

Psychical Archives

The SPR's Hon. Archives Liaison Officer Explains the SPR Archives

MELVYN WILLIN

Beginning around the mid-1850s there was an increase in interest in what are now termed 'paranormal' phenomena. These included stories of ghosts, poltergeists and the blossoming of the contact-with-the-dead religion, namely Spiritualism. This led to claims and counter-claims raised by science and religion. The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in London in 1882 for the purpose of investigating 'that large body of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical and "spiritualistic" [...] in the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned enquiry which has enabled Science to solve so many problems.' [1]

A group of scholars led the organization in an attempt to get to the truth about such important matters. These men of high calibre included Henry Sidgwick, a Cambridge University professor; Frederick Myers, a classics scholar; and Edmund Gurney, a scholar of wide-ranging interests and abilities. They formed committees with other learned people and collected vast amounts of data concerning their investigations of apparitions, hauntings, poltergeist, hypnotism, mediums and other phenomena.

The so-called 'Literary Committee' collected this data together which led to the formation of the SPR Archives. A *Journal* and *Proceedings* were started in the 1880s and a library was created. The scale of the work undertaken can be seen in such collections as the *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), the *Census of Hallucinations* (1889 – 1892) and *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). After the deaths of the founders, various mediums claimed to be in touch with them and the so-called 'Cross-Correspondences' were accumulated.

The Archives and the Library (some 4,000 books) travelled with the SPR from its different locations in

London until 1989 when the majority of the Archives and the rare books were housed at Cambridge University Library (CUL). This also included a number of interesting artefacts and photographs. Of course, the main library is still housed at the office in London. Other important events have been the production online of most of the SPR's publications via an Abstracts Catalogue; the removal and cataloguing of the audio-visual material (currently housed in a separate building at the author's house); and a catalogue listing much of what is held at CUL.

So what do the Archives contain? The simple answer happens to be the nearest to the truth and that is just about anything that a researcher into paranormal phenomena from the last 150 years could wish to investigate from a massive range of different perspectives. The size of the collection



is measured in metres and as of 2014 this stands at 100 metres. At CUL one will find thousands of manuscripts covering such diverse subjects as apparitions, ESP, mediums, hauntings, near death experiences, past-life memories, experimental parapsychology, poltergeists, psychokinesis, survival issues and dreaming. The list is far from

Andrew Mackenzie Collection, Folder No. 28

- Correspondence re ghostly singing, Epsom and SPR Newsletter Jan. 1988.
- Correspondence re apparition of Col. Albones, Lincs. and death certificate 1969.
- Correspondence re celestial music, Mrs Gove, S. Africa 1989.
- Correspondence re psychic experiences, Mrs Atrobus 1978.
- Correspondence re precognition, Mrs Appleton, Woodford Green, Essex and article 1982/83.
- Correspondence re York Xmas ghost; police and R. B. Godward, New Zealand 1992/93.
- Correspondence re woman who smells death, J. Lester 1971.
- Correspondence re apparition, V. O' Sullivan 1972.
- Correspondence re psychic experiences, R. Hillard, Tewkesbury 1988.
- Correspondence re psychic experiences, W. Compton, Belfast 1987.
- Correspondence re apparition, Mrs Lee, Surrey 1968/69.
- Correspondence re psychic experiences, Ellen Fauser and photo 1979.
- Correspondence re psychic experiences, D. Shelton, Bristol 1971.
- Correspondence re cards falling at time of death, B. Truerman 1988.
- Correspondence re apparition in France (in French and English) 1994.
- Correspondence re predictions, J. P. Warren, USA 1972.
- Correspondence re apparition in Southend-on-Sea, Mrs Freeman 1971.
- Correspondence re apparition in London, Mrs Bergman 1968/69.
- Correspondence re apparition in 1939, Mrs Bullard, Hastings, 1969.

exhaustive and each category can be broken down into more detail. For instance, 'poltergeist' would include Amityville, Borley Rectory, Cardiff, Enfield, South Shields, Rosenheim and on and on.

