year, decided to try an experiment with people that had no real idea of the history of the place. Accordingly, he advertised for people to come and stay at the place and solve 'The Great Borley Mystery'.

These experiments bore fruit, for on more than one occasion significant phenomena were seen by independent and sceptical witnesses. One example was writing appearing on a wall in front of a BBC television engineer.

In an attempt to find out more about the 'nun', some of Price's colleagues attempted to contact her via a ouija board session. The sitters were told that she was buried in the garden 'near the house', under trees. They were then told she was buried under a stone on the pathway with the letter 'B' on it.

A Mrs Glanville tried a further experiment, which was to try to contact the nun from her own home in Streatham, some 70 miles away, having not been given any of the previous information. At the sitting, the girl's name was given as 'Lairre', and she had come from a nunnery at Havre. The first message to appear was 'Marriane' - the same name given in the writing that had often appeared on walls when the Foysters had lived there. She also (again) stated that she was buried in the Rectory's garden. Lastly she stated her burial had been in 1667, and she had been resident at a nunnery in Bures.

A second sitting was held three days later, and her full name was revealed as 'Mary Lairre'. She had died at the age of nineteen. On being asked again where she had been buried, she replied, 'At the end of the wall'.

She went on to say that she had been strangled, and the Waldegrave family was the cause of her unhappiness. (Price inferred that it was one of the Waldegraves who had perpetrated the strangling).

## **The Rectory Burns**

In 1939, on February 27, Captain Gregson watched as a stack of books tipped over, knocking over an oil lamp, thereby causing the conflagration that burnt out the Rectory. When he heard the news, Harry Price thought that would be the end to the manifestations, but according to other independent observers they were still continuing.

## **The Cellar**

In 1943 Price decided to have a go at digging up the Rectory's cellar. This followed a number of seances which resulted in messages pointing at, or near to, that location. He obtained help with the labour and accordingly began digging. It took them quite a while to clear out debris and items blocking the wells which existed in the same location. In one well was discovered an 'as new' Sheffield plate cream-jug.

They then started on the cellar floor. Their first find was a jawbone and part of a human skull. Later analysis showed it to be of a woman, possibly under 30, and over a hundred years old.

On the second day, a small medal was found, later discovered to be one of the 'miraculous medals', struck at about the same time as the Bull's rectory was built. The medal was struck on the Virgin Mary's instructions, as given to Blessed Catherine Laboure, to commemorate three visions seen by Catherine in 1830.

## The Last Phenomena?

By 1944, Borley was a dilapidated ruin under demolition, and Captain Gregson was anxious to find a new owner for the site. Price visited the site to view the demolition with David E Scherman, 'Life' photographer and war correspondent. As Scherman took a picture of the remains of the kitchen, a half-brick shot up into the air. The picture of the brick and the enlargement can be seen in Price's second book on the Rectory.

### Who hasn't heard of Harry Price?

The following situation will be familiar to many readers of this magazine. When you tell a new acquaintance of your serious interest in the paranormal you will frequently be asked a question along the lines of 'Do you believe in ghosts?' If your answer is a cautious 'What do you mean by a ghost?' or something similar, it will no doubt disappoint your questioner. This is because the popular image of a paranormal researcher is someone promoting a belief in anomalous phenomena rather than examining them objectively. As your conversation continues, you might well be asked about Harry Price, the only psychic researcher most people have heard of.

It is curious that in popular imagination Price is often seen, probably as a result of Borley, as a promoter of belief in the reality of paranormal phenomena. In fact, he spent most of his life debunking fraudulent psychics. The reason most people have heard of Price is through his undoubted gift for self-publicity. The public image of a paranormal researcher (cue eerie darkened rooms, candlelight, tied-up mediums) probably derives largely from Price himself.

Price did not endear himself to fellow researchers with his methods and desire for publicity. Inevitably, many of them regarded his results from Borley with suspicion. Borley remains highly controversial among paranormal researchers to this day.

Price spent much of his life collecting books about the paranormal. His lasting memorial is his amazing collection of books at London University. ASSAP's own library is housed in the same building. *Ed.*

# OAK COTTAGE

by Colin Randall

**A great deal is known about the history of 'Oak Cottage'. The current owner believes that a previous tenant is haunting the building. Alerted by media interest, a team that included ASSAP investigators went to see if there was anything to the alleged haunting. Early results were, indeed, promising.**

## The Cottage

Oak Cottage [*pseudonym*] is a pleasant dwelling situated in a picturesque town. The cottage is in the oldest part of the main street. We are concerned with the right-hand cottage in a terrace of three. Before the cottages were built, the site was that of River House [*pseudonym*].

Stepping through the 18th-century front of the cottage, one is greeted by a staircase that looks far too grand and out of proportion to the house. It is built of Canadian pine, stained to make it look dark and old, possibly built around 1900-1905.

The back of the house looks older than the front. Sally [*pseudonym*], the present owner of the house, believes the kitchen to have been altered at some stage. She tells a story of how a visitor who had been sleeping in the front room awoke terrified to see a ghostly figure walk through the wall from the kitchen. Sally had then taken a hammer to the spot on the wall and discovered an unsuspected hidden lintel, evidence of an old doorway of years ago.

