

## Who you gonna call? Sheffield Paranormal Investigations!





wenty years ago, Sheffield Paranormal Investigations was in its undeniable heyday. Founded in 2002 by Brenda Diskin, the group had

world of those interested in the other-worldly, it had a "very good reputation," Diskin claims, pointing out they were often the first investigators invited into Yorkshire's most allegedly haunted buildings, such as Castle Howard in York. "I think that's because we always honoured and respected the property and would give the owner full reports of what we found, including whether we thought a lot of it was imaginary or debatable," she says. Several pages on the group's extremely retro-looking website warn prospective ghost-hunters that they have a "no drinks, no drugs policy on all their investigations". Diskin, a 75-year-old medium who lives in Parson Cross, regrets that this does have to be mentioned. "I'm disappointed in a lot of the things that go on these days," she tells me. "People don't show respect for the actual work." It's not that she's a stick in the mud — if she was investigating a

grown from a team of six to more than 200 in just two years. In the rarefied

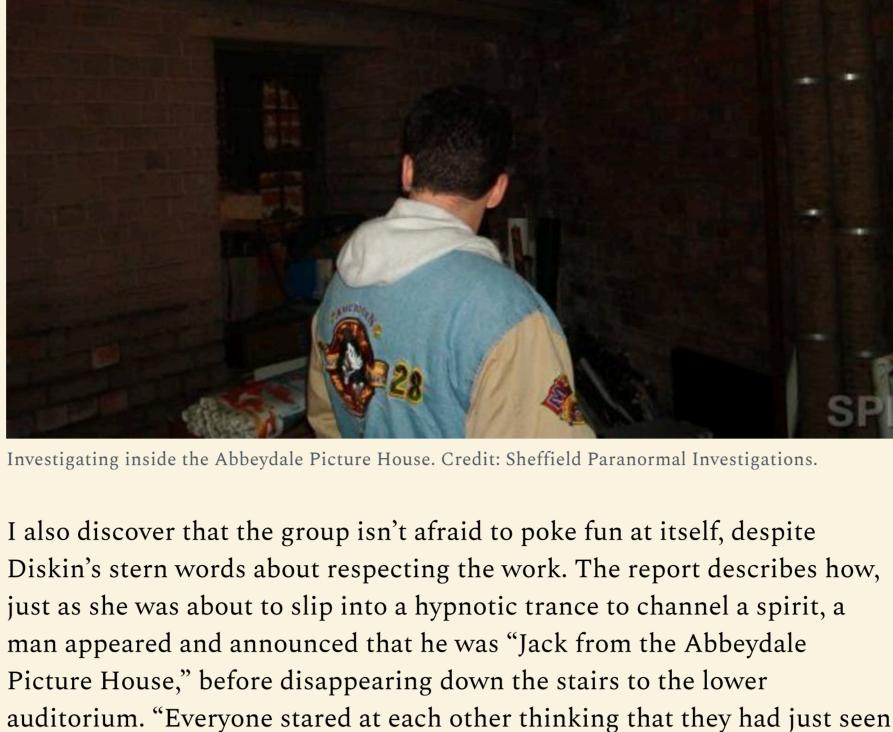
But too much more than that would not only "cloud your judgement when picking up sensitive information" from the other side, it would also invalidate the group's insurance if someone tripped on the uneven stairs of an old building. "Obviously I don't mind people having fun — but there's a time for fun and a time for sitting down and listening and seeing what you pick up on." And, over the years, the wealth of investigation reports on the group's website suggests they've picked up on quite a lot. Take their trip to the Abbeydale Picture House in 2005, when Brenda and her son Mike, another accomplished medium, felt the presence of a young woman "dressed in 1930s-style clothing" near the old dressing room. "Apparently, an actress

had committed suicide in this area," the report on their website notes. At

first, I assume this must be a mistake — after all, the Abbeydale Picture

pub, she wouldn't bat an eye at someone ordering a single pint beforehand.

House was a cinema, not a theatre. But further research reveals Sheffield's "Picture Palace" once offered "cine-variety" shows, in which variety acts performed between short films, albeit only until 1930. Also present that night was the shade of Lionel, a young boy brought to the Picture House as a birthday treat, who fell on the steps and hit his head on the balcony. "Although this did not kill him, he died later as a result of his injuries," the report reveals.



their first full manifestation of spirit," the report reads. "Carl went to

was to do with the Abbeydale group."

a minimum of £400.

