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CONTENTS

Chinese Whispers <i>by Chris Huff</i>	2
Haunted Places? <i>by Dr Jason Braithwaite</i>	14
Celestial Apparitions <i>by David Taylor and Carolyn Adey</i>	25
Editorial	30

Chinese Whispers

by Chris Huff

There are innumerable books giving lists of allegedly haunted places. Most serious investigators soon learn to take these with a pinch of salt. Even a casual investigation usually uncovers that the last sighting was fifty years ago by an unknown passer-by or something similar. Chris Huff looks into how certain sites gain a reputation for being haunted, whether deserved or not, and finds that we should not always dismiss them all as mere tourist traps.

There are many, many accounts in the popular literature about castles, halls and great houses, usually those in a severe state of disrepair or of Victorian Gothic style, which, thanks to horror writers and Hammer films, have acquired an almost universal reputation for being haunted. Indeed, throughout my researching activity here in the north-east, it has been an education discovering just how many of these buildings have acquired this reputation solely because of their appearance.

In my NOT HAUNTED files there are many examples of buildings which have acquired this status, where, upon serious research, no documented phenomena other than local folklore can be traced. In conjunction with this there is also the frequent situation where the named witnesses to such phenomena can never be traced, the 'oh, they moved away years ago' or 'I haven't seen them in years' syndromes. Alternatively, questioning about witnesses to the paranormal events produces the response that they were an unnamed man or woman, some playing children, holidaying visitors, a member of staff or a passing member of the public, often returning home late at night. The unsubstantiated stories usually make a good read or are an anecdotal tale to be told in the pub to

newcomers in the area or, of course, any fool passing through asking silly questions about whether there are any tales of the paranormal in connection with the local castle, hall, public house etc.

Those buildings which may have a genuine ghostly presence, or at least had one or more occurrences of the paranormal manifest there, have also invariably had the paranormal tales twisted and extended. Why this happens is due to a variety of reasons, and I strongly recommend Paul Chambers' article (*Anomaly 30*) on eyewitness testimony as a starting point. Paul eloquently demonstrated the fallibility of memory as a key element in the gradual transmogrification from the mundane account to a story with the blanks filled in by the unconscious imagination. Secondly, he identified the effect which can occur by aggressive, rather than passive, questioning of the witness. Thirdly, for the purposes of this document, the way in which the events were transformed by a cultural viewpoint, the expectation of what should occur over perhaps the events which actually occurred. I will also add, in my own experience, that sometimes the tale is deliberately enlarged upon for the storyteller's prestige - especially if the account concerned them directly.

This gradual transmogrification of the evidence is what I have chosen to call the Chinese Whispers Effect. It is a factor to be considered when faced with stories of haunting, whether by mouth or in print. This was certainly the case in an earlier article on the haunting at Hylton Castle (*Anomaly 29*) where the altered tale became so popular that it was converted to a stage play, which bore very little in common with the details of the original haunting. Another of these Chinese Whisper Ghost Stories, suffering from an acute case of transmogrification, but which has not yet been converted to tread the boards, is presented below in three acts. The

first deals with the known history of this little studied castle, the second chronicles the folklore associated with the building and finally the third part assesses the physical evidence for a haunting potentially occurring at the site.

Therefore, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, Mesdames et Messieurs, I present for your delectation and delight tonight's play entitled 'The Lady in White or The Awful Spectre of Blenkinsopp Castle'.

Act 1: A Brief History of Blenkinsopp Castle

Blenkinsopp Castle was probably first constructed as a fortified stronghold sometime after the Norman 'Harrying of the North' in response to the northern uprisings against the Norman usurpation of the Saxon throne. At this time the area was unquiet and troubled, under constant threat of raids from Scotland and local unrest. The original stronghold, a square keep of about 15 to 16 meters square with an enclosing curtain wall constructed at a distance of 4-5 metres outside was probably begun in the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries.

The castle is documented to have been rebuilt in about 1330-40 allegedly re-using much stonework from nearby Hadrian's Wall. The stronghold was subsequently fortified against the Scots in 1340, when it was granted a licence to crenellate and it is mentioned as a castle (*castrum*) in a document dated 1415. Richardson (1844.148-9), in passing, further informs us that the castle was vaulted beneath. It was in the possession of the Blenkinsopp family for many generations until finally falling into disuse some time during the nineteenth century; Pattison (*Richardson 1846.144*), writing in 1845, comments that ' Until about 1820 there were some poor families who occupied a few of the rooms which the hand of time had

spared, but these are now ruinous and deserted'. Richardson (1844. 148-9) records in his records for 1830, that 'About this year was built into the south side of Blenkinsopp Castle, a new dwelling house, in the castellated style, as a residence for the agent of the adjoining quarry. Until this time the castle had been partly occupied by two or three labouring families, who contrived to find a shelter in a few of the least dilapidated rooms...' The demise of the building went further when, in a very poor condition, it was used as a farmyard for cattle by a local farmer.