The dining room smells musty, probably indicating dampness. The original name of the house referred to a stream that ran nearby and, indeed, under the floor. Dowsing rods have been used, appearing to show water under the dining room and through into the garden.

From old maps evidence has been uncovered that the front of the house was built out into part of the original main street, by what had been a wider market place in the past. Observing the stone wall at the rear of the house, one can see changes in

the courses of stone. A small narrow stone course indicates the original height of the building, marking the line of eaves of a lower roof. The splayed walls of a cupboard show that at one time this had been an exterior wall. Another old window was also found in another cupboard showing splaying down to the ground, indicating that these windows had at one point had a seat below them.

It has been deduced that what now appears as a terrace of cottages was in fact built onto the front of a building of two rooms' width. Also, at some time the roof was removed and a complete upstairs added. Other buildings nearby have been altered in a similar way, making the main street much narrower than it was originally. Oak Cottage is, it would appear, much older than had been assumed at first sight.

Sally has a theory that her ghost is one Ellen Moss [*pseudonym*], who lived in the house during the first half of the nineteenth century. A plaque in the local church commemorates Ellen and her husband Charles [*pseudonym*]. Charles was a successful, wealthy young businessman, and the house was listed as a malt house, brew house and a dwelling. He died in 1811, aged 45 years.

Sally believes that the ghost disapproves of liquor. Sally and a friend have witnessed a bottle of wine falling from a rack and tipping its contents over her.

Ellen lived on to 1845 and it was she who planted the tree that gave its name to the cottage in the rear garden between 1826 and 1828. Around this period her nephew lived with her, prompting her to add to the house in 1830, building over the stream. Charles had already extended the house forward to the main street some forty years previously.

After Ellen Moss the house passed to Henry Tate [*pseudonym*], who on his death gave it to his two daughters who lived there until 1920. It was these two sisters who had the grand staircase built.

River House was then split up by the next owner in 1933. It has been discovered that there was an estate owned by a man called Thoroughgood [*pseudonym*] and a deed in another name referred to an original building on the site dated 25 July 1494. Oak Cottage is thus thought to have originally been a medieval longhouse more than five hundred years ago.

The grounds of Oak Cottage once consisted of a long, narrow strip running away from the building. Similar strips were repeated along the main street, each with separate boundaries. The presence of such a pattern of strips has led to the conclusion that the basic shape of the landscape is more than 4,000 years old. Oak Cottage's boundaries thus extend back in time to the Bronze Age.

## **Events Reported by Witnesses**

Michael Lewis, ASSAP's NIC, was alerted to this case by the media. He then got in touch with me with a view to attempting an investigation. I got in touch with the current owner of the cottage, and a meeting with Sally was arranged. On my arrival we chatted about what had happened in the house over a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Then to my surprise we both felt a cold draught, and a smell suddenly arrived at the same time. Sally said that a presence had just come in. I could feel goose pimples and the hairs on my neck standing on end. Thinking this was a good start, we arranged a date for an all-night vigil on Tuesday 22 April.

The front room is a pleasant setting, full of fine antiques and nick-nacks, not one you might normally associate with a ghost. It was here, however, that Ellen Moss expired in a corner in a chair (date 1856), to be found later by her maid. At times there is a strong smell of a decomposing corpse in the vicinity. Also in this room is the original exterior wall, now dividing the front room from the kitchen. There used to be a door in this wall, but it has now gone. The site of the original doorway is where Sally's friend had seen the figure coming through the wall. There are also strange events reported in the kitchen, such as cooking smells when no one is preparing any meals. Also there are smells of polish from time to time.

It is said that the ghost does not like doors being closed and goes round opening them. This phenomenon has been noticed by members of the media who have visited the cottage. A particular instance of this concerns the toilet. It is claimed that if you visit the toilet and bolt the door, when you come to leave the room the door will be unbolted.

A sound of walking is heard on the landing floor from time to time. Bangs are also heard on a window upstairs. The sound of scratching has been heard on a particular window from time to time. On subsequent examination, scratch marks have been found where there were none before.

Sally talks to the ghost who, she claims, replies. It reportedly told her that the fireplace was of a recent date and, if removed, there was a better one behind. This was apparently done and proved indeed to be the case.

The ghost is also reported to have claimed that under or inside the eponymous tree in the garden lies the 'fortune of the house'. Years ago the tree was used as a meeting and vantage point for smugglers. There is a tunnel leading to one of the three dwellings on the site of Oak Cottage. This was presumably used by the smugglers. Alas, it has long been bricked up.

## **The Visit**

The appointed day arrived for our visit to Oak Cottage. Our party included three ASSAP investigators (Joanne Darwood, Philip Upton and myself) as well as John Girvan, an historian, and John McGraw, a spiritualist. On arrival we introduced ourselves and began to settle in for the night. Several photographs were taken of the house, internally and externally, of the front and back. A quick tour inside made everyone aware of what went on and where.

