# THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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RANDOM NUMBER GENERATORS AND GHOST HUNTING

INSIDE A HAUNTED MUSEUM IN SOUTH CAROLINA

ANOMALIES IN HELMSHORE

TWO NEW APPARITIONAL EXPERIENCES FROM NEWCASTLE

RUPERT SHELDRAKE JERRY KROTH W.H. BACH'S 'PSYCHE'

THE SPONTANEOUS THE SPONTANEOUS CASES COMMITTEE SCC CHAIR, DR GRAHAM KIDD, TAKES US BEHIND THE SCENES OF SPR INVESTIGATIONS

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Editor Leo Ruickbie magazine@spr.ac.uk

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## contents

Dr Graham Kidd, SCC Chair The Work of the Spontaneous Cases Committee

Mike Nichols A Chance of a Ghost

Karma Wilde Cause and Effect of a Haunted Museum

Karma Wilde An Old, Dirty Baby Buggy

**Chris Aspin** The Helmshore Anomalies

Ken Smith



Ashley Knibb

The Maid and the Monster

Report on Lectures by Rupert Sheldrake and Jerry Kroth



**Brandon Hodge** Ghosts in the Machines: W.H. Bach and His 'Psyche'



Cover 'Disibod's Maze' by Leo Ruickbie. A modern turf maze in the ruins of Disibodenberg monastery, Germany.

## editorial

or most of its history, the Society for Psychical Research has published acounts of people's personal experiences, known among members as 'spontaneous cases'. Usually, these were further investigated, often thoroughly, and over the years this has grown into a considerable record, probably unparalleled, of the 'paranormal' in everyday life. This was a major theme of my contribution to the SPR's Study Day to commemorate the Society's 140th anniversary this year. Called 'Phantasms of the Victorians', I looked at the role played by apparitional experiences in the early Society for Psychical Research. The Society essentially began with a handful of ghost stories and a desire to find out more about them: one of its first committees was a Committe on Haunted Houses. Although the Committee on Haunted Houses was shortlived – few people wanted to invite such a group into their homes, much less tell the world about any alleged hauntings – this investigatory zeal for the spontaneous inspired the great pioneering works of that era: *Phantasms of the Living* published in two volumes in 1886, which in turn led to the survey-based 'Report on the Census of Hallucinations' published in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research in 1894.

At some point, the documentary work started to decline and eventually all but stopped. Investigations into Spiritualism and the Cross-Correspondences took up more of the active members' time (and space in the SPR's publications) and against the rising tide of laboratory-based parapsychology, the spontaneous cases lost their shine. As the funding for the SPR's Research Officer dried up – the late Prof. Donald West was the last to hold this title – no other sources of funding became available and the SPR itself chose not to free up resources to keep it going.

People did not stop having these experiences and other people did not stop recording them, but the SPR as a whole seemed less interested. Except, that is, for a small band of dedicated (and unfunded) investigators, the Spontaneous Cases Committee (SCC). Yet even here, a reluctance (or lack of opportunity) to publish as a committee has left their work largely unrecognised.

Over the years of my editorship, in addition to publishing spontaneous cases that have come my way, I have badgered successive chairmen and other members of the SCC to provide articles for the magazine and re-connect with that early spirit of data gathering, which I might sum up as 'no investigation without publication'. Therefore, I am delighted to begin this issue with Dr Graham Kidd's account of the current work of the SCC. The SCC has had a tumultuous history of late, adjusting to the heavy burden of GDPR and with some significant changes to its line-up, but it has weathered its several storms to emerge stronger than ever and with a definite desire to bring cases investigated to our attention through the pages of the *Magazine*.