During work to clear and convert some of the older structures for this new use, a small door was found located beneath the debris from years of neglect at the ground level of the keep. The original description of this find is given by Patterson (*Richardson 1846.142*) who remarks on the discovery thus: 'A few years ago, the vaults of the keep of the castle were ordered by the occupier of the neighbouring farm to be cleared for the purpose of wintering cattle. On removing the rubbish, a small doorway was discovered on a level with the bottom of the keep. On clearing out the entrance, the workmen were surprised by a large swarm of meat flies, and the place itself smelt damp and noisome. The news soon spread abroad that the entrance to the Lady's Vault had been discovered. And people flocked in great numbers to see it. Of the whole number assembled, however, but one man was found willing to enter. He described the passage as narrow and not sufficiently high to admit of a man walking upright. He walked in a straight forward direction for a few yards, then descended a flight of steps, after which he again proceeded in a straight forward course until he came to a doorway. The door itself had fallen to pieces, the bolt rusting in its fastening, and the hinges clung to the post with palsied grip. At this juncture the passage took a sudden turn and a flight of precipitous steps presented themselves. Opening his lantern, and turning the light, he peered down the stairs into the thick darkness, but

encountering thick noxious gasses his candle was extinguished, and he was obliged to grope his way back to his companions. He made another attempt but never descended the second flight of stairs, and so little curiosity had their employer about the matter, that he ordered it to be closed up, and the contents of the vault remain undiscovered to this day.' The article is concluded with the remark that the last time he saw the doorway (pre 1846) was after some of the infill had been broken away, and some young boys were throwing stones through the opening and listening to the noises that they made as they fell, presumably down the steps.

The final chapters on the history of the castle show that Blenkinsopp had somewhat of a revival of fortune in the 1870s ; in 1877 to 1880 it was largely rebuilt by William Glover in the Tudor Gothic style much favoured at the time. Unfortunately the rebuilt castle came to an abrupt end in 1954 when the building was gutted by fire, and it has remained a partial ruin since this event

Act 2: The Legend of Blenkinsopp

With a brief overview of the history of the castle itself sketched out, we move swiftly on to the local legend, which asserts that the ruin is haunted by the ghost of a White Lady. In some variants of the tale she is credited to only appear to children, in order to show them where buried treasure is hidden. The various folk tales which have been undoubtedly invented to account for the haunting by the White Lady all subtly changed to heighten the story. The White Lady in residence at Blenkinsopp is always alleged to be of the Blenkinsopp family by marriage, a rich woman brought to this country from Palestine by one of the Crusading knights, Brian de Blenkinsopp (some would have the name as Blenship). As the third and last Crusade took place in 1189-92 and the current ruin dates back only as far as 1330-40, either the story of the haunting has

become associated with a popular historical event, or the castle of the haunting is an earlier fortification, concealed beneath or within the present ruinous structure. Robson (1993) suggests a date of the 1500s, but this is equally vague and unhelpful.

The legend of Blenkinsopp Castle is one of greed and a marriage for money, for local tradition describes how it required twelve men to carry the chest containing the dowry. It is also alleged that after the marriage the unnamed woman retained a tight control over the purse strings (somewhat unlikely in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries) and did not allow this fortune to be easily disposed of. This tension over money soon led to quarrelling between the lord and lady, whereupon Lady Blenkinsopp is supposed, in the best traditions of the ghost story, to have buried the treasure in a cellar or dungeon. Robson alternatively suggests that the money was buried by the woman to test whether her husband's love was for her or for her money and, as it appears that the money was the most important factor in the marriage of Brian de Blenkinsopp, she left (also highly unlikely). I am sure that in the middle ages, when killing was a fact of life, if the money was more important than the wife, some means would have been employed to make her talk eventually and then have her calmly and quietly disposed of.

The Castle is supposed to have been deserted soon after this familial quarrel. Numerous 'reasons' for the desertion of the castle are given by a variety of authors. Oxley suggests that the lady was left behind to keep her treasure company by her disaffected husband. Tegner (1991) asserts that the couple mysteriously disappeared. Braddock (1991) suggests that first Brian de Blenkinsopp left and later, after perhaps one year, his wife followed in an attempt to find him. Finally, Robson (1993) suggests that the lady died after five years desertion by her husband, distraught in the dungeons where she buried the treasure. Curiously, no 'dark deeds' are recorded in the

local folk literature that could obviously account for the female ghost that has been witnessed at the castle. This, to me, was rather surprising considering the state of border warfare between England and Scotland which has dominated much of the history in Northumberland, and why I firmly believe that the haunting by the White Lady has had a historical character invented to 'fill in the blanks'.

The story of a hidden passageway is told and retold by all and sundry with various twists and turns to heighten the script. This passage was allegedly discovered in 1880 during restoration (perhaps by Coulson) and was traced for some distance by a brave-hearted man, who in one story took with him a canary to warn of gas, and in another a lantern or candle to light his way. At some point along the passage the canary succumbed to the gasses therein, or the lantern went out, and so the exploration was halted. There seems something almost compelling for writers on the paranormal, when re-telling a previous tale, to add to or overdramatise the story with invented detail. For example, in the case of Blenkinsopp, we have Oxley writing that the passageway mentioned above was located at the ground level of the keep, in the east wall, and was discovered during work to clear the moat of accumulated debris. What happened to the curtain wall and the farmyard within? Forster (1971.16) informs us that the man, having descended the stairs, found that his way was barred by a door which he pushed open to continue his exploration. But with a sudden rush of evil smelling air the candle went out, and he was forced to grope his way back to the light. What happened to the canary? Tegner (1991.53) reports the finding of a well or a dungeon and paraphrases Patterson's last sighting of the doorway (by which time he is firmly asserting that it is a well), adding that the boys were throwing stones down it to listen to the sounds as they hit the water far beneath. So did the unnamed brave soul who ventured

into the cellars of the keep via the small doorway at its base actually descend a well? No wonder the candle went out. Or did the canary drown?

