

# Seeing a Ghost?

by Mike White

Apparitions are rare in hauntings and even rarer at ASSAP Training Days. But our chairman saw one. Or did he?

Training Day 2003 was held at a hotel in the Midlands. During one hour-long vigil session a figure was seen strolling through the grounds of the hotel by two of the investigators and it is this seemingly innocuous event that forms the basis of this article. This is not a straightforward description of a mysterious apparition, nor is it a simple account of a series of events; rather it is a tale of the progress of an investigation which will hopefully act partly as a procedural guide and mostly as a salutary warning.

## **Background to the Sighting**

The hotel has been the subject of an ongoing investigation by the Merseyside group Para.Science for a number of years, and they were kind enough to suggest it as a suitable venue for Training Day. They also offered to use their experience of the phenomena associated with the venue to manage the overnight training vigil. As is the usual practice at Training Day, attendees generally remained in their daytime training groups, each led by an experienced ASSAP member. However, because Para.Science were handling vigil logistics for the night, each group was additionally accompanied by one of their investigators. Because a number of trainees did not stay overnight there was, in practice, a considerable mixing of the groupings, which is how two ASSAP Executive members (Wendy Milner and Mike White) found themselves in the same group. For the sake of brevity, rather than

anonymity, I shall refer to them simply as W and M.

## **The Event**

During the fourth watch period of the vigil W and M were sitting in the bar/lounge area of the hotel with a third investigator (who will remain nameless to spare his blushes, as he was fast asleep throughout the events detailed below). The room in question has a large bay window which looks out over a patio area and on towards a grass area dotted with mature trees, which slopes gradually away from the hotel. At the time of the sighting the room was moderately lit and the area outside was dark.

At approximately 3:15am W casually stated that she could 'see a figure outside'. Note that the statement was carefully neutral in its phrasing. M looked out of the window and replied that nothing was visible. W then commented that she had seen something moving outside and, on closer examination, M too observed something - a figure walking from right to left past the window. Neither investigator thought too much of the sighting, but did ask the nearest Para.Science member to radio the vigil HQ to ask who was walking outside at that time. On checking it turned out that Hugh Pincott (H), then ASSAP Chairman, had taken a stroll at that time and so the event was logged and forgotten. At around 6am the post-vigil debrief took place and the various investigators headed for home.

It was only a few days later that the catalogue of errors made that night began to come to light, and I hope that highlighting some of the ways in which a simple observation can be (mis-)reported and interpreted will serve as a salutary lesson to all investigators.

The story began to unravel when, a week or so after Training Day,

H queried the exact time of the sighting, both with Para.Science and W/M. In his haste to get away in time for Training Day M had left his watch at home and had no way of knowing the time – he had in fact been relying on W for the night’s timekeeping. W had a watch but had not synchronised it with the central HQ. H had not noted the time he had taken his walk outside that night. As a result, the only definitive time that could be identified was that of the radio call to HQ, a matter of a few minutes after the sighting. Once the exact time of the sighting had been calculated, H realised that he had not been walking in the direction that W and M had seen the figure; in fact, he had been proceeding in exactly the opposite direction. Suddenly, a casual and unremarked figure walking through the grounds became a possible unidentified event!

