



'Only the closed mind is certain ...'

SPOOKED

EXPLORING THE PARANORMAL IN NEW ZEALAND

JO DAVY & JAMES GILBERD



1 | STRANGE CREW THE TEAM COMES TOGETHER

Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing.

— *Thomas Henry Huxley*

James and Denise never forgot the terrifying night of 1 January 1997, and eight years later events conspired to bring it again to the forefront of their minds. James tells the story of how a comment about detectives led to a re-evaluation of the Whanganui event, and how two professional photographers, an illustrator and a part-time retail assistant came to form a paranormal investigation team called Strange Occurrences.



A long-time friend once commented that my gallery and studio is in a building of exactly the kind that would have housed the Sam Spade detective agency. The image of myself with my feet up on the old wooden desk, full ashtray and nearly empty bottle of

whisky within reach, a fan in a corner blowing the summer heat and flies around, lay dormant in my head for a time, alongside the mystery of the terrifying Whanganui encounter.

Work was stressing me out. The photography business was swamping everything, taking over my spare time and home life. This kind of stress is a well-known hazard of self-employment, and it wasn't the first time I'd experienced it. Denise accurately observed that during these times, my response is the exact opposite of what is actually required: I take on something totally new, requiring even more time, effort and application. We were watching TV late one night and there was an episode of The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) *Ghost Hunters* showing. Fiction aside, I'd never heard of paranormal investigation before seeing this show, and my immediate response was, 'Hey, we can do that!' I think Denise may have groaned, but I was too overwhelmed with enthusiasm to notice.

The next day at work, my friend and colleague Mark Marriott dropped in. He was looking a bit tired and flat, so I knew an extended coffee-drinking session was in order, making the most of our newly installed, TradeMe-sourced commercial espresso machine. I had recently changed the layout of the business to accommodate an extra room that had become available in the building and Mark and I were discussing how to best use the new space. I mentioned the Sam Spade thing, then I remembered the TAPS show and I fired the idea at Mark. He burst out laughing, and we both killed ourselves over it for several minutes. That alone made the idea worthwhile, but in our now espresso-fired brains, the concept of an old-school, Sam Spade-period Paranormal Investigation Agency took on solid form. Sam's ashtray and whisky were replaced by many and varied items of quasi-scientific equipment of the period that could conceivably, with a stretch

of the imagination, be used to detect and measure spirit activity. We were talking oscilloscopes, voltmeters, seismographs, Geiger counters, reel-to-reel tape recorders. Mark, ace-scrounger that he is, already had access to much of this equipment, understood how it worked, and could have built it if it couldn't be found at the recycling centre or opportunity shop.

Then we started talking about our paranormal experiences, as you do in these situations. Mark told me about an out-of-body experience (OBE) he had once had, saying that it scared the crud out of him and he never wanted to feel anything remotely like it again: 'What happens if you can't get back in?' I had a few experiences of my own to relate, and we discussed books we'd read on the subject. We realised we had another common interest.

Still more coffee, and the Paranormal Investigation Agency became an art installation. (You really have to experience the efficacy of three or four cups of Photospace Gallery coffee to get thinking like this.) Pretty soon there was a plan to apply for a spot at the Venice Biennale as a living, functional art installation, representing New Zealand. If a failed attempt at a farm vehicle — the Trekka — and a pile of cardboard boxes of export butter could make it, then why not this? That night, a skeletal webpage went up, and my partner (now wife) Denise Durkin and friend Karen Lee were drafted on board: 'Mark and I are starting a paranormal investigation unit and you're in it.'

The obvious first step was to go live on the internet using pseudonyms, as conceptual artists are wont to do. We decided to keep our given names and use old family names for surnames. Mark became Mark Collington, Denise chose Stark, Karen used Gray and I had to be flash and use the name of a seventeenth-century feudal lord on my mother's side, Duncan Campbell. (He was known as Black Duncan. Think of the first series of *The Black*

Adder, but much more serious, then add *Macbeth* for the Scottish backdrop and the terrifying, ruthless scheming and murder, and you have him. Also, I feel there's a family resemblance.) Thus Campbell, Collington, Stark & Gray, Paranormal Investigators was born.

