

# Harry Price

(1881-1948)



There is no question that Harry Price was one of the most influential figures in the formative years of ghost research. He was a highly charismatic personality whose energy and enthusiasm for the paranormal made him the first celebrity ghost hunter. Price was instrumental in bringing ghost research to the general public, realizing that only by making the research entertaining could he attract the attention of the masses. Because of this, after his death in 1948, jealous “colleagues” would attack not only Price’s research, but the man himself, staining his reputation for years to come.

Price was regarded as an embarrassment during his time and lingering effects from this still linger today. Despite more recent work supporting his claims and methods, many British researchers still regard Price as something of an enigma. Because of his flamboyant manner and continuous self-promotion, Price made a number of enemies within the psychic research field, especially within the Society of Psychical Research (SPR). Much of the resentment revolved around that fact that Price had no real scientific training (as most SPR investigators had) and that he was so skillful at what he did. Price was a skilled magician and an expert at detecting fraud so he was not taken in by many of the fraudulent which plagued the SPR for years. His success was a slap in the face to what many considered the “established” psychical researchers. Regardless, his work is considered ground-breaking for many today.

Harry Price was born in London in 1881, the son of a grocer and traveling salesman. His interest in the paranormal began in 1889 when he saw his first performance by a stage magician. From that point on, he became an amateur conjurer and began collecting what would become an immense library of books on magic.

Price had his first encounter with the supernatural at age 15, when he and a friend locked themselves overnight in reportedly haunted house. After hearing noises in an upstairs room which they could not explain, and what appeared to be footsteps on the staircase, they set up an old-fashioned powder-flash camera at the bottom of the stairs. About an hour later, they clearly heard the footsteps descending the stairs again and fired the camera. When the plate was developed, it showed nothing but an empty staircase. Price would always consider this as his first encounter with a ghost.

After graduating from school, Price worked at a number of jobs, including as a journalist. Then, in 1908, he met and married a wealthy heiress named Constance Mary Knight. He then settled down to become what all of us wish we could be, an independently wealthy ghost hunter.

By the time that Price joined the SPR in 1920, he had already begun his career as Britain’s most famous ghost investigator. He had spent many hours at alleged haunted houses and in the investigation of Spiritualist mediums. He was also an expert magician and soon made a name for himself within the SPR for using his magic skills to debunk fraudulent psychics, then in keeping with what was the main thrust of the current SPR investigations.

One of Price's first efforts exposed the work of spirit photographer William Hope, who was making a fortune taking portraits of people.... and portraits which always seemed to include the sitter's dead relatives. Price was sent to investigate and soon published his findings. He claimed that Hope used pre-exposed plates in his camera, which he learned by secretly switching the plates the photographer was using with plates of his own.

It was only chance which led Price into another aspect of his career. One afternoon, while taking the train from London to his country home near Pulborough, Price met a young woman named Stella Cranshaw. The two happened to strike up a conversation about psychic anomalies, during which Stella, who was a hospital nurse, told the investigator that she had been experiencing strange phenomena for years. She said that rapping noises, cold chills and household objects inexplicably taking flight had been bothering her for some time. Price, excited at the prospect of a new test subject, told her that he was a psychic investigator and asked if she would submit to being tested as a medium.

Price, being an amateur inventor, immediately designed new equipment to test the young woman's abilities. One of them was the "telekinetoscope", a clever device that used a telegraph key that when depressed would cause a light to turn on. The key was then covered by a glass dome so that only psychic powers could operate it.

During 13 séances, conducted between March and October 1923, and always conducted in front of witnesses, Stella managed to produce all sorts of strange, physical phenomena. During one séance, for example, she managed to levitate a table so high that the sitters had to rise out of their chairs to keep their hands upon it. Suddenly, three of the table legs broke away and the table itself folded and collapsed. Needless to say, this ended the sitting.

Price kept a journal of the events and also noted a number of temperature fluctuations during each séance and the fact that Stella was able to manipulate the foolproof telegraph key device. In the end, Stella's career as a medium would be short-lived, but Price's investigations would earn her much respect in psychic circles. In addition, Price's handling of the investigations would earn him prestige and respectability as well.