Of all the paranormal occurrences in the castle, the most famous account, claimed to be a witnessed event, is once more to be regarded more as folklore or local legend, considering the twisted tales about the haunting. In the tale, a gardener and his wife and their son were housed in the castle at some time in the eighteenth century (*Braddock 1991*). In the night the son was heard screaming from his room, and when his parents reached him he told of a ghostly white woman who had sat on his bed and promised, if he would go with her, to show him where a great treasure was hidden. When he didn't move for fear, the ghost is alleged to have attempted to carry him off forcibly. Three times more this happened, until he was moved from the room. Not surprisingly, the family moved from the castle, which was occupied at various times by poor families until the building was bought in the later nineteenth century by one Colonel Coulson.

The apparition of the White Lady is claimed by some authors to have been seen by others. Robson (1993.8-10) also records the local tales of the White Lady, which assert that she is to be seen dressed in a white, wispy dress floating about the castle keep and on the castle walls, and that she may be seen in the dungeons (vaults?) weeping (access on special open days via the small door that is blocked up, no doubt). A local author, Tegner (1991), attests in his '*Ghosts of the North Country*' that he knows a man (unnamed, yet again), described as being neither psychic nor credulous and romantic, prominent in Newcastle upon Tyne in the book trade, who has seen the White Lady. This unnamed man is recorded as stating that he 'ran like hell' on the occasion, but can this testimony be accepted without one shred of corroborative proof? Probably not.

Lastly in this twisting story is a peculiar tale, recorded first by Richardson and later others, which involves the visit to the area in the nineteenth century (sometime between 1800 and 1845 is the closest that can be ascertained) of a woman (unnamed, of course) who stayed at an inn (unnamed, of course) at Greenhead, which is about 1km from the castle. The tale attests that she told the landlady, in confidence, who then apparently told everybody who would listen, that she had a dream about a strange white lady who wanted her to find a chest of gold that was buried in a castle called Blenkinsopp. This visitor is alleged to have waited for several weeks for the owner of the castle in order to gain permission to look in the ruins (the owner was away somewhere unnamed, of course). Eventually, she left, presumably out of money, having not succeeded in searching for the hidden treasure. Her name, address and any other detail which may have been of use were not recorded for posterity. As such, in its present form, the tale is anecdotal and of little use to the serious paranormal investigator, who is fully justified in asking, with so little evidence, whether it really happened at all.

So, having read all of the above, what are we to believe of the tale? When I first read the most accessible of the literature on the castle my reaction was 'what a load of *****'. All that was needed was a variety of headless ghosts, horses pulling carriages down the drive, clanking chains, dark, hooded figures, owls hooting, bats flying and perhaps a banshee or family retainer making an appearance to portend death, to complete the assemblage.

After playing with the scripts for a while, I was on the point of consigning it to the box of no return (the large box-file marked NOT HAUNTED - FOLKLORE) when I got lucky. While digging through the local section in Durham University's Palace Green Library on matters archaeological, I became distracted when lo, there was the

original description of the haunting, in Richardson's Table Book(s), a series on local events published at various times during the 1840s. After reading the account by Patterson contained therein, I was determined to find out more. I got lucky twice more shortly after this by finding a copy of Braddock's *'Haunted Houses of Great Britain'*, and Warren and Wells, *'Ghosts of the North'*. Both of these books dealt factually and fairly with the evidence for a haunting occurring there, and without them there would be no Act 3, on recorded phenomena at the castle, nor in all likelihood this piece on Blenkinsopp.

Act 3: Documented Phenomena at the Castle

In the 1890s the Anne family rented the renovated castle. Braddock (1991) relates some tales of the paranormal which were obtained from Major George Anne, whose family had the tenancy of the castle in the 1890s. On one occasion when Major Ernest Anne, the head of the household and father of George above, was about to leave for a trip to Iceland in 1893, he saw the figure of a woman in a white dress leaning on the banister and looking 'piercingly' at him as he was about to ascend the stairs. Thinking that it was one of the two female servants who were employed at the time, he decided not to climb the stairs but to go for a short walk in the garden. There he saw both of the servants in the garden, which made the presence of the woman in white on the stairs quite inexplicable. This woman was also witnessed by the Major's youngest son, Bob, who died in combat in 1917. As a two-year-old he is known to have shouted while in the nursery, 'go away, lady'. Major George Anne also told Braddock that there were unexplained knockings on the bedroom door (unspecified as to which bedroom) which would occur at 2am and 5am.

The present owner of Blenkinsopp, Michael Simpson, related some tales of the ghosts of the castle (*Warren and Wells 1995*) which would certainly support a case for the castle still being haunted. On one occasion he was in his bedroom when he heard the steady but loud and unmistakable sound of approaching footsteps in the corridor outside. The footsteps appeared to stop outside the bedroom door, and by the bright moonlight Michael Simpson saw the knob of the door slowly turn, as if to open, and then turn back to its original position. Assuming it was his brother returning from a late night, in a state of some inebriation, he thought little more about the incident, until he discovered that his brother had not returned that night. On balance, it would seem that a haunting has occurred at Blenkinsopp, but whether it is still active is unknown. The evidence presented by Braddock suggests that there may be some fact behind the folklore of the White Lady, even to suggest that she appears to children. However, short of staking a young child down during a vigil in the ruin and waiting and watching what happened, I suspect that this would be hard to prove. The recorded phenomena are of such low intensity that I suspect a vigil or three at the castle would not stand a very good chance of witnessing anything of the paranormal. I fear that this little-known haunting will remain, like so many others, just that, and slowly fade into obscurity.