investigate and returned to tell us that it was actually a living person who

The Halloween special is now something of a Tribune tradition — a task

that has always previously fallen to our founder Dan Hayes. See his piece

last year on Cakin' Night, the Halloween alternative once celebrated on the

"wild and windy western fringes of Sheffield," or his article on the alleged "most haunted road in Britain": the Stocksbridge bypass. However, as Dan himself points out, one city can only harbour a finite number of spooky sites and tales. Thus, to up the ante this year, I wanted to talk to a professional. For example, it's accepted common knowledge that the National Emergency Services Museum is one of the city's most haunted buildings. According to a **Sheffield Guide article**, it is plagued by spectral prisoners from when it was a Victorian police station, plus "spirit dogs brushing up against visitor's legs and even a spook that tries to grope ladies". The veil

between this world and the next is reportedly so threadbare in the building

that it's become a neat little money-spinner for the museum, which offers

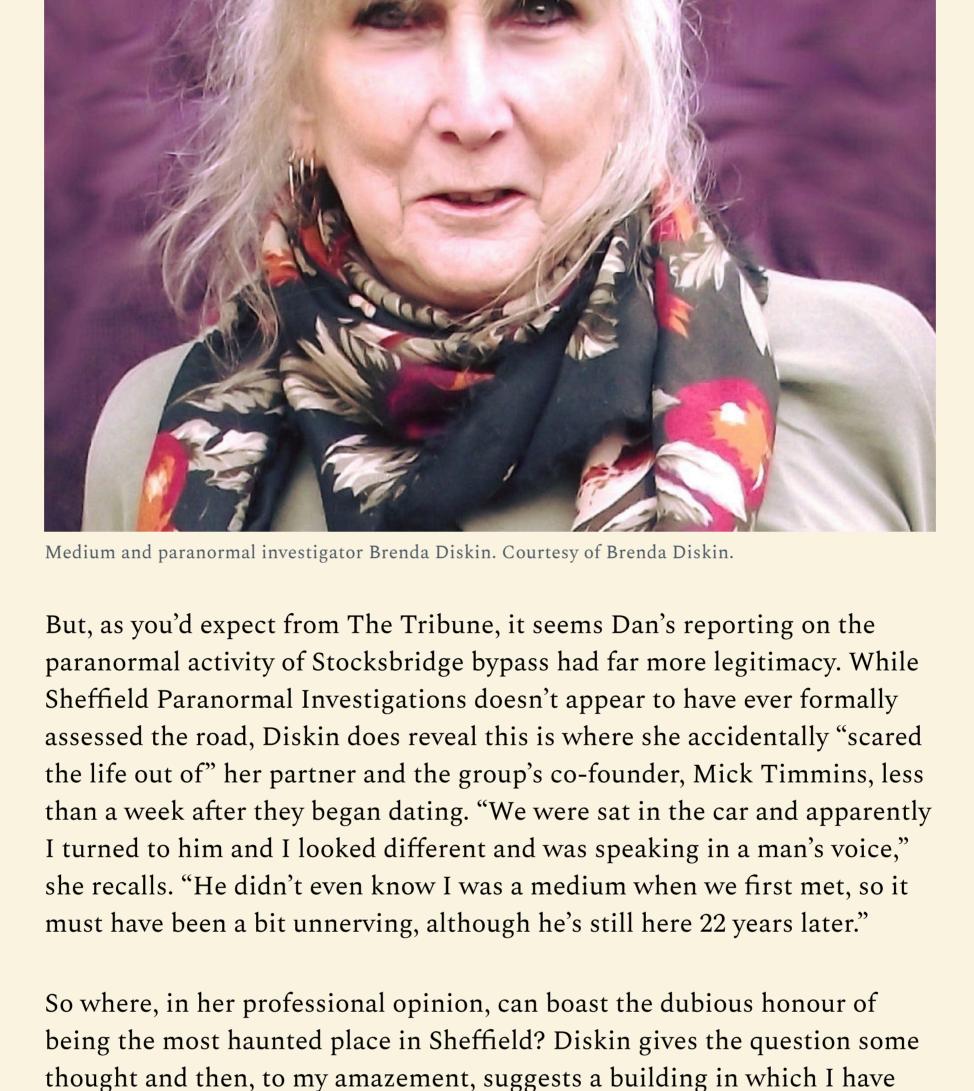
paranormal investigation groups the chance to hire the place overnight for

Diskin, however, clearly considers its reputation a bit overblown. She

claims her group only picked up "bits and pieces" during their visit —

she says, "it was not as active as we thought it would be."

there's not even a report of this trip on the website. "To be quite honest,"



Hillsborough, now 38 upmarket flats — were not ghosts, but rather their fellow leaseholders. However, given Diskin insists it is "obviously one of the most active" spots she has ever visited, perhaps the schism dividing this gated community is merely a symptom of a deeper supernatural unease. Diskin describes visiting one flat where tenants who had paid six months rent in advance abruptly moved out after just one. "The woman got held down on the bed and her partner, who was quite a big man, couldn't pull her up," she claims. Middlewood Lodge in Hillsborough. Credit: The Tribune.