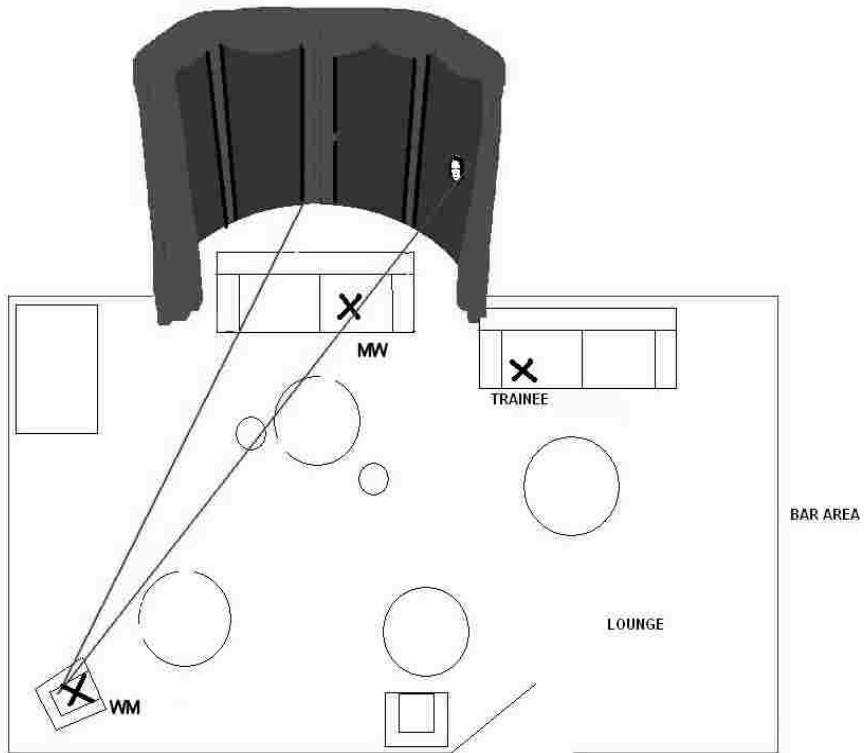
W and M submitted the usual ASSAP report sheets and attempted to illustrate what they had seen. Even less than two weeks since their observations had taken place their descriptions differed markedly.

### **Initial Witness Testimony**

*W’s initial statement:*

My first impression was that the face I could see was a female with longish dark hair, I assumed, one of the members of another team outside. I couldn't see much below the neck because some of the view was obscured by the back of the sofa on which M was sitting, so it looked a bit like a disembodied floating head.

It(!) immediately came into view through the window as it passed. I noticed a pale face looking up at the window (ground outside was lower) and afterwards we reckoned about 30 feet [9m] from where we were sat. The face was the size of a pea at arm's length, and looked towards the window for the whole time I could see it.

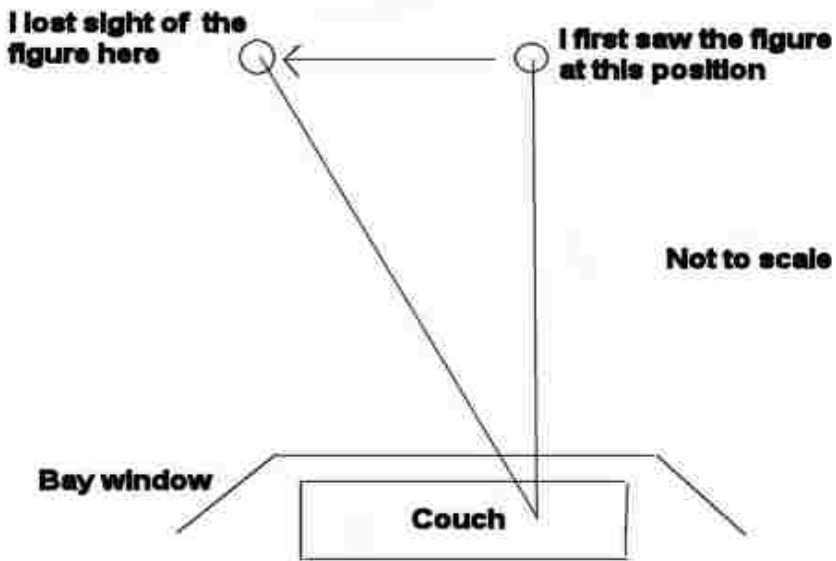


*Wendy's viewpoint*

The 'person' moved from right to left all the time looking up at the window until obscured by the middle upright. (No longer than five seconds). As I watched I said to M, 'there's a figure outside' and he turned to look over his left shoulder. By the time he had turned around to look over his right shoulder, I had lost sight of the 'person' and M may have said that he thought it was H. We checked via Stuart's (The Para.Science team member of the group) walkie-talkie and H confirmed that he had been outside the bay window 'a minute ago' and we accepted that identification. I couldn't see anything else in the garden except a few trees but the face was illuminated and stood out quite well.

