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The Workings of Spirit Photography

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Visual Arts Practice. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

The coincidental emergence of the spiritualism movement and the artistic practice of photography allowed for the genre of 'Spiritualistic Photography' to emerge. The early days of photography allowed for experimentation, so when William Mumler essentially discovered double exposures on accident, this allowed for him and numerous other 'spirit medium' photographers to take advantage of grieving populations. Through both glass exposures in the dark room and manipulation in print, many people were tricked into believing that real ghosts and spirits were caught on camera. This thesis will go through the evolution of spiritualistic photography, from its beginnings in the mid nineteenth century to recent modern day examples.

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Introduction

Human beings have believed in ghosts and spirits for thousands of years, possibly since the beginning of civilisation. Stories appear in ancient civilisations like Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, and have travelled between civilisations and religions¹. For this thesis, I intend to explore and research the early spiritualist movement and its impact on paranormal and spirit photography. Throughout, I will be investigating the historical and cultural contexts that aided the shaping and emergence of spirit photography's practices. I intend to research the fascination behind the medium's resulting images, alongside how, on occasion, many people continued to trust and defend the artists behind such work despite evidence of fraud. I not only aim to discover the technologies that helped to create these early images, but also investigate the medium's relationship with truth and evidence versus belief. I will discuss practitioners William H. Mumler and William Hope, alongside my investigation into the cases of the *Brown Lady of Raynham Hall*, *The Spectre of Newby Church* and the *Wem Town Hall Ghost*.

I have had an interest yet fear of ghosts and the supernatural since I was a young child. I remember as a child watching 'haunted stories' and apparent ghost sighting compilations on YouTube. Even now, I will sometimes stop and watch a video of a supposed 'Skinwalkers' in the Appalachian Mountains, or of other supernatural creatures. I'm not completely sure as to why I have an interest in these things. Perhaps because I was brought up in a Catholic household where I went to Church once a week. While no longer a practicing Catholic, or see myself as such, I do perhaps believe that there could be something out there bigger than ourselves. Perhaps there's a chance that there is an 'in between', a way in which dead relatives and loved ones want to contact us, or where they go if they can't move on into the afterlife.

So with this interest, I wanted to look into spiritual medium photographers and reported cases of paranormal photographs. I will examine the genre's evolution, from its origins in the mid nineteenth century to more recent examples from the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty first. I have accumulated many types of sources, which I will delve deeper into in Chapter One, that being my theoretical framework chapter. These include academic writings (*The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* by Louis Kaplan), museum sources (*Science Museum Group Journal*, *American Museum of Photography*), independent blogs (*Kimberlysmith.net*), educational sites

¹ Piper, Grant. "The Earliest Ghost Stories." Medium. Exploring History. 31st October 2020. <https://medium.com/exploring-history/the-earliest-ghost-stories-93643d893203#> accessed 4th of February 2026.

(*Encyclopaedia Britannica*), and many news and media sites (*BBC.co.uk*, *Shropshirestar.com*). Both Academic sources were used in my investigation into William Mumler, an engraver turned photographer. They offered some explanations of the cultural context that led to his deception of grieving families. Museum and archival sources gave me an understanding of photographic manipulation techniques, especially in the case of William Hope. Along with additional cultural context, an article by Museum Crush titled *William Hope: The Fraudster who Fooled the World with His Spirits* gave an explanation on the public's attitude towards Hope and his supposed photographic 'evidence' of ghosts. I will discuss Mumler and Hope in depth in Chapter Two. Different news and media articles aided my research into the case studies developed in Chapter Three, where I will be talking about the *Brown Lady of Raynham Hall*, *The Spectre of Newby Church* and the *Wem Town Hall Ghost*.

As stated, I will be talking about William Mumler and William Hope in chapter two. I start the chapter looking into the development of the spiritualist movement, and how the timing coincided with that of photography. Both Mumler and Hope, though from slightly different eras in photography's evolution, both began their careers in photography around the time of wars, which they found easy to exploit as many people at this time were looking for ways to contact deceased family members and friends. Both had similar work processes and were eventually found guilty of and condemned for fraud. Both had differing social consequences though, as Mumler began a career in normal photography, while Hope continued to be backed up by multiple people, most notably Sir Arthur Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes fame.

In chapter three, I will be exploring the cases of the *Brown Lady of Raynham Hall*, *The Spectre of Newby Church* and the *Wem Town Hall Ghost*. I wanted to look into these as their photographs were more one off cases, where their photographers were not professionals in the field of photography and not in search of ghosts. This chapter looks into how easy it is even for amateurs to fool other amateurs.

With this structure and content, the aim of my thesis is to delve deeper into spiritistic photography, its origins and purposes. I want to explore the evolution of different practices, look into different practitioners, and look into famous examples. I want to deepen my understanding of what exactly spiritualism is, how it originated, and perhaps how the movement still influences us today, both directly and indirectly.

The Theoretical Framework

“Ghosts pull us in two directions: they frighten us but at the same time console us, hinting that death might not be the end”²

The literature I accumulated on spirit and paranormal photography provides both historical context and a critical perspective. When researching sources pertaining to spiritualism and spirit photography, they seemed to collectively trace their roots back to Victorian era Britain, as well as the United States around the same time – that time being the nineteenth century. When spiritualism began to emerge as a religious and cultural movement, alongside it developed the practice of spirit photography. Different source, such as Encyclopaedia Britannica, situate the origins of the practice within the broader cultural and historical contexts of spiritualism, which emerged with the focus of communicating with the dead. The historical context found in the different sources situates spirit photography within the broader societal fascination with spirits and the supernatural. This helped to illustrate how exactly the spiritualist belief system shaped both public perception, as well as the early reception of, the supposed ‘evidence’ of spirits and ghosts.

There are manipulative techniques used that can challenge our assumptions about photography as an objective record of reality. Take spirit photographer practitioners William Hope and William Mumler. Both started their careers as amateur photographers after years in other trades – Mumler as a jeweller and engraver³, Hope as a carpenter⁴. They both supposedly discovered ‘spirit’ photography on accident. Mumler was one of the first practitioners, ‘discovering’ it in the studio one day when he took a self-portrait and a second figure appeared on the developed plate⁵. This ended up being a mistake, as it was later explained to him that the glass he had used for the photograph had been used before but not washed properly.⁶ Hope’s methods were similar, where he would find

² Ruffles, Tom. 2004. *Ghost Images: Cinema of the Afterlife*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

³ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

⁴ “The Spirit Photographs of William Hope.” The Public Domain Review. <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope/> accessed 29th October 2025

⁵ Kaplan, Louis. 2003. “Where the Paranoid Meets the Paranormal: Speculations on Spirit Photography.” *Art Journal Vol. 2, No.3 (Autumn 2003)*

⁶ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

an image of the client's deceased relative, expose it onto a plate, then reuse the plate for the client's sitting⁷. Both techniques resulted in a translucent effect. For people who did not know how photography work, it seemed like a natural phenomenon had occurred. But many sceptics, especially those who had some sort of idea how cameras worked and could test out different methods, believed that the artists were profiting off people's grief. Both photographers began careers at convenient times for this, with Mumler starting around the time of the US Civil War and Hope around the time of World War One. It is my belief that the grieving people saw what they wanted to see, as they were already longing for a connection between themselves and their deceased friend or loved one.