The original plan had been for seven people to meet at the cottage, but in the event only five could make it. My previously planned rota thus then had to be amended.

As Sally and her friend Hilary [*pseudonym*] were also staying the night, we decided to all sit quietly in the front room, in a relaxed pose, hoping Sally or Hilary might be able to make contact with 'Ellen'.

At 9.05 pm John McGraw, sitting in a chair by the bay window, reported the presence of a woman said to be excited by our being there.

9.07 pm: Still in the front room, seven people were present. The temperature was recorded at 15.7/C. John McGraw reported a feeling in his hands described as 'a sense of tiredness and being worn-out - a sensation of arthritis'. Then after a few minutes he got up with a headache and feeling of depression.

9.15 pm: Hilary, Sally and Joanne all saw shadows apparently moving anti-clockwise around the room, which seemed to disappear in Joanne's seat area (Ellen's seat). I took a photograph under direction from Sally as I could not see the shadows myself.

9.20 pm: Hilary reported sensing the presence of 'Ellen' as well as a small blonde girl and a man, all in the front room. These sensed presences persisted for 5-10 minutes. Sally walked around the house to see if she could pick them up again, but without success.

9.47 pm: John McGraw held Hilary's pendant, dangling from his fingers. Seconds later it started to make small circular, swinging motions, then to my surprise it was seemingly snatched from his hand by something unseen. It dropped on the floor over a metre away with John left holding a couple of links in his fingers. On picking up the pendant and looking at the chain, there were no broken links to be seen.

10.05 pm: I sat in a chair by the bay window and felt a headache and feeling of depression. The feeling later passed away after I had left the chair. John decided to walk around the house for a while. On his return to the front room some time later he reported a cold presence.

Joanne entered the bathroom, carefully bolting the door as she entered (to see if the door would be unbolted). After she had waited 5 or so minutes and nothing happened, she unbolted the door. There was then a bang on the window, which then vibrated.

10.12 pm: The temperature in the front room was recorded to be 18.2/C.

10.17 pm: The presence of 'Ellen' was reported again in the front room. Most of the group felt a peaceful, sleepy atmosphere.

## **The Vigil**

11.30 pm: It was now time to start the formal vigil. As I was two people short of the original vigil team, new plans were made. Joanne and John McGraw decided to spend a couple of hours in the front room. John Girvan, Philip Upton and I elected to stay in the hall and staircase area. As we could not cover the rest of the house so easily, John G. decided to sit in the kitchen for two hours on his own.

Philip sat near the bottom of the staircase, and I was stationed upstairs in the corridor watching the landing and bathroom areas.

As I sat on my own on the landing, Sally and Hilary bid us 'happy ghost hunting' and said goodnight, each retiring to bedrooms off the landing. At last all seemed quiet as the vigil really began.

12.10 am: I heard creaks like footsteps along the landing. Though all the lights were on I could not see any movement.

12.25 am: Hilary got up to visit the bathroom. On her return I asked her to close the bathroom door. I noted that her steps sounded similar to the creaks I had heard earlier but were not as heavy.

12.40 am: The telephone rang in Sally's bedroom, and there followed a lengthy chat.

1.10 am: Sally visited the bathroom. Again I noticed that there were hardly any creaks on the floorboards as she passed by. After closing the bathroom door, she retired to her own room, closing the door behind her. Silence again settled on the house.

1.17 am: Heavy creaks were again heard on the landing, though once again nothing was seen.

1.30 am: Everyone assembled back in the front room for a snack and a quick chat. John G. had been sitting in the kitchen and John M. in the front room. They were unknowingly sitting either side of the old blocked-up doorway. They both reported that at 11.42 pm a strange scratching noise was heard from within the wall, sounding rather like an old door opening. Neither of them saw anything, however.

We then had a changeover; Philip went to the kitchen, John M. to the landing, Joanne to the hall, and John G. and myself to the front room. Our findings were as follows.

Nothing was reported in the front room, but Joanne said she became very cold at 3.20 am. I joined her to check the temperature - it was 17.5/C. As we both became aware of a sudden cold chill, we observed the kitchen door latch click. The door opened about 15cm. Philip asked us who had opened the door. When we told him no one had, he was surprised.

3.33 am: Everyone, except Philip, assembled in the front room again, taking our seats in different places around the room. I noticed that the temperature started to drop. The door was open and the window was closed and shuttered with four people in the room. The temperature began dropping constantly, going from 16.9 to 16.2/C, by 3.48 am. It then remained between 16.1/C and 16.2/C. John M. had the cat sitting on his lap. It had been quite settled, when at 4.05 am the temperature dropped to 15.9/C, whereupon the cat got up and wandered about, seemingly unable to settle.

4.06 am: There was a bang on the fireplace which was heard by all four of us present.

4.18 am: Philip entered the front room, closing the door behind him. The temperature was then recorded at 15.8/C.

4.35 am: The temperature dropped to 15.6/C.

5.10 am: Everyone agreed that it now felt very cold. Several people put on extra garments. The temperature continued to drop going down to 15.2/C.