At the time, the only known paranormal investigation group in New Zealand was Spooks, based in Christchurch. They had a website and had been in the news for some investigation work they did around 2004. As soon as our website was properly established, with the name Strange Occurrences in place, I dropped them an email to say hi. There was no response.

Soon after that, we received our first supposedly paranormal photograph for analysis. It was rather an obvious one to debunk, showing a bit of out-of-focus white bird poo on the window of a car, with a front gate and a house in the background. We sent back our tactfully worded verdict and never heard another thing. Admittedly, the fuzzy poo did look a little bit like an apparition, but we wondered if the photo had been sent to test us, to see if we were genuine and had any real expertise in evaluating ghost photos, as we claimed we did.

At this point, I hasten to add, photographs were about the only thing in the field of the paranormal that we did know anything about. Both Mark and I are full-time professional photographers, but when it came to the rest of the paranormal world, evaluating other forms of potential hard evidence, we knew very little. We'd started this thing and were getting enquiries, so it was time to do some serious reading and a bit of exploratory investigating. We needed to find our feet.

Although we were all pretty much in love with the initial concept of Strange Occurrences, we soon realised it was necessary to make some changes. I'd downloaded the PDF application form

for the Venice Biennale. The 17-page document went on and on about how they wanted to hear from world-class curators and artists with international experience, the importance of this world stage for promoting New Zealand's place in the international art world, etc, etc. They could have saved 16 pages by stating on page one, 'No riff raff'. Completing and submitting the form would've given someone in the offices of Creative New Zealand a good laugh and perhaps provided a bit of humorous chat over morning tea, but ultimately it was going to be a waste of everyone's time. In any case, we were receiving legitimate enquiries by email — some to analyse photographs, others reporting paranormal events and hauntings — and answering these genuinely concerned people from behind the pseudonym J. Duncan Campbell made me uncomfortable. There is absolutely no room in the field of paranormal research for any form of dishonesty or deception, so the pseudonyms had to go. Strange Occurrences Paranormal Investigation emerged from behind its mysterious web presence to stand firmly in the world of serious paranormal research and investigation in New Zealand.

In pastimes as in business, there's nothing like a bit of competition to get one out of bed in the morning. For a short period we had the field more or less to ourselves. The Spooks team seemed to be inactive, and soon their website disappeared. Then we got a call from a gentleman named Brad Scott, an Australian who had recently moved to Wellington. Mark, Denise and I met him for lunch, in the inauspicious setting of the Johnsonville Mall food court, to talk paranormal stuff. We soon realised that Brad was seriously interested in the field, experienced and well tooled-up. He soon started his own group — NZ Paranormal Investigators — which continued to operate until he relocated to Brisbane in 2009. We offered to work alongside NZPI and help

out where we could, but politely declined the invitation to join his group; Strange Occurrences was growing up and we wanted to see how it would turn out.



If variety is the spice of life, then Strange Occurrences is a tasty dish. The team expanded over the next couple of years to include a statistician (Helen Jones), a marine biologist/writer (Jo Davy), a dive instructor (Rob Wilson) and an airport security guard (Patrick Brown). It boasts a smattering of undergraduate and higher degrees in both arts and sciences as well as a black belt in ninjutsu. All members found the group in a variety of ways — Helen via a newspaper article, Jo via Helen, Patrick via another team of PIs he was involved with, Rob through the Strange Occurrences website. There was no paperwork, interviews or negotiations involved in joining — most of the group was just gently assimilated over time (often following an informal chat over tea/coffee and biscuits). Now, as an eightsome with a range of skills and specialities, Strange Occurrences feels complete.

Unlike members of some investigative groups around the world, none of us claims to have special powers (although if there was World Pun Champion, Mark would be it). But like James and Denise, we all have an interest in the paranormal, a desire to search for answers, and the time and inclination to do so.



