

# ANOMALY

Journal of the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena

Number 30

May 2002

ANOMALY is published twice a year. It is free to members. Single copies can be bought by non-members at £2.50 (including postage and packing - see last page for address details). PLEASE NOTE that the names of witnesses and places have been changed in line with ASSAP's Code of Conduct. The views expressed by individual authors are their own. ASSAP has no corporate views.

© ASSAP 2002  
ISSN 0969-7713

Editorial Team: Maurice Townsend and Valerie Hope. Production: Hugh Pincott.  
Front Cover Illustration: Wendy Milner. Printed by March Press.

ASSAP is a registered charity (number 207042) and a company limited by guarantee.

Web site: [www.assap.org](http://www.assap.org)

Phone enquiries: 01373-451777

## CONTENTS

<b>Cave Canem</b> <i>by Chris Huff</i>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Eyewitness</b> <i>by Paul Chambers</i>	<b>20</b>

*The editors would like to express their appreciation for the work of Andy Norfolk on Anomaly covers for many years. Sadly he can no longer do them. We also wish to thank Wendy Milner for the cover of this issue.*

# Cave Canem

by Chris Huff

**The Black Dog phenomenon remains an enduring connection to our ancient history. But many the ‘facts’ we thought we knew about the phenomenon may not be true after all.**

Black Dog (henceforth BD) legends and folktales are known from most counties of England, a few from Wales and one example, that is known to the author, from the Isle of Man. There are many tales about these spectral animals. Few are alleged, in the popular sources, to bode well for the witness, and there has grown a misleading folklore around the phenomena which is largely unsubstantiated by the scanty evidence. What exists is a collection of folk tales, spread across the length and breadth of Britain, about large spectral hounds, with black fur, large glowing eyes and perhaps an ethereal glow around them, who may explode, emit sulphurous breath, augur death and misfortune and produce poltergeist-like activity. At the outset I must take pains to point out that any recorded examples of BDs which may be a genuine haunting by a dog, which happened to be black, have (bar one at Ivelet in Swaledale) been screened out. The evidence presented below is not comprehensive but is believed to be a representative sample of the available recorded cases and thus may produce an insight into the phenomena, or promote further in-depth study.

Some common misconceptions or misrepresentations about the BDs include the following three statements:

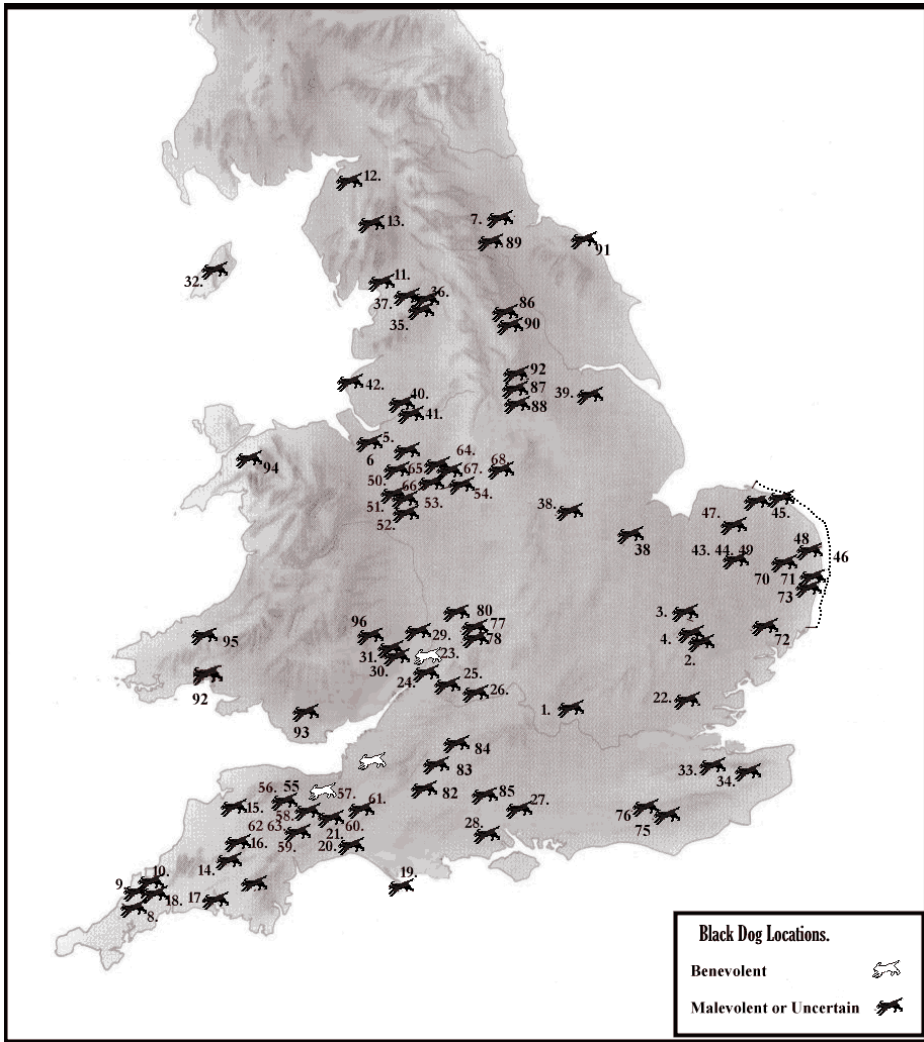
*(1) It has frequently been claimed that the BDs are to be found in the Anglo-Saxon and Viking areas of Britain.*

The first problem with this sweeping statement is that all of England was at one time under Saxon kingship; at first smaller Kingdoms, Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria in the Saxon Hegemony, and later under Athelstan and his successors as a unified whole. Viking areas are even more difficult to properly define, their extent very much depends on the time period at which the researcher looks. At the time of Alfred, for instance, there is a division of the country to define the Viking or Dane lands as being north and east of the Thames. Under Cnut, one can argue that all of England was Viking. Yet another problem is that Wales and the Isle of Man also have versions of the BDs. These areas were neither Saxon nor, apart from a brief Viking interlude on the Isle of Man, Viking centres either. The accompanying map of locations clearly demonstrates that this locational belief is false. BD phenomena have been reported from almost everywhere, the exception so far noted in the course of this study being Scotland.

Should, however, this Germanic origin for the phenomena be true, then we may place the start of reports of BDs in the British landscape at either the fifth and sixth centuries, when there is evidence of Saxon settlement in the archaeological record, or the ninth to tenth centuries for the Vikings. The Lindisfarne raid of 793, which opened the 'Viking' Age in Britain, cannot count as settlement.

*(2) being Anglo-Saxon or Viking in origin the phenomena is clearly associated with the Germanic pagan religion.*

The place of the BD in the pagan Germanic religion is something that has been repeatedly stated 'parrot fashion' by authors on the paranormal for decades. Brooks (1994.282), for example, strongly asserts this Saxon/Viking link to the phenomena, when he writes that:



'Black Dogs represent evil, having derived from Odin's Black Hound in Viking Mythology'.

While the origin of the BD as a phenomena may indeed be Germanic, Odin did not have a BD as a companion. Odin is accompanied in the world of man (Midgard) by his two ravens,

*Huginn* and *Muninn*, (thought and memory) and his two wolves *Freki* and *Geri* (both terms generally translated as 'greedy one'). If a Germanic origin for the BD is accepted, a generally accepted 'folklore fact' which must be treated with considerable scepticism, and a candidate from the Germanic tales must be sought to identify the BD, then such a more fitting one is perhaps Garm, the hound that guards the gates to the underworld. Garm is described in the Lay of Grimnir as being the fiercest hound who is chained in the cave Gnipahellir at the entrance to the land of mists, (Niflheim) and the land of Hel.