The Epilogue

If this piece has a purpose, it must be to act as a caveat to one and all about assumptions. The danger of assuming that, because a site is in a book on ghosts, or is in a state of ruination or is dark and forbidding of aspect, it must be haunted. Also, the assumption that all old or only old or ugly buildings are haunted. Or the assumption that all the recognised authors in the field have bothered to research the facts, and by accepting blindly we become equally guilty of complacently regurgitating the same old tired *****. Even the

assumption that ghosts are best seen at night. None of the above assumptions are true. They are what they are: assumptions coloured in by our own preconceptions. Conversely, just because the tales of a haunting twist and turn in convoluted Chinese Whispers, it is impossible to dismiss them out of hand without first digging deep into the older, more obscure accounts as well as modern accounts by more reputable authors, who check their facts and do not elaborate for the sake of that pernicious and persistent legacy from Victorian Gothic Horror, a good ghost story.

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Haunted Places?

by Dr Jason Braithwaite

Jason Braithwaite looks at how to measure environmental differences in allegedly haunted locations. He also reveals how he has found highly variable background radioactivity readings at such locations.

For me, an important question in contemporary apparitional research concerns whether there is anything 'different' about locations where individuals report strange experiences relative to other locations where they do not? There is good reason to assume there may well be some kind of 'environmental signature' or 'fingerprint' underlying some aspects of strange experience. Recent advancements from cognitive neuroscience have revealed that particular magnetic and electromagnetic fields (EMFs) can induce strange human experiences under controlled laboratory conditions. In the case of apparitions, researchers have argued that such EMFs could be present at locations that seem to produce multiple instances of these experiences spontaneously. The EMF / brain account states that complex EMFs of particular frequencies / strengths perhaps commonly available in particular environments can stimulate the brain and induce strange, anomalous experiences. The implication is that the subsequent experience of apparitions represents an instance where an observer has simply been exposed to such complex EMFs.

The major aim for researchers is to try to provide a framework for carrying out meaningful research directed towards providing a more refined picture of EMF variance and its potential links to the human brain. Laboratory studies are leading the way here. However, field studies designed to test these accounts are also of

paramount importance. In the present paper I will outline just a few issues important to researchers attempting to address these questions. In order to establish any 'differences' we need to be clear about the size and nature of the particular environmental 'dimensions' (eg. magnetic fields, radioactivity, temperature) we are measuring.

The Nature of the 'Difference'

Although the idea that supposedly 'haunted' locations might be 'different' (in some environmental sense) is nothing new, exactly how or what might be different is a little unclear. Potential candidates could be magnetic, electromagnetic or static fields, background radioactivity and so on. However, even if we accept that these environmental 'dimensions' are crucial, the problem now becomes one of 'what components are different' and 'how are they different'? This is not a trivial matter. For instance, it could be that background levels of electromagnetism / geomagnetism or gamma radiation could be permanently elevated or reduced at such locations compared with appropriate baseline locations. This may imply that a more general characteristic of the locale could be playing a role. An example might be that of a granite-based structure, such as a building. It has long been known that the background radiation at locations built out of granite (or standing on it) can be permanently elevated. This is perfectly natural - though we need to be aware of it. Conversely, the general background radiation (arising from such things as cosmic rays) may be quite low but much more transient, variant and volatile in nature. A spontaneous anomalous phenomenon may correspond to such a sharply varying 'dimension', only recordable at the time of the event. Or it could correspond to a permanently elevated reading. Indeed, it may well be a combination of both constant and

transient variables. The point is, we need to be aware of issues and questions like these when considering the concept of a 'difference'. I have met many researchers with fancy equipment claiming to be interested in monitoring atmospheric anomalies at haunted locations. Very few have even considered the above issues (or even the use of baseline recordings), and so their efforts are little more than useless. This is a great shame. If we are going to be successful in finding important signals in random noise, we need first to record that noise in order to distinguish the signal from it. We also need to have some ideas concerning the forms that such signals can take.

Quantifying differences: Absolute values

In a typical investigation context it is usually the case that a number of measurements will be taken throughout the course of the event. Investigators will note down temperatures, radioactivity, electromagnetism, and so on. After the event the coordinator will need to make sense of these - perhaps by trying to establish overall means of temperature and so on. Although it is indeed important to know the nature of such averages, simply reporting these on their own may not be as helpful as might first appear. The reason for this is, of course, that any average across a range of measurements will hide the nature of those individual measurements themselves. They will also hide what is perhaps a more important aspect in the data - namely how these measurements actually vary over time. I will return to this point later on, but for now I will concentrate on the process of taking readings in a meaningful way.