ABOVE The first incarnation of Strange Occurrences: Campbell, Collington, Stark & Gray, Paranormal Investigators. The pseudonyms were dropped after genuine enquiries about paranormal phenomena began to arrive.

LEFT Black Duncan.

STRANGE BIOGRAPHIES

JAMES (OUR ILLUSTRIOUS LEADER): Born in Wellington in 1963, James has been immersed in photography since the mid-1980s, and obtained a Bachelor of Design degree (with a photography major) from Victoria University of Wellington in 1997. He has also played drums in bands more or less continuously since the post-punk era, and through many genres including the uncategorisable. He has always tended to take his hobbies quite seriously.

DENISE (QUIETLY SENSITIVE): Denise was born in Johannesburg to English parents in 1966 and arrived in Napier in 1971. She came to Wellington to train as an illustrator and worked for *The Dominion* from 1996–2001, but now works from home as an artist and graphic designer (with a speciality in postage stamps). She met James in 1995 and they married in 2008. They have a very large cat. On paranormal investigations, Denise is often drawn to objects as a way of connecting to the history of a site.

MARK (TECHNO-WHIZZ): Originally from Nottingham, Mark arrived in New Zealand in the early 1970s and lives in Lower Hutt. He studied industrial chemistry and worked for Shell New Zealand for a few years before enrolling on Wellington Polytechnic's professional photography course, where he met James and first became notorious for his punning. In 1998 he helped James set up Photospace Gallery and since then has worked as a photography tutor at various places, including Inverloch Art School in Wellington, where he is now also the manager. In addition to his other qualifications, he obtained a degree in art history and English literature from Victoria University of Wellington in 2006, and is a master of all things electrical.

KAREN (HISTORY BUFF): Wellingtonian Karen is another accomplished photographer, and works part-time for a family-owned retail business that specialises in scientific toys. Her interest in history, love of old buildings and constant scanning of newspapers and other sources made her an ideal early recruit to Strange Occurrences. Karen appreciates brevity.

PATRICK (ENTHUSIASTIC SKEPTIC): Timaru-born Patrick was assimilated into the team after James and Denise met him in 2009. Although he can relate a number of strange experiences, he doesn't claim any special gifts or powers and is interested in the methodical process of investigating the paranormal. He also likes tinkering with gadgets. Pat works as a security guard at Wellington Airport, which inspires confidence when wandering around dark, deserted locations at night.

JO (RESEARCHER AND CHRONICLER): Jo made her way to Wellington from the UK in 2007 via four years in Brisbane, where she studied for a PhD in coral ecology. She completed an MA in Creative Writing at Victoria University in 2009 and now blends her scientific life with a wordy one. Like Mark, she describes herself as being 'as psychically sensitive as a brick' but her interest in the paranormal is still more than just academic, because she's hopelessly optimistic about almost everything.

HELEN (MORE SENSITIVE THAN THE AVERAGE BEAR): Hailing from the lovely island of Guernsey, Helen is a marine biologist who followed a calling to applied statistics, working at the Ministry of Health since she arrived in New Zealand with her family in 2008. Her interest in the paranormal stems from a number of inexplicable experiences she had during her childhood and early adulthood,

but she is resolute in her opinion that natural explanations for all of them might exist. Cool and level-headed, she is also the team member most likely to bring home-baked goodies to investigations.

ROB (SHARP-EYED GADGET MAN): Rob was the last person to join Strange Occurrences but was the first person to be officially invited, after James met him and he participated in an investigation as a guest. Curious, thorough and with an eye for details that others often miss, Rob lived in Japan for nine years and speaks fluent Japanese. He is an experienced diver, a keen photographer and also a second-degree black belt in Togakure Ryu Ninpo Taijutsu (a form of traditional ninjutsu), which may one day prove useful on an investigation if hostiles from any plane of existence are encountered.



From the beginning, the Strange Occurrences website has stated that the primary aim of the team is to help people who have experienced or observed phenomena they can't explain. In doing so, we hope to:

- identify the causes of reported paranormal phenomena in New Zealand;
- encourage people to be more understanding of, and open-minded about, the paranormal;
- contribute to greater understanding and knowledge of paranormal phenomena;
- foster co-operation and collaboration between the various paranormal investigation teams and interest groups in New Zealand and overseas.