The association of the BD phenomena and the Germanic pagan tradition is far more likely to stem from the later medieval period, when pagan gods and beliefs were being blamed for all manner of occurrences, both natural and supernatural, by the zealots of the Christian church.

*(3) BDs are to be found most prolific in the counties of East Anglia.*

From the accompanying table and map you can see that the phenomenon are not outstandingly prevalent in East Anglia and the eastern counties. Only 23 eastern county locations have been identified as having phenomena reported, which represents only 26 percent of the total recorded areas and far less than would be expected should the assumption be true.

One statement which may, however, have some justification is that BDs are always detrimental to the witness. In this sample of the phenomena, there are a very few examples where the sighting of a BD is beneficial (only 4 percent), and a large number where the associated folklore is non-committal (52 percent). But it may be observed that the proportion of BDs which are reported to be harmful to the witness is disturbingly large, at 44 percent of cases. While it is true that in many accounts the phantom is accredited

with being a bad omen, a harbinger or a servant of evil, only sometimes is the BD identified as a harbinger of death (see Black Shuck, Wootton Bassett and Foxham, Hergest Court, Whitmore Park and Sedgley examples below). It is clearly an erroneous statement when the Gurt Dog of the Quantocks is perceived as a benevolent force. Physically the phenomena has consistently been described as a large black dog of the mastiff or great dane variety, often having a luminosity which marks its paranormal nature. In some cases the dog has been credited with breathing a sulphurous breath, and in others it has been witnessed to explode violently, thus causing damage to property and persons in proximity. It may be tentatively concluded that the general assumption, to meet a BD in the British countryside is an ill omen, is largely confirmed.

The witnessed phenomenon itself may be split into a number of sub-types, each of which are linked by the central theme of the visualisation of a black dog, which has been generally perceived of as an evil omen. Some of the phenomena included in this study are of a dangerous exploding type, some are portents of death, some are family retainers of a sinister kind, a very few are seen as beneficial and finally there are the packs of dogs associated with the wild hunt. The individual dogs, although sharing many features which group them under the BD banner have been assigned a plethora of names. In Norfolk and Suffolk it is called Black Shuck or Old Shock (from Scucca) meaning demon; in Winchester it is the Black Dog; in Wakefield it is Padfoot while in Burnley and Manchester it is Barghest. These are common names to be found elsewhere in the country, as are Galleytrot, Gabriel Hounds, Glassensykes, Trash and Guytrash. In the Quantocks Hills area of Somerset we find the term Gurt Dog being used, while in other parts of the country the generic term Black Dog is a constant. The names given to the phenomena for the BDs outside England are: the Gwyllgi and Cwn Annwn, of Wales and the Mauthe or the Moddey Dhoo (*Mauthe Doog*) on the Isle of Man.

Perhaps the classic example of the most dangerous type of this phenomena, and certainly the most written about and commented upon, is to be found in a case from Bungay in Suffolk, which occurred on Sunday 4 August 1597 between 9 and 10am, during a service in the church. The events were said to have occurred during a storm. As it worsened and produced lightning a BD suddenly appeared inside the church. With the interior of the building illuminated by the electric storm overhead the dog was seen to run down the centre of the aisle, between the assembled villagers. Two of these were struck dead as the beast passed by, and another was described as shrivelling up as he was touched. The phenomena is recorded on the market weathervane at Bungay where the usual cock or arrow is replaced with the figure of a wild BD. At the same time as the example in Bungay, the people of Blythborough also witnessed the same form of phenomena in their church. As before some people were killed and the dog is alleged to have scratched at the church door leaving deep gouges which are visible to this day.

Other phantom dogs seem just as dangerous to encounter. On Dartmoor, a farmer in the moor area is alleged to have heard a padding sound from behind him which was, when the farmer turned to investigate, a large BD. Attempting to stroke the beast (a dangerous thing to do if other examples are to be believed) the dog ran off emitting a sulphurous breath. As the dog approached a stream of running water it exploded violently. In Essex, a volatile BD is described occurring in Hatfield Peverell. A wagon was set alight upon striking the BD which exploded. In Suffolk, on the heathland adjacent to Walberswick and the remains of Dunwich the variety is called the Galleytrot, an interesting account of which is rendered by Boar & Blundell (1983). During the second world war an American serviceman and his wife were living in one of the remote houses (a flat-topped hut to be precise) which bordered the Walberswick marsh. On a stormy night the couple were frightened

by a loud banging on the door to the building. Looking through a window the serviceman saw a BD, the Galleytrot, trying to enter and causing a lot of noise. The attack lasted for hours, the door had been barricaded from within and would not yield to the dogs assaults. The sound of the barrage was heard from all the walls and even the roof. After the attack had faded away, daylight gave the couple courage to investigate. Expecting to find a great deal of damage to the property, they were astounded to find that no damage had been caused and furthermore there were no prints in the area to suggest that a dog had been there at all. Another tale from Snitterfield in Warwickshire of a BD seen racing across gardens was reported by Palmer (1976) as leaving no trace of its passing.

Often the sighting of a BD is taken to herald some forthcoming calamity, possibly the most prolific of all this type of BD appears in East Anglia, termed Black Shuck, Old Shock or Skeff. The Fens are a favoured haunt of this variety, as is the coastline from Felixstowe to Hunstanton, around Cromer, the area around Wicken Fen (Newmarket) and the Norfolk Broads. Interestingly the BD is seen to patrol the Peddars Way across the forested Breckland. Hundreds of incidents have been reported alleging a sighting in the lanes and small roads in these areas at night. The hound is described in some of these reports as having a single eye in the centre of its forehead which blazes red, orange or yellow and is accompanied by the clanking of his chain. This version is always viewed as a portent of death and disaster. Porter (1974) relates the tale from Garveston in Norfolk where the dog was termed Skeff. Here the dog was the size of a small pony, with a shaggy coat and saucer sized eyes burning as though on fire. In Thetford in the last century a blind boy and his sister were standing on the bridge over the river, when the boy distinctly felt a large dog pushing him from behind towards the river. The sister could not see any dog and asserted this when her brother asked her to get rid of it. She realised that this must be the

Black Shuck when her brother was thrown forwards towards the river. She managed to catch her brother and they both ran home.

In the west of the country, Somerset has a couple of examples of the BD phenomenon. The first is located at Budleigh Hill and the second the Audries to Perry Farm road. The first of these was seen in 1907 and described as a large BD with fiery eyes the size of saucers. The second account is more vague and is alleged to appear only to those about to die. Whitlock (1976) relates the tale of two villages in Wiltshire, Wooton Bassett and Foxham, which have BD phenomena. In both cases the sighting of the creature is taken as an omen of death, illness or calamity to the witness. Simpson (1976) records that Herefordshire has a BD tale which occurs at Hergest Court. Here the BD heralds a death in the Vaughan family. The Glassensykes of Darlington in Co. Durham is of the mastiff type, a huge black beast, which pads through the streets of Darlington or its outlying districts at night. It is described as having huge glowing eyes, the size of saucers, and is alleged to bring bad luck to anyone unfortunate to be confronted by it. Fortunately for most perhaps, the dog is only supposed to appear to those people of Darlington. The BD was recorded as being last seen in October 1989 in the Northern Echo. Increasing traffic in the Darlington area at all hours seems to have greatly diminished the phenomena. An interesting example, which may be a BD, is revealed by John and Anne Spencer as haunting a bridge in Swaledale. At Ivelet there exists a humpbacked bridge which is alleged to cross the river at the point where the old corpse way ran. This was a path used to convey the dead for burial at a churchyard. The haunting takes the form of a headless BD which glides on the bridge and disappears over the edge. As with other BD legends, this example is alleged to foretell doom and tragedy for those who witness it. Palmer (1976) records an example from Whitmore Park in Warwickshire where a BD with shaggy matted fur and green eyes is alleged to foretell the death in the family of the witness. At Sedgley in Staffordshire, Raven (1978)

reports a local BD who is meant to bring death to the witness. One man is alleged to have been followed to his house by this beast. As the man entered the dog started howling, very soon the house fell down killing the man inside.