Among the case studies and famous examples of supposed ghosts caught on camera, the *Brown Lady of Raynham Hall* (see figure one) is one of the most famous. Apart from being one of the few photographed ghosts or spirits to have actual reported sightings, many dating back to the eighteenth hundreds, her image stood out to me as one of the few captured ghosts taken by a professional photographer, or at least by a photographer whose career was not primarily focused on spirit photography. The image was taken by Captain Hubert Provand and Indre Shira. I couldn't find information about the photographers online, outside of articles about the image. So I'm unsure as to whether this photograph was their only credited work or perhaps they used an alias / professional name.

This new genre of photography emerged in the mid nineteenth century as both a theological and technological phenomenon alongside the rise of spiritualism. Technological in response to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries being a time of rapid technological advancement and theological in the sense that people believed that your soul lived on once your body was deceased. Spiritualism came about as a movement rooted in the belief that the living could communicate with the dead through people such as mediums, a medium being a person who is supposedly able to make contact with spirits, usually in a trance like state⁸. The writings on Spiritualism, from sources such as Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Spiritualists' National Union, the movement is framed as a belief system that seeks communication between the living and the dead. Within the context of the early stages of photography, a combination of the two ideas reflects the yearning people had for

⁷ McNab, Kate. "William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his 'Spirits.'" Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. <https://museumcrush.org/william-hope-the-fraudster-photographer-who-fooled-the-world-with-his-spirits/> Accessed 19th October 2025.

⁸ "Medium | Occultism." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/medium-occultism> accessed 4th of February 2026.

proof of the afterlife, as well as the fascination with new technologies that could potentially visualise the invisible.

I think it is easy to conclude that early spirit photographers such as William Mumler and William Hope exploited the grieving's desire for communication with their deceased loved ones. Sources such as The Public Domain Review and those released by Louis Kaplan reveal this genre's early entanglement with the ideas of truth deception and faith, while also exposing Mumler and Hope's production of spectral images which resulted from a blend of faith, fraud, and public fascination. Other sources illustrate how such images were able to walk a fine line – offering proof of an afterlife to believers, while also inviting sceptics to expose their fraud. As a collective, my gathered researched materials help to establish a foundation for a theoretical framework which examines photography as both a spiritual and as a scientific instrument. Within the framework, spirit photography becomes less about evidence of the supernatural, and more about the natural human desire to materialise belief and loss through image making.

I intend to apply this framework and use it to investigate the workings of spirit photography. How were they made and produced? Why were people so easy to believe them? I want to explore how images such as Mumler's can produce a tension between deception and exposition.

Through compiling my sources, one thing is clear – spirit images are easy to hoax and fake. I intend to explore the controversies and scandals around famous spirit photographers, as well as investigate the genre as a whole and see how it can both construct and dismantle someone's beliefs. The visual strategies reflect the exchanges between faith and fabrication. Alan Kaplan identified these as a central part of spiritualist photography, including the viewer's willingness to suspend their disbelief in the pursuit of renown. Through these applications, photographs no longer become proof of the paranormal, but a site where faith, memory and the photographic apparatus all intersect to reveal the persistence of spiritual longing.



Figure 1, 'The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall', 1936, by Captain Hubert C. Provand and Indre Shira⁹

⁹“Kat Devitt – Author of Gothic things – the Brown Lady of Raynham Hall.” Kat Devitt. October 5th, 2017. <https://katdevitt.com/2017/10/05/turning-through-history-the-brown-lady-of-raynham-hall/> accessed 30th October 2025

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After researching cases such as the Wem Town Hall Ghost, I invite readers to question photography’s role as a witness, as well as in trickery and forgery. Can we truly believe what we are seeing and count it as evidence? Or is it all just a hoax? All the images illustrate the complex connection between photographic technology, spiritualists beliefs, and the public’s fascination with anything paranormal. By examining these images through the lens of historical and critical sources, it becomes clear that the power of these photographs lie not in the proof of spirits, but in their capacity to engage with cultural anxieties, belief systems and the performative aspects of photography itself.

My main aim throughout my thesis will be to discuss, research and investigate the cultural context of early spirit photography; famous examples, notable case studies, and some of the more memorable practitioners of the genre. I will explore how the spiritualist movement kickstarted, inspired, and impacted this photographic genre, exploring how it shaped and inspired the craft. I will review and explain controversies surrounding the artists, as well as delve into different hoaxes and cases of fraud. By tracing the origins of spirit photography, I will be able to highlight the cultural, social, and psychological factors that fuelled the public’s fascination and beliefs with these images.

By analysing each case, my thesis will consider the relationship between authenticity and deception, art versus documentation, and the tensions between scientific rationalism and how spiritual beliefs came about. Situating spirit photography within the correct historical and cultural frameworks and contexts, I will hopefully be able to provide an insight into the broader societal fascination with the supernatural, as well as explore the relationship between beliefs, scepticisms and the emerging photographic technologies at the time.

Ultimately, my study seeks to demonstrate the significance of spirit photography beyond it being a mere novelty or spectacle. By examining the motivations of both audience and photographer, the aim of my research is to contribute to the broader discussion about the role of photography in

shaping perception and beliefs. In the end, this thesis seeks not only to document and analyse these historical practices but also to understand their enduring impact on both photography as a medium and the ways in which society engages with the unseen and mysterious.

The case of William H. Mumler and William Hope

“Spiritualists are those who believe in a continued future existence, and that people who have passed on into the spirit-world can and do communicate with us”¹⁰.

Spiritualism became a religious movement in nineteenth century America and Europe¹¹. The movement’s faiths and philosophies are based on the belief that the human consciousness can survive physical death¹². Many practitioners believed that departed souls could make contact with the living¹³, and there were copious amounts of spiritualists who sought to make a connection with the dead. This could be done a variety of ways, but was primarily done through the assistant of a medium, that being a person who was believed to have the ability to contact spirits directly. Another popular way of communication with the spirits was through table turning. This was a practice in which participants placed their hands on a table and wait for it to vibrate or rotate. This was a popular pastime in many Victorian drawing rooms¹⁴.