The rest of this issue follows in this investigatory vein. Mike Nichols joins us to describe his pioneering approach to using random number generators in the investigation of hauntings. Karma Wilde tells us about her development of a 'haunted museum' and some of her experiences in relation to her creepy collection. Local historian, Chris Aspin has gathered several intriguing cases from his area, covering poltergeists, past lives and premonitions. No issue would be complete, of course, without Brandon Hodge's ever-engaging contribution to the history of spirit communication devices.  $\Psi$ 

#### Dr Leo Ruickbie, FRHistS

Leo Ruickbie, PhD (Lond), MÁ (Distinction), BA (Hons), Associate of King's College, is a Visiting Fellow in Psychology at the University of Northampton and the author of six books, most recently *Angels in the Trenches: Spiritualism, Superstition and the Supernatural During the First World War* and is co-editor with Robert McLuhan of *Is There Life After Death?* (in preparation). Actively involved in the parapsychological research community, he is a Council Member of the Society for Psychical Research and a Professional Member of the Parapsychological Association, as well as being Editor of *The Magazine of the Society for Psychical Research*. He is also an elected member of the Royal Historical Society and a member of the Royal Photographic Society. See ruickbie.com.

56 the Society with a handful of stories and a desire to find out more

## A CHANCE OF A GHOST

Using Random Number Generators in the Investigation of Hauntings **MIKE NICHOLS** 

or some time now, I have been aware of the rising popularity of reality television series that focus on paranormal investigations. Although one certainly can cite precursors within the genre, it is probably safe to say that the programme 'Ghost Hunters', which premiered on the Sci-Fi channel in 2004, set the tone for the many similar shows that were to follow. Such programmes are said to be documentary in nature and, while they do indeed document the activities of the investigators, one cannot help coming to the conclusion that many of them are simply good theatre, created and edited more for the sensationalism of the thrills and chills they deliver to their audience, than with any intent to demonstrate sober and dispassionate interest in the advancement of scientific knowledge about parapsychological experiences.

For the sake of full disclosure, I should confess that I bring my own biases to my perception of such television programmes, having spent the greater part of my life as a devoted student of academic parapsychology, culminating in teaching a graduate-level course in parapsychology at the University of Missouri at Kansas City during the 1980s. As such, I was accustomed to focus on three areas of study: first, on the hundred-plus-year history of the field of parapsychology as a scientific discipline beginning with the founding of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882; second, on the extraordinary men and women, some of the most respected scientists and philosophers of their day, whose contributions advanced the field; and third, on the ever-increasing body of scientific knowledge being accumulated, as each new generation of parapsychologists adds to the knowledge of those who have gone before

However, when I turned my attention back to the paranormal investigation shows currently airing on television (or streaming over the internet), I found myself profoundly ambivalent about what I was seeing. On the one hand, I felt deeply saddened that most paranormal investigators had little knowledge or understanding of the rich history of, and the scientific achievements within, the field of academic parapsychology. Hence, there was an ongoing tendency for modern investigators to keep trying to 'reinvent the wheel'.

On the other hand, I discovered an admiration for the sheer enthusiasm being brought to the field of paranormal investigation by this new generation of researchers and felt delight in the fact that the subject matter itself seemed to be appealing to a wider audience than ever before. I found myself wondering if there might not be some way to bridge the gap between classic parapsychology and modern paranormal investigations.

#### PARANORMAL EVENTS AND SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

For the purposes of this paper, a 'paranormal event' will be defined as any experience, whether subjective or objective, reported by the paranormal investigator in the course of the investigation of a haunted location, which meets that researcher's usual criteria for being anomalous. On the subjective side, examples of such events might include the feeling of walking into cold spots, feeling a room charged with 'energy' or 'evil', hearing voices that no one else hears, or seeing shadow figures that no one else sees. These moments seem ubiquitous in the television shows that we have been discussing. For audience members who are already true believers in ghosts, spirits of the dead, hauntings (or even demons), these subjective experiences of the investigators might seem to provide 'proof' that such entities actually exist. Unfortunately, mere subjective experiences by researchers, no matter how deeply felt, do not constitute

scientific evidence that such paranormal phenomena are in any sense objectively 'real'.

On the objective side, paranormal investigators rely on a vast array of electronic detection equipment to provide evidence of paranormal phenomena. Examples of these devices may include such diverse equipment as electromagnetic field (EMF) meters, audio recorders for capturing electronic voice phenomena (EVP), Frank's Boxes to elicit spirit communications, night-vision or heat sensitive cameras to capture unusual visual phenomena, as well as more traditional 'low tech' equipment, such as dowsing rods and Ouija boards. The problem with all such 'objective' equipment is that there continues to be concerns about the reliability of the equipment, uncertainty about what is actually being measured and even doubt about whether the results indicate the presence of any paranormal activity.