*M's initial statement:*

I was sitting on the couch in the bay window; W was in a chair to the right side of the room by the fish-tank light. W commented that she could see a figure moving outside so I turned around to try to take a look. Because of the reflections from inside the room, visibility was very poor (my face was almost pressed against the glass) and it took me some time to spot the figure she had noticed. Apart from the figure itself no details of the gardens were visible. The figure was moving slowly (at the pace of a slow walk) from my right to left as I looked out. I would estimate its distance at somewhere between 30 and 40 feet [9-12m], subject to the proviso that there were no visible landmarks to confirm this. The figure seemed to be of average height and was wearing dark clothing so that all that was really visible was the face and head topped by either dark hair or hat. I watched the figure for around 10 seconds before it moved into an area of the window with a strong light reflection. Despite changing my position I was unable to relocate the figure. A couple of minutes later, on S's (a Para.Science member) next visit to the lounge, we asked him to use his radio to find out who was outside and he was able to confirm that H



*Mike's viewpoint*

had passed outside the window at approximately the time we had been observing the figure.

Taking this as a positive identification W and I chatted briefly about how differently we would have reported the figure and then settled down to resume the vigil.

Some minutes later (anywhere between 5 and 10) W again spotted a figure retracing the path of the first. This time we were able to



*What Wendy saw (including portrait of chairman!)*

make a positive identification of H as the face was visible - embarrassingly I have a horrible suspicion that because of this the event never got logged! H was in sight for 30 seconds to a minute.

## **Additional Testimony**

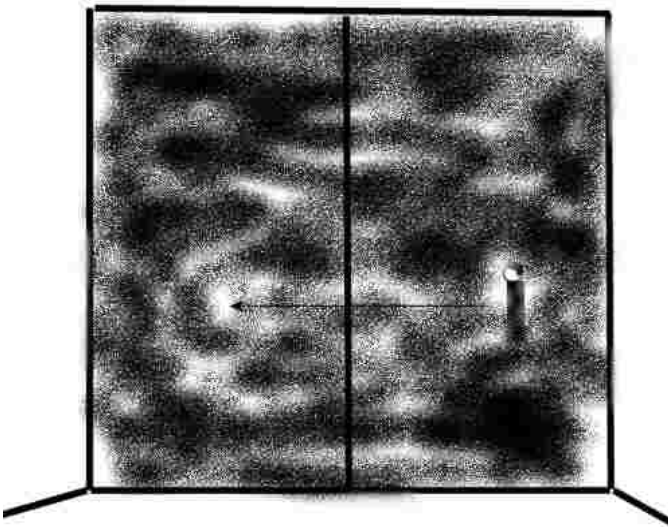
Included above are the illustrations given by each witness of their viewpoints in relation to the figure seen. As you can see, these diagrams correlate closely, both to each other and to the witnesses' respective descriptions of the sighting. Note that, at this point, the descriptions of the figure's movement are quite similar although W has provided far more details of the apparition's facial features. After reading both descriptions and following some discussion of the event, W added the following details:

I didn't remember seeing H those few minutes later when I recalled the event because I realised that I didn't actually see him at all with my own eyes, M did and he confirmed that it was H. I seem to remember standing up this time to confirm it for myself as well, but I was unable to see

properly due to the reflections on the window. I was slightly puzzled as to how I ever saw anything the first time because of this, but it may have been that there was less reflection from my vantage point towards the right half of the bay window ... the face I saw was well illuminated when it appeared beyond the window frame.

I agreed with M's suggestion of 30ft [9m] (from where I was) at the time because I had estimated the size of the head at arm's length to be about the size of a pea, and did my calculation from that. Certainly not accurate though!

Important bit: It was very difficult not to fall asleep during that particular session due to the lateness of the hour and, although I did close my eyes a few times, I was unable to sleep because I was wearing contact lenses. After having worn them all day I will admit that my eyesight was not at its best if a little bit foggy at times. I recall that I blinked a lot to clear my vision, although the memory of seeing the face seems clear. It was not just my eyesight which was foggy though, my head wasn't particularly clear either.