Naturally, this new movement provoked opposition¹⁵. Not only was there verbal condemnations, but there was also occasional mob violence. Many church leaders associated the spiritualism movement with witchcraft, while other churches regarded the practice as part of necromancy – that being the communication with the dead in order to learn about the future. In 1898, there was even a Decree of the Holy Office of the Catholic Church that condemned the spiritualist practices. Though, it did approve of legitimate scientific investigations of related phenomena. There were also numerous cases of mediums who, one by one, were discovered to be engaged in fraud¹⁶. These controversies, as well as later ones, are part of why I believe the first generation of believers avoided organising

¹⁰ BBC – Religions – Spiritualism: Beliefs.” N.d.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/spiritualism/ataglance/glance.shtml> accessed 30th October 2025

¹¹ J. Gordon Melton. 2012. “Spiritualism | Religion.” In *Encyclopædia Britannica*

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiritualism-religion> accessed 29th October 2025

¹² “About Spiritualism – the Spiritualists’ National Union.” The Spiritualists’ National Union. June 13th 2025

<https://snu.org.uk/about-us/about-spiritualism/> accessed 30 October 2026

¹³ J. Gordon Melton. 2012. “Spiritualism | Religion.” In *Encyclopædia Britannica* accessed 29th October 2025

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

themselves as a church until at least the 1890s, although the movement was inherently a religious one¹⁷ from the get go.

“At the time of taking my first picture, in March 1861, I was an employ of Bigelow Brothers and Kennard, leading jewellers of Boston, as their principal engraver”¹⁸

One of the many fascinating genres of photography that originated in the mid nineteenth century was the practice of spirit photography¹⁹. This practice was “discovered” by a Boston engraver named William H. Mumler in March 1861. He was in a studio alone one day and took a self-portrait, only to discover a second figure appearing beside him on the developed plate, who he believed to be his cousin that had died a couple years prior²⁰. Mumler stated that “On submitting it to the operator for an explanation, his opinion was that the negative was taken upon old glass that had previously been used for the same purpose, but had been insufficiently cleaned.” This theory was acceptable to him at the time due to his, and many other people’s, limited knowledge of photography. So when asked by employers and others about the picture’s production, he supplied that statement²¹.

With this accidental creation of the supposed first haunted image, in the world, Mumler inadvertently pioneered the field of spirit photography²². Using the emerging US Civil War to his advantage, this amateur photographer quickly became a professional, creating a lucrative business fuelled by mourning relatives of those killed in the war²³. Mumler became a media sensation, which led to him being known as a “Spirit Photographic Medium”. With businesses in Boston, he serviced those who sought a supernatural connection to deceased relatives²⁴. He charged people \$10 to have their portrait taken alongside their ‘dearly departed’, or at least a likeness of them.²⁵

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

¹⁹ Kaplan, Louis. 2003. “Where the Paranoid Meets the Paranormal: Speculations on Spirit Photography.” *Art journal Vol. 2, No.3 (Autumn 2003)*

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

²² Chen, Min. “This Man Snapped the World’s First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?” Artnet News. October 31st 2024. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/eureka-spirit-photography-william-mumler-2560743> accessed 29th October 2025

²³ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. “The intriguing History of Ghost Photography.” BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20150629-the-intriguing-history-of-ghost-photography> accessed 8th October 2025.

²⁴ RHP, 2022. “The Curious Business of Spirit Photography That Was Spooky and Controversial, 1860-1875.” Rare Historical Photos. April 8th, 2022. <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/spirit-vintage-photos/> accessed 29th September 2025.

²⁵ Chen, Min. “This Man Snapped the World’s First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?” Artnet News. October 31st 2024. accessed 29th October 2025

As stated before, it is likely that Mumler's photographic technique was inspired from the process that created the original 'spirit image' of his cousin. His process may have included a previously prepared positive glass plate that featured the deceased. He would have placed into his camera, in front of an unused glass plate, which was then used to photograph his client. So this double exposure technique not only captured the image of the client, but also transferred a ghostly overlay from the previously prepared glass plate in front²⁶. So although we can assume Mumler shot sitters using double exposing techniques, the exact methods and chemicals that he used remain unknown.²⁷

Mumler received clients at his studios all the way through to the early 1870s. His most notable client Mary Todd Lincoln, the widow of the United States' sixteenth president Abraham Lincoln²⁸ (see figure two). This portrait of Mary Todd arguably remains his most famous, and it is the last photograph she ever sat for²⁹.

Although starting his career in 1862, it only took about two years before the sceptics arrived. A doctor, who had sat for a portrait in 1863, recognised the ghost in the resulting photograph, that being the ghost of his wife. The only problem? His wife was still alive.³⁰ Arguably, one of the most outspoken sceptics of Mumler's work was showman P.T Barnum. Barnum declared that Mumler's career took advantage and profited off of people's grief,³¹ people keen to make some kind of supernatural connection with their loved ones.³² The doctor's claims led to the accusations that Barnum's statements likely came from – those being that Mumler had broken into houses to steal photographs of people's deceased family members, not realising that some of these relatives were very much still alive.³³

²⁶ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. "The intriguing History of Ghost Photography." BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015. accessed 8th October 2025

²⁷ Chen, Min. "This Man Snapped the World's First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?" Artnet News. October 31st 2024. accessed 29th October 2025

²⁸ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. "The intriguing History of Ghost Photography." BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015 accessed 8th October 2025

²⁹ RHP, 2022. "The Curious Business of Spirit Photography That Was Spooky and Controversial, 1860-1875." Rare Historical Photos. April 8th, 2022. <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/spirit-vintage-photos/> accessed 29th September 2025.

³⁰ Chen, Min. "This Man Snapped the World's First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?" Artnet News. October 31st 2024. accessed 29th October 2025

³¹ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. "The intriguing History of Ghost Photography." BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015 accessed 8th October 2025

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid



Figure 2. "Mary Todd Lincoln", Circa 1870, William H. Mumler³⁴

³⁴ Piepenbring, Dan. "The Photographer Who Claimed to Capture Abraham Lincoln's Ghost." *The New Yorker*. 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/photographer-who-claimed-to-capture-abraham-lincoln-ghost> accessed 29th November 2025.

Eventually, in 1869, Mumler was put on trial for fraud,³⁵ and Burnam was one of the people that testified against him.³⁶ Probably the most incriminating moment of the trial came when a knowingly bogus photograph was presented as evidence, in hopes of presenting just how easy it was for someone to make one of Mumler's 'spirit' images³⁷. His defence team, led by John D. Townsend, offered a closing argument that addressed both the legal and the spiritual aspects of the case. The team proclaimed Mumler's innocence, arguing that he was charged with fraud not because of any wrong doing, but because the prosecution could not understand how the spirits in his photographs were produced.³⁸

Despite the evidence, William Mumler was acquitted of fraud³⁹, as the prosecution ultimately failed to prove just how exactly he created his images⁴⁰. Before starting a career as a spirit photographer, Mumler had a reputation as an honest and trustworthy person. Employed at the leading jewellers in Boston, he was often entrusted with their valuables, usually in large quantities.⁴¹ Despite all these things, the damage had been done and his career as a spirit photographer was over.⁴² And as a result, he later moved on to doing regular photography.⁴³

“This reputation, that I had been years in establishing, vanished like a soap-bubble when I commenced to take spirit-photographs. I was condemned as a trickster, branded as a fraud, and deserted by those who were happy to acknowledge my acquaintance, when in – to them – a more honourable business.”⁴⁴

Although William Mumler's reputation was now essentially ruined, this did not in any way halt the development of spirit photography. His work and processes only inspired and influenced others, both in America and Europe. One of these people was a man named William Hope in the United

³⁵ Chen, Min. “This Man Snapped the World's First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?” Artnet News. October 31st 2024. accessed 29th October 2025

³⁶ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. “The intriguing History of Ghost Photography.” BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015 accessed 8th October 2025

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

³⁹ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. “The intriguing History of Ghost Photography.” BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015. accessed 8th October 2025

⁴⁰ Chen, Min. “This Man Snapped the World's First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?” Artnet News. October 31st 2024. accessed 29th October 2025

⁴¹ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

⁴² Timberlake, Howard. 2015. “The intriguing History of Ghost Photography.” BBC.com BBC future. June 30th, 2015 accessed 8th October 2025

⁴³ RHP, 2022. “The Curious Business of Spirit Photography That Was Spooky and Controversial, 1860-1875.” Rare Historical Photos. April 8th, 2022. <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/spirit-vintage-photos/> accessed 29th September 2025.