RNG EVENTS AND THE USE OF RANDOM NUMBER GENERATORS For our purposes, an 'RNG event' will be defined as any output of a Random Number Generator that meets the researcher's criteria for being anomalous (that is, a statistically significant deviation from randomness) as defined further in the section on RNG hardware and software below. Random Number Generators have a long history of applications in parapsychology, initially being used as a means of randomizing targets in ESP and PK experiments in the laboratory. But more recently, statistical anomalies in RNG output have been shown to correlate with focused mental intention by subjects in laboratory experiments, such as those conducted by Dean Radin, and with focused mental attention on a worldwide scale as in the Global Consciousness Project (GCP) under the direction of Roger Nelson at the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR)

laboratory. RNGs have even been used in the investigation of haunted houses, although the experimental procedure has been markedly different than the one used here, as discussed below.

As a tool in the investigation of hauntings, the RNG is unique in that it has no component that acts as a 'detector' which is meant to read input from the immediate environment (as, for example, the lens of a camera, or the microphone of an audio recorder). Rather, its sole function is to generate a constant stream of random numbers, which may then be subjected to statistical tests to determine whether or not anomalies are present in the data stream. This makes the RNG unusually resistant to any type of 'hoaxing' or fraud. Any statistically significant deviation in the randomness of the data might then be interpreted as a perturbation in the 'entropy' (or 'probability') within the immediate environment. Therefore, if a researcher reports any kind of paranormal event while investigating the haunted house (which, by definition, will be a highly 'improbable' event), one might reasonably expect an RNG in close proximity to reflect this same improbability through a significant deviation from random output.

Field research in parapsychology has always been problematic, and perhaps never more so than in the investigation of hauntings, for many of the reasons discussed in the previous section. When a researcher experiences a 'paranormal event' during an investigation, whether subjective or objective, how is one to evaluate it in terms of evidence?

It occurred to me that the evidential value of such reports would be greatly enhanced if it could be shown that these paranormal experiences occurred at approximately the same time as anomalous readings occurred on the RNG. Arguably, both events could be responding to the same transient fluctuations in the 'probability field' of the local environment (a metaphor explored below).

#### EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

My goal was to create an easily repeatable experiment that could be conducted in collaboration with virtually any paranormal investigation team, in the most noninvasive way possible, allowing them the freedom and familiarity to conduct their investigations as usual. Only two requirements would be necessary

(which many teams already incorporate). First, team members would be required to time-sync all their detection devices so that any anomalous readings or recordings could later be compared to the automatic time stamps of any RNG anomalies. Second, all team members would be required to carry two-way radios to immediately report any paranormal events, either subjective or objective, to the 'command post'.

Back at the command post (typically the staging room for the investigation, where remote monitors are usually clustered to keep tabs on video recorders throughout the site), someone is tasked with logging all reports of paranormal events the moment they are called in by one of the researchers, being careful to note the exact time the call is received by consulting internet time servers. No attempt is made to evaluate the evidential content of the paranormal event being reported, whether subjective or objective. For example, a report of a shadow figure being captured on a video recording is deemed no more important than a report of the subjective feeling of a cold spot. This is a very important point. It is enough that the researcher believes it to be sufficiently significant, by whatever criteria is customary to the investigating team, to call it in. For the purposes of this study, it is not the nature of the incident itself that is of interest, but merely the time it occurs.

Concurrently, any anomalous reading from the RNG, which is continually running at the command post, is also logged, along with the exact time it occurred, as well as other details of that particular RNG event (which will be explained in the next section). In this way, a running log of all paranormal events, and all RNG events, is created on site and in real time. Later, after the investigation is concluded, all of the devices which are capable of making continuous recordings (such as video and audio recorders), will be reviewed by the investigating team for any further paranormal events that may have been recorded, though not noticed at the time of their occurrence. If any such events are found, they are added to the investigation's log file, along with their time stamps as recovered from the device. All of the log entries are then entered into an electronic spreadsheet, broken into one-minute increments for ease of analysis.