It is certainly the case that some environmental factors will vary over time more quickly than others. Consider temperature for instance. Although temperature may increase or decrease naturally across the 24-hour cycle, it generally does so in a steady manner. It

is unusual for temperature to vary hundreds of times a second. To summarize temperature readings one may want to report mean temperature and possibly minimum and maximum readings for the study period. The use of minima and maxima is very important as it gives us a general indication of how that factor varied overall. This seems fine and appropriate and there is certainly nothing fundamentally wrong with this approach. The problem is when one considers factors that are in a constant state of flux - varying much more over relatively short time periods.

Quantifying differences: The importance of variance

Examples of highly variant environmental factors would be background radiation, geomagnetic and artificially induced electromagnetic fields. All of these factors can vary significantly hundreds of times a second. As a side issue, we also need to be aware of this when choosing equipment. Electromagnetic sensors only sample at fixed intervals and present an average for that period. Most cheap equipment will typically only sample once or twice every second or so. This means that, although we are getting valid recordings, they can be little more than a snapshot of what is actually taking place. The main point I want to raise here is that, when trying to quantify such factors (assuming we have appropriate equipment), the problem of misrepresenting such variance by overall readings becomes important. In these situations, an overall mean reading - though useful - will hide perhaps more important information about how that factor is actually varying. A further problem is that if that variance is high, or even skewed for some reason, overall mean recordings can be distorted. This is a big problem if we are trying to establish whether background / transient events are different at some locations relative to others.

Overall mean averages could be similar, or quite different, though the underlying variance can be quite distinct. Taking the mean average alone would not reveal this, and the mean itself would not be the best measure in some circumstances. Indeed, the variance itself may be more revealing than absolute values in some cases.

Means , Medians and Variance

Most undergraduate text books on research methods and statistics in psychological science (and other sciences) will outline the theory and need for taking means, medians, and variances. All I want to do here is suggest that, for values that might be highly variant, we may want to summarize them by using a median as opposed to a mean (at least until enough data are available to critically assess the nature of the data from specific sites).

As most readers will know, to calculate a mean we simply add all the values taken and divide by the number of values taken. The problem is that any extreme values can skew a mean, so that it can become artificially inflated / deflated (depending on the direction of the extreme reading) and thus you are in danger of misrepresenting the true 'average'. There are ways we can protect the mean by eliminating possible extreme values - but in our case these extreme values may be what we are interested in, so disregarding them based on some mathematical procedure might also be inappropriate.

Instead, a median has the advantage that it is not skewed by extreme scores. This means we can leave all the extreme scores where they are. All we do is take the values we have, place them in numerical order and take the middle value. If there are two middle values, simply add those and divide by two. This is the median. If the distributions of readings are not skewed in some way and

extreme scores are not a big problem, then the mean and median value will be very similar. I suggest that researchers give this issue their serious consideration when conducting research and writing reports.

For the variance I certainly suggest that researchers document minimum and maximum readings from their study. I would also advocate that they calculate the variance as a statistic as well. I will not cover this here but, as noted above, most general textbooks on research methods and statistics will address this for those interested. Complex statistics also exist for analyzing the differences between variances such as the ANOVA / MANOVA (the Analysis of Variance and Multi-variate Analysis of Variance), but this may be too excessive for some researchers. This is not a problem, if you gather your data in a reliable and valid way and document the important aspects of your data: you can always pass this onto someone else to analyze it at a later date. For researchers who do not want to get too deep into the statistical side of things, simply concentrate on means / medians / and variance for now.

An Example

One of my more prominent cases is a location in the north of England. I have been the exclusive researcher at this location for over twelve years. I have been trying to document the nature of a number of environmental factors there for some time. In the mid 1990s the ASSAP Northern Group raised some money for a handheld gamma radiation detector - the Radalert 1202 from Perspective Scientific. This is an extremely accurate device. Indeed, at the time of purchase it was the most accurate available for the price. It has a powerful microprocessor which can sample at a high rate and give overall readings every 4 seconds, 1 min, 5 mins, and every 15 mins. The longer the sample duration the more readings

contribute to the final reading, and hence accuracy is increased. However, we need also to know how radiation is varying over time as a transient. I have typically used this device during investigations set to readings every 4 seconds (note: ideally we would like to measure radiation at a much faster sample rate than this but as long as we are consistent with the time frame the comparisons should be valid).

Over the years that I have been using this device I have found that, overall, the background radiation at some allegedly haunted sites is generally elevated - though not greatly so relative to baseline locations. However, one important finding is that radiation in small areas (such as rooms) linked to instances of strange experiences can be much more variant than other rooms within the same location not linked to strange experiences, and other baseline locations. Indeed, in one particular case, the built-in alarm has been triggered on more than one occasion, indicating extremely high radiation transients. This has not happened to date at the baseline locations, which are also built out of similar materials as the test site.

Therefore, at least for the tests I have been running for gamma radiation, overall background readings, though elevated (and there are some good geological reasons for this) do not seem crucially distinct from other locations. The important difference seems to be how much such factors vary at specific locations. Note that if I had just computed means as average readings I would not be able to identify this important pattern.

Some Suggestions

Based on these findings, I would suggest that, for factors such as electromagnetism / magnetism and radiation, the variance at specific areas associated with strange experience may be one

important dimension underlying the notion of a 'difference' between haunted / non-haunted sites. This variance appears more critical than the overall readings, at least based on this preliminary evidence.