5.15 am: The temperature remained between 15.2 and 15.3/C.

We all sat relatively quietly for the remainder of the vigil. The temperature remained at 15.3/C.

When Sally awoke she enquired about the night's events. On retiring to bed, she had closed her door. On rising she found it wide open.

That was our first vigil in Oak Cottage, which we found quite eventful. We left at 7.00 am after thanking Sally for allowing us to spend the night in her house.

A subsequent vigil was uneventful. In spite of that a third one is planned given the promising indications from the first night.

Editor's Note: The recorded temperature variations seem quite modest overall and to be expected overnight. The feelings of coldness that overtake everyone late in the night have been reported in other rather less eventful vigils. They are probably physiological in origin.

## **DIGITAL CAMERAS**

by Tony Wells

**It has often been pointed out, not least in the pages of Anomaly, that witness testimony cannot be relied on to provide proof of paranormal phenomena. The use of instrumented vigils is therefore seen as an important way forward. Luckily, equipment is becoming cheaper and more reliable all the time.**

### **Introduction**

The fun side of a vigil is setting up the video camera and pointing it down the haunted corridor. The boring job is to review 4 hours of the same corridor on the family TV. This article offers some comfort and hope for the future!

Digital imaging is becoming prevalent in the business and personal computing worlds and it is only a matter of time before digital movie and still cameras will start to be used on vigils. The purpose of this article is to explain the concepts of the technology and discuss how it can be used in the vigil.

Digital imaging is completely different from conventional systems, and generally relies on a PC (personal computer) to store and display the information. There are two types of digital camera, the 'still' camera and the 'movie' camera.

## **The 'Still' Digital Camera**

There are various models available, the general price being between £250 and £500. Instead of recording the image on film, they record it on a subminiature floppy disk. The image sensor is a matrix of tiny photosensitive cells. Some models have sensors that are sensitive in the infra-red region, and these can work in low-light situations. This will, of course, be extremely useful in vigils. When you have taken your pictures, you plug the camera into your PC and copy the images across. Because the image is captured in digital form it is copied to the PC without any deterioration or loss of image quality. Once in the PC the images can be printed and even 'blown up' to identify any strange blobs or streaks. The limitations of storage capacity mean that the resolution of a digital image is never as high as conventional film. But the convenience and immediacy of the method has immense advantages. It is possible to take a picture and within one or two minutes examine the image on a PC screen.

## **The 'Movie' Digital Camera**

There are two digital techniques.

The first technique is the use of a conventional video camera with a video output lead. Alternatively, a dedicated 'miniature' video camera could be used. The camera is plugged into a PC with a video card. This decodes the images and stores the information on disk. The second type of camera plugs directly into the printer port of the PC, and the moving pictures are again stored on disk. The cost of the first type is approximately £100-200, provided you already have a video camera. The second type is of a similar cost.

Once the camera is plugged in you can set the PC to operate in different ways. One way is to take a snapshot every few seconds or even every few minutes, allowing 'time-lapse' photography. This is very handy in the case of a vigil. For example, you can set the camera to store an image every 5 seconds. If you then replay the movie at high speed you can review an entire vigil in a few minutes. Again because the images are captured digitally, it is possible to copy or 'blow up' the images without loss of quality.

## **Problems with Fraud**

The biggest problem with digital images is that it is so easy to manipulate them. For instance, someone could introduce a 'ghost' on a few of the frames. Or a 'ghost' could be edited out! The best way of guarding against this type of problem is to make several copies of the images and give it to other responsible vigil members. If there are disputes over any images, then they can be compared with the copies. Being digital the copies will, of course, all be identical.

## **A Glimpse into the Future - Digital Processing**

With the rapid pace of development of commercial and personal digital imaging, we are only two to three years away from low-cost digital processing. Processing offers two exciting prospects for the ghost hunter. The first is that the PC can automatically scan the movie and pinpoint any anomalous changes in the image - eg. the ghost you were hoping to catch! This will considerably reduce the amount of post-vigil reviewing. The second advantage is digital enhancement. This will scan the images, which may have been captured under difficult light conditions, and 'firm up' any images which otherwise would be missed by the reviewer.

But do not throw away your old video tapes of those corridors! Digital processing can also be used on existing video tape recordings. The images can be 'played back' to the PC and processed as before. You never know what might be found!

## **Trying it Out?**

If anyone wants to try out these techniques, they will need a Pentium PC with Windows or Windows 95 and plenty of spare disk space - 2 Gigabytes will be required to store about an hour of video using time-lapse. If you already have a video camera, you can use a video card in the PC such as the VideoBlaster card. For those without a video camera, the Connectix QuickCam camera is ideal and plugs into the PC's printer port. Like any other PC purchase, make sure you purchase any equipment from a reputable PC dealer and are satisfied that your equipment combination is suitable.

If anyone else has been experimenting with this type of technique, I would be interested to hear from them. I can be contacted via the editor, or via an open letter in Anomaly or other ASSAP publications.