At the time, although I 'measured the distance' in my mind with the arm's length business, the thought that it may be anomalous didn't even cross my mind, strangely, given the circumstances! Being tired as well caused me to just accept that it was

H.

Although, as might be expected, the styles of the two submissions are very different, the information they convey is remarkably consistent. W was sitting at the far side of the room from the window so from her viewpoint the figure seems to be quite low down; conversely M was right up against the window and consequently had an entirely different viewpoint. Both images illustrate the darkness outside and the undeniable human shape of the figure.

After seeing the previous reports, H offered his own interpretation of the sighting:

During my perambulations, I deliberately avoided passing close to the lounge window, for three reasons. Not wanting to be thought of as a spy/voyeur/whatever; not wanting to give anybody an unpleasant surprise, and certainly not wishing to precipitate an erroneous phantom sighting. Consequently, when I passed that side of the house, I did so well down on the lawn slope - yes, 30 to 40 feet [9-12m] from the window. I believed the internal illumination of the lounge was so bright that nothing outside at that distance should be readily visible. Never at any time did I walk along the patio outside the window. During this particular watch, I must have traversed that lower lawn area about half a dozen times.

Several times when I passed, the only occupants of the lounge seemed to be M and W, seated as drawn in the plan. M's head and shoulders were visible, and just W's head on occasions. In fact in later patrols, I moved down the slope a little more, so that just the top of her head was visible. Since her seat constantly faced the window, I surmised that if I could not see her eyes, then she could not see me, even if the light was sufficiently bright.

W saw facial details quite clearly, and records it seemed about 30 feet



[9m] from where she was sitting. This was some 20 feet [6m] from the window, which implies "her" apparition would have been just outside the window, as distinct from M's, which was definitely farther away. Under the lighting circumstances, I would suggest it was virtually impossible for W to see me on the lawn from her vantage point. Interestingly however, both figures were observed to move from right to left.

Neither of these could have been me, because at the time of the observations I was walking from left to right - in the OPPOSITE direction! When the radio call came I was standing on the lawn just below the main entrance, and estimate I had been there a couple of minutes. During those minutes I was looking over the lawn and patio, seeing ... nothing unusual whatsoever. Of course, had any presence been visible from the outside when observed, I could have missed it as I was facing the other direction when walking away.

I may well have made a further patrol, 5 to 10 minutes later, but cannot recall any details.

## **Discussion**

From comparing these reports a number of points become clear. W described how she only saw the head of the apparition as it passed whereas H stated that he could just see W's head as he walked past. The logical conclusion is that W's figure can be explained as a simple sighting of H on one of his passages past the window. The relative lines of sight between M and H would seem to confirm this theory. However there are sufficient points of difference to justify querying this simplistic explanation.

Firstly, H explicitly states that at the time W and M were seeing their figure he was walking in the opposite direction. Unless the times given by each participant were radically wrong, this would seem to totally negate the possibility of a misidentification of H.

Furthermore, H states that he passed by the window on a number of occasions without attracting attention. While it is quite possible that he was only noticed on one occasion (especially as W explicitly mentions that she found concentration difficult), he also notes that he thought it unlikely that anyone inside would be able to pick out his dark figure in the gloom; a factor that is corroborated by M's original problems in spotting anything because of the reflection in the window and W's later corroboration of this effect.

Given the disparity in the estimates of the distance given by both W and M, it has been suggested that they were actually observing two separate figures! This would explain the differences in the fundamentals of the descriptions given, with M readily accepting the identification of H, whereas W described a more feminine face. (For those readers who are not acquainted with H, I should point out that he has a beard). If we accept this hypothesis, then the witnesses were either observing H and an unidentified figure closer to the window or two entirely unknown forms. However, some studies (eg. Horgan, 2004) have indicated that female witnesses are more likely to recall facial details than male witnesses, so perhaps W's description should be taken as more accurate than that given by M, which *might* explain the differences in the descriptions. As a male witness, I will avoid further discussion along these lines!