As researchers, we need to think about such things as the actual environmental variable ('dimension') in question (eg. temperature / magnetism) and ask how it varies naturally over time? From this point, we would need to ask how we take our readings from it (sampling) and how we then summarize these readings for our own comparisons and the communication of our results to the public? By raising this issue here, I hope other ASSAP members carrying out similar research will present their findings as well. Furthermore, I also hope this article has helped to raise awareness of these issues so other teams can direct their attention towards these important, though often neglected, aspects. I would be interested to see whether other researchers are also finding this interesting pattern in relation to the actual time-varying state of particular environmental variables.

Measurement Summary

One of the major aims for researchers is to try to provide a framework for carrying out meaningful research directed towards providing a more refined picture of environmental variance and its potential links to strange experience. A commonly held opinion is that perhaps there is something 'different' about the localised environment at haunted versus non-haunted locations. However, exactly how or what might be different is still unclear.

I have addressed three main possibilities that are often overlooked. These were the notions that:

- (i) background levels of certain environmental factors could be more permanently elevated or reduced at such locations relative to appropriate baseline locations,
- (ii) though the general background 'dimension' may be quite small, it can be much more transient, variant and volatile,
- (iii) a combination of both constant and transient variables could be important.

In the present paper I have outlined some problems with methods that seek to quantify the nature of this difference in a reliable and valid way. I have also outlined that it may be the nature of the variance, rather than the overall readings *per se*, that may be the crucial difference between haunted and non-haunted sites. Why this might be the case is open to question. The important point is that we are now in a position to be able to ask this question based on the useful and helpful data so far gathered in the manner outlined above.

Final Thoughts

This is the last article in a series on the ELF / brain account that I have compiled for ASSAP and its members. In the first article I addressed what form an integrated ELF (and DC) monitoring system should take in order to be maximally useful. In the second article, I addressed perhaps the more important issue of appropriate research design relating to using such equipment as effectively as possible. Both articles were templates that were simply geared towards providing members with useful information that they could then go on to apply and adapt themselves based on their own aims and limitations (financial or otherwise). Even if certain groups do not see the importance of EMF research, I hope they can appreciate the need, for those of us who do see it as important, that the research carried out is properly thought through and is

appropriate. This is an important point because it highlights the fact that the information I have provided in these articles is not simply to be read, but also to be digested and applied. Thus, it is material that you 'do' something with. Take any aspects that you were not aware of, the aspects you found most useful, and adapt the information to your needs. Then apply it in your research and the questions you ask. Make it work for you. Any sections with which you do not agree, make sure you are clear in your mind why you do not agree and justify this to yourself and other members of your groups.

Arguments from the Pro-paranormalist

For the pro-paranormalist who prefers to simply reject outright many of the arguments or approaches I have suggested, you should know this. The evidence provided from laboratory studies is compelling and has now been replicated by a number of independent laboratories around the world (unlike many other areas of the paranormal). If ASSAP members reject the EMF / brain account as being a valid area of research, the burden of producing a high standard of contradictory evidence now rests with them. Note that here I am challenging such fraternities to produce evidence, not anecdotal tales or personal beliefs. These will no longer do (and I doubt they ever did).

Researchers that still entertain nineteenth century notions of ghosts being 'the spirits of dead people' or 'intelligent' in some way are finding themselves in an increasingly uncomfortable position. This is primarily due to the serious scientific investigation of the paranormal that is providing some fascinating insights into the nature of these experiences, insights that were never forthcoming from spiritualistic approaches, which seem to do little other than confirm what some people already 'believe' to be the case in the first

place. That is not science. People used to believe that the world was flat. It is not. People used to believe that the Earth was the centre of the universe. It is not. Some people used to believe that the bumps on a person's skull could reveal important characteristics about them. They cannot. Ideas and beliefs come and go, even ones based on what seem to be plausible observations. The validity of an idea is not based on how many people subscribe to it, but by how the evidence can be taken to support it or reject it in favour of an alternative.

Although I subscribe to the EMF / brain account as perhaps the most useful framework for field research in this area, I have never advocated that it is indeed either comprehensive or accurate in its current form. Indeed, the articles I have produced are directed at producing research that would hopefully impact on these areas. The EMF / brain account (in its various guises) should be an account that is given serious consideration by researchers from all perspectives. We are not in the business of setting out to 'prove' anything; we are in the business of trying to 'understand' the phenomenon whatever the underlying processes may be. Are your methods up to this challenge?

About the Author

Dr Jason Braithwaite is a cognitive psychologist specializing in the cognitive neurosciences of visual selective attention and awareness. Dr Braithwaite founded the ASSAP Northern Group in 1992 and has been the investigations co-ordinator for that group since it was founded. He is a well-known sceptic and is openly critical of many research practices often used in paranormal research. He has been an avid supporter of the scientific study of strange experiences in relation to the EMF / brain account for many years. As well as apparitions, his other research interests are concerned with cognitive neuroscientific accounts for out-of-body and near-death-experiences.

Celestial Apparitions

by David Taylor and Carolyn Adey

If you mention anomalous phenomena in the sky most people will think of UFOs. But there have been other unusual sightings in the heavens, particularly in previous centuries. This article examines the history of celestial apparitions.