Other examples are not apparently seen as dangerous or harbingers. The tales merely record details of a sighting. Deanne & Shaw 1975 relate a tale, originally collected by the folklorist William Painter at the turn of the century, concerning a stretch of road which had a BD between Bodmin and Launceston in Cornwall. This BD was described as being as big as a calf and had eyes as large as saucers while its mouth foamed. Buckinghamshire has a BD story from Aylesbury, where a farmer saw one of these dogs and struck at it with his stick whereupon the dog vanished. Padfoot is a large BD who has saucer eyes and allegedly backwards pointing feet. The Barguest of Trollers Gill in Yorkshire is similar in that it has the large burning eyes and follows travellers. In Burnley there is the variety known as Shriker or Trash a large dog whose feet make a splashing, padding sound as it passes the onlooker. Simpson(1976) records that Bunbury, the lanes near Barthlemy and The Stretton Hills have BDs, the latter described as having fiery eyes. Brooks (1994) records BDS at Bunting Nook near Norton in S. Yorkshire, and East Riddlesden, Keighley in West Yorkshire among many others.

In contrast to the above, there exist at least two examples where the BD is viewed as a good influence. The Gurt Dog of the Quantocks was believed to be responsible for keeping children from harm on the hills. A second instance of a benevolent BD is an unusual tale related by Simpson (1976), which was centred on woods near Withington. In the tale, a woman was being approached by a man of ill or dangerous repute while walking through the woods, when at her side there appeared a large BD. The BD who kept her

company and safe until she reached the end of the trees. Thereupon the creature vanished.

Also to be mentioned briefly, although they represent a whole genre of their own are the packs of dogs, associated (once more) in folklore with our pagan heritage, which form a part of the Wild Hunt. This is a subject largely outside the scope of the current article and is a topic worthy of its own study. However, a few cases are included to illustrate that they are a different phenomenon from the BDs of this study. In the south of the country, this plural variety of BD phenomena, occurs on Dartmoor and especially around the area of Whistman's wood. In this case a pack of BDs (the Whisht Hounds) are to be heard emitting fearsome howls. Of a similar nature there are the King John's Hounds around Purse Caundle in Dorset.

There are a number of northern accounts of this phenomenon. One is alleged to occur near to the old Pele-Tower of Cresswell, which has a Viking legend associated with it, and is supposed to be haunted by a White Lady. The BD phenomena occurs on the area of the beach of Druridge at the southern end of Cresswell which is well attested to be haunted. Here there are phantoms of dogs, described as big, black, hairy retrievers by one author, and as sporting dogs by another. They are alleged to appear when the weather is wild and a stiff wind is coming from the North Sea. A more definite identification with the Wild Hunt is to be found in the local tales of the Gabriel Hounds. These hounds, of county Durham, are to be seen on wild nights, especially when storms rage, whose howls and cries are to be plainly heard. They are supposed to be large dogs with humanoid heads and are always associated with calamities for the watcher. They are also supposed to hover around the house of someone who is about to die. Perhaps the same phenomena is witnessed at Todmorden in West Yorkshire, once more termed the Gabriel Hounds, who are perceived to fly

down the Cliviger Gorge and vanish into the ground. It is only since the advent of Christianity in the north they have been associated with the angel Gabriel, the spirit of truth, and also of fire and lightning.

Exactly what these large BDs are, in terms of paranormal classification, remains somewhat of a mystery. Except for a few 'family retainer' cases and the Ivelet phenomena, which have been included for the portents of death which are associated with them, the included accounts (see table) of BDs are certainly not the manifestations of a deceased animal. Their destructive or ominous nature has little in common with a benign, if not friendly, wandering animal ghost. Neither do they seem to be corporeal animals, for they share no affinities with that other mystery animal, the alien big cats, that roam parts of our countryside. Corporeal animals are not liable to explode on contact. The closest parallel to some of the reported occurrences may be ball lightning, especially in the Bungay case, or the Jack-o-lanterns that have been reportedly witnessed on the remoter moors and fens.

Overall, while there are always caveats which must be applied, there are a number of similarities between all the examples. The large size, colour and large burning eyes are common denominators. They tend to have a remarkable affinity for track ways, especially older tracks such as Peddars Way, Roman roads, barrows and Iron Age hill forts (areas where emotion has been spent in the past). They seem to be wary of water. Even the Swaledale example (which may be no more than an ordinary haunting) disappears over the bridge where it finds water. One recurrent association has been the location of the BD with that of UFO activity. Whether the association is meaningful or just circumstantial, in that a remote area is more conducive to both phenomena, is unclear. The topic of UFO phenomena and its

connection with the appearance of BDs, is not one in which the author has enough experience to offer a comment.

As the author has not witnessed any of this phenomena, nor heard of any recent accounts, it would be of interest should any members of the society have such a sighting. Please write in, perhaps with a short piece in ASSAP News, to aid the continuation of the research. With communications improving year on year, travel becoming easier and people venturing further into the remoter places in Britain, it might have been expected that more sightings of this phenomena should have been forthcoming. This has, as far as the author is aware, not been the case. No recent accounts (within the last 20 years) have come to light. Perhaps the BD is no longer to be witnessed in the British countryside. Perhaps it never was and the tales of BDs are merely that, tales to frighten children or to explain accidents and unexplained deaths on the highways, or a variety of other mundane reasons.

However, during the course of this study, one single factor has been made clear to the author, the BD phenomenon, if it exists, should not be approached in a cavalier fashion by the curious under any circumstances. Be warned, Cave Canem\* strictly applies to the study of this particular aspect of the paranormal.

*\*Editor's Note: I suppose it was my fault for introducing Latin in volume 28. I believe the title of this article translates as 'beware of the dog'.*

County.	Location.	Name.	Details.	Notes.
Bucks.	Aylesbury. (1)		Farmer struck out at dog with glowing saucer eyes, it vanished.	Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122.
Cambs.	Balsham. (2)	S h u c k - Monkey	Encountered on Wrattling Road. Has face of monkey, otherwise as Black Dog	Brooks 1984.84.
	Wicken Fen. (3)	B l a c k Shuck	Black Dog.	Brooks 1984. 105.
	Wandlebury. (4)		Black Dog.	Brooks 1984. 105.