Price then journeyed to Munich to investigate the famous medium brothers, Willi and Rudi Schneider, at the laboratory of Baron Albert von Schreck-Notzing, a flamboyant investigator. Price was so impressed with what he saw during the séances there, he invited the brothers to his own laboratories in 1929. He was also impressed with the publicity-seeking methods of von Schreck-Notzing too and decided to emulate him in his own career.

Soon, Price began testing his own psychics and set about trying to measure some aspects of the séances in a scientific manner. He managed to record strange temperature drops and other phenomena that finally convinced him of the reality of the paranormal. From this point on, he devoted his time to pursuing genuine phenomena rather than debunking mediums, which did not sit well with the SPR.

The relationship between Price and the society had always been strained so Price had formed the National Laboratory for Psychical Research in 1923. It would take three additional years for the laboratory to get up and running and would be located in the London Spiritualist Alliance. This was the final straw for the SPR and in 1927, they returned Price's donation of a massive book collection. To make matters worse, after Price's death, it would be three members of the SPR who would attempt to discredit him. The American branch of the society apparently did not hold a grudge however and Price would serve as the foreign research officer for the American Society for Psychical Research from 1925 to 1931.

In 1926, Price came across the case of a Romanian peasant girl named Eleonora Zupan, who was apparently experiencing violent poltergeist phenomena, including flying objects, slapping, biting and pinching. The girl had been rescued from an insane asylum by a psychic investigator who Price had met in Vienna. Price returned to London, with the girl, and began a series of laboratory tests which were only partially successful.

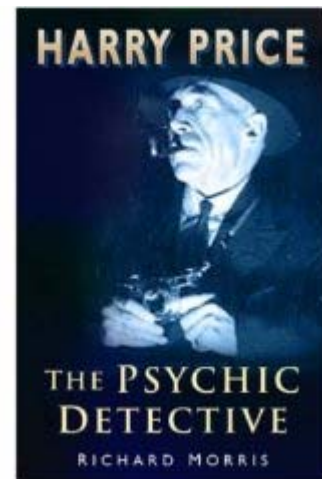
Testimony and reports from the testing claimed that "stigmata" appeared on the girl's body under conditions that precluded the possibility of the girl producing them by natural means. It was also stated that she was able to move objects with her mind, although no cause could be discovered for her abilities outside of the fact that she had been severely abused as a young child. Eleonora's abilities ceased abruptly at the age of 14 when she entered puberty.

In 1929, Rudi Schneider, whose abilities were said to surpass those of his brother, traveled to England to be tested by Price. The investigator was still adding new scientific technology to his array of gadgets and one device wired the hands and feet of Rudi, and everyone else seated around the séance table, to a display board. A light would signal if anyone moved enough to break the electrical circuit.

Despite these controls, Rudi was said to have produced an array of effects, including ectoplasmic masses, rappings and table levitations. Lord Charles Hope, a leading SPR investigator, was astounded, as was Price himself. At the end of the sessions, Price declared that the phenomena produced by Rudi was "absolutely genuine" and "not the slightest suspicious action was witnessed by any controller or sitter."

In the spring of 1932, Price began testing Rudi again. In these sessions, he planned to photograph Rudi's manifestations as further evidence of his psychic abilities. Although Price obtained some favorable results, the sittings were not as successful as before as Rudi's talents seemed to have diminished with age. In the Fall, Lord Charles Hope conducted more tests of the young man and while he too noticed a decline in his abilities, still maintained that his powers were genuine.

And then, even as Hope was preparing his report, Price rocked the paranormal community with the announcement that Rudi was a fraud. As evidence, he produced a photograph that was taken



during a séance and which showed Rudi reaching for a table. The camera had been set to go off if there was any movement by the medium. The resulting image was grainy and shadowed, but it managed to destroy Rudi's reputation and embarrass the investigators who had declared him to be genuine.... including Harry Price. Those who claimed that Price was simply a publicity-seeking fraud were (and are) hard-pressed to explain why he would have made himself look ridiculous in this matter.

By the time of Rudi Schneider's downfall, the appearance of credible new mediums had all but ceased. Soon, Price had turned his attention from investigating mediums and psychics to investigating haunted houses and bizarre phenomena.