One final operational definition was necessary for the study. In order

to determine whether paranormal events were occurring in tandem with anomalous RNG events at a rate that chance alone could not account for, the degree of temporal proximity of our two variables needed to be stated before the experiment began. Mindful of such studies as the Global Consciousness Project (GCP), in which the largest effect occurred at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was apparent that the anomalous output of the RNGs started well ahead of the first plane hitting the first tower (hours before!), and then trailing off after the attacks and their immediate aftermath had subsided. Since we were scaling down from a global phenomenon to a purely local one, I theorized that any consideration of synchronous events in our study would scale down accordingly. Therefore, I defined a 'correlation' to be any paranormal event that occurred within three minutes of an anomalous RNG event. A threeminute window was chosen because it seemed the optimal amount of time for a paranormal event to be experienced by a researcher, for that event to be evaluated against normal explanations, for the researcher to make the decision to call it in to the command post, and for the person at the command post to consult internet time for an accurate time stamp and log the event.

#### **HYPOTHESIS**

My hypothesis was that we would see a correlation between a reported paranormal event and an anomalous RNG reading at a level of statistical significance of p<0.05. The null hypothesis would therefore be that no statistically significant correlation between paranormal event and RNG event would be found.

#### RNG HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE

In our study, a computer-based random number generator was used, running on the Android operating system of a smartphone (used here as a handheld computer) to generate a constant stream of binary random numbers (that is, either zeros or ones). True randomness (as opposed to pseudo-randomness, or algorithmbased randomness) is achieved by the ability of such devices to sample 'atmospheric noise' (similar to 'white noise') and convert it into numeric data. For a full discussion of this approach, the interested reader is referred to the various research papers, including the results of extensive tests for true randomness,

available online at random.org.

The custom-created software is programmed to generate a total of 100 random binary numbers (called a 'run'), then to analyse the resulting set for the degree of deviation from the mean, repeating this process in a continuous loop. It is comparable to flipping a fair coin 100 times and then comparing the number of 'heads' to the number of 'tails'. When the programme is run, the operator is prompted to enter a 'threshold' deviation in order to operationally define when an anomalous RNG reading (or 'RNG event') has been attained. After a short pilot study, it was determined that a deviation of 15 (+ or -) from the mean worked well. This is tantamount to flipping a fair coin 100 times, and getting 66 or more heads, or 66 or more tails. The probability of such an event is easily computed, with p=0.000458105 (which would happen by chance only 1 time in 2183 runs). When this threshold is met, or surpassed, the programme alerts the operator that an RNG event has occurred, and simultaneously records and displays on screen the following data: the time stamp, the run number (counting sequentially) of the RNG on which that particular event occurred, and the actual number of zeros and ones generated during that run. As both a check, and a backup, this information is also entered manually into the investigation log.

It is worth noting here that, to my knowledge, this protocol represents a significant departure from the way RNGs have previously been used in haunting investigations. Typically, an RNG is started running at the investigation site, with the random numbers that are generated being continuously added to the previous ones, with the overall cumulative deviation from chance being calculated at the end of the entire session. By contrast, our approach constantly returns the system to the baseline, starting fresh after each run of 100 random numbers have been

generated and checked against the operationally defined threshold. This has the advantage of evaluating deviations from chance in much smaller time increments, thus making it possible to examine each individual RNG event for a possible correlation to a paranormal event as reported by a member of the investigation team. From this point, it is a simple matter to statistically evaluate the probability of the crosscorrespondence of these two variables.

#### DATA COLLECTION

In August 2018, I was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of a paranormal investigation team based in Ottawa, Illinois, called the Paranormal Research Institute (PRI), and discovered that their research methods already included the practice of minute-by-minute logging of all reported paranormal events during the investigation of allegedly haunted houses, with the hope of finding correspondences in their data. This made them the ideal team with which to partner, so I approached PRI founder Dan Williams with my idea of the RNG experiment. He was immediately enthusiastic and agreed to incorporate my experiment into his team's next paranormal investigation.