Rob decked out in his camo gear, taking temperature readings with a digital thermometer.

These are perhaps lofty aspirations, but it never hurts to set your sights high.

At all times, we try to avoid working with an assumption-driven, belief-led approach but we also shun hard-line debunking: holding that ghosts, for example, absolutely do not exist. This would be a fixed position and we endeavour to remain open-minded.

We also don't discount the possibility that we might actually have fun doing all of the above. We all chose to be involved in this field because of personal interest and scientific curiosity, not for the money (there is none; we don't charge for our services) or the attention (it can be scathing). The specific interests and skills of the group means our focus tends to be on 'ghostly' phenomena (hauntings and apparitions; see below) and photography, but we'd never say 'never' if other opportunities presented themselves. So if anyone claiming to be capable of extrasensory perception comes calling, for example, we'll be happy to help test that purported power.

Some of our investigation opportunities arise from enquiries made through the Strange Occurrences website, but a larger number of leads tend to come from casual conversation, or friend-of-a-friend comments. In this closely connected country, it's not surprising to find that we're often only a degree or two of separation away from a supposed paranormal incident.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PARANORMAL RESEARCH

We're certainly not the first group to set out to investigate such phenomena; human interest in matters of life after death, communication with spirits and experiences beyond the five senses

stretches back to ancient times. The foundation of modern studies of the paranormal can be traced back to a group of Victorians who were brought together by a common interest in furthering the field through scientific study.

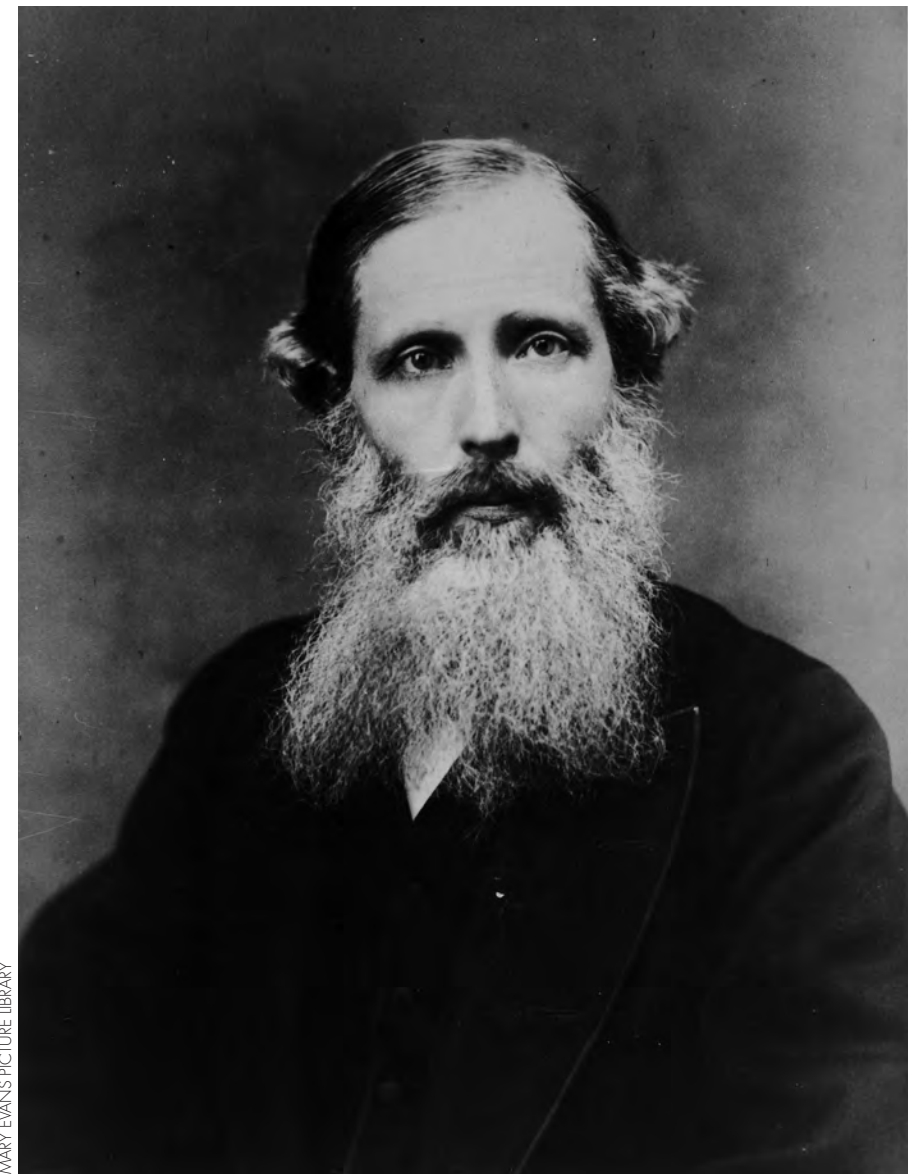
In Cambridge, England in 1882, a group of eminent men and women came together at the first official meeting of the Society for Psychical Research, which is still active. From the outset, and despite the fact that many of the members were prominent figures in their own fields of philosophy, psychology, physics and other scientific disciplines, the SPR faced resistance from many mainstream scientists. In her book *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Deborah Blum chronicles the first few decades of research by SPR members, and the many obstacles they faced in trying to gain acceptance for their findings. Academic and personal reputations could be — and often were — severely damaged by association with the society, and defence of one's psychical research in the public realm could even lead to having to fight to keep your day job. Blum herself recalls that many of her mainstream science friends warned her against writing the book, speculating that it would damage her career.

