

The Ghost in the Library

It will never be entirely clear just what happened – if anything - in the Library of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society on the evening of 13th December 1953. Whatever it was, it haunted the Society for some time afterwards ...

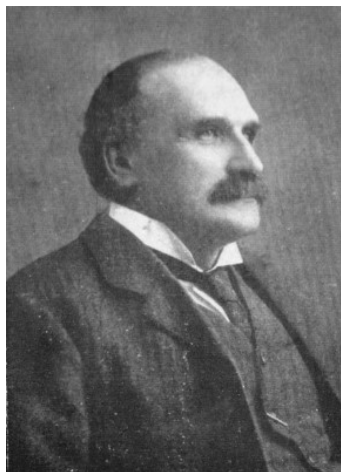
The story begins slightly earlier. On the evening of Sunday 20th September 1953 the Museum was in use for an evangelical meeting. Afterwards George Jonas, the caretaker, locked the main door and, with his wife, went into the basement kitchen. They heard footsteps from the Museum above, and Mr Jonas went to investigate. When he was half way up the stairs leading to the first floor, he saw *“an elderly man crossing from Mr Willmott’s office into another room. I thought he was an odd looking chap, because he was wearing a frock coat, drain pipe trousers, and had fluffy side whiskers. He had very little hair and walked with a slight stoop. I decided he must be an eccentric professor.”*¹

² After a brief exchange of words with Mr Jonas, the ‘eccentric professor’ headed for the Library – then on the ground floor, where the Museum shop is now located – muttering “I must find it; I must find it.” *“He was standing between two tall book racks pulling first one book and then another from one of the shelves.... I thought to myself, this has gone far enough. So, thinking he was deaf, I stretched my right hand out to touch him on the shoulder. But as my hand drew near his coat he vanished, and the book he had been holding dropped to the floor.”* Mr Jonas recorded the time of this incident as 8.40 p.m. (British Summer Time).

The Keeper of the Museum, George Wilmot, was duly informed of the incident, and joined Mr Jonas at the Museum on the following Sunday evenings. Four weeks later, on Sunday 18th October, unfortunately shortly after Mr Wilmot had left the Museum, the ‘eccentric professor’ again came down the stairs from the first floor, crossed the hall, and passed through the (closed) Library door: the time was precisely 7.40 p.m. GMT (the clocks having been put back between the two appearances, this was exactly the time of the previous appearance).

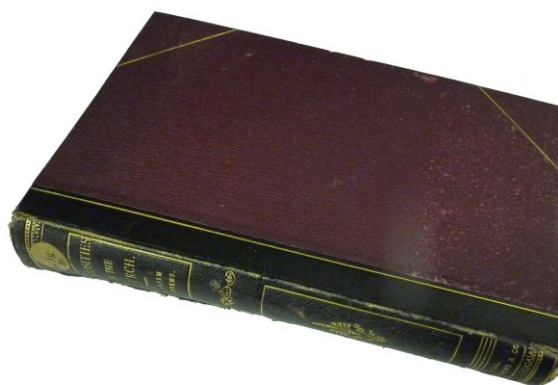
Exactly four weeks later, Mr Jonas was again in the Library at 7.40 p.m., this time accompanied by Walter French, the son-in-law of a friend, Mr F.A. Nutt. Mr Nutt himself arrived a few minutes late, and missed the excitement. Although the mysterious figure did not appear on this occasion, both men believed they heard the rustling of pages being turned over, followed by a thud of the book falling to the ground – where, in fact, they found it lying moments later¹.

The book in question was at some stage identified as *Curiosities of the Church. Studies of curious customs, services, and records* by William Andrews (1891), part of a 1927 bequest to the Philosophical Society by Alderman Edward Wooler of Darlington. This led to the assumption, later, that the spectre must have been Mr Wooler, in search of the *Curiosities*; or, possibly of some item he had left within its pages. He was much in the habit of using his books as an informal filing system for letters, notes, and other memorabilia. Many of these items still remain *in situ*, although none, alas, within the pages of Andrews' *Curiosities*, which is still in the Library of the Yorkshire Museum.



With such a regular event – every fourth Sunday at 7.40 p.m. – Mr Jonas made his preparations for the next scheduled appearance, Sunday 13th December. He introduced a group of potential witnesses into the Library in good time

for the evening's expected event. These consisted of his brother, James Jonas, Mr F A Nutt and Walter French, Mr S. (a solicitor) and Dr D (Mr Jonas's doctor). The latter two gentlemen, in later giving their account of events, wished for professional reasons to preserve their anonymity. Also present – and this was to cause the YPS some later anguish – was a journalist, Brian Lumley.