For the sceptics among our readers, allow me to lay out Diskin's psychic

credentials - her "clairvoyant vitae", if you will. While she only became a

full-time medium in 1996 after she was made redundant, Diskin has been

making money from her innate gift since was just 15 years old, when she

stage before a crowd and giving out messages from the spirit world to

gave her first one-on-one reading. (Her first "platform work" — getting on

random audience members — took place only a year later.) She tells me she

spent a considerable chunk of time, reporting on people allegedly pushed

to the brink by malicious presences and nearly losing my own mind in the

Of course, the sinister forces described by many residents of Middlewood

<u>Lodge</u> — once the administrative building of a Victorian mental asylum in

process.

knew from a young age that she had a connection to the dead but that it was only when she got to school and was bullied by the other children that she realised this was considered abnormal. "I was probably three or four years old when I said something to one of my mum's friends about a lady with one leg shorter than the other wishing her 'happy birthday' for tomorrow," she recalls. "It turned out it was her mother." Diskin is certain that both her mother and grandmother shared her psychic abilities, but seemingly never sought to share their gift with others. Though she says she was never actively "discouraged" from embracing her own ability, she notes that UK citizens could technically still be tried for

witchcraft up until the 1950s and feels this is why her mother kept her own

brushes with the supernatural "very much behind locked doors". When her

young child naively passed on messages from the dead, Diskin suggests, "it

A teenage Diskin, however, was desperate to know more, which is why she

followed an advertisement in a specialist magazine about the supernatural

to a coven of witches in west London, where she grew up. "They did teach

me some little bits and pieces, but not the sort of things I really wanted to

obviously we were quite naive in those days — and they suggested we dance

naked round a bonfire. That was it, I was gone." But through another ad,

Diskin then found the Rayners Lane Spiritualist Church, a group who met

in an old Scout's Hut and took her under their collective wing, encouraging

know about. They were more interested in the witchcraft side of things,

like worshipping deities," she says. "The reason I left is because —

was kind of her worst nightmare".

her to take her talents to the stage. I'd been under the impression that a link to the dead must be a pretty difficult relationship to navigate at times. After all, it's hard to make a good impression on a first date if your suitor's dead grandmother keeps haranguing you to pass on where she hid the heirloom jewellery. However, Diskin surprises me by revealing that she's able to keep a professional distance from those who have departed the mortal realm the vast majority of the time. "I only allow anything to come through when I'm in work mode," she says. "Obviously, occasionally things do slip through but very, very rarely — there's got to be a real reason for it."

Courtesy of Brenda Diskin.

When Diskin talks about "work mode," she's not referring to some kind of

only do at certain times," she explains — but literally to the periods she's in

her billable hours. Even the process of inducing a trance seems to involve

far less occult pageantry than I had been imagining. "It's done with deep

breathing and relaxation skills," Diskin explains, in the patient tone of a

What also surprises me is Diskin's belief that she's never once received a

message from one of her own loved ones. "I've had a lot of people pass, far

primary school teacher dealing with an over-excitable child.

heightened state of consciousness — "going into a trance is something I

too many over the years, and I've not had anything from any of them," she says. Indeed, the only time a spirit tried to communicate a message to her through another medium, it seems they got the supernatural version of a wrong number. "This lady said 'I've got your dad here, he's this, this and this," Diskin recalls. "And I said 'he's not my dad but, if he's going spare, I'll have him'." Then again, she muses that it's possible one of her relatives *has* tried to get in touch, but simply done it so subtly that she's written them off as her imagination playing tricks on her. "To be quite honest, I'm probably the worst Doubting Thomas out there," she claims. While the reports on the group's website give off the impression that Diskin is constantly swimming

upstream against a deluge of apparitions — unable to even turn a corner

without bumping into the victim of a tragic fire — she says that, after all

a handful of instances "where we could say without a doubt that it was

something supernatural".

that aren't seen."

everywhere."

these years and "many hundreds of investigations," she's only encountered

Diskin is keen to point out that psychic abilities are not a necessity when it

them don't actually have any known psychic abilities," she says. Her partner

Timmins, for example, claims to be "about as psychic as a brick wall" and

medium with you sometimes," she adds, "because they can pick up things

even he has "seen things" on their expeditions. "But it's nice to have a

comes to paranormal investigations. "A lot of people that go out and do

Those without the gift have to rely on technology and, fortunately, there is a whole host of tools specially designed to help weed out presences from the beyond. The essentials include night-vision cameras to spot spectral apparitions, digital recorders to capture EVP or "electronic voice phenomena", thermometers to note sudden cold spots and — most famously — EMF meters to measure the electro-magnetic fields allegedly emitted by the departed. (Diskin claims that she also gives these off when she enters into a trance.) An EMF meter. Credit: Rvcrewe/Wikimedia Commons.

When she goes to investigate a building, Diskin always brings a "techie"

with her — someone who will set up the various pieces of equipment and

also guard them against anyone trying to manipulate their finds. This is,

paranormal. "People do try and fabricate things," she says, disappointedly.

"