## Instrumented Vigils

Psychic researchers have been spending time in reputedly haunted locations for over a century. Interesting phenomena have been recorded from time to time, but there is still no general acceptance of the reality of these phenomena. The weak link in the set-up is probably the human observer. Everyone knows how fallible we all are as observers of our environment. While instruments can be fooled on occasion, they do not suffer human biases, particularly beliefs. A better set-up for the future is surely one that combines the complementary talents of man and machine. Therefore ASSAP is currently trying to promote the idea of the instrumented vigil as an important part of any investigation. Computers are making such instrumented vigils a practical possibility, as demonstrated in this article. *Ed.*

## NATURAL CAUSES

by Maurice Townsend

**When a case appears to have a paranormal conclusion critics will quickly gather to pick holes in it. Distressing though this experience can be for the investigator, it is a useful process for improving our methods. When a case report contains a conclusion of 'natural causes' there is usually no such criticism. This is not such healthy state of affairs.**

### Introduction

The paranormal is defined negatively. It covers those phenomena not explained by current scientific theories. It can therefore only be concluded that paranormal phenomena have occurred when there are no natural explanations to cover the incidents concerned. Investigations are therefore given over to proving the absence of natural causes. This is done by considering a variety of obvious natural causes and seeing if any of them explain the phenomena. This is always going to be a difficult process as someone can come along later and suggest a natural

explanation you never considered. It may be too late at that stage to get any evidence to test the new theory. Thus cases generally end up with one of two conclusions: 'natural causes' or 'unknown causes' (implying possibly paranormal). There is always a possibility that the second conclusion may have to be changed to the first at a later date if new evidence emerges. More frustratingly, it could simply become a case of 'insufficient evidence to tell' if a possible natural cause emerges later when it can no longer be tested.

## **Unknown Causes**

When investigators conclude that no natural explanation can be found for a case, it is a serious matter. The investigators will be expected to justify their conclusion with sound evidence, all of it negative (ie. explaining why it could not have been this, that or the other). Clearly there will be close scrutiny of the case and many people will reject it out of hand because it appears to be outside current scientific thought. This pressure may seem rather hard on an honest investigator trying to discover scientific truth, but it is no more than has been applied to many scientists down the centuries. Such scepticism is in fact perfectly healthy. Without it, science would simply become a series of untested assertions and observations. All scientific knowledge must be based on sound evidence which has withstood logical analysis. New scientific discoveries require extra scrutiny before they can be accepted as fact.

## **Natural Causes**

Now, consider an investigator who has concluded that natural causes were indeed responsible for the phenomena in a particular case. This is exactly what happens to the majority of reports received by ASSAP. Often it is obvious that somebody has misidentified a phenomenon as 'unnatural' when it is not. The people who report such phenomena are usually not trained observers or scientists and often the conditions for observation are far from ideal. In addition, some observers may have personal beliefs that colour their perceptions. Even highly promising cases may be explained by natural causes after exhaustive enquiries. Very few cases make it all the way through untrammelled to the 'unknown causes' category.

However, there is a crucial difference between how this case report is received and how the previous one was. When investigators conclude that natural causes are responsible there is usually no close scrutiny of the report. After all, the

conclusions do not challenge the status quo in science, therefore they are of little interest to most people. A case has been solved and everyone is happy. The investigators may even get a warm feeling from reporting such a case. It does, after all, prove that they are not pushing their beliefs and can accept negative results. It can even add to the credibility of their next positive case.

The trouble with this happy picture is that it means that 'natural causes' are hardly ever subject to the same critical scrutiny that 'unnatural causes' are. That is a pity, because it may lead to paranormal researchers dismissing cases or even whole phenomena as 'only natural causes' when it may not be true. I certainly do not want to encourage people to believe that every case ever found to have natural causes is in fact paranormal. Far from it! Any serious, neutral, active researcher will tell you that the majority of cases received have readily obvious natural causes. Rather, I want to encourage people to apply the same cutting edge of sceptical scrutiny to both 'natural' and 'unnatural' causes. If we do not, there is a danger of using differing standards according to case conclusion.

## Examine Natural Causes Sceptically

I now want to examine some of the pitfalls of investigation that might lead to a false conclusion of 'natural causes'. These are often fallen into by people who are too eager to rubbish 'the paranormal' before they even begin an investigation. Such people are likely to accept ANY natural explanation, whether it fits with the known case facts or not. But even careful, unbiased investigators can become less thorough as soon as a natural cause starts to look likely. Cases become less attractive if they do not challenge science and may be prematurely terminated.

## Simulation is Not Proof

A favourite method of searching for natural causes is through simulation. Since the supposed paranormal effect is no longer taking place (which is true in most reported cases), you can attempt to recreate the circumstances of the original event. This is a valuable technique which often reveals unusual coincidences or misperceptions that can indeed account naturally for the phenomena reported. You can then try to recreate the effect by any plausible mechanism you can think of, even if there is no direct evidence of its happening that way. You could, for instance, insert an unseen person into a darkened room to see if he could have caused a weird effect undetected by the witness.