An unusual aspect of the Battle of Edgehill, the first major skirmish of the English Civil War, was that after the battle on 23 October 1642 the whole event was re-enacted on the Saturday before Christmas. A group of shepherds out in the chill of the Warwickshire winter were startled by the sound of distant drums and the noise of soldiers. Before they could run away, they saw battalions of soldiers and neighing horses in the sky above them. There then ensued a three-hour battle before the celestial apparitions vanished. The following night, Christmas Eve, the battle was re-enacted again. This time it was witnessed by other villagers. News of the spectacle soon reached King Charles I in Oxford. He appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the phenomenon. Once again the phantom army appeared, and has apparently continued to appear ever since, although recent reports are far rarer.

Mysterious celestial sights of this kind were extremely common in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. They were the stuff of rumour and gossip and the subject of dozens of pamphlets and broadside ballads reporting strange and sensational news. Fascination with such phenomena was not confined to the credulous poor. Worthies and men of letters were quick to interpret these sightings. In the case of Edgehill, the spectral battle was seen as a sign of God's displeasure with the Civil War, which was seen as purely political rather than religious.

Reports of celestial battles were not confined to the British Isles. Damascius tells us in *'Vita Isiclori'* that, after a battle outside the walls of Rome against Attila and his Huns in AD 452, the ghosts of the dead were reported to have fought for three days and nights. The clash of their weapons could be heard all over the city. In some cases, the phantom battles lasted more than just a few nights. Pausania records in his *'Guide to Greece'* that at Marathon, where the Athenians repulsed the Persians in 490 BC, the ghostly sounds of men fighting could be heard 500 years after the battle had finished!

Celestial phenomena have always been seen as a portent of change. Comets have always been seen as omens of doom. The ancient Chinese manuscript, *'The Book of the Prince of Hwai-Nan'*, tells that as King Wu marched on Zhou, a comet appeared in the sky. In 240 BC huge floods devastated China following a comet, and similarly in England, sightings of Halley's comet preceded the Great Famine (AD 989).

Interpreting celestial phenomena became the practice of a select few. Philostratus records in *'Heroicus'* that, on the plain outside Troy, the sight of the dead heroes of the Trojan War (circa 1200 BC) were seen as harbingers of specific events. Spectres covered in dust forecast drought, those covered in sweat foretold rain, while those drenched in blood forecast plague.

In sixteenth century Italy, the people of Verdello in Bergamo were terrorised between 15 and 22 December 1517 by aerial visions of a fierce battle that replayed several times a day. Onofrio Bonnuncio wrote about the spectacle, "...and in the most terrible battle all are cut to pieces ...half an hour later everything is still, and nothing else is seen...". The sightings came to the attention of Pope Leo X who interpreted the event as a portent of Turkish attacks. Days later, the Turks did indeed attack. Similarly, in 1735 on Midsummer Eve, a

ghostly army was seen over the Cumbrian mountains of Souther Fell. The event was seen as a warning of the Scottish Rebellion of 1745.

So why aren't there reports of phantom celestial armies being seen today? Of course, the world today is a very different place than in the sixteenth century. We still have civil wars, in Europe, of course, as well as the occasional riot in England. And what about UFOs? Reports of red, blue and black 'globes' were witnessed by many people in Nuremberg in Germany on 14 April 1561. Are these examples of historical UFOs? What are we to make of these reports, especially in relation to sightings of phantom airships of the 1800s and ghost planes and rockets of the early 1900s? In 1907, at the instigation of the poet W.B. Yeats, the anthropologist and religious scholar W.Y. Evans-Wentz embarked on a two-year journey through Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany to interview people who had allegedly encountered fairies and other supernatural beings. One thing Evans-Wentz noticed from his research was that one common activity that fairies seemed inordinately fond of was waging war. In his book *'The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries'* Evans-Wentz presents the testimony of dozens of individuals who claimed to have seen these spectral conflicts. Reports included moonlit meadows thronged with men battling in medieval armour, or desolate fens covered with soldiers in coloured uniforms. Sometimes the battles were eerily silent. Sometimes there were terrible dins. And sometimes they could only be heard but not seen (*Evans-Wentz, 1911*).

What makes Evans-Wentz's accounts most interesting is that they show how cultural and historical expectations can colour experiences. Modern-day ufologists will have no trouble interpreting the Nuremberg sighting above as a UFO, in the same way that the Irish peasant farmer saw fairies. A good example of

this is the aerial phenomena that occurred at Fatima. The event, which is traditionally associated with a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was witnessed by hundreds of people. However, what was reported depended very much on the individual. Those of a particular religious belief saw Moses, while others saw Jesus. A photograph of the event shows that the camera simply saw a luminous ball of light!

When examining reports of phantom battles we must also remember that they were used as an important political and theological tool of the period (*Finucane, 1982*). Blatantly exploited as propaganda by Royalists and Parliamentarians alike during the Civil War, the reports were used by each side to show that God was on their side. A striking example of this is the report that the headless body of the royal martyr, King Charles, had been seen hovering over the place of his execution in Whitehall in 1649. Similarly, in a series of three tracts with the title '*Mirabilis Annus*' published in 1661 and 1662, the beleaguered non-conformists assembled a collection of celestial signs and wonders to support their cause. In one of many reports, they have celestial armies thrusting preachers from their pulpits above East Sussex. Over the years there have been countless attempts by researchers to explain away apparitions like these as superstitious nonsense. Psychical researchers have been tempted to use these reports to add credence to their own particular theories, most notably electromagnetic and geomagnetic fields, without fully realising that these theories in turn are a product of their time and will soon be replaced by a new orthodoxy.