⁴⁴ Kaplan, Louis. 2008. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press C.

Kingdom.⁴⁵ Hope was similar to Mumler in a couple of ways, such as not always working as a photographer – he began his working life as a carpenter – as well as his introduction to the practice of spirit photography. He first gained an interest in the medium around 1905, after supposedly capturing an image of a ghost while photographing a friend.⁴⁶ Like how Mumler claimed the ghost in his image was his cousin, Hope claimed that the apparition in his friend’s portrait bared a striking resemblance to the sitter’s sister, who had recently died.⁴⁷

The next photographer, William Hope, was born in a town called Crewe, Cheshire in 1863.⁴⁸ Upon the discovery of his newfound talents in the paranormal, Hope went on to set up and lead a spiritualist group called ‘The Crewe Circle’,⁴⁹ which contained six members at the time of establishment.⁵⁰ The group gained some renown after the addition of Archdeacon Thomas Colley as a member. This new member brought William Hope’s ‘talent’ to public light, claiming to be able to verify Hope’s ‘powers’. Championing his work to the public, Colley gifted Hope with his first standing camera.⁵¹

Hope also received positive endorsement from famous author and physician, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.⁵² The Sherlock Holmes author was an avid spiritualist and strong believer in spirit photography⁵³. Doyle was a member of the *Society for the Study of Paranormal Pictures*. Hope took an image of the group, where Doyle can be seen sitting in the centre row, second from the left (Figure 3).⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Chen, Min. “This Man Snapped the World’s First Photo of a Ghost – or Did He?” Artnet News. October 31st 2024. accessed 29th October 2025

⁴⁶ “The Spirit Photographs of William Hope.” The Public Domain Review. <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope/> accessed 29th October 2025

⁴⁷ McNab, Kate. “William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his ‘Spirits.’” Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. <https://museumcrush.org/william-hope-the-fraudster-photographer-who-fooled-the-world-with-his-spirits/> Accessed 19th October 2025.

⁴⁸ “The Spirit Photographs of William Hope.” The Public Domain Review. <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope/> accessed 29th October 2025

⁴⁹ McNab, Kate. “William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his ‘Spirits.’” Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. Accessed 19th October 2025.

⁵⁰ “The Spirit Photographs of William Hope.” The Public Domain Review. <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope/> accessed 29th October 2025

⁵¹ McNab, Kate. “William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his ‘Spirits.’” Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. Accessed 19th October 2025.

⁵² “Photographic Plates and Spirit Fakes: Remembering Harry Price’s Investigation of William Hope’s Spirit Photography at its Centenary.” Science Museum Group Journal. <https://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/article/photographic-plates-and-spirit-fakes-remembering-harry-prices-investigation-of-william-hopes-spirit-photography-at-its-centenary/#abstract> accessed 1st December 2025

⁵³ McNab, Kate. “William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his ‘Spirits.’” Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. Accessed 19th October 2025.

⁵⁴ Ibid



*Figure 3, untitled (taken at a meeting of the Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures), 1920s,
by William Hope⁵⁵*

⁵⁵ McNab, Kate. "William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his 'Spirits.'" Museum Crush. 31st October 2018 Accessed 30th of November 2025

The *Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures* was a small psychical organisation that was established in the year 1918 in London, England.⁵⁶ The society was set up to promote the scientific study and investigation of supernormal pictures. The vast majority of members were professional photographers.⁵⁷ The organisation was supposedly set up to rival the Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R). The S.P.R was founded in 1882 by a group of scientists who intended on making an organised and systemic inquiry into “The large group of disputed phenomena referred to as mesmerism, psychism, spiritism.”⁵⁸ The first president of the S.S.S.P was a man named Abraham Wallace. He was assisted by three vice presidents – W.G. Mitchell, H. Blackwell, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.⁵⁹ Many of the society’s views were not considered ‘acceptable’ to other psychical researchers, and ceased operations by 1923.⁶⁰ Compared to the Society for Psychical Research, which is still in operation today, with their last research projects being undertaken in 2024 (as of February 2026).⁶¹

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a fervent supporter of William Hope⁶², despite his images being fabrications, some blatantly so (see figure 4). Hope’s methods were similar, and probably inspired, by William Mumler. Hope used a camera called a ‘Lancaster Quarter Plate Camera’⁶³. To create an overlay of the so-called “spirit”, Hope would procure an existing photograph of the deceased, and expose it onto a photographic plate prior to the sitting of the client. He used this method to create double exposure images, which allowed for a translucent effect.⁶⁴ But nobody knew about these pre exposures, since he insisted on sitters bring their own sealed photographic plates to reduce the chances of any ‘interference’.⁶⁵ So with the approval to physically inspect Hope’s old fashioned camera, lens and carrier,⁶⁶ as well the translucencies being consistent with the expectations of how

⁵⁶ “The Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures | Encyclopedia.com.” 2026. Encyclopedia.com <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/society-study-supernormal-pictures> accessed 3rd February 2026.

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ “American Museum of Photography – View Great Photographs.” 2026. Photographymuseum.com <https://photographymuseum.com/sssp/> accessed 3rd February 2026

⁵⁹ The Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures | Encyclopedia.com.” 2026. Encyclopedia.com accessed 3rd February 2026.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ “Current Research Projects | Spr.ac.uk 202. <https://www.spr.ac.uk/research/current-research-projects> accessed 3rd February

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ “Spirit Photography and the Occult: Making the Invisible Visible.” 2022. National Science and Media Museum. 10th February, 2022. <https://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/spirit-photography-occult-images> accessed 29th September 2025.

⁶⁴ McNab, Kate. “William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his ‘Spirits.’” Museum Crush. 31st October 2018 Accessed 19th October 2025

⁶⁵ “Spirit Photography and the Occult: Making the Invisible Visible.” 2022. National Science and Media Museum. 10th February, 2022. <https://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/spirit-photography-occult-images> accessed 29th September 2025.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

a spirit may manifest itself in our world, many fans and believers insisted that Hope's photographs really did allow for the deceased to reveal themselves⁶⁷.