Cheshire	Bunbury, (5)			Simpson, J., 1976.
	Lanes near Barthlemy. (6)		Black Dog.	Simpson, J., 1976.
Co. Durham	Darlington. (7)	Glassen-sykes	Black Dog. Glowing eyes the size of saucers, harbinger of ill fortune	Newton, A. C., 1993.13
Cornwall	Bodmin to Launceston road. (8)		Black Dog.	Deane, T, & Shaw, T., 1975. 110
	Whitborough Barrow, St. Stephens Down, Launceston (9)		Black Dog.	Deane, T, & Shaw, T., 1975. 110
	Botterell, Berriow Bridge (10)		Black Dog.	Deane, T, & Shaw, T., 1975. 110
Cumbria	Beetham.(11)	Cappel	BD. Blazing eyes & ferocious.	Brooks 1984.178
	Caldbeck - Lane to Braithwaite. (12)		Black Dog.	Brooks 1984.180.
	Shap. (13)		Black Dog. Runs for a short distance then plunges over edge of sheer drop. Accident spot. Harbinger of accident.	Brooks 1984.192.
Devon	Dartmoor. (14)		(A) Farmer tried to stroke large black dog, it ran off emitting stream of sulphurous vapour from mouth, exploded. (B) Lanes through area have sightings of Black Dogs.	(A) Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 349 Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122. (B) Whitlock, R., 1977.61
	Great Torrington. (15)		Seen in villages to the SE along Torridge Valley.	Brooks, J., 1984.22.
	Okehampton. Castle. (16)			Brooks, J., 1984.22.
	Plymouth. (17)		Walker in C19th tried to pat a large Black Dog that was keeping him company. Hand went through the dog. Nearer to Plymouth there was a flash and explosion as of lightning & thunder, the man ended up in the ditch unconscious.	Whitlock, R., 1977.60
	Yealmbridge. Boynton to Egloskerry Road. (18)		Black Dog Seen at midnight when the moon is full.	Whitlock, R., 1977.61

Dorset	Portland. (19)	Tow Dog.	BD. Shaggy with large blazing eyes, blocks way but not harmful.	Brooks, J., 1984.24.
	Uplyme. (A) Black Dog Lane (20)		Black Dog which gets larger as the witness approaches. Herald of death to witness within a year.	Whitlock, R., 1977.61
	Uplyme. (B) Black Dog Pub. (21)		Black Dog appeared in building, owner tried to strike it with a poker, dog escaped through the ceiling releasing a shower of gold coins as it did so. Now haunts lane to the side of the pub. Benevolent	Brooks, J., 1984.22.
Essex	Hatfield Peverell. (22)	Shane's shaggy dog.	Explosive variety, set light to wagon after waggoner tried to hit it. Not seen allegedly since advent of petrol engine.	Brooks 1984.93. Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 349 Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122.
Glos.	Withington. (23)		Black Dog.	Simpson, J., 1976. 91
	Fairspeare. (24)		Black Dog.	Briggs, K., 1974. 147
	Birdlip Hill. (25)		Black Dog.	Briggs, K., 1974. 75, 147
	Wilcote. (26)		Black Dog.	Briggs, K., 1974. 147
Hampshire	Winchester (27)		Black Dog.	
	New Forest. (28)	Tyrrell's Dog.	Black Dog. Huge and black. Once rushed into a forest cottage and out through a wall.	Boase, W.,1976, 106-7.
Hereford & Worcester	Alfrick (29)		Black Dog.	Brooks 1984.110
	Eardisley. (30)		Black Dog.	
	Hergest Court & Area. (31)		Black Dog. Associated with ghost of Black Vaughan	Simpson, J., 1976. 90. Brooks 1984.120-1.
Isle of Man	Roads on Isle of Man & Peel Castle. (32)	Moddey Dhoo.	As big as a calf, with eyes like pewter plates suddenly appearing to travellers on lonely roads at night.	Killip, M. 1975.150.
Kent	Trottscliffe. (Pilgrims Way) (33)		BD - said to be gigantic.	Brooks 1984.57.
	Leeds Castle. (34)		Black Dog. Considered as a harbinger of death to members of family in residence.	Brooks 1984.49.
Lancs.	Burnley. (35)	Shriker, Trach	Large shaggy dog, broad feet, made splashing noise as it ran.	Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 350

			Disappears.	
	Dobb Park Lodge. (36)		Black Dog, Guards Treasure.	Simpson, J & Roud S., 2000. 25.
	Wycoller Hall, Colne. (37)	Guytrash Lightfoot.	Black Dog.	Brooks 1984. 195.
Leics.	Holwell Mouth Wood. (38)	B l a c k Shug	Haunts Wood called Holwell Mouth, seen at dusk or dawn, death to witness.	Brooks 1984. 163
Lincolnshire	Grayingham to H e m s w e l l . (39)		Black Dogs as big as tables.	Brooks 1984.92.
Manchester	Godley. (40)		Yellowish-brown , as big as a bull fierce, appears and disappears spontaneously.	Brooks 1984.183
	Manchester. (41)		Large shaggy dog, Headless, witnessed 1825 outside church.	Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 350
Merseyside	Formby. (42)		Enormous BD witnessed on beach, never leaves footprints.	Brooks 1984.183
Norfolk	Breckland and Broads (especially coast). (43)	B l a c k Shuck	Calf-sized dog, huge glowing saucer eyes, sometimes single eye, sometimes headless, sometimes invisible, hot breath, clanking chains, footsteps. Howls. Smell of Brimstone.	Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 349 Porter. E., 1974. 89. Brooks 1984.90.
	Breckland (Peddars Way) (44)	B l a c k Shuck	See description above.	Porter. E., 1974. 89.
	Cromer. to Overstrand. (45)	B l a c k Shuck	See description above.(A) Runs with head over one shoulder. (B) Death within a year to witness.	Porter. E., 1974. 89.Brooks 1984.90.
	Felixstowe to Hunstanton. (46)	B l a c k Shuck	See description above.	Porter. E., 1974. 89
	Garveston (47)	Skeff.	Small Pony sized, coat shaggy (skeffy) like an old sheep, eyes as big as saucers, blazing with fire. Vanishes	Porter. E., 1974. 89.
	N o r f o l k Broads. (48)	B l a c k Shuck	See description above.	Porter. E., 1974. 89.
	Thetford. (49)	B l a c k Shuck	Blind boy claimed big dog around him, pushed into river, sighted sister did not see dog.	Porter. E., 1974. 89-90.
Shropshire	Baschurch. (50)		Black Dog.	Simpson, J.,1976. 89
	Bishops Castle. (51)		Black Dog.	Simpson, J.,1976. 89
	Broomfield. (52)		Black Dog.	Simpson, J.,1976. 89
	M o u n t f o r d Church. (53)		Black Dog.	Simpson, J.,1976. 89

	The Stretton Hills (54)		Fiery-eyed. Associated with ghost of Wild Erdric.	Simpson, J., 1976. 89
Somerset	Budleigh Hill. (55)		Black Dog. Seen 1907. Fiery eyes as big as saucers.	Palmer, K., 1976. 87 Spencer, J., & A., 1992. 350
	Audries to Perry Farm road. (56)		Black Dog. Appears just before death of witness. Allegedly last seen 1960.	Spencer, J., & A., 1992. 349 Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122.
	The Quantocks (57).		Black Dog	Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122
	Westport. (58)		Black Dog	Palmer, K., 1976. 86
	Dommett. (59)		Black Dog	Palmer, K., 1976. 86
	Hinton St. George. (60)		Black Dog	Palmer, K., 1976. 86
	Stapley (61)		Black Dog, with eyes the size of saucers.	Palmer, K., 1976. 86-7
	Bishop's Lydeard (62)			Palmer, K., 1976. 87
	Buckland St. Mary. (63)		White Dog/Donkey. Harbinger of death to family at the Grange.	Palmer, K., 1976. 87
Staffordshire	Comberford Hall. (64)		Black Dog brings death to the witness.	Raven, J., 1978. 22
	Ipstones. (A) Lane to Hermitage Farm. (B) Indefont Well. (65)		Black Dogs.	Brooks 1984. 164.
	Sedgley. (66)		Black Dog, huge with eyes like teacups. Followed man home, howled loudly whereby the house fell down and killed him.	Raven, J., 1978. 23
	Swinscoe. (67)	Padfoot	Black Dog	Brooks 1984. 172.
	Wolverhampton. (68)		Black Dog huge with eyes like teacups. Followed man home, howled loudly whereby the house fell down and killed him	Raven, J., 1978. 23
Suffolk	Area. (69)	Old Shock.	Calf sized Black Dog, frequenting highways and footpaths at night. Witnesses get thrown about, bruised and suffer trauma.	Spencer, J., & A., 1992. 349 Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122.
	Bungay. (70)		4 Aug. 1577 during great storm. Lightning, Black Dog appeared and raced down nave. Wrung	Porter, E., 1974. 90. Brooks 1984. 105.

