



Who Ya Gonna Call?

Ghosts and Apparitions are not studied. The reality is that most people with an active interest in such spontaneous anomalies usually only ever encounter verbal or written reports or alleged images of such phenomena. Investigation is therefore in reality the study of second-hand and secondary sources of information. Such a situation frequently leaves room for much doubt in the minds of some as to whether the phenomena have ever been genuinely encountered and properly documented.

The terms 'Ghost' and 'Paranormal' on the cover of a book, magazine or video has frequently proved to be a sales winning strategy but much of the claimed evidence being presented as factual is poorly understood or has little to do with the actual subject at all. Dowsing and the channelling of spirits by sensitives and mediums has become inexorably intertwined with modern gadgetry in the search for 'proof' of the existence of ghosts. The overuse of the depiction of such methods as providing 'scientific proof' of the claims of many amateur investigators adds to the state of confusion that currently exists.

Central to all strands of ghost investigation is that there is a series of phenomena that can be easily studied simply by spending time in haunted locations. Virtually this entire new breed of 'Paranormal Investigator' assumes that there is intelligence behind these phenomena. The popular viewpoint amongst the subject's greatest supporters is that the human spirit can survive death in some way and can return at will to locations frequented during their lifetime. A second, equally popular view has it that the environment can in some way record a traumatic event or memory into the fabric of its surroundings to be played back at some later time. Often these two notions may be mixed together and presented as definitive explanations by those who champion such ideas. There may be some logic and rational thought behind both of these concepts but there is also much disagreement and a current lack of any meaningful study being undertaken to test such ideas.

The truth about ghosts and ghost investigations is that a central core of anomalous reports are continually being appropriated and hijacked by people with their own agendas. The motivations behind them may often be well meaning but the results serve only to scatter the subject and cause disagreement. Evidence of ghosts and related paranormal activity is widely presented on the internet, published in magazines and books or shown on TV. The major casualty of all this 'information' is undisputed truth. Many interesting cases are now badly tainted by the poor standard and sensationalist nature of the evidence that is being presented by investigators.

The vast majority of paranormal case investigation is amateur and the vast majority of investigators undergo a rudimentary initiation at best. It may be easy to condemn the chaos and confusion of ideas that result from such methods but it is the inevitable outcome of the current popularity that ghost hunting enjoys. Here in the UK there are over one 1,200 groups currently seeking to interact with ghosts many of whose membership rely for proof of their personal experience on the dubious claims of some individuals with the self proclaimed apparent ability to communicate with, or to sense ghosts and spirits within a given location. The members are not encouraged to seek explanations for their own and others experiences but instead are informed that the information they are given is in the form of indisputable fact, this is demonstrated by the many groups who claim to be seeking 'Proof that the paranormal realm exists' rather than seeking explanations as to why such experiences are reported.

There are some more thorough investigations being undertaken, some of which is producing vital and

challenging work. However, the continued sensationalist approach by the majority has left the subject of spontaneous case investigation largely in an academic limbo. Well documented reports of ghost and apparition encounters are fascinating and more substantial than many cynics would like to admit but many of those researchers employed in university parapsychology and anomalous psychology departments regard amateurs in amateur paranormal investigation groups almost as a kind of 'Care In The Community' branch of the study and really who can blame them given the current approach that most amateurs seem to be taking. Spontaneous case study is often seen as a sure route to career suicide for scientific and social scientific minds. Research undertaken in Psychology, Physics and Sociology has made a substantial contribution to the debate but has often failed to impress those involved in gathering field reports. In most cases those active in amateur paranormal groups simply don't have access to or fail to understand the academic research. In some cases, they get the gist of new ideas and theories but without a proper understanding of what they could be contributing they are instead free to interpret the ideas often in a novel or bizarre fashion, EVP research and the use of electromagnetic field (EMF) detectors are just two areas where the current trend is becoming increasingly disassociated with the original ideas and research that suggested their potential for usefulness in spontaneous case investigations.