Notice how W revised her statement after reading the other descriptions of the event. This may have been due to a process of cognitive dissonance or it may have been due to memory reassessment due either to the passage of time or post-event discussion. Certainly, the simple process of discussing an experience with another person has been shown to have major effects on the subsequent accuracy of recall (Wells, 2003). In any event it is certainly possible to say that any memories of the sighting possessed by any of the witnesses are now so tainted by

memory decay and subsequent discussion and analysis that any further attempts to extract further details would be largely pointless (Loftus, 1996).

One highly significant (some might well say definitive) factor relating to the whole evening that needs to be considered is that, despite its rural location, the hotel had been plagued with trespassers in the area surrounding the buildings in previous months. This raises the possibility that this was a mundane sighting of someone sneaking into the hotel grounds rather than anything paranormal at all. In fact, an ex-member of the hotel staff was arrested for trespass some days after Training Day, which probably offers a mundane explanation for the whole sighting.

I have deliberately drawn no conclusions as to the identity of the apparition but, whatever its origin, a number of clear points emerge from this incident which, while obvious in hindsight and covered in every training course and manual you are ever likely to find, bear repeating.

1) Every vigil, training or otherwise, offers the possibility of experiencing something potentially paranormal and needs to be taken seriously for just that reason. Because W and M perceived this as a 'training event' they took a relaxed approach to the anomalous sighting and consequently the timing of the event was called into question.

2) Accurate tracking of personnel is essential. Similarly, no investigator should head off into the unknown without someone else alongside. Seeing two investigators passing a window would have allowed a greater chance of identification and allowed cross-checking of times, route taken, etc. I should point out that the Para.Science team who had organised the Training Vigil had, quite

properly, kept detailed notes of the movements of their team members and the hotel staff.

3) Accurate timekeeping is essential. M had no watch – W could not rely on the accuracy of hers, leading to considerable confusion.

4) Accurate note-taking is a must!

5) Recall is unreliable even a couple of weeks after an event. In fact, Ebbinghause's Forgetting Curve demonstrates that as much as 50% of all useful information may be lost beyond recall after less than an hour! Additionally, discussion of this sighting led to a diversification of the descriptions given by the various parties rather than a growing consensus. There is increasingly an awareness of the fact that any memory is particularly malleable once it has been picked over and dissected by a number of parties (Weingardt, 1995).

6) The 'zombie zone' in the early hours of the morning is the time when errors of any kind are most likely to be made, when the body is at the lowest ebb in its daily sleep cycle. Statistically more accidents happen to shift-workers at this time ([www.shiftwork-resources.com](http://www.shiftwork-resources.com)); this is also the time most patients die of cardiac arrest (Pasqualetti, 1990), although I am sure this is not likely to happen on an ASSAP vigil. Over-tiredness can certainly cause errors of judgement at any time, and vigils need to be structured to allow 'downtime' for any investigators who need to refresh themselves. The team member who was asleep during the events detailed here never misreported any odd events during the night!

7) Assumptions are dangerous. Despite following the correct procedure, by checking whether there was someone out in the

grounds at the time, W and M made the (possibly erroneous) assumption that this explained the figure they had seen. Furthermore, once this had been decided, the incident was relegated to unimportant and not mentioned at the post-vigil briefing at which point any discrepancies in the events reported could have been spotted.

Doubtless readers can come up with other lessons of their own. In this article I have deliberately highlighted and stressed the various errors made during the reporting of the events described in order to make particular points, and I would like to apologise to all parties concerned despite having obtained their permission before publication.

## References

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- KR Weingardt, EF Loftus, DS Lindsay, 1995, Misinformation revisited: new evidence on the suggestibility of memory, *Memory and Cognition*, 23
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Anyone interested in further reading on the subject of memory and recall could do worse than start at: <http://www.humanfactorsconsultants.com/memory.rtf> or <http://cms.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-19950101-000021.html>