A roll-call of early SPR members reads like a *Who's Who* of some of the most distinguished scientists and thinkers of the late Victorian era, and includes a number of future knights, Nobel Prize winners, a British prime minister and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of *Sherlock Holmes*. Henry Sidgwick, a professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge University, was the convenor of the SPR, along with his student Frederic Myers and friend Edmund Gurney. William James, brother of novelist Henry, and a prominent philosopher and professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, served for a time as president of both the

British and American branches of the SPR.

Sidgwick was the first president of the British SPR and in his inaugural address he urged members of the society not to allow themselves to fall into the trap of subscribing to foregone conclusions. But his attempt to position the society as one that was skeptical didn't appease everyone, and in his second presidential address Sidgwick noted that, 'many regard us with disfavour', a comment he probably delivered with some degree of disappointment. But he also showed optimism, and an awareness of the enormity of the task that the psychical investigators faced, when he said that he thought the society would get a fair hearing from at least some educated people and that their work would be judged on its merits. He believed that if they failed to convince people it was either because they weren't doing a good enough job or because the phenomena in question presented so many peculiar difficulties for investigation. Of the many things that have changed since the Victorian era, this latter point is not one of them.

By the time the three founding members of the SPR and William James had died, in the early 1900s, and despite the optimism shown by Sidgwick in his early speeches, psychical research still hadn't been accepted into the realm of orthodox psychology. In his final essay on psychical research, James pronounced gloomily that he believed he and his colleagues had been too hopeful that this would happen. Still, research by the SPR continued into the twentieth century and New Zealand-born Andrew MacKenzie (1911–2001) was an active member for several decades, publishing many articles in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* as well as a number of books.



MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

Henry Sidgwick, co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research. Sidgwick was a professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge University and the cultivator of a very impressive beard.

DECIPHERING THE JARGON

Demonology, poltergeist, spirit guide, residual energy . . . Investigating strange occurrences means learning many new words and phrases, and use of some of them can give clues as to your level of belief or skepticism. Words that are most pertinent to the following chapters are defined below. Beware though: it is hard to define something that is not yet proven to even exist. Therein lies just one of the many challenges of paranormal investigation.