As previously stated, William Mumler used the time of the US Civil War to his advantage.⁶⁸ The same could be said about William Hope, using the timing of the First World War to his benefit, which undoubtedly led to his success.⁶⁹ His photography was embraced by the grieving population of the early twentieth century with hopes of connecting with a loved one lost to the devastating events of World War One. With the supposed apparition present within the image, it could be used as proof that their loved ones were still present in our world and there was some sort of life on the other side of death.⁷⁰

As with many things, Hope's work was met with criticism. One of his most fierce critics was a man named Harry Price, who was a leading paranormal investigator at the time and one of history's most famous ghost hunters, well known for outing fraudsters and hoaxes.⁷¹ The work of William Hope and his Crewe Circle was investigated on various occasions, but was so most famously in 1922 when Harry Price was sent by the Society for Physical Research to investigate them. Price went out on the mission of collecting evidence that Hope was substituting the glass plates brought by clients with his own in order to produce his spirit photographs.⁷²

⁶⁷ McNab, Kate. "William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his 'Spirits.'" Museum Crush. 31st October 2018 Accessed 19th October 2025

⁶⁸ Timberlake, Howard. 2015. "The intriguing History of Ghost Photography." BBC.com BBC future. June 30th 2015 accessed 8th October 2025.

⁶⁹ McNab, Kate. "William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his 'Spirits.'" Museum Crush. 31st October 2018 Accessed 19th October 2025

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² "The Spirit Photographs of William Hope." The Public Domain Review.

<https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope/> accessed 29th October 2025



Figure 4. "A photograph of a middle aged man", William Hope, Circa 1920⁷³

⁷³ Ibid
16

With Harry Price suspecting the spiritualist's photographs were a hoax, he set up a trap with the goal of firmly disproving the legacy of Hope's photography and outing him as a scammer. We know that Hope allowed clients to bring in their own plates, so when Price came in for a sitting, he provided his own marked plate. So when the photographic results of his sitting came back, he was able to conclude what he already knew – Hope had switched the plates with his own pre-exposed ones.⁷⁴ So when Harry Price published his findings later that year, he was able to finally uncover the truth that William Hope was, indeed, a fraudster.⁷⁵

Many of Hope's most devoted supporters spoke out on his behalf.⁷⁶ So despite his photographs having been proved to be fake and fraudulent, his reputation remained strong amongst the spiritualists who refused to accept the unwelcome truth.⁷⁷ Following Price's report, Arthur Conan Doyle published his own report named *The Case for Spirit Photography*. This report not only endorsed William Hope's character, but also offered evidence of his works' validity, and presented numerous testimonies by some of Hope's many satisfied customers. So whether his intentions were to offer solace to mourning families, or instead profit off of their grief, Hope continued to practice photography for the rest of his life.⁷⁸

In conclusion, the spiritualist movement aided in the development of Spirit Photography. Believing the dead could communicate with the living, photographers such as William H. Mumler and William Hope used the ongoing traumas of the US Civil War and the First World War to their advantage. With the new camera and photographic technologies, people were unsure how they worked. Mumler benefitted from this as he believed nobody would figure out his process of getting apparitions on camera. William Hope, although using similar techniques to Mumler, went about it slightly differently. He would allow his clients to inspect his equipment and bring their own photographic plates, then would swap it for his own. This would allow people to fall into a false sense of security. Eventually, both photographers were exposed as fraudsters and hoaxers. But they continued to have supporters despite it. In my opinion, they profited off people's traumas. Because in the end, many people will believe what they want to believe, despite the evidence stating otherwise.

⁷⁴ McNab, Kate. "William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his 'Spirits.'" Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. Accessed 19th October 2025

⁷⁵ "The Spirit Photographs of William Hope." The Public Domain Review. <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope/> accessed 29th October 2025

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ McNab, Kate. "William Hope, the Fraudster Photographer Who Fooled the World with his 'Spirits.'" Museum Crush. 31st October 2018. Accessed 19th October 2025

⁷⁸ Ibid

Three notable one off cases

Examples of spirit photography are not limited to war times or people profiting off of other people's grief. There were numerous other examples of supposed other ghosts caught on camera throughout the twentieth century, both by other supposed 'spirit medium photographers', as well as many one off cases. Famous examples of such one offs include the *Brown Lady of Raynham Hall* (1936), *The Spectre of Newby Church* (1964), and the *Wem Town Hall Ghost* (1995).

The legend of the Brown Lady was not just the product of an infamous photograph, but was part of Norfolk legend for at least two centuries before the photograph was taken.⁷⁹ Different places refer to her with different names – Lady Townsend and Lady Dorothy Walpole – but this is the same person.⁸⁰ Raynham Hall, located in Norfolk, England, was renowned for both ghostly resident and its architectural splendour. Lady Dorothy Townsend was the wife of Charles Townshend, the second Viscount of Raynham. Before her marriage to the Viscount, she was believed to be the mistress of Lord Wharton. Now, her husband Charles was a man known for his jealousy and temperamental nature⁸¹. So when he suspected Dorothy of adultery, he locked her away inside their Raynham home.⁸² He refused to let her leave the hall, and she never saw her children again.⁸³

There were a few reported sightings of the apparition over the two centuries before her unofficial portrait was photographed. One example was in the early 19th century, when she was seen by King George IV while he was staying at the hall. He reported seeing an apparition standing by his bed. The monarch claimed that she wore a brown dress, had a pale face. And her hair was dishevelled. This spirit was seen again in 1835 by Colonel Loftus whilst he was visiting the house for the Christmas holidays. He accounted that when he was walking into his bedroom late one night, he saw a figure standing in front of him wearing a brown dress. He tried to see who she was but she disappeared

⁷⁹ "The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall", Burials and Beyond, 2025. <https://burialsandbeyond.com/2018/11/06/the-brown-lady-of-raynham-hall/> accessed 13th of January 2026

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ "Raynham Hall and the Ghost of the Brown Lady", Spirits and Hauntings, 25th of May 2024. <https://spiritsandhauntings.com/ghost-stories/the-haunting-of-raynham-hall-and-the-brown-lady-ghost/>. Accessed 13th January 2026.