With the advent of Protestantism and the Scientific Revolution, celestial armies and even ghosts in general were dismissed as Popish superstition. Even when the new faith found itself unable to completely vanquish the ingrained belief in ghosts, the Protestants

were forced to concede that the spirits of the dead could only return at the instigation of demons (Newton, 2002). Religion was losing its iron grip. The great English Elizabethan dramatist Christopher Marlowe summed up the feelings of many when he wrote: "I count religion but a childish toy, And hold there is no sin but ignorance" (Marlowe, 1919). Even great minds such as the German philosopher Kant were forced to concede that the existence of ghosts could not be dismissed out of hand. So if the belief in ghosts is so ingrained in our folklore, indeed our very psyche, why have reports of phantom armies and battles such as Edgehill declined? Keith Thomas has commented on the popular belief about ghosts in the sixteenth century: "If they stopped seeing ghosts, it was because such apparitions were losing their social relevance, not just because they were regarded as intellectually impossible" (Thomas, 1971). More than this, we believe, the world had changed too much for the socio-political relevance of phantom armies to have the same hold upon the fears of the masses. Unlike the citizens of Troy for whom the phantoms of the Trojan War were seen as omens, the people of today have other preoccupations in their lonely search for meaning.

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Editorial

Mike White has started a fashion for editorials in *ASSAP News* so I am following suit (I think David Boreanaz to play me, Mike!). Actually, this is the space I'd reserved for all those letters in response to Jason Braithwaite's provocative articles in the last issue. Except there weren't any! I find this very surprising, as I am sure there must be some members who do not subscribe to Jason's views. There is another of Jason's articles in this issue, and you are once again invited to write in with your views on the matters he raises.

Whether you subscribe to Jason's views or not, there is little doubt that many investigators are using inadequate equipment on vigils. It usually comes down to a question of money. In particular, cheap popular electromagnetic detectors are neither very sensitive nor do they sample frequently enough to address the issue of the electromagnetism / brain theory. In an attempt to fix that problem, ASSAP is putting funding into a project being run by Jason. It will involve purchasing some highly sensitive magnetometers which sample at up to 250 times per second. They are, unfortunately, very expensive. However, it is proposed that they will eventually become available to ASSAP groups wishing to carry out their own measurements. The project is an exciting prospect that will put ASSAP at the cutting edge of serious scientific research into the paranormal. The project will be described in detail at a later date.

On another matter, I was slightly taken aback recently when I heard someone make a comment about ASSAP. They said they had the impression that ASSAP was only interested in ghosts. It made me think. Is it a fair criticism?

If you look at *ASSAP News* you will see a wide range of articles, courtesy of our subject coordinators. It has to be said that in *Anomaly*, hauntings tend to rule (see this issue, for instance!). Similarly, the investigator's training course also concentrates mainly on hauntings and finishes with a live vigil.

As editor of *Anomaly* I can, of course, only publish what I'm sent. The fact that most of it is about ghosts must say something about the interests of the membership. It could be related to the fact that most of the cases we actively investigate involve ghosts. The Investigation Department can only look at the cases it receives from the public. These tend to be mostly hauntings. So are the public obsessed with ghosts? It is possible, given all the publicity ghosts receive on television and the internet. However, I suspect the main reason is that ghosts tend to stick around for a while unlike, say, UFOs, alien animals or falls of frogs, which are usually one-off events. This makes them more obvious to the public. Indeed, many witnesses come to us in order to get rid of ghosts!

So I am not going to apologise for *Anomaly's* preoccupation with ghosts. Indeed, I think our concentration on hauntings, albeit unintentional, could be useful for the study of anomalous phenomena in general. The static, long-lasting nature of hauntings makes them an excellent test bed for long-term study and experimentation. I'm sure that one of the reasons for the lack of progress in anomaly research is the fleeting nature of our subject matter. At least haunted houses don't move! And once we solve the problem of what hauntings really are, it could offer a huge insight into the true nature of many other, much more elusive, paranormal phenomena.

Most paranormal researchers, including skeptics, are united in the idea that there is something different about haunted places.

Whether it is a 'stone tape' imprint which can be replayed somehow, electromagnetic fields impinging on susceptible brains or something entirely different, we need to know if 'haunted places' really are different. Jason's articles have pointed out that many research methods currently being used on vigils are simply not up to answering that question meaningfully. Hopefully, the new project Jason is starting will go some way towards answering those criticisms. And hopefully others will follow his lead and apply more rigorous methods to their own investigations.

But what happens if it turns out that ghosts really are just externally induced electromagnetic hallucinations, existing entirely within our brains? It would be a huge step forward but it would leave a great deal to explain. We would need to identify the source of the electromagnetic fields (bearing in mind that ghosts predate man's use of electricity) and why they were in particular locations and not others. There is also the matter of why ghosts behave repetitively, as if in a holographic film. Another thing that has always puzzled me is why we only see figures instead of whole scenes*? Then there is the matter of why some ghosts apparently use previous building layouts for their walks. Without knowing the basic reason why people see ghosts we cannot really hope to tackle these tricky questions. The sooner we know that the better!

** I know there are such cases but they are quite rare*

Maurice Townsend.

PS: If you have any comments on this, or any other articles in *Anomaly*, please write and let us know.