That investigation occurred on the night of 8-9 September 2018, at the historic (and reputedly haunted) Beattie Mansion in St Joseph, Missouri. As it happened, three separate paranormal research teams co-operated in the investigation that night. Earthbound Voices Paranormal (EVP), consisting of Tami and Jim Beth from Kansas City, Missouri, had initially arranged for the venue and had invited PRI, consisting of Williams and team members Scott Hibbs and Brandie Bryan, as well as Midwest Investigations of the Paranormal (MIP), consisting of Laura Snoderly, Justin Caro and Tiffany Lucas, to join them. All members of all teams carried radios and immediately reported back to the

command post with any paranormal events they experienced. At the command post, Brandie Bryan was in charge of logging and time stamping all the paranormal events that were reported, while staying objectively apart from the other investigators as they made their rounds. I also stayed at the command post to monitor the RNG and report any events, which Brandie also logged and time stamped.

During the course of the night's investigation, there were 19 anomalous RNG events (defined as meeting the threshold criterion as stated above). Out of this total of 19 RNG events, 12 of them (63 per cent) occurred within three minutes of one or more paranormal events (sometimes they clustered) as reported by the various members of the investigation teams. It should be noted that some of these paired events occurred even closer in time (say, within one minute of each other), but no attempt was made (at least, for now) to give added weight to such occurrences. It should also be noted that, although the direction of deviation for each RNG event was automatically recorded and logged (that is, whether the zeros or the ones were predominant), no attempt was made to correlate the direction of deviation with other factors, although this remains a possibility for future studies. After the night's investigation was concluded, all of the raw data was transferred to a spreadsheet formatted in one-minute increments, which was then handed to an independent researcher for statistical analysis.

#### STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Between the first pilot studies of the RNG, which were carried out in August, and the Beattie Mansion investigation in September, I had the pleasure of consulting Dave Shumacher of the Paranormal Research Group (PRG) of Illinois,

## there is a correlation that exists between two equally improbable things

about some of the details. Now, he graciously agreed to carry out the statistical analysis of our data, acting in the capacity of an independent researcher.

Schumacher ran a standard Chi-Square test for independence of the two variables: the paranormal event and the RNG event. Since we were looking for these two variables occurring within three minutes of each other, he began by breaking the 384-minute investigation into three minute segments, which yielded 128 three minute segments. He then counted how many of those segments had the following: RNG event and paranormal event: RNG event but no paranormal event; paranormal event but no RNG event; and neither RNG event nor paranormal event. This created a 2×2 contingency table. The null hypothesis is there is no relationship between RNG event and paranormal event. The alternative hypothesis is there is a relationship. He set the significance level at 0.05. The Chi-Square statistic was calculated to be 29.187 with a p<0.00001, which is considered 'extremely statistically significant'. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis that there is a correlation between the RNG event and the paranormal event. In other words, the odds against chance of this pairing of events is about 100,000 to 1.

#### DISCUSSION

Although the chief accomplishment of this study is to suggest a new and viable approach to the use of an RNG in haunting investigations, the preliminary data obtained does seem to agree with prior work done in the field. Likewise, it is equally important to underscore what this investigation does not accomplish. It does not prove that there was a ghost - or a spirit, or a haunting, or a demon, or a revenant, or any of the other things that a paranormal investigator might understandably wish to prove. It does not even prove cause and effect, because we do not really know what the RNG is responding to - or if 'responding' is even the right word. Common sense suggests that the paranormal event does not 'cause' the RNG to go off the track because, at times, the RNG anomaly occurs before the related paranormal event. And it seems silly to think that a bunch of random numbers that suddenly deviate statistically from what is expected of them could 'cause' a paranormal event to occur deep within this new approach to the use of an

the bowels of a haunted house. Even without debating whether the 'arrow of causation' can point backward in time, we are at an impasse.

At the most, all we can assert is correlation, not causation. There is a correlation that exists, at a level far beyond what chance alone would allow us to expect, between two equally 'improbable' things: the paranormal events being reported by a team of investigators as they perform their customary nocturnal research and a series of randomlygenerated data bits in a handheld computer that occasionally lurch into the extreme ends of a binomial distribution curve. What does such a correlation tell us? Well, I, for one, believe that it adds considerable evidential weight to the paranormal experiences - to the feelings, sights, sounds and equipment readings being reported by the investigators. Their reports of anomalous experiences no longer exist in isolation, because now a totally independent piece of equipment at the same locality 'agrees' with them. The correlation of the RNG event is too statistically significant to be meaningless. It affirms their diligence and dedication.