⁸² Pettit, Harry. 2020. "Most famous GHOST Photos from History – including Spectral Soldiers and Dog Apparitions..." The Irish Sun. 4th November 2020. <https://www.thesun.ie/tech/6107637/famous-ghost-photos-history-soldiers-dog/> accessed 27th October 2025

⁸³ "The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall", Burials and Beyond, 2025.

before he could get a closer look. When he saw the figure a week later, he was able to get a closer look. The report was similar yet to different to George's, as she was wearing a brown dress but her skin glowed with pale luminescence and her eyes had been gauged out.⁸⁴

Reports of Lady Townshend continued for many years. Then on the 19th September 1936, two photographers for Country Life magazine were in Raynham Hall on an assignment when they captured the famous portrait⁸⁵. The image was taken by Captain Hubert C. Provand and his assistant Indre Shira who were photographing the hall for a general Country Life article. It seems they initially had no intention of covering the spectral legend.⁸⁶ But those original plans were scrapped in exchange for an article about Provand and Shira's experience. The article was published on the 26th of December 1936,⁸⁷ and caused a big sensation in Britain and America.⁸⁸

Since publication, the image has been used as evidence of ghost existence⁸⁹. But like with pretty much all other spiritual photographs, sceptics argued that it was a fake. There could be many explanations for the ghostly appearance, with many suggesting that it could be the result of double exposure or possible grease on the lense.⁹⁰ One photo analyst by the name of Joe Nickel examined the image and concluded that it was nothing more than a composite image resulting from two photographs being put together.⁹¹ The general consensus between many critics is that the image is not of an apparition, but possibly either a living figure concealed beneath a sheet or simply a superimposition of a Madonna / Virgin Mary statue, believing they could see hands in a raised prayer position.⁹²

⁸⁴ "The Brown Lady of Raynham." 2025. Hoaxes.org <https://hoaxes.org/raynham.html> accessed 22nd October 2025

⁸⁵ Life, Country. 2021. "The Day a Country Life Photographer Captured an Image of a Ghost, a Picture that's become one of the Most Famous 'Spirit Photography' Images of All Time." Country Life. 30th October 2021. <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/nature/the-day-a-country-life-photographer-captured-an-image-of-a-ghost-234642> accessed 22nd October 2025.

⁸⁶ The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall", Burials and Beyond, 2025.

⁸⁷ ibid

⁸⁸ Wade, Mike. "Ultimate Proof that Ghosts Exist, or Maybe It's just Dust on the Lens. The Times. 27th March 2009. <https://www.thetimes.com/travel/destinations/uk-travel/scotland-travel/ultimate-proof-that-ghosts-exist-or-maybe-its-just-dust-on-the-lens-5xt5v03kk8k> accessed 22nd October 2025.

⁸⁹ The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall", Burials and Beyond, 2025

⁹⁰ ibid

⁹¹ "The Brown Lady of Raynham." 2025. Hoaxes.org

⁹² The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall", Burials and Beyond, 2025



Figure 5. "The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall." Captain H.C Provand and Indre Shira, 1936⁹³

⁹³ ⁹³ "Kat Devitt – Author of Gothic things – the Brown Lady of Raynham Hall." Kat Devitt
20

Our next image takes us to the Church of Christ the Consoler on the grounds of Newby Hall⁹⁴. It is a relatively young church, being built in the 1870s and founded in 1876.⁹⁵ Although a colourful church with a vibrant interior, this happy looking church has a tragic backstory. In April of 1870, a man of noble heritage by the name Frederick Vyner, along with several other British and Italian tourists were ambushed during their travels to Greece⁹⁶. Vyner was the youngest son of Colonel Henry Vyner and his wife Lady Mary⁹⁷. While the group were travelling through the mountains of Athens, they met with a stroke of bad luck when they encountered a group of brigands and five members of the group were abducted⁹⁸. They were held hostage with a ransom demand of one million drachma (approximately £32,000) for their release⁹⁹.

Although a large portion of the funds were gathered a failed rescue attempt saw three members of the group be murdered, including Frederick¹⁰⁰. These murders became known as the Dilessi Massacre, and were reported in newspaper all across Europe¹⁰¹. Frederick's mother Lady Mary, obviously heartbroken, saw to it that the accumulated ransom money was used for the construction of two churches in memory of her son. One was built on her daughter's land at Studley Royal, the other at her property at Newby Hall¹⁰² - where the famous photograph was taken.

⁹⁴ "The Spectre of Newby Church." Burials & Beyond. 5th of March 2019.

<https://burialsandbeyond.com/2019/03/05/the-spectre-of-newby-church/> accessed 27th October 2025

⁹⁵ *ibid*

⁹⁶ *ibid*

⁹⁷ "Our Story – Christ the Consoler." 2025. <https://www.christtheconsoler.com/about.html> accessed 15th January 2026.

⁹⁸ "The Dilessi Massacre and a Gothic Revival Masterpiece | English Heritage." English Heritage. 2024. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/st-marys-church-studley-royal/history/dilessi-massacre/> accessed 15th January 2026.

⁹⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰⁰ "The Spectre of Newby Church." Burials & Beyond.

¹⁰¹ "The Dilessi Massacre and a Gothic Revival Masterpiece | English Heritage." English Heritage.

¹⁰² "The Spectre of Newby Church." Burials & Beyond.