I would strongly encourage the use of this technique as it can suggest many possible natural causes that you may not have thus far considered. However, you should remember something very important about simulation. Showing how something COULD have happened is not the same as proving what ACTUALLY happened. One could no doubt sail from Ireland to South America in a coracle to show that the Irish discovered Brazil. But without finding ancient Irish settlements in Brazil, the conjecture is no more than speculation. Amazingly, however, some people believe that, if you can show how natural causes might have produced an effect, it cannot therefore be paranormal! This is neither scientific nor logical.

The answer is not to conclude your investigation at this point but to use your simulation as a starting point to look for more evidence. Firstly you can reexamine the original evidence to see if anything suggests that your simulation might be true. You may have missed such clues when first gathering evidence as you were not looking for them. Secondly you could reinterview the witness to deliberately search for evidence to back up your theory. If neither of these approaches produces

anything to back up your theory, try looking at the scene of the original incident again. Would your hypothetical cause have produced any other changes to the environment that might still be visible now? For instance, if you hypothesised a strong draught causing an object to move, you could look for unusual patterns in any dust present in the room.

A very important test to apply to hypothetical natural agencies is this. Should the agency have produced any other effects IN ADDITION to the apparently paranormal one observed by the witness? As an example, suppose you hypothesised that a lighthouse briefly illuminated an object in a darkened room, making it appear to suddenly glow in the dark. If you knew that the curtains were wide open at the time of the incident, then the lighthouse should have illuminated the whole room and not just one object. In this rather silly example it is fairly clear that, although the theory could account for the effect, it should have produced other obvious effects that were not observed. Therefore you can eliminate the theory from your enquiries. Astonishingly, this thought does not seem to occur to some people who are anxious to 'solve' a case as quickly as possible.

Obviously, if you do find evidence to back up your hypothesis then you can safely conclude natural causes are indeed to blame. Otherwise you can mention your hypothesis as an idea in your report but make it clear you could find no evidence to substantiate it.

## **Expert Knowledge**

Are you an expert in geochemistry or biophysics? Most investigators will no doubt answer 'no' to this question. Expertise in specialised subjects such as these is sometimes required to propose and test plausible natural causes in a case. Unfortunately, this does not stop some people without such expertise from proposing explanations based on these subjects. Of course, people can teach themselves quite complex subjects from books in their local library. However, this is hardly ever a substitute for a formal course and years of research experience.

It is important to point out here that I do not want to discourage anyone from investigating simply because they have never studied science. Also, I would not want to discourage anyone from consulting library books to find out more about possible natural causes they suspect might account for reported phenomena. Rather I would say that if you are not an expert in a particular subject then consult

someone who is. Experience shows that writing to universities, official bodies (such as the British Geological Survey) or museums often produces useful answers. Though scientists are often very busy, they may well be intrigued by the questions you put and the subject you are studying even though they will rarely want to get involved directly.

If you come to the conclusion that natural causes are involved in a case and that they rely on science that goes beyond everyday knowledge, get an expert involved. Ideally your report should include a statement by a scientist with expertise in the area concerned. Of course, if you happen to be an expert geochemist yourself, just say so.

There are two main problems that occur when people stray unassisted into fields beyond their knowledge. Firstly there is vagueness. By this I mean that someone may claim that such and such a phenomenon is due, for instance, to 'sound resonating in a nearby abandoned mineshaft'. There is no attempt to show the precise mechanism whereby such sound reaches the surface, no discussion of what the resonating frequency of a mine shaft might be, no attempt to discover how the dimensions of the shaft or surrounding soil structure might affect the sound. In other words, all the sorts of questions that a sceptical scientist might ask are left unanswered. The vague assertion might be correct but no attempt has been made to justify it. Such vague assertions might be taken literally by a reader who assumes you are an expert.

The second problem is one of misunderstanding. Someone who is inexpert in a field might misunderstand some of the basic concepts without anyone to guide their thoughts. The 'natural' explanation they suggest for a phenomenon might actually be unscientific and quite unnatural! Thus a 'natural' explanation might ironically be 'unnatural'! Consulting an expert could have easily corrected this problem and allowed a more plausible mechanism to be suggested.

We cannot all be experts in everything we come across in a case of anomalous phenomena. This should not discourage us from investigating provided we realise that we might need help.

To summarise: Try to test your proposed natural explanations. Is there any actual evidence in their favour? Are they scientifically plausible? Are they sufficiently detailed to satisfy an expert? Should your proposed mechanism have produced

any detectable side effects at the time or left a residue to be found later? Be sceptical of your own skeptical explanations!

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

by Phil Walton

**Our subject is largely based on the first impressions of people facing unfamiliar phenomena. Phil Walton, ASSAP's Research Officer, has researched how people react in such situations. When he was recently invited to give a talk at Oxford University he made this research his theme.**

Imagine you open the latest paranormal investigation magazine and read the following article. It is a review of some sensing equipment used in anomalous investigations.