			necks of 2 praying parishioners, shrivelled but did not kill another	Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122. Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 350 Simpson, J & Roud S., 2000. 25.
	Blythborough. (71)		4 Aug. 1577 during great storm. Lightning, marks of claws on door.	Porter. E., 1974. 90-1 Brooks 1984.105.Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 350 Mitchell, J., & Rickard, R. J. M., 1977. 122. Simpson, J & Roud S., 2000. 25.
	Clopton. Woolpit Road. (72)		Two saucer eyes. Would not move out of way, grew larger, spoke 'I want you within a week'. Man who witnessed it died next day.	Porter. E., 1974. 89.
	Walberswick. (73)	Galleytrot.	Black Dog (see description for Black Shuck).	Brooks 1984.105.
	Wicken Fen (Newmarket) (74)		Black Dog (see description for Black Shuck).	Brooks 1984.106.
Sussex	Alfriston. Road to Seaford (75)		White Dog. Appears every 7 years on Midssummer Eve. Visible to men	Simpson, J., 1973. 40.
	Black Dog Hill, between Ditchling & Westmeston. (76)		Headless Black Dog	Simpson, J., 1973. 50.
Warwickshire	Lower Quinton. (77)		Black Dog running down hill, turned into a woman.	Palmer, R., 1976.78
	Alveston. (78)		Black Dog witnessed on 9 successive occasions by boy walking home, last occasion appeared as woman, headless and in silk gown. When he got home his sister was dead.	Palmer, R., 1976.78
	Whitmore Park. (79)		Matted shaggy coat. Green Eyes. Harbinger of a death in the family of the witness.	Palmer, R., 1976.79
	Snitterfield. (80)		Garden of Brook House during WWII. Large BD seen crossing garden but left no tracks on the freshly turned soil.	Palmer, R., 1976.79
Wiltshire	Area (81)		Black Dogs often seen dragging	Brooks, J.,

			chains or headless.	1984.42.
	Chapman-slade. (82)		Black Dog. Large dog with fiery eyes.	Whitlock, R., 1976.129 Brooks, J., 1984.42.
	Foxham (83)		Black Dog.	Whitlock, R., 1976.129
	Wootton Bassett. (84)		Black Dog.	Whitlock, R., 1976.129
	Pewsey at Bridge. (85)		Large Black Dog on glittering chain, led by a woman in black.	Whitlock, R., 1976.
Yorkshire	Appletree-wick. (Trollers Gill.) (86)	Barguest.	(A) Fiery eyes as big as saucers. (B) Yellow coat, large eyes.	Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 349 Brooks 1984. 163
	Bunting Nook near Norton (87)		Black Dog. Fiery eyes as big as saucers.	Brooks 1984. 213.
	E. Riddleston, Keighley (88)		Black Dog. Size of a donkey. Harbinger of death to witness.	Brooks 1984. 206.
	Ivelet. (89)		Headless BD, runs onto bridge & disappears over edge. Bridge on corpse way, road for transferring corpses to churchyard.	Spencer, J, & A., 1992. 349 Brooks 1984.210
	Ilkley. (90)	Guytrash	Black Dog.	Brooks 1984.210
	Kettleiness. (91)		Black Dog.	Brooks 1984.211.
	Wakefield. (92)		Black Dog.	

# The Eyewitness

by Paul Chambers

**Few researchers are lucky enough to witness paranormal phenomena personally. We therefore have to rely on witness testimony. But how accurate is that vital testimony?**

When it comes to solid proof, the paranormal world does not have a good track record. Several centuries of serious-minded investigation have yet to produce a single piece of independent evidence that satisfies the demands of the sceptic.

With almost every reported paranormal experience the only evidence we have to go on is that of the eyewitness. However, considering how important eyewitness testimony is to the credibility of the paranormal, it is amazing how little attention is actually paid to the conditions under which such testimonies are taken or the factors which can affect their reliability. In fact, experience suggests that many paranormal researchers start with the premise that eyewitness testimony is both 100 percent correct and infallible. This paper aims to show that there are many factors which can affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimony and that such factors must be taken into consideration if the paranormal is to be taken more seriously by the established scientific community.

One of the most frustrating aspects of any paranormal experience, be it a poltergeist or UFO, is the lack of solid proof to back up people's claims of having had an apparently impossible (in scientific terms) or improbable experience. It is this lack of hard evidence that more often than not defines a case as being paranormal. If a cryptozoologist could bring back the body of the Bigfoot, rather than just a few out of focus pictures of something

that might or might not be an unknown species of giant ape, then there would be no mystery to solve. Zoologists could examine the body and be happy that there is a wild primate living in the forests of western America. Likewise, if every alien abductee could bring back a piece of material not found on Earth or every ghost be made to appear at a pre-arranged press conference, then most paranormal investigators would be out of a job. However, none of this hard evidence ever comes to light and it seems, as many have remarked, that the paranormal world will give just enough proof to keep people intrigued but not enough for them to be able to convince a sceptical world.

Whether by design or accident, the long and short of all this is that we are left with no tangible evidence other than the word of the witness or witnesses to the paranormal phenomenon concerned.

Considering that practically every sphere of the paranormal relies heavily on the testimony of eyewitnesses, there has been remarkably little work done into the question of its reliability. It seems that while paranormal investigators will travel long distances to see the site of a strange activity or will spend hours researching in libraries, very few ever direct their attention towards understanding the ins and outs of the reliability of the eyewitness testimony that underpins their craft.

Given the lack of direct research performed by the paranormal community, it is necessary to look for parallels in other research fields. A literature search revealed that practical research into the accuracy of eyewitness testimony has almost exclusively come from the legal profession, whose concern is the reliability of the testimony of eyewitnesses in a court of law.

The testimony of an eyewitness will often be the only evidence offered up in a court of law. There tends also to be a propensity for

a court jury to believe without question what an eyewitness tells them. For this reason there has been a great deal of research done as to how accurate an eyewitness testimony in court actually is and, in cases where it turns out to be inaccurate, why errors have occurred and how they can be spotted or avoided in future.

Eyewitness testimony in court frequently concerns the recall of a spontaneous event or events which occurred some time previously (eg. a car crash). Eyewitness testimony given in the aftermath of a paranormal encounter is also likely to concern a spontaneous event which occurred some time ago. The parallels between criminal and paranormal witnesses are profound. Thus the bulk of the material in this paper will be drawn from research carried out on behalf of the criminal justice system but which can equally well be applied to paranormal research.

## **Hearsay Evidence**

The first matter to be considered is whether or not second-hand testimony by witnesses is admissible as evidence.

Using first-hand sources might seem to be a common-sense thing to do, given that first-hand accounts are generally considered to be more reliable than second-hand ones, but the need for first-hand evidence is even more crucial than this.

The paranormal researcher, like most courts of law, is almost totally reliant on eyewitness testimony in their need to study the mystery before them. In a court of law only first-hand eyewitness testimony is admissible, with so-called hearsay evidence (i.e. telling somebody else's version of events) being wholly inadmissible. In other words as far as the law of the land is concerned, second-hand evidence is a non-starter. If the paranormal world is to gain the respect of scientists and other professional researchers, then it too

should adopt this same high ideal. But why is hearsay evidence so unreliable?