So, if our two correlated yet independent variables do not 'cause' one another, is it possible that they are both being 'caused' by a third, hidden variable? I cannot help noticing that both of our entangled variables are themselves irrevocably entangled with the concept of improbability. It is highly improbable that an apparition should suddenly appear or that an object should suddenly move on its own, just as it is equally improbable that a series of truly random numbers should suddenly veer into the realm of nonrandomness. And the fact that these incidents co-vary within close proximity leads me to suspect that improbability itself may be the 'cause', the hidden third variable, the 'field' that affects these observed phenomena. Of course, speculating about 'ripples in the improbability field' is nonsensical; probability is not a 'thing', after all; rather, it is a characteristic of an event. Still, it may be useful as a metaphor, especially if it helps conceptualize events occurring within actual fields that may exist in haunted locations, such as the 'psi field' famously postulated by parapsychologist William Roll, one of the USA's pre-eminent experts on hauntings.

Finally, and coming full circle,

RNG in the investigation of hauntings accomplishes two things. First, it bolsters the evidential value of the findings that are already being collected and catalogued by paranormal investigators. Second (and perhaps more importantly), this technique is easy to implement even for amateur and hobbyist investigators, and encourages the use of the scientific method in their approach. By harnessing the boundless curiosity and enthusiasm of the ever-growing community of paranormal investigators, we may inspire them to become the latest iteration of the non-accredited 'gentlemen scholars' of the eighteenth century, who made such vast contributions to our collective scientific knowledge. In short, this easily repeatable procedure, and others like it, allows the methods and tools of parapsychology to be brought into the paranormal investigation world, producing results that are more likely to stand up to the scrutiny of critics, sceptics and the scientific community in general.  $\Psi$ 



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## in this issue



#### Chris Aspin

Chris Aspin is a retired journalist. He gathered stories of the supernatural while writing local history and has published four collections. He lives in Helmshore in the north west of Great Britain and has written books on Lancashire and the early cotton trade as well as the history of his own locality. He is a member of the SPR.



#### Brandon Hodge

Brandon Hodge is a collector, historian and occult researcher. He curates the world's largest collection of automatic writing planchettes and spirit communication devices, and travels the world documenting séance artefacts and lecturing on Spiritualist history. He serves as a director for the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist & Occult Periodicals (IAPSOP.com) and is always interested to hear from readers, contact him via mysteriousplanchette.com.



#### Graham Kidd

Dr Graham Kidd, MBBS, MRCPsych, has been a member of the Society for Psychical Research since 1969. He joined the Spontaneous Cases Committee in 2009 and in 2021 became its chairman. He has been a member of the SPR's Council since 2014 and is currently Hon. Secretary of the Society. Trained at St Bartholomew's Hospital, he was medical officer to the 10th Gurkha Rifles, subsequently training in psychiatry and he continues to work in private practice.



#### Ashley Knibb

Ashley Knibb is an investigator, researcher and general explorer of the field of the paranormal. When he is not working as a Service Delivery Manager in the IT and mobile communications sector or looking after his children, his focus is on the paranormal and his blog at www.ashleyknibb.com. He is a member of the Society for Psychical Research and Events Reporter for the *Magazine of the Society for Psychical Research*.



#### Mike Nichols

Mike Nichols is an author, lecturer and investigator, During university, Nichols was research assistant to the parapsychologist Robert H. Ashby and, after graduating, began teaching classes in parapsychology, including mentoring American parapsychologist George Hansen, and culminating in teaching a graduate-level course in parapsychology at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, Missouri, USA. Most recently, Nichols has returned to field research.



#### Ken Smith

Ken Smith (Leslie K. Smith) is a retired journalist living in Newcastle upon Tyne and author and co-author of several books on aspects of the history of North-East England. His main areas of interest are ghosts, hauntings and poltergeists, and he has investigated cases of alleged spontaneous phenomena in the North-East, reporting his findings to the Spontaneous Cases Committee. He joined the SPR in 1986.



#### Karma Wilde

Karma Wilde is an American rental property contractor, paranormal investigator and owner of Dark Corner Paranormal LLC. In May 2020, she opened 'The Haunted Museum' in Marietta, South Carolina, with a collection of creepy artefacts and a history of unusual occurrences.

#### THE BENEFITS OF BEING A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH











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