After inspecting the book and its shelf, the assembled company settled down to await events. Curiously, a sketch of the Library prepared at the time to show the positions of the book and of the observers indicates that only James Jonas had a clear sightline of the book. However, in a report he wrote shortly afterwards with the aid of his friend John Askew ("Mr S." the solicitor) Dr Blackford ("Dr D.") records that "*my legs from the knees to feet felt cold. Just at this time the book was heard by all and seen by me, to be drawn out from its place on the shelf ... The person next to me – an engine driver [James Jonas] – said "the book came its full width from the shelf before falling, and then did not seem to fall at the same speed that books usually fall ... immediately the book had fallen my legs felt a normal temperature."*²

The Keeper was summoned by telephone and informed of the evening's events. The following day (Monday 14th December), having "*reprimanded the caretaker in the strongest terms for inviting strangers into the library*", he approached the Chairman of Council of the Philosophical Society, Mr H. E. Harrowell, and insisted that the matter be discussed at the meeting of Council that evening, with a view to inviting the Society for Psychical Research to mount an investigation. This Mr Harrowell categorically refused.²

The next day, Brian Lumley's article appeared in the Yorkshire Evening Press³, under the heading



Mr Harrowell was phoned by the Yorkshire Post and invited to comment: somewhat to his surprise, his comments appeared verbatim in the following morning's Yorkshire Post. *"I am not taking any notice of this report ... It is too silly for words. There will be no investigation. It would only make everyone a laughing stock. I would not let the subject be brought before the Council of the Society. I would not waste time on such tripe."*⁴

This enraged Willmot. For the next meeting of YPS Council 11th January 1954, he submitted a lengthy memorandum², detailing the course of events, and the misbehaviour – as he saw it – of Mr Harrowell. Much of the memo is taken up with a justification of the investigation of 'psychic phenomena' as "a recognised field of scientific research" and of the credentials of the Society for Psychical Research to undertake such research. Poltergeists, in particular, are mentioned, with accounts of bouncing tables, mysteriously active musical boxes, and the celebrity Cock Lane Ghost. To this is appended Dr D.'s description of the events of 13th December, the most specific first-hand account we have.

The main thrust of the memorandum, however, was an attack on the Chairman, and his assumption of powers that – according to Willmot – he did not have. Specifically, he maintained that the Chair of Council was merely the person requested to chair each successive meeting of Council, and had no powers either to determine what was discussed, or to speak for the Society; that he was not even an officer of the Society. Willmot concluded, in the sonorous phrase of an 18th Century parliamentarian, that "the powers of the Chairman have increased, are increasing, and ought to be diminished", and recommended to Council that the Keeper should thenceforth have the right "to bring any matter before the Council that he wishes"; and that Council should write an apology to the Society for Psychical Research.

In discussing this submission Council recalled that "*dissatisfaction with [Mr Willmot's] outlook and behaviour ... covered a much longer period*", including an earlier memorandum⁵ criticising the handling of the Museum's collections, and questioning whether "*the Yorkshire Philosophical Society was worth preserving*".

Council may also have remembered a supposedly jocular speech Willmot made in June 1953 to the Museums Association⁶. In this he discussed the founding of the Society: "*The first thing necessary was a committee ... [to which] ... were added from among York's professional committee men, Mr Tuke, from the York Society for the prevention of lewdness and profanity, Mr Graham from the Society for the promotion of loyalty and subordination among the lower classes; but the main batch came from the Committee of Bootham Lunatic Asylum, who had recently been sacked ... it was the Bedlam tradition of incompetence and face-saving that played so formative a part in the history of the Society ... But ... it would be wrong to regard the Museum as having been entirely the irresponsible sport of ignorant and conceited small-town nonentities ...*". Perhaps Council felt that this was not directed only at their early predecessors.