Anybody who has ever tried to make a copy of an audio or video tape will know that the second copy is never as good as the original. This is because the copying process is imperfect and any minor faults on the first tape will become exaggerated on the second one. If a third copy is made from the second tape then this will be of worse quality still. If copies of copies are continually made, then by the sixth or seventh generation the imperfections will be so great as to make the original soundtrack and picture practically unrecognisable. Anybody who has bought a pirated videotape from a market stall will be able to testify that the quality is most certainly not the same as an original one purchased on the high street. The same is true of any type of sequential copying, be it art forgery or video piracy: to guarantee quality you have to go back to the original source. This is also true with eyewitness testimony and there have been a number of interesting experiments done to prove this.

The earliest, and probably still the best, experiment done with regard to hearsay evidence was performed in the 1930s by Sir Frederic C. Bartlett, a Cambridge psychologist who had an interest in the reliability of memory. In addition to his desire to understand the workings of human memory, Bartlett also had a fascination with folktales, especially with regard to the manner in which their meaning and content could become altered through time. He chose to use a folktale as the central focus in the following experiment, something that makes it all the more relevant to students of the paranormal.

In deciding how accurate a second or third hand recounting of somebody else's description of events is, Bartlett set up an experiment in which one person was told a traditional American

Indian ghost story. This person then had to tell the story as best as they could remember it to another person who in turn had to tell it to somebody else who told somebody else, and so on down the line. In so doing, Bartlett wanted to see how much it was possible for a story to change after going through several generations of repetitions. The original ghost story was as follows:

*One night two young men from Egulac went down to the river to hunt seals, and while they were there it became foggy and calm. Then they heard war-cries, and they thought: 'Maybe this is a war party'. They escaped to the shore, and hid behind a log. Now canoes came up, and they heard the noise of paddles, and saw one canoe coming up to them. There were five men in the canoe, and they said:*

*'What do you think? We wish to take you along. We are going up the river to make war on the people'.*

*One of the young men said: 'I have no arrows'.*

*'Arrows are in the canoe', they said.*

*'I will not go along. I might be killed. My relatives do not know where I have gone. But you', he said, turning to the other, 'may go with them.'*

*So one of the young men went, but the other returned home.*

*And the warriors went on up the river to a town on the other side of Kalama. The people came down to the water, and they began to fight, and many were killed. But presently the young man heard one of the warriors say: 'Quickly, let us go home: that Indian has been hit'. Now he thought: 'Oh, they are ghosts'. He did not feel sick, but they said he had been shot.*

*So the canoes went back to Egulac, and the young man went ashore to his house, and made a fire. And he told everybody and said: 'Behold I accompanied the ghosts, and went to fight. Many of our fellows were*

*killed, and many of those who attacked us were killed. They said I was hit, and I did not feel sick'.*

*He told it all, and then he became quiet. When the sun rose he fell down. Something black came out of mouth. His face became contorted. The people jumped up and cried.*

*He was dead. [1]*

Bartlett based a number of experiments around the telling and retelling of this story, which he calls 'The War of the Ghosts'. See if you can recognise the following version of 'The War of the Ghosts':

*Two Indians were out fishing for seals in the Bay of Manpapan, when along came five other Indians in a war-canoe. They were going fighting.*

*'Come with us,' said the five to the two, 'and fight.'*

*'I cannot come,' was the answer of the one, 'for I have an old mother at home who is dependant upon me.' The other also said he could not come, because he had no arms. 'That is no difficulty,' the others replied, 'for we have plenty in the canoe with us'; so he got into the canoe and went with them.*

*In a fight soon afterwards this Indian received a mortal wound. Finding that his hour was come, he cried out that he was about to die. 'Nonsense,' said one of the others, 'you will not die.' But he did. [2]*

This version of 'The War of the Ghosts' emerged from the tenth person to be told the tale. While it is still recognisable as being related to the original story reprinted above, there are very significant changes in terms of its length, detail and overall meaning. In fact, if you were to read this last version without having first read the original, it would not make much sense at all, there being no real point to it.

Bartlett repeated the experiment using different stories and found the same result in each case. Like making copies of video tapes, as a story gets copied from person to person, the inaccuracies get steadily worse until much of the original detail and meaning is lost. The stark lesson here is obvious. Only first-hand eyewitness testimony can be considered to be reliable. The legal courts accepted this fact a long time ago and so must we in the paranormal.

## **A Matter of Time**

Before leaving Bartlett's work entirely we must complicate matters further. It is not just the reproducing of a story from person to person that can cause radical changes in it - the details of even a first-hand experience can also change radically with the passage of time. The crucial factor in this is the length of time that elapses between an event and the person being asked to recall the details of it.

Human memory is not infallible, and the quality of a recollection fades rapidly with time. This degradation can introduce new details, or subtract original ones, from the original version of events.

Going back to 'The War of the Ghosts' again, look at the next two reproductions of the story. The first was told six weeks after the person first heard the story, the second after six and a half years.

## After Six Weeks

*There were ghosts. There took place a fight between them. One of them asked: 'Where are the arrows?' The other said: 'They are in the canoe'. A good many of the combatants were wounded or killed. One of them was wounded, but did not feel sick. They carried him to his village some miles away by rowing in the canoe. The next day something black came out of his mouth and they cried: 'He is dead'. [3]*

## Six and half years

*Brothers. Canoe. Something black from mouth. Totem. One of the brothers died. Cannot remember whether one slew the other or was helping the other. Were going on a journey, but cannot remember why. Party in war canoe. Was the journey a pilgrimage for filial or religious reasons? Am now sure it was pilgrimage. Purpose had something to do with a totem. Was it on a pilgrimage that they met a hostile party and one brother was slain? I think there was some reference to a dark forest... [4]*

Here we can see the degree to which the memory can alter or we forget key pieces of information.

It can reasonably be argued that the volunteers involved in Bartlett's experiments were not recounting an actual experience but merely a story that had been told to them.

A frightening paranormal experience could be expected to imprint itself on the mind more powerfully than a dull ghost story and so could be expected to be recollected better. Although this is to some degree true, experiments similar to those of Bartlett have been carried out on people who have had memorable experiences, such as being involved in street crime, and have produced the same results. [5]

Again, the conclusion from this must be that even first-hand testimony should only be considered to be accurate if the witness is interviewed within a short period of time of their experience having occurred. The greater the length of time between the occurrence of an event and the eyewitness' recollection, the less reliable the testimony will be.

## **A Matter of Perception**

Bartlett's experiments show us some of the pitfalls inherent in eyewitness testimony. However, the actual set-up of his tests, which involve the rote learning of an oral tale, bears little relationship to undergoing a physical experience and then later having to recall it.

Judging how accurately a person can recall an experience that has actually occurred to them would seem to be much more relevant to the paranormal than being able to recount a ghost story word for word.

Considering how important eyewitness descriptions are in criminal cases, research into this field of memory was surprising late in coming, with the first useful experiments not taking place until the 1970s. Most of the work in this field has been performed in order to assess the reliability of people's reporting of events in court, but it can be directly applied to paranormal cases as well.

In general, various studies of memory have found that not only do we have differing means of storing memories, such as short-term and long-term memory [6], but that we have differing ways of recollecting different types of information.

For example, the way in which we memorise and recall a telephone number is different to the way in which we memorise and recall the events of a traffic accident. Those looking into the question of

eyewitness memory have broken the field down into a number of different areas based upon the type of detail that the eyewitness is being asked to recall.