*'An expensive piece of equipment costing approximately £25000 to develop to the fully mobile version. It comes in two distinct models, one being bulkier and the other having a better sensor range. The instrumentation is not based on silicon but carbon. During tests we were disappointed by the overall tolerance levels. Units needed a lot of protective coatings to work out in the field. Some models supplied failed to work altogether or badly malfunctioned. Those that we did manage to get started turned out to lack a hard-copy data output. Though hard-copy can theoretically be downloaded using special interface tools, this proved almost impossible. Units have an annoying habit of networking with other units after any event, which corrupted all data. Another irritating habit showed up during field trials. Units would move from the area designated to them spontaneously and randomly for no obvious reason. Some just shut down after a few hours of use for no reason we could find and needed to be kicked to start them up again. Accuracy levels were very poor and, when put to the test, error rates were high and differed from unit to unit. We regretfully concluded that, on the whole, the units were expensive and of dubious reliability.'*

So why do we rely almost solely on these useless heaps of junk when investigating paranormal phenomena? Maybe because we all have one! If you have not guessed yet, I am talking about the human being as an observing machine. Using humans

as the main data collecting device is general practice in our field. We call them witnesses, but how accurate are they? I decided to make this my main theme when I was asked to give a lecture this spring.

I was delighted to be asked to address the Oxford Scientific Society at their Wednesday Lecture. 'Of course I will speak' was my reply, knowing that I had over six months to prepare. But six months soon passes and it is then time to do some serious procrastinating. After cleaning the oven out more times than was strictly necessary I finally decided on the title, 'The Paranormal - A Science?' I took a look at the standard of evidence needed to establish whether something was indeed paranormal and the quality of evidence that we receive from witnesses. I wondered whether it was good enough to establish a case. To prove that a genuine paranormal event has occurred takes a case water-tight enough to convince a skeptic that something unusual has indeed happened. In my time at ASSAP I am not sure I can say that there are many cases, if any, that would provide PROOF to most people that a ghost, for example, had indeed been seen.

I started my talk in the Inorganic Chemistry Building to a keen audience of undergraduates, pens poised in hand. My usual rambling style soon put paid to any coherent note taking as they settled down to listen to my first points about what ASSAP is and what we do. Then I posed the question, 'When doing experiments, what level of error is acceptable?' They pondered and, after a few caveats, decided that an error of +/- 1% or less was acceptable. I then presented some research that a few of us have been undertaking. At this point I must thank Paul Rogers and Colin Galletly for taking part in the experiments that I featured and will now describe.

The experiments were conducted at this year's Fortean Times UnConvention. Any of you who have attended the ASSAP Training Day will be familiar with what follows. An argument breaks out, usually with one of the audience, while I am talking. On one occasion Paul, and on another Colin, posed as very irritating 'techies' fiddling with the TV while I was talking. They then stormed out after I had rudely asked them to stop what they were doing. Though the audience was not warned of the exercise, all the events took place in full view of all of them. They were then left to fill in a questionnaire describing what they had just witnessed.

The questions started with straightforward descriptions such as 'What was worn above the waist?' Then leading questions such as, 'Describe the badge worn' and 'Describe the book carried' were put. There was, in fact, no book but it was

interesting to see the effect of suggestion on a group of witnesses. The statistics for the human observing machine gleaned from those experiments were then collated and analysed.

At the Oxford lecture I showed a picture of one of the subjects, Colin, on a wall and then read out five separate personal descriptions. I asked the audience to judge if one or more, or indeed any, were of Colin. By this time the audience had realized that it was an interactive talk and debated among themselves. While there was a scatter of votes for each description, the majority was sure that it was a trick and thought none of the descriptions matched the image. Here are the descriptions:

<b>Sex &amp; Build</b>	<b>Hair &amp; Eye Colour</b>	<b>Name &amp; Age</b>	<b>Clothing</b>	<b>Items carried or worn (leading questions)</b>	<b>Duration of event</b>
Male 1.9m 75kg	Dark brown hair, no idea of eye colour	Colin. 27	Blue shirt, maybe denim, glasses, blue trousers, black shoes	Yellow plastic security pass, not carrying anything, ring on the left hand, black leather belt, silver buckle.	12s
Male 1.67m 100kg	Black hair, green eyes	Bob. 30		Carrying a black hard-back book, brown belt, gold buckle, gold watch	120s