Deciding that they “could not dismiss previous occurrences of a like character, or forget the many occasions when the Keeper had made contemptuous references to his Society”, Council resolved, firstly, “that the Keeper’s appointment be terminated” and the Chairman and Secretary were delegated to go and ask for his resignation; and, secondly, that “the Society for Psychological Research be given every facility for investigation”.⁷

Having missed Alderman Wooler’s next scheduled appointment on 10th January, the Society for Psychological Research’s team duly arrived at the Museum on 7th February. The Press, of course, were keen to join them in the Library: “only by resolute and fairly plain speaking were we able to keep them at bay”. Accompanied by George Jonas and George Willmot, they established themselves in the Library and awaited events. At 7.40 p.m. nothing happened: a few minutes later George Jonas was “almost sure” that he had seen a disembodied white hand feeling its way down the bookshelf, and that he “felt dreadful like he did before”, but afterwards thought that this might have been “a trick of the light”.¹ A similar session on 7th March similarly produced no ghosts, and the investigators gave up, asking only that any further extraordinary events should be reported to them, and that they would in future make occasional and informal visits to the Library.

The Yorkshire Post duly reported the non-event of 7th February, noting that 12 investigators were present and that Alderman Wooler would have made this number up to 13. Was the ghost superstitious (or had it simply missed its train)?⁸ Thereafter the Press seems to have lost interest, having exhausted the capacity of the ghost to generate news, or even levity.

George Willmot’s resignation was not the end of the story as far as the Philosophical Society was concerned. A number of members of the Society were concerned at Willmot’s departure, and insisted on a Special General Meeting of the Society, on 8th March, to discuss it. Shortly before the Meeting Mr Harrowell resigned, explaining that “There is no significance in my resignation. I have had my turn. I have had quite a long spell and there is no reason why somebody else should not take it on.”⁹

A York museum curator resigns

Decision after ‘ghost’ controversy

realised that a resignation that accepted could not be Willmot was asked instead to old job: he was then re-same terms as previously, but that a new contract, more to be forthcoming.¹²

After heated discussion at the meeting it was resolved that George Willmot should be asked to withdraw his resignation and that he should be reinstated as Keeper.¹⁰ In the mean time, he had been appointed to the post of Assistant Director of Doncaster’s Art Gallery and Museum ¹¹ This proving not to be an obstacle, it was then

New development at a York museum

Keeper asked to withdraw his resignation

had been formally withdrawn, so reapply again for his appointed on the on the understanding his liking, would later

Resignation of 13 members of Yorkshire Philosophical Society

This outcome must have been quite satisfying to George Willmot: less so to members of YPS Council, thirteen of whom promptly resigned.¹³

New members of Council were elected, whose views on Museum management were perhaps more realistic than those of their predecessors. The 'ghost' incident – trivial in itself - had precipitated a 'changing of the guard' and allowed the YPS and the Museum to move serenely forwards. George Willmot was undoubtedly a 'difficult' employee, and had often made fraught situations worse by being deliberately provocative, and by attacking individuals rather than their views. But on the important questions about how a modern Museum should be professionally run – and, indeed, on the capacity of YPS Council to manage a museum - he was largely correct.

The Society did move forwards. Council took a realistic look at the important questions that Willmot had been pressing on them, and in due course decided that the future of the Museum and Gardens could best be secured by negotiating their transfer to the City of York; which Willmot had been urging, not always as tactfully as he might, for some years¹⁴. The process was not always serene: old habits die hard, and Willmot managed to provoke one further move to dispense with his services. In 1961, however, the Museum and Gardens were in fact transferred to the City, Willmot remaining as Keeper, and the Yorkshire Philosophical Society moved on to its own, rather different, future.

- 1 Dingwall, E.J. and Hall, T.H. (1958). *Four modern ghosts*. (London, Duckworth). Dingwall and Hall were members of the Society for Psychical Research's investigation team on 7th February 1954, and interviewed several of the witnesses who were present on the previous 13th December)
- 2 Memorandum submitted by George Willmot for consideration at the meeting of YPS Council on January 11th 1954. (YPS Archives, Borthwick Institute)
- 3 Yorkshire Evening Press 15th December 1953
- 4 Yorkshire Post 16th December 1953.
- 5 Memorandum to YPS General Purposes and Finance Committee, 20th March 1951. (YPS Archives, Borthwick institute).
- 6 G.F. Willmot: *The Yorkshire Museum*. Paper read at Museums Association Conference, York, 23rd June 1953. (YPS Archives, Borthwick Institute).
- 7 YPS Council Minutes 11th January 1954.
- 8 Yorkshire Post 8th February 1954.
- 9 Yorkshire Post 24th February 1954.
- 10 YPS Minutes of Special General Meeting 8th March 1954.
- 11 Yorkshire Post 16th February 1954.
- 12 YPS Council Minutes 1st March and 22nd March 1954.
- 13 YPS Council Minutes 22nd March 1954; Yorkshire Post 25th March 1954.

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