Photographic material ranges from early glass plates purporting to show spiritualistic phenomena to the Cyril Permutt Collection. This contains thousands of photographs across the whole spectrum of subjects such as ghosts, poltergeists, auras, séance images, Kirlian photography

other items in the SPR office in London. On opening the box, I found it to contain over 100 sealed envelopes. Some of these were blank, some had names and dates on and some had instructions, such as 'not to be opened until after the death of the writer'. I opened all of these envelopes in the presence of Professor Donald West and Karen Patel (the SPR Librarian) in April of the same year and catalogued their contents. This mostly consisted of wishes to make post mortem contact and how clues would

however, since the actual content is not necessarily made clear by the label. For instance, Archie Roy's fascinating 'Pearls of Great Price' (Conference 1995); Manfred Cassirer's 'Endor Revisited' (Conference 1986); and Noah Zerdin's 'What Granddad Did...' leave much to the imagination.

The effort of gaining entrance to the library in Cambridge is well worth the minor inconvenience. Students and graduates of Cambridge University already hold a reader's ticket, but a letter from either another



FAR LEFT: SPR recordings in the CSAPP Archive (see Cooper and Saunders in this issue). LEFT: Objects involved in the Enfield Poltergeist case now in the SPR Archives. RIGHT: Dr Melvyn Willin in The Golden Fleece, York. Dr Willin is the SPR's Hon. Archives Liaison Officer. He can be contacted at melvyn.willin@gmail.com.

and even UFOs – a subject not traditionally delved into by the SPR.

A number of researchers have honoured the SPR by bequeathing their research papers to it. These have included Maurice Grosse, E. R. Dodds, Andrew MacKenzie, Drayton Thomas, Mostyn Gilbert, Manfred Cassirer and many others.

To provide the reader with an insight into the detail of any single file of the thousands held in the Archives, let me choose one to give a flavour. The Andrew Mackenzie Collection is one of the smaller compilations consisting of just thirty folders. Folder No. 28 (see opposite) is illustrative of the diversity of material than one can expect to find throughout the Archives.

Of course, new material of an impressive nature still comes to light. On 22 March 2007, I discovered a metal box, the contents of which were unknown, underneath a number of

be left after death.

The correspondence made both interesting and poignant reading. For instance, one such letter from the Egyptologist Howard Carter dated 1891 provided details of his beliefs and that he intended to make contact after death using a coded name which he specified in the letter. Another envelope contained correspondence between the author Henry James and leading SPR investigator Richard Hodgson from 1892.

The audio-visual collection contains over 1,200 cassettes of lectures and other recorded material, as well as videos of phenomena that have been sent to the Society. These are being copied ready for availability online in due course. The information held in this format is undervalued, since it often provides insights into the speakers' thoughts that did not appear in their written material. The titles of talks can be confusing,

university department or the SPR (please note that this applies to SPR members only) usually allows access to the Manuscripts Room where a considerable amount of material can be viewed after it has been brought up from the vaults.

To use the library in London it is wise to contact the office first to ensure it is open before undertaking a visit. Enquires about the audio-visual collection should be made directly to myself. New material is often welcomed into the Archives and cataloguing needs constant updating. It is therefore best to check with either Peter Meadows, Head of Manuscripts, CUL, or myself as to the existence of any specific documents. The Archives of the SPR are a wonderful resource that deserve to be used far more often.

NOTES

[1] Quoted in Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 137.

Consulting the SPR Archives

1. Send a letter to the Manuscripts Room of the Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DR, ideally with a covering letter from either a university or the SPR. See www.lib.cam.ac.uk, or telephone 01223 333000.
2. Try to give a time and date when a visit is desired and to save time an idea of what material is to be scrutinised.
3. Await a reply and then arrive at the library accordingly with covering letters.
4. Bring only pencils and writing paper. Cases, etc., must be deposited in lockers.
5. Ask to see a catalogue of the SPR material or tell the person in charge (currently Peter Meadows) what you wish to see.
6. Fill in a library slip and hand it to the desk for items to be collected for you. This may involve a wait at busy times.
7. Some photocopying may be available depending on the condition of the items scrutinised.