FIRST IMPRESSIONS

by Phil Walton

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

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

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

So why do we rely almost solely on these useless heaps of junk when investigating paranormal phenomena? Maybe because we all have one! If you have not guessed yet, I am talking about the human being as an observing machine. Using humans as the main data collecting device is general practice in our field. We call them witnesses, but how accurate are they? I decided to make this my main theme when I was asked to give a lecture this spring.

I was delighted to be asked to address the Oxford Scientific Society at their Wednesday Lecture. 'Of course I will speak' was my reply, knowing that I had over six months to prepare. But six months soon passes and it is then time to do some serious procrastinating. After cleaning the oven out more times than was

strictly necessary I finally decided on the title, 'The Paranormal - A Science?' I took a look at the standard of evidence needed to establish whether something was indeed paranormal and the quality of evidence that we receive from witnesses. I wondered whether it was good enough to establish a case. To prove that a genuine paranormal event has occurred takes a case water-tight enough to convince a skeptic that something unusual has indeed happened. In my time at ASSAP I am not sure I can say that there are many cases, if any, that would provide PROOF to most people that a ghost, for example, had indeed been seen.

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

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

The questions started with straightforward descriptions such as 'What was worn above the waist?' Then leading questions such as, 'Describe the badge worn' and 'Describe the book carried' were put. There was, in fact, no book but it was interesting to see the effect of suggestion on a group of witnesses. The statistics for the human observing machine gleaned from those experiments were then collated and analysed.

At the Oxford lecture I showed a picture of one of the subjects, Colin, on a wall and then read out five separate personal descriptions. I asked the audience to judge if one or more, or indeed any, were of Colin. By this time the audience had realized that it was an interactive talk and debated among themselves. While

there was a scatter of votes for each description, the majority was sure that it was a trick and thought none of the descriptions matched the image. Here are the descriptions:

Sex & Build	Hair &Eye Colour	Name & Age	Clothing	Items carried or worn (leading questions)	Duration of event
Male 1.9m 75kg	Dark brown hair, no idea of eye colour	Colin. 27	Blue shirt, maybe denim, glasses, blue trousers, black shoes	Yellow plastic security pass, not carrying anything, ring on the left hand, black leather belt, silver buckle.	12s
Male 1.67m 100kg	Black hair, green eyes	Bob. 30		Carrying a black hard-back book, brown belt, gold buckle, gold watch	120s
Male 1.8m 95kg	Dark brown hair, no eyes seen	32	Blue shirt, glasses - square ones	Black jeans with brown label, black belt, brown shoes, red badge, black tie, black leather belt, trainers	90s
Sex & Build	**Hair &Eye Colour**	**Name & Age**	**Clothing**	**Items carried or worn (leading questions)**	**Duration of event**

Male 1.75m 100kg	Dark brown eyes	Simon. 28	Blue shirt, yellow tie, glasses, tan trousers, black shoes	Small white badge, yellow tie of average size, average book, brown leather belt square silver buckle, black digital watch, black leather shoes	90s
Male 1.78m 80kg	Black greying hair, no eye colour seen.	Phil. 48	Blue shirt, charcoal trousers, sound of keys heard or similar	No tie, no book, no rings no belt, no watch, couldn't see shoes	30s

As it turned out, all the students were wrong. In fact ALL the descriptions where of Colin. They illustrate the variety of answers given by the UnConvention audience. About the only consistency (on this occasion) was the sex. There is a picture of Colin here (taken at the UnConvention) that might allow you to judge for yourself how accurate the statements were. He was less than flattered by some of the statements given but that is, alas, the nature of the experiment.

Statistics of Witness Reliability

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

THE VICTIMS

Colin Galletly (right) pictured at the UnConvention.

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

[both pics Val Hope]

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

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

They observed his age as between 25-35.

The colour of his shirt was as follows:

- *light shirt with pockets*
- *grey checked shirt*
- *striped grey white shirt*
- *blue shirt*
- *light blue shirt*
- *checked long-sleeved shirt*
- *beige/brown shirt with subtle checked pattern*
- *red shirt (dark)*
- *patterned jumper*

His trousers were described as:

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

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

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

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

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

Those who supplied an answer described it as:

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

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

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

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

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

In answer to a question about 'the belt':

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

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

The height was between +7% and -7% of the real value. The weight was between +18% and -26%. When the audience was asked to estimate how long the staged event lasted, the error was between +313% and -71%. Taking height alone, a 7% deviation on a 1.67m person would narrow the search down to between 85 and 95% of the human population! Not very good.

I finished my Oxford lecture by describing the need for a more instrument-led approach to gathering information at vigils and wherever possible the use of cameras and videos. This was tempered by a warning not to be too reliant on photos, as even these can, of course, be faked. I promptly showed them an example. There followed an hour of questions and a tour of Oxford by the President of the Society. I would like to thank both James and Giri for their hospitality while I was in Oxford.

My conclusion, following the talk and experiments, is as follows: To PROVE the case for the paranormal we must accept nothing less than would be expected to prove a law of physics or find someone guilty in a court of law. In both cases the evidence would be tested for its accuracy and reliability, something sadly lacking in the quest for the paranormal. Only then will we answer the question- 'The Paranormal - A Science?'

The Unreliable Witness

The unreliability of witness testimony is sadly obvious from this study. This has not stopped some people developing extravagant theories of the universe based on such shifting sands. There can be no doubt that instrumented vigils are an important way forward in this respect. ASSAP has been in the forefront of efforts to make such an approach standard in field investigations.

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