The field of research that most applies to the eyewitness testimony of paranormal experiences is called 'event memory', which focuses on people's ability to recall events that they were a witness to or participated in, such as accidents, robberies, fights, riots, etc. Most of these events are of short duration, occur unexpectedly and have an emotional effect on the witness. In this respect they are very similar indeed to the average paranormal experience.

Many people (including many psychical researchers, especially those using hypnotic recall techniques) treat the human memory as though it were some form of video tape recording that is capable of faithfully reproducing the sights, sounds and smells from any point in a person's life.

This view of memory as being infallible has led to great faith being placed in the value of eyewitness testimony by the police, legal system, paranormal researchers and others. Bartlett has already shown us how inaccurate the memory can be when repeating learned information, but how accurate are people's memories of physical events? In other words, how much faith can we place in the testimony of those who claim to have undergone a paranormal experience?

Over the last few decades many different experiments have been designed with the objective of quantifying the accuracy and reliability of event memory. Almost without exception these experiments have concluded that event memory is highly unreliable as a matter of routine. In fact, not only is it unreliable, but it can also be seriously affected by many external and internal factors.

There are many factors than can influence or change a person's memory. Here I will briefly cover the three that are most applicable to the reporting and investigation of a paranormal event. These are:

- (1) the influence that can be exerted by an interviewer over his/her interviewee.
- (2) the influence that personal bias can have on memory.
- (3) spontaneous changes that can occur to memory.

## **Leading Questions**

In order for news of a paranormal experience to make it into print, the eyewitness will normally have had to tell their story to a third party, such as a journalist. This extra link in the chain between the witness and the paranormal researcher can present a problem.

During my years of interest in the paranormal I have interviewed many people about their strange encounters. I have always tried not to put words into their mouths, preferring instead to let them tell me things in their own way. I also always try to tape record the interviews so as to avoid problems with my own inaccurate memory or with scantily scribbled notes that later do not make any sense. I hope that by doing this I introduce a minimum of bias into the interview process and can also later faithfully reproduce what was said to me. While this is probably the preferred means of operating, it is difficult to tell whether first-hand accounts presented by other paranormal researchers have been gathered in the same way. If the interview has not been carried out properly then there is a danger of bias entering the process.

A classic example of what can happen when the interview process goes wrong can be seen in some of the satanic ritual abuse scares which swept through America, Europe and Australia during the 1980s and 1990s [7]. At this time dozens of people were accused by

the authorities of having kidnapped children and then having subjected them to vile black magic rituals.

Few of these charges ever stuck, with most of the court cases falling to pieces as soon as the prosecution witnesses took the stand, their testimony turning out to be highly unreliable and biased. Later investigations into some of the more spectacular court case collapses of satanic ritual abuse trials found that the testimonies were inaccurate because of bias introduced at the interview stage.

Dealing with interviewer bias is a very serious problem for both the legal system and the paranormal. In the case of one of the most famous satanic ritual abuse scares, that of the Broxtowe Estate in England, the government report into what went wrong found that social workers who had interviewed children had deliberately misled them into changing their testimony during the interview process [8].

This is a very easy thing to do both deliberately and by accident. A person interviewing an eyewitness can very easily change that person's testimony using leading questions. In one study it was found that volunteers who had watched a video recording of a car accident could have their testimony of the event changed almost at the will of the interviewer [9]. After watching the accident on video, several volunteers were subjected to close questioning about the actions of the drivers and other details of the accident. The interviewers found that when they asked 'About how fast were the cars going when they contacted each other?', the average answer was 30.8 mph. However, if they changed the question to 'About how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?', people's estimation of the speed of impact rose to 41 mph. The simple rephrasing of a question changed the estimation of speed by 10 mph. The same was found to be true for other aspects of the accident, including the car's colour, the number of drivers, etc. This

is a relatively minor example of how the wording of a question can affect a person's view of events.

Less subtle questioning can produce even more dramatic results. In the aforementioned Broxtowe Estate satanic ritual abuse case it was found that the social workers interviewing the child 'witnesses' had not only asked highly leading questions but also refused to accept any answers that did not fit in with their view of events. The following is a transcript of an interview between a social worker involved in the Broxtowe Estate satanic ritual abuse case. Note that the interviewer simply ignores the child's responses, choosing to follow their own agenda instead:

Interviewer (I): 'You had to eat babies more than once?'

Child (C): 'I can't remember.'

I: 'We think you did.'

I: 'Who brought it? A name? Difficult to remember who killed the baby?'

C: 'I didn't kill it.'

I: 'Who told you to? Did she give you the knife?'

C: 'No.'

I: 'I think she did. You were asked to kill the baby. You had to do it. How was it killed?' [10]

In this questioning technique there is no subtlety at all. The child is not given the opportunity to give an answer that differs from the preconceived beliefs of the interviewer, who clearly believes that a baby has been killed and eaten and will not accept answers to the contrary. Similar techniques were used in ancient witch trials where the accused would be tortured until they confessed. There was never any question of their innocence.

However, questioning need not be so severe in order to change people's point of view. In the aforementioned experiment involving

the video of the car crash, leading questions like: 'He was driving too fast, wasn't he?' or 'How close was the car when the boy stepped into the road?' also changed the testimony considerably. Leading questions like these are not permitted in court, and we must be wary of them in paranormal cases too.

As the conditions under which an eyewitness to a paranormal event is interviewed are rarely published, it is difficult to know whether or not they have been asked leading questions. However, one of the most common criticisms of those sceptical of the paranormal is that interviews, particularly those conducted under hypnosis, have had an element of bias introduced into them by the interviewer. In some cases this is most certainly true. Look at this transcript of a female alien abductee being interviewed under hypnosis.

Abductee (A): 'My legs are up, and I'm getting snipped, but internally...'

Interviewer (I): 'They're using instruments for this, I guess?'

A: 'Very tiny, tiny, long, very long little itty bitty scissor things...'

I: 'Do they remove their instruments?'

A: 'Yeah, they removed something out of me...'

I: 'An embryo, you mean?'

A: 'Yeah, it's like...'

I: 'What do they do when they remove it?' [11]

Note how the interviewer uses leading questions to reinforce the story being given by the person under hypnosis, encouraging them to develop the story rather than just telling it. This line of questioning would not be allowed in a court of law and should be viewed with suspicion by the paranormal fraternity too.

Over-enthusiastic interviewers present a problem with regard to the accuracy of eyewitness testimony to paranormal experiences. The extent of this problem has, however, never been quantified and so

for the moment we must simply be aware that it may have had an influence on some of the cases encountered.

## **Personal Bias**

The introduction of bias into an interview need not just come from the interviewer, but can also come from the interviewee as well. Preconceived ideas held by witnesses themselves can be introduced into the version of events without their knowing it. Again we must turn to the experiments performed in connection with court witnesses.

A great many experiments have been done with regard to the degree to which racial stereotyping can affect a person's view of events. A recent study asked volunteers to look at slides of an altercation between a black man and a white man on the London Underground. In these slides the white man was holding a knife threateningly towards the black man. The volunteers were then shown a second set of slides and asked to pick out the one that matched the incident they had seen before. A significant number of people picked out a slide in which the black man was holding the knife. [12]

The racial bias of the volunteers had led them to expect that the black man would be holding the knife and this expectation had either consciously or subconsciously filtered into their memory of the events causing them to radically change their belief as to what it was that they had originally seen.

The same bias can easily be introduced into paranormal cases as well. Many people have preconceived ideas as to what a paranormal experience should or should not be like, and doubtless some imaginary details can later get added by mistake. Testimony given under hypnosis is a particular problem. A great many alien

abduction victims rely almost totally on hypnosis as an aid for recalling their memories of the abduction itself, the original memory having allegedly been 'erased' by the aliens.