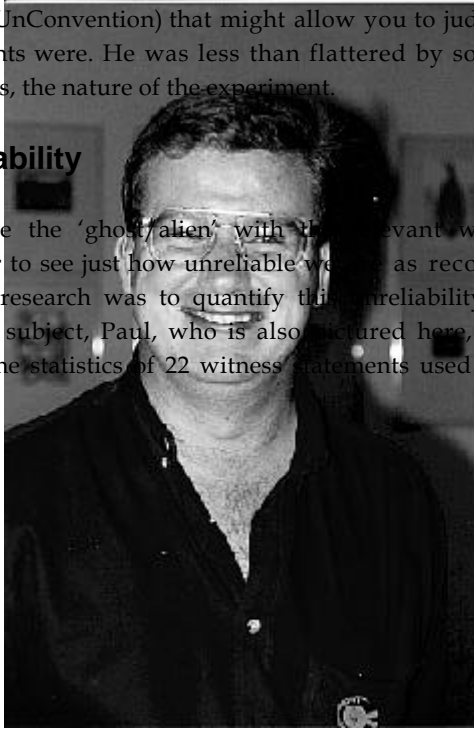
Male 1.8m 95kg	Dark brown hair, no eyes seen	32	Blue shirt, glasses -square ones	Black jeans with brown label, black belt, brown shoes, red badge, black tie, black leather belt, trainers	90s
<b>Sex &amp; Build</b>	<b>Hair &amp; Eye Colour</b>	<b>Name &amp; Age</b>	<b>Clothing</b>	<b>Items carried or worn (leading questions)</b>	<b>Duration of event</b>
Male 1.75m 100kg	Dark brown eyes	Simon. 28	Blue shirt, yellow tie, glasses, tan trousers, black shoes	Small white badge, yellow tie of average size, average book, brown leather belt square silver buckle, black digital watch, black leather shoes	90s
Male 1.78m 80kg	Black greying hair, no eye colour seen.	Phil. 48	Blue shirt, charcoal trousers, sound of keys heard or similar	No tie, no book, no rings no belt, no watch, couldn't see shoes	30s

As it turned out, all the students were wrong. In fact ALL the descriptions were of Colin. They illustrate the variety of answers given by the UnConvention audience. About the only consistency (on this occasion) was the sex. There is a

picture of Colin here (taken at the UnConvention) that might allow you to judge for yourself how accurate the statements were. He was less than flattered by some of the statements given but that is, alas, the nature of the experiment.

## Statistics of Witness Reliability

It is not often you can compare the 'ghost/alien' with the relevant witness statements, and it is an eye-opener to see just how unreliable we are as recording machines. The next stage in my research was to quantify this unreliability. The following data refer to our other subject, Paul, who is also pictured here, as he appeared at the UnConvention. The statistics of 22 witness statements used broke down as follows.



## THE VICTIMS

Colin Galletly (right) pictured at the UnConvention.

Paul Rogers (below right), also at the UnConvention, is shown buying an ASSAP Tee Shirt from Chris Walton.

*[both pics Val Hope]*

Out of 22 people who heard me call out his name:

- 17 heard Paul
- 2 Phil
- 1 Mike
- 1 Colin

They observed his age as between 25-35.

The colour of his shirt was:

- light blue checked shirt
- grey checked shirt
- striped grey white shirt
- blue checked shirt
- light blue checked shirt
- light blue checked shirt
- light blue checked shirt
- light blue checked shirt
- light blue checked shirt
- light blue checked shirt



- *patterned jumper*

His trousers were described as:

- *blue jeans*
- *grey trousers*
- *dark trousers*
- *blue stone-washed jeans*
- *trousers (dark jeans)*

When asked about the badge he was wearing, answers included:

- *yellow UnConvention badge*
- *orange badge*
- *blue badge*
- *red badge*
- *'was not wearing one'*

Answers about the colour of 'the tie' were as follows:

- *11 said 'no tie'*
- *7 gave an answer*

Those who supplied an answer described it as:

- *yellow tie of average size*
- *brown thin tie*
- *straight tie*
- *red tie*

Interestingly, only one person had mentioned a tie in the description before being specifically asked about it. He was, in fact, not wearing a tie!

Of those that answered the question, 'Did he wear any rings?':

- *4 said on the right hand*
- *2 on the left hand*
- *1 gold*

- 1 silver

This was in spite of the fact that he was not wearing any rings.

In answer to a question about 'the belt':

- 13 saw a belt
- 5 said it was brown
- 6 said black
- 2 said it was leather
- 4 saw a buckle - 2 silver and 2 metallic

From the collection of over 160 witness statements the accuracy broke down as follows.

The height was between +7% and -7% of the real value. The weight was between +18% and -26%. When the audience was asked to estimate how long the staged event lasted, the error was between +313% and -71%. Taking height alone, a 7% deviation on a 1.67m person would narrow the search down to between 85 and

95% of the human population! Not very good.

### The Unreliable Witness

I finished my Oxford lecture by describing the need for a more instrument-led approach to gathering information at vigils and wherever possible the use of cameras and videos. This was tempered by a warning not to be too reliant on photos, as even these can, of course, be faked. I promptly showed them an example of an important way forward in this respect. A SSAP has been in the forefront of efforts to make such an approach standard in field investigations.

However, we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. As Jason Braithwaite's patient Lake District study (*Anomaly Vol 18*) has shown, witness testimony is essential in establishing what is going on. It is worth remembering that the first plate people may make space recordings but they can also record light to sound, smell, temperature etc. at the same time unlike most instruments. There is also suggestive evidence that people may turn out to play an important part in actually producing paranormal phenomena rather than merely being passive observers. It is possible that people have to be present before some phenomena occur. Therefore, there will certainly be a continuing requirement for people in detecting paranormal phenomena in future, though in partnership with instruments.

Ed.