PARANORMAL VERSUS SUPERNATURAL: It's worth noting that these two words are not synonymous and that their exact meanings in the context of unusual happenings is a matter of debate. It is generally accepted that paranormal phenomena are those that modern science cannot currently explain, but which could conceivably be explained upon the discovery of a new natural law, or variation of an existing one. Examples include **EXTRASENSORY PERCEPTION (ESP)** (encompassing **TELEPATHY** — transference of thoughts between humans — and **CLAIRVOYANCE** — the ability to see actions or objects removed in space or time) and **PSYCHOKINESIS** — moving objects using the power of the human mind. Considered by some as a sub-heading under the paranormal banner, supernatural phenomena, including **APPARITIONS** (manifestations of a living or dead person) and **HAUNTINGS** (the habitual appearance or presence of a ghost at a location), are those that do not have a

natural explanation and which are associated with the possibility of life after death and the spirit world. As such, the word supernatural may have connections with religion and deities that paranormal does not necessarily have. It can get complicated: a **POLTERGEIST** could be a noisy ghost that chucks things around a room for the fun of it, or it could be activity caused by a stroppy, hormonal teenager who is capable of recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis i.e. has paranormal ability. It's worth bearing in mind that the argument about semantics is probably less of an issue than many others facing the paranormal (or supernatural, or paranatural, or supernormal) researcher.

CRISIS APPARITION: This particular form of strange occurrence has long fascinated many of those involved in paranormal research. Peter Underwood, a former president of the Ghost Club, describes them in his book *The Ghost Hunter's Guide*: 'These post-mortem appearances take place at or soon after the death or near-death of the person seen and do not seem to be linked to any particular place or event. They are quite common but are ghosts of limited duration and rarely occur more than four days after the death or crisis in illness of the person seen . . . It seems likely that such figures are "thought forms". In a moment of crisis or danger a person is likely to think with considerable feeling of a loved one and . . . it may be that they telepathically transmit a likeness of themselves to that person.'

PARAPSYCHOLOGY: This word has its roots in ‘psychical’, and today is more commonly used to describe the scholarly study of the mental phenomena of humans, such as ESP, that are currently beyond the scope of normal physical explanation, but not those that imply survival beyond the grave.

PSEUDOSCIENCE: Literally, ‘false science’, pseudoscientific studies are taken to be those that have not been carried out under carefully controlled conditions and subjected to substantial critical assessment, and therefore are not supported by testable evidence. Generally, pseudoscientific theories will not progress far beyond intuition, guesswork and belief-driven assumptions, even if effort is made to produce conclusive data. While some topics, such as astrology and alchemy, are widely considered to be pseudoscientific, there is a wide and highly contentious grey area that includes, for example, a number of alternative therapies, including chiropractic, as well as many paranormal phenomena.

The Society for Psychical Research wasn’t the only group actively investigating the paranormal in Victorian Britain: the Ghost Club, which also originated at Cambridge University, was formed in 1862. This club has also boasted a smattering of famous members over the years, including Charles Dickens, and, like the SPR, it exists to allow, ‘open-minded, curious individuals the opportunity

to debate, explore and investigate unexplained phenomena with like-minded people and record the results for posterity.’

But while both organisations still exist, some original differences between the two seem to have become amplified over the decades. Former Ghost Club president Alan Murdie explains in an essay on the club website that, ‘whilst the SPR was a body devoted to scientific study the club remained a selective and secretive organisation of convinced believers for whom psychic phenomena were an established fact’ and that, ‘the change in the twentieth century from séance-room investigation to laboratory-based research meant that the Ghost Club was becoming out of touch with contemporary psychic research.’

Murdie isn’t the only one to have noticed the Ghost Club’s tendency to attract ardent believers and to use some methods that skeptics abhor, such as dowsing rods; in his book *Will Storr versus the Supernatural*, investigative journalist Storr recounts his experiences on two investigations of haunted locations with the Ghost Club. Club members use rods and channel ‘spirit guides’ during the investigations, and Storr refers to them as ‘unashamed and unreconstructed Ghostaholics’.