The later reconstruction of memory where none previously existed leaves the whole process open to abuse by both the hypnotist asking leading questions and by the hypnotised subject simply basing their memories around the experiences of other alien abductees.

Although many will deny it, most alien abduction victims have a very extensive knowledge of the alien abduction experience prior to their own encounters. Such a strong and preconceived opinion of a paranormal experience can act in exactly the same manner as the racial bias did in the experiment with the slides above.

The power that preconception can have is illustrated in a piece of modern research by war historian Helmut Schnatz, who performed an in-depth study of the allied bombing of the German city of Dresden in February 1945.

After the bombing raids it had commonly been claimed that allied fighters flew low over the city, strafing its fleeing citizens. Over the years there have been a number of eyewitnesses who have come forward to testify that this apparently heartless attack took place. However, Mr. Schnatz examined records of flight paths, levels of fuel of the aircraft and official reports of the intensity of the firestorm that followed the bombing. His conclusions were that there could categorically not have been fighters flying as low as eyewitnesses have described. They would have had neither the time, the fuel nor the visibility to do so.

The conclusion was that people's memories of the events of that night had been severely altered by a cultural belief, which had been

heavily reinforced by the East German government, that the strafing had taken place. In other words, some survivors from Dresden had been led (or told) to believe that the attacks took place and so they adjusted their memories of the experience to accommodate them. [13] This is not as uncommon or as improbable as it may at first appear.

It may be, for example, that the wide cultural use of the 'grey' alien (those beings with the wide elliptical eyes, no nose and thin mouth that currently appear on everything from book covers to T-shirts) during the 1980s and 1990s could lead many who report alien abduction experiences to expect that their kidnappers would be grey aliens whether they were or not. After all, if racial bias can completely alter the sequence of events in an everyday experience, then cultural expectations about certain paranormal phenomena must be expected to intrude to some degree into a testimony of a paranormal experience.

Even though personal bias is very hard indeed to discern from within a person's testimony, there is undoubtedly an element of it in a great many first-hand accounts of paranormal experiences. It is something that must be borne in mind.

## Other Factors

In addition to a testimony being affected by the preconceived ideas of both the interviewer and the witness, various research programmes have noticed a number of other factors that can affect the reliability of an eyewitness statement. I will not dwell on these factors but they are worth noting.

One of the strangest affects noticed about eyewitness testimony is the regularity with which the duration of the incident has been exaggerated.

In 1987 Elizabeth Loftus carried out an experiment in which she showed volunteers a video tape of a bank robbery that took exactly 30 seconds to complete. In later interviews it turned out that almost everybody had vastly overestimated the length of time that the robbery had taken, the average estimate being two minutes and thirty seconds - five times longer than the reality. [14] This is something to bear in mind, given that most paranormal experiences are estimated to be of very short duration indeed, with the longest ones, which are commonly the UFO encounters, being a few minutes long at most (alien abductions excluded). If the overestimation factor really is genuine, then this could mean that the average paranormal experience is actually only of a few seconds' duration rather than the tens of seconds or minutes commonly estimated by the witness.

Other factors in the reliability of eyewitness testimony include a person's age, occupation, sex and confidence.

In general it is middle-aged people that have the best memory of events, those that work in the security forces (eg. police) or army that have the best eye for detail, and those that are confident that are less likely to later change their statements, even if what they

have said is blatantly wrong. [15] Women are more likely to notice details about clothes and faces than men, while men are more likely to notice details about cars and other machinery. [16]

There is, as might be expected from Bartlett's experiments, a strong tendency for peoples' memory of events to change very seriously with both time and the number of times a story is repeated. The most accurate statements are those that are taken within a few minutes or hours of the event itself. When it comes to eyewitness testimony, nothing is as straightforward as it first seems, and various experiments have shown that sometimes an eyewitness description of a crime scene actually bears little resemblance to the reality, with people, objects and events being added, removed or changed to such a degree that little of the original series of events is memorised with any accuracy.

### **Is Nothing Sacred?**

The lesson from all this is quite clearly that a person's memory of an event is not a fixed recording, but can become radically altered through a whole series of differing factors. The degree to which all these factors can affect the final testimony varies considerably from person to person. An old age pensioner being asked leading questions about an event that occurred several weeks ago is unlikely to produce a very accurate testimony. A thirty year old man being interviewed a couple of hours after an event is more likely to give a reasonable version of events.

It must by now seem to the reader that virtually any testimony given by anybody, whether in a court of law or to a paranormal researcher, is practically useless with few aspects of people's memories remaining unaffected by the influence of bias, age, etc. This is not entirely true.

Although it is recognised that a first-hand version of a paranormal experience will contain some inaccuracies, a knowledge of how a testimony can be affected may be able to give us an idea as to how seriously we should take such cases.

The police will not refuse an eyewitness testimony because it is several years old, but they will be aware of the fact that, while the broad gist of the story may be accurate, some of the finer detail may not be. The same is true for us.

Paranormal researchers are rarely, if ever, called out to the scene of a paranormal experience. In fact, we are lucky if we can get to a witness within months of their experience. More commonly it is several years. Given this, there is bound to be some embellishment or alteration to the testimonies they give, but that does not mean that these testimonies are useless.

I hope that this article has helped point out some of the problems that may be encountered during the interview process. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

paulmchambers@hotmail.com

## REFERENCES

1. Bartlett, F. C. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1995 (Original 1932). Quote from p.65.
2. Bartlett, F. C. Op. cit., p.124.
3. Bartlett, F. C. Op. cit., p.76
4. Bartlett, F. C. Op. cit., p.77. This was originally presented as a long list of 17 points. Here I have removed the numbers from the list and have omitted points 14 to 17 for reasons of space.
5. For a summary of this information see Ainsworth, P. B. *Psychology, Law and Eyewitness Testimony*. John Wiley and Sons (Chichester), 1998.

6. I use the phrases short and long-term memory to illustrate the point. Most modern researchers do not hold to this theory any more, the reality being somewhat more complex.
7. Chambers, P. *Sex and the Paranormal*. Blandford Press (London), 1999.
8. As 7.
9. Loftus, E. F. and Palmer, J. C. 'Reconstructions of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory.' *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour*, Vol. 13; p. 585-589. 1974.
10. *JET Report*; A report by the UK government into the satanic ritual abuse scares of the late 1980s and 1990s. Despite assurances that the report would be published, its findings were so damning that it remains unavailable to the public today. Fortunately a copy was leaked onto the Internet where, despite attempts to suppress it, copies can still be found on several web sites today.
11. Jacobs, D. *Secret Life: First-hand Accounts of UFO Abductions*. Fourth Estate (London), 1993. Quote from p.124. The quotes given by the abductee have been edited because of their length.
12. Boon, J. and Davies, G. 'Attitudinal influences on witness memory: Fact and fiction.' in Gruneberg, M. M. *et al.*, *Practical Aspects of Memory: Current Research and Issues, Volume 1*. John Wiley and Sons (Chichester), 1988.
13. BBC NewsOnline; Daily Telegraph, 6/6/2000
14. Loftus, E. F., Schooler, J. W., Boones, S. M. and Kline, D. 'Time went by so slowly: Overestimation of event duration by males and females.' *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Volume 1: p. 3-13, 1987.
15. For a summary of this information see Ainsworth, P. B. *Psychology, Law and Eyewitness Testimony*. John Wiley and Sons (Chichester), 1998. Chapter 3.
16. Powers, P. A., Andriks, J. L. and Loftus, E. F. 'Eyewitness accounts of males and females.' *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol. 64: p. 339-347., 1979.