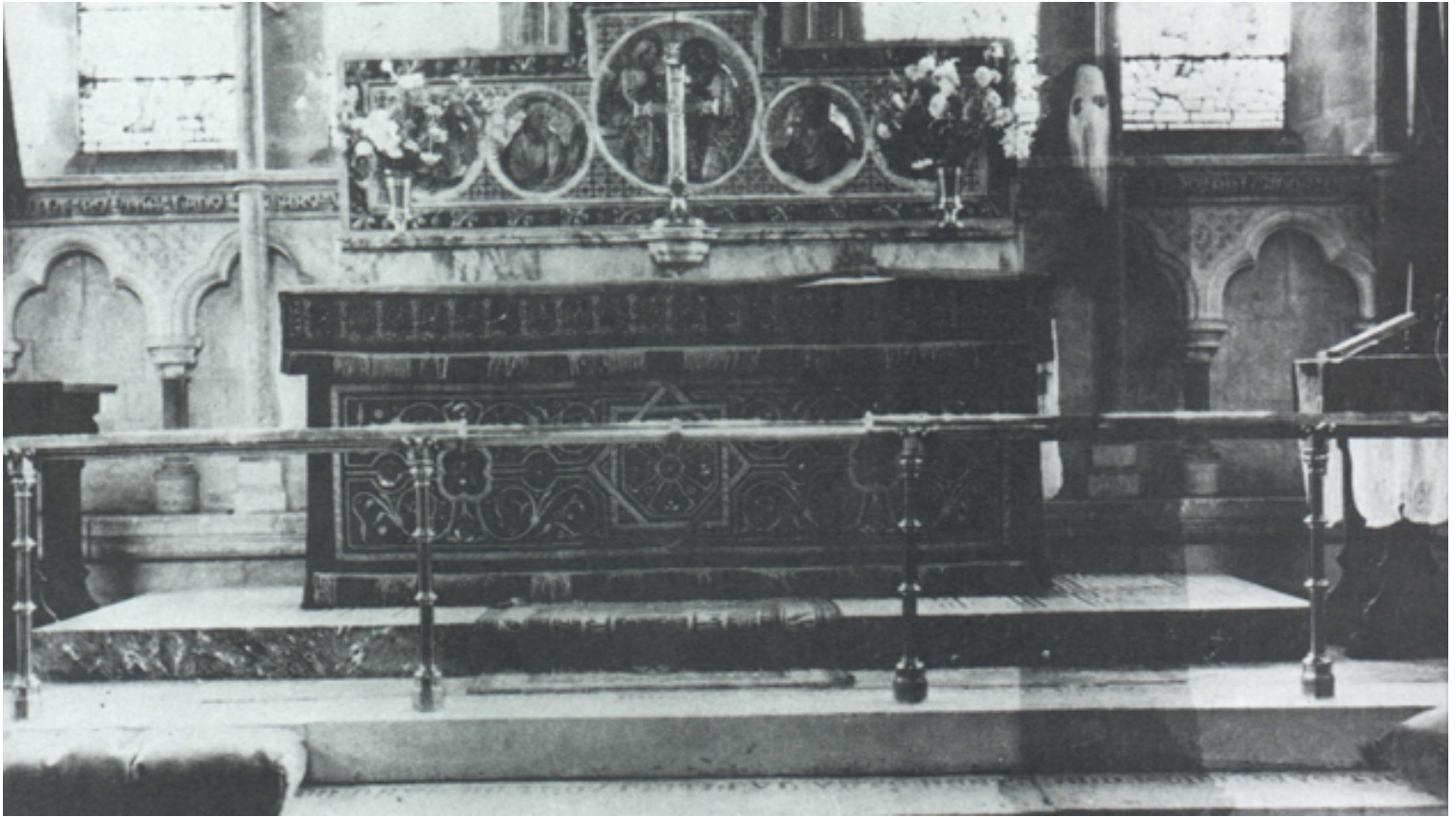


Figure 6. "The Spectre of Newby Church". Reverend Kenneth Lord. 1963.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ "The Spectre of Newby Church." Burials & Beyond. 5th of March 2019. Accessed 15th January 2026
22

'The Newby Monk', AKA the 'Spectre of Newby Church' is a name given to a ghostly monk like apparition developed in a 1963 photograph taken by Reverend Kenneth F Lord¹⁰⁴. Claiming there was no figure at the time of taking the image¹⁰⁵, the Reverend was surprised to discover the tall, masked transparency standing in frame¹⁰⁶. When the image was developed and began to circulate, people began to speculate as to what or who the figure was. There were multiple reports of supposed photographic experts claiming to have examined the image and found no evidence of tampering. But there were also many other investigators who noted the hallmark indicators of a double exposure image¹⁰⁷.

Many of the photograph's critics argued that the image was simply too good to be true. But Lord continued to insist that there was no other person in the room but him at the time the image was taken. He repeatedly swore to the validity of the photograph, and grew frustrated when people suggested he was involved in faking it somehow¹⁰⁸. Many claim that the monk looks to be posing¹⁰⁹, while others put forward that their calculations concluded that the figure would be a total of 2.7 metres, or nine feet, tall when compared to surroundings¹¹⁰.

To some, the image was legitimate because the North Yorkshire church had no history of supernatural activity. As far as people were aware, there had been no ghost sightings and no unusual activity on the premises¹¹¹. But others noticed some inconsistencies. As people tried to figure out the mysterious clergyman, they spotted something. Multiple people offered the idea that this figure could have been a 16th century monk¹¹², noting his hooded figure and the white shroud covering his face, which was worn to possibly mask leprosy or a facial disfigurement¹¹³. But what business would a monk from the fifteen hundreds have haunting a church built three hundred years after his time? I personally think the image is likely a fake, but whether that by accident or on purpose I'm not sure.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ "The Spectre of Newby Church". Daffadillies. 2021. <https://www.daffadillies.co.uk/trigger/b720031> accessed 27th October 2025

¹⁰⁷ "The Spectre of Newby Church." Burials & Beyond.

¹⁰⁸ "The Spectre of Newby Church". Daffadillies.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

¹¹⁰ "Spectre of Newby Church." Engole.info. 2019. <https://engole.info/spectre-of-newby-church/> accessed 15th January 2026

¹¹¹ "The Spectre of Newby Church". Daffadillies.

¹¹² "The Spectre of Newby Church." Burials & Beyond.

¹¹³ "Spectre of Newby Church." Engole.info.



Figure 7. "Wem Town Hall Ghost". Tony O'Rahilly, 1995¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ "BBC – Shropshire – Features – Weird Shropshire – the Wem Ghost Mysertyy." www.bbc.co.uk.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/shropshire/features/halloween/halloween_wem.shtml accessed 15 January 2026
24

Figure seven is the image of the supposed Wem Town Hall Ghost, a case which gained national attention during the 1990s.¹¹⁵ It was taken by amateur photographer Tony O’Rahilly on 19th November 1995 as he watched the namesake of the photo burn to the ground. Taken with a 200mm lens from across the road, neither O’Rahilly nor any onlookers saw a little girl in any of the Town Hall’s doorways. The little girl was reportedly only spotted after development.¹¹⁶ Unsure what to do, the image was sent to the *Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena*, who in turn sent the photo and its negative to a man named Dr Vernon Harison. Harrison was the former president of the *Royal Photographical Society*. He analysed both the print and its negative, and reported back that “The negative is a straight forward piece of black and white work and shows no signs of having been doctored with”.¹¹⁷

Even after analysis, Dr Harrison still considered himself somewhat of a sceptic. He suggested that it was possible that the girl was an illusion, a convenient trick of the light, perhaps a smoke, flame or shadow creating an optical illusion at just the right time.¹¹⁸ Parasearch, a special paranormal investigation unit, also investigated the image. According to them, O’Rahilly had tampered with the image to make it look as though a girl was inside the burning building.¹¹⁹

There were varying beliefs and speculations as to who, or what, the girl could be. Wem Town Hall burned once before in 1677. Records show that the fire was started by a young girl name Jane Churm after she accidentally dropped a candle. She perished in the fire. Since then, a belief has been maintained that the Town Hall premises is haunted by her ghost¹²⁰. There is also another belief that O’Rahilly captured the ghost of a girl pictured on a postcard from 1922 (see figure eight below). Andrew Homer, a chemist and member of Parasearch, stated that “the picture was not debunked until long after Tony died in 2005”¹²¹. It was Homer’s colleague, a man by the name of Steve Potter,

¹¹⁵ Bartlett, Luke. “Meet the Paranormal Specialist who Debunked the Region’s Biggest Mysertyy.” Shropshirestar.com. 21st January, 2018. <https://www.shropshirestar.com/news/local-hubs/north-shropshire/wem/2018/01/21/meet-the-paranormal-specialist-who-debunked-the-regions-biggest-mysertyy/> accessed 15th October 2025.

¹¹⁶ “BBC – Shropshire – Weird Shropshire – the Wem Ghost Mysertyy.” Bbc.co.uk https://www.bbc.co.uk/shropshire/features/halloween/halloween_wem.shtml 15th October 2025

¹¹⁷ ibid

¹¹⁸ ibid

¹¹⁹ Bartlett, Luke. “Meet the Paranormal Specialist who Debunked the Region’s Biggest Mysertyy.” Shropshirestar.com.

¹²⁰ “BBC – Shropshire – Weird Shropshire – the Wem Ghost Mysertyy.” Bbc.co.uk

¹²¹ Bartlett, Luke. “Meet the Paranormal Specialist who Debunked the Region’s Biggest Mysertyy.” Shropshirestar.com.

that discovered the photo to be a copy in 2007¹²². It is my belief that the figure is the latter, the girl from the postcard.