The academics who do claim to study spontaneous phenomena seldom conduct field based research. Much academic work instead concerns itself trying to replicate such events and experiences within the laboratory and academics have often slammed the contributions of their amateur colleagues as primitive and inaccurate.

Parapsychology is the general term coined to include just about all academic investigation of ghosts, apparitions and other ostensibly spontaneous paranormal experiences. It is not however a science. Spontaneous case investigation really requires a multi-disciplinary approach involving experts from many fields of study if it is to ever succeed at all. The current trend within the academic mainstream of parapsychology instead leaves a vacuum that has been all too readily filled by pseudoscientific theorists and quasi-religious devotees driven along by the entertainment industry and scammers eager to make a quick buck from an all too willing and often gullible public.

Despite these complications we have to keep one thing in mind, people continue to see and experience things we cannot begin to explain. Many of the people on the receiving end of such experiences did not ask for them and do not seek any publicity.

Ghost encounters may peak at times when ghosts are popular within the media but they never go away. Most, in fact many cases can be easily explained but are kept alive by a mixture of faith and bullshit but there is a handful where the evidence presents a serious challenge to established ideas. But is there a future for Ghost Hunting and Ghost Hunters? To be honest it is a bleak one at present. The very popularity of the subject is condemning it even further into the fringe world of entertainment and thrill seeking. With so many groups now active and so many people spending their leisure time in pursuit of ghosts and apparitions it has become increasingly difficult to find cases and locations that have not been trampled in the rush to enjoy a personal encounter with a ghost or spirit. Genuine cases have become lost and buried in a deluge of ghost hunters. Savvy venues have realised that they are sitting on a goldmine and now routinely charge extortionate amounts for a few hours access. No serious researcher begrudges paying a reasonable amount toward the costs of maintaining a location or paying for overnight staffing but does it really cost up to £1,000 to allow a few people to spend a night in an alleged haunted pub with a bowl of cornflakes sometimes thrown in to sweeten the blow?

Organisations have formed specifically to cater to this mass market and offer 'Ghost Hunting' experiences to anyone with cash to spare. These events are sold as genuine paranormal investigations often with claims of tuition and training in paranormal investigation techniques and ALWAYS with a medium to ensure the punters have a 'genuine paranormal' experience. Large profits are being made by such entrepreneurs none of which is ever ploughed into funding serious research programmes. Several of these organisations also claim to be 'Not for Profit' which is almost never the case when costs and

charges are examined. In recent months we have also seen the raise of paranormal groups acting as agents for the haunted venues, creaming off a profit from others interested in visiting the location. Along with the almost obligatory sales of T-Shirts, mugs and other paraphernalia it's become a good source of revenue for such groups.

Genuine cases which used to be frequently reported and assistance sought by the experients are now rarely received by serious and well established research bodies such as the SPR. With so many groups now operating it is difficult for anyone to find an objective research group to investigate their situation. The internet has become the primary contact media for many individuals looking for such help but it is more likely to turn up one of the majority of groups who are more interested in personal thrill seeking than conducting a thorough investigation. Inevitably, the outcome will usually be unsatisfactory for the original witnesses and will normally result in either poor evidence being presented as factual or the exploitation of the case by the investigators happy to use the case for their own ends. The internet also abounds with video and photographic evidence produced to support the claims of these less than scrupulous investigators. Such footage and photography is freely shown without any regard for the privacy of the original witnesses. Many depict personal scenes of family life and all too often show young children without any apparent regard for client anonymity.

If spontaneous case investigation is to continue it needs to alter its approach radically. Ethical guidelines need to be adopted by all researchers and codes of conduct adhered to. It would be useless to try and impose such conditions upon the groups as too many hold tight to their entrenched beliefs and would resent the intrusion into their hobby and in some cases income. By instead educating the public about what constitutes a good quality of investigation and by letting them know that they need to take control of the investigative process by the simple expedient of informed consent things may in time change. Instead of asking "Who Ya Gonna Call?" it should change to "Who Ya Gonna Let Into Your Home?".