But not all of Price's cases (or publicity-seeking antics, as some would call them) were as successful. One trip took him to Germany where he went to test a spell that would convert a mountain goat into a man. Needless to say, the spell failed and Price was the subject of much ridicule.

Another of Price's strangest (although possibly genuine) cases was that of Gef, the Talking Mongoose of Cashen's Gap, and yes, if you are not familiar with the case, you did read that right.... a talking animal! The case began in 1931 with a disembodied voice claiming to be that of a mongoose, a weasel-like creature. It began at an isolated place on the Isle of Man and according to the Irving family, who lived at Cashen's Gap, this creature ate rabbits, spoke in various languages, imitated other animals and even recited nursery rhymes.

The case was personally investigated by Price in the company of RS Lambert, then editor of a popular radio show called *The Listener*, but the animal refused to manifest until after they had left. The case may have been related to poltergeist phenomena as Voirey Irving, the 13-year old daughter in the family, was closely associated with the manifestations of the talking mongoose. Price failed to detect any evidence of fraud.

Lambert, who investigated other supernatural cases with Price, almost lost his job over the Cashen's Gap affair. The publicity around the case caught the attention of his employers at the BBC and one of his supervisors concluded that Lambert's interest in the supernatural reflected poorly on the broadcaster's competence. Lambert sued him for defamation of character and kept his job.

The Cashen's Gap case was also investigated by Nandor Fodor who interviewed a number of witnesses to the phenomena, many of them hostile to the haunting, but couldn't shake any of the testimony to say that it was not real. Fodor did not accept the explanation of a poltergeist and half seriously suggested that it may have actually been a mongoose who learned to talk! Many years later, after the affair had died down, a strange and unidentified animal was killed in the area. Some suggested that it may have been Gef.

During this period, Price also made some serious contributions, although they were not as widely publicized. In 1933, he persuaded the University of London to open a library and set up a University Council for Psychological Investigation. The library still exists today at the university and consists mainly of Price's enormous occult collection.



Borley Rectory

The year 1929 marked a turning point in Price's career, although the case would not be made public for several years yet. It was in that year that he became involved in a case which would take over his life and for which he would become most famous. The case involved a deteriorating Essex house called Borley Rectory.

It would be during Price's investigations of Borley Rectory that he would become the best-known and most accomplished of the early ghost hunters, setting the standard for those who would follow. He carefully documented both his findings and methods and established a blueprint for paranormal investigations.

Many of Price's accounts from Borley would be first-hand, as he claimed to see and hear much of the reported phenomena like hearing bells ring, rapping noises and seeing objects that has been moved from one place to another. In addition, he also collected accounts from scores of witnesses and previous tenants of the house, even talking to neighbors and local people who had their own experiences with the rectory.

Price even leased the house for an extended, round-the-clock, one year investigation. He ran an advertisement looking for open-minded researchers to literally "camp out" at the rectory and record any phenomena which took place in their presence. After choosing more than 40 people, he then printed the first-ever handbook on how to conduct a paranormal investigation. A copy was given to each investigator and it explained what to do when investigating the house, along with what equipment they would need.



Harry Price (Left) with the Foyster family at Borley Rectory

Price turned the Borley investigations into two books entitled *The Most Haunted House In England* (1940) and *The End of Borley Rectory* (1946). Both books became very popular and entrenched Price solidly as the organizer of well-run paranormal investigations.

Despite what his detractors would claim, the books would set the standard for future investigations and would mark the first time that detailed accounts of paranormal research had been exposed to the general public. While his critics saw this only as further grand-standing, future investigators were able to use the books when researching their own cases.

Regardless of what some may think of his methods and research, Harry Price must be remembered today as a pioneer in paranormal research. He is the one person who so many of modern researchers (even unknowingly) emulate today with their investigations. Price managed to give ghost research a place in the

public eye and opened it up to those who don't fit into the categories of professional scientists, hard-headed skeptics, nor fall into the realm of gullible "true believer". If for no other reason that this, we owe him a debt of gratitude.

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For more information about Harry Price

The Harry Price Research Group, go to:

<http://www.harryprice.co.uk/Research%20Group/rghome.htm>

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