Spirit photography is not always limited to war times or the idea of profiting off of people's grief. When these types of photographs are not taken by professionals, especially by those who claim to be 'spirit mediums', there can be ways to explain the image off if we're unsure if it is a result of double exposure, like the Wem Town Hall ghost so clearly is. When these mysterious figures are explained away to natural excuses like light and dust, those who may not know how cameras work or know what signs to look for when inspecting a rumoured fake image will easily accept the reasoning. In my opinion, these types of photographs are more believable if where they were taken is supposedly haunted.

"It is interesting to compare the two pictures. I was intrigued to find that she bore a striking likeness to the little girl featured as the Wem ghost. Her dress and headgear appear to be identical." – Brian Lear¹²³

I found it difficult to find sources about figure eight, let alone reliable ones. But some sources state that it was in 2010, five years after O'Rahilly's death, that a 77 year old man named Brian Lear who spotted the girl on the postcard¹²⁴. Lear supposedly spotted a print of the image in the Shropshire Star, in a section called 'Pictures from the Past'.¹²⁵ I am inclined to believe that the young girl from the postcard is not an apparition of the young Jane Churm who burned down the hall two or three hundred years prior. To me, the clothing items look more like items worn in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, not the seventeenth. I think that the ghost in O'Rahilly's image is the girl from the postcard edited in with some adjustments (see figure 9 for side by side comparison).

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ "Mysertyious Photos." 2017. Thehorrorzine.com

<https://www.thehorrorzine.com/Morbid/MsteriousPhotos/MysertyiousPhotos.html> accessed 3rd February 2026

¹²⁴ "Debunking ghosts: The Wem Town Hall Ghost Girl." Kimberly Smith. 24th April, 2017.

<https://www.kimberlysmith.net/debunking-ghosts-the-wem-town-hall-ghost-girl/> accessed 3rd of February 2026

¹²⁵ "Mysertyious Photos." 2017. Thehorrorzine.com accessed 3rd February 2026



Figure 8, Wem High Street Postcard, unknown, 1922¹²⁶

¹²⁶ “The Wem Town Ghost Photograph Exposed” Europanormal. 21st May 2016. <https://europaranormal.com/the-wem-ghost-photograph-exposed/> accessed 15th of January 2026



Figure 9, side by side comparison of 'Wem Town Hall Ghost' and the 1922 Wem High Street photograph¹²⁷

¹²⁷ "Mysertyious Photos." 2017. Thehorrorzine.com accessed 3rd February 2026

Conclusion

As an overall research topic, I wanted to look into how, even from the dawn of photography, it has been easy to fool people and exploit the innocent even with some of the most 'simple' of art types. Throughout the thesis it has become clear to me how easy it actually is to exploit and profit off of people's grief, even if it is not directly obvious. And, like many other things, once faults are exposed, people return to what's comforting as a false sense of security.

In chapter two, I learned how spiritualism emerged as a religious movement throughout America and Europe in the nineteenth century¹²⁸, and how its practitioners believed the human consciousness could survive a physical death¹²⁹. Spirit mediums were believed to have a special communication with the dead, so when William Mumler came out with his 'spirit photographs' in the 1860s, it was a sort of a confirmation bias.

My research for chapter two also taught me how practitioners of the 'spirit' genre went about that work, using glass plates and double exposures in the dark room. William Hope had the smart idea of allowing people to look over his camera then change his set up last minute. This misplaced reassurance allowed for people to back him up, even after being exposed as a fraud. It wasn't odd for photographers in this genre to be outed as fraud, because William Mumler was eventually exposed as well, with PT Barnum went around stating that Mumler was profiting off of people's grief.

I found it interesting how, despite Mumler and Hope's exposures, there were many people who continued to believe that this type of work was legitimate. This is most likely because the spiritualist movement tended to peak around the time of wars, so many were longing for some sort of connection to their now lost or deceased relatives, no matter what it took. As many people, especially in the early days of photography's development, didn't know how cameras or photograph development worked. This was easy to exploit, so Mumler, Hope, and many others in the photographic field used this to their advantage.

I also found it curious how eventually even amateurs began using these techniques as photography became more accessible to lower incomes. Yet, despite photography's increasing accessibility, most people still don't know how these supposed 'ghosts on camera' were caught. If people didn't know

¹²⁸ J. Gordon Melton. 2012. "Spiritualism | Religion." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiritualism-religion> accessed 29th October 2025

¹²⁹ "About Spiritualism – the Spiritualists' National Union." The Spiritualists' National Union. June 13th 2025
<https://snu.org.uk/about-us/about-spiritualism/> accessed 30 October 2026

how to double expose film or how to use photoshop, captures of apparitions such as the Newby Spectre were essentially used as confirmation of existence of the paranormal. When researching, I came across some instances of supposed 'captures' in places where there was supposed paranormal activity, like with the case of the Brown Lady in Raynham Hall. In these types of situations, I found people were more likely to believe the images released.

During my research, I tried my best to gather a wide variety of different sources. But some of my topics were possibly too niche, with some websites unable to give me new information, instead mostly just repeating what others had said. If providing new information, mostly in places like blogs, many didn't provide sources or suggestions for further reading. I tried my best to stick to what I believed to be reliable sources, especially if it was some sort of science or photography based writing, like the *American Museum of Photography*, or news sources such as the *shropshirestar.com*.

Before starting my research, I wanted to look into supposed ghosts caught on camera. I thought about looking to see if there was any real, undisputed examples of these apparitions. The most I could really find was of cases like the Newby Spectre not leaning one way or the other, saying that there's no real evidence of double exposure or manipulation, but also that the clothing of the spirit was outdated, dating to before the church was even built, and thus had no reason to even be in the image or haunting the chapel. One thing I definitely wanted to look into was the concept of faking these types of images and why they are so easy to believe. I did this with the help of William Mumler and William Hope, looking into their practices and how they worked. These photographers helped lay the groundwork of my investigation, leading me to research the origins of the spiritualist movement, the cultural contexts of each artist, and how the evolution of photography and people's ignorance on the subject allowed them to be successful.

Throughout my time researching and investigating different topics for my dissertation, I have learned a few things. These include, but are not limited to, the importance of cultural emergences, the development of new technologies and the naivety that comes with it, and how easy it is to actually exploit people's grief in a way that negatively impacts one person but positively impacts another. I also found that people who already believed in an afterlife or that there was some sort of spiritual realm were more likely to believe that these images were legitimate. It was evident to me that there was some sort of symbiotic relationship between photographer and grieving. An evolution into a sort of relationship where the grieving are unknowingly exploited, and the exploiter makes some sort of profit, monetarily or with recognition. Even without exploiting others, it's possible for the

photographers of these one off cases to be in it for some sort of gain. What sort of gain? I'm not entirely sure. But it's hard sometimes hard to find a reason if the search for gain or profit is involved.

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