If we assume that the Ghost Club and the Society for Psychical Research effectively defined the parameters of paranormal investigation back in the 1800s, then the Ghost Club could perhaps be considered the forerunner of many of the current crop of paranormal ‘entertainment’ shows, while the SPR probably inspired a number of more skeptical and scientific investigative groups.



Strange Occurrences doesn’t boast any Nobel Prize winners or prime ministers among its ranks, and it doesn’t have the long and

distinguished history of the SPR or the Ghost Club. Beards are in rather short supply. But the team was certainly created in the mould of the SPR in that it approaches matters of a paranormal nature from a standpoint firmly rooted in skeptical territory. And although we focus solely on locations and incidents in New Zealand, we share the same overarching aims: to improve the methods by which reports of the paranormal are investigated, and to contribute useful data on paranormal phenomena.

But, like most paranormal investigation groups through the ages, we sometimes face the question ‘Why bother?’ There are many who think that attempting to study matters of a paranormal nature is one enormous, misguided (and, at times, fraudulent) waste of time. Writing on the international Skeptics Society website, Michael Shermer suggests that ‘there are already enough legitimate mysteries in the universe for which evidence provides scientists fodder for their research.’ This viewpoint, while valid to some degree, seems to have a flaw: who decides where the cut-off point between the ‘legitimate’ and other mysteries of the universe is, and therefore where research attention is best focused?

Frustratingly, paranormal phenomena are usually sporadic and unpredictable (more often than not totally random, in fact), and therefore quite the opposite of the controlled, repeatable events that are amenable to testing by established scientific method. For this reason, and also because much so-called paranormal research is conducted in a decidedly unscientific way, the entire field of paranormal investigation tends to be regarded as pseudoscience. We agree; this is largely true, and it may be a

reason why you might choose to follow Shermer’s suggestion and investigate other mysteries of the world instead. While we can develop and test hypotheses regarding paranormal phenomena, it is not currently possible to substantiate theories because we don’t have controllable phenomena to experiment with. For example, we can’t validate a theory predicting that when a spirit materialises there will be a temperature drop, because it’s impossible to produce a spirit on cue on which to carry out tests.

What we can at least do is collect evidence, make observations and develop hypotheses to try to explain them. We can search for a natural explanation and never assume a paranormal cause. We can remain neutral, enquiring, cautious and skeptical (but not cynical). We can avoid jumping to conclusions and be prepared instead to go where the evidence leads us. And we can each of us pledge to avoid committing that which Jung referred to as the ‘fashionable stupidity . . . regarding everything I cannot explain as a fraud’.

OPPOSITE The Strange Occurrences team in front of Inverlochy House, circa 2011. Note James’s attempt at an impressive Sidgwick-style beard. Standing (from left): Patrick, Denise, Helen, Mark, Jo, Karen. Kneeling: Rob, James. Squatting menacingly: Rob’s truck.



None of us involved with Strange Occurrences believe that we have much to lose by choosing to investigate the paranormal in New Zealand. No careers are on the line and, as a society, New Zealand is surprisingly tolerant of this line of enquiry. This tolerance is perhaps explained by the findings of a recent study by Massey University, which established that 40 per cent of respondents believed they had felt a spirit force (up from 33 per cent in 1991). It may also be the reason why the most common form of heckling we've had to endure so far is a bit of light-hearted banter about proton-pack-wielding exterminators or cartoon janitors: scarcely will you have mentioned that you are a member of a paranormal investigation group before someone barks, 'Who you gonna call?' or channels the ubiquitous nemesis of Scooby Doo's Mystery, Inc., stating emphatically that 'If it wasn't for you pesky kids, I'd have gotten away with it!' But as long as we take care not to overstate our case, keeping in mind the principles of science and rationality, a few scathing comments and some *Ghostbusters* and *Scooby Doo* jokes might be the worst that gets thrown at us.

In the chapters that follow, we outline the methods and equipment that Strange Occurrences has used in its investigations to date, as well as the history of some of the locations and our findings. Our hope is that they will serve to illuminate the intriguing, challenging, sometimes amusing and often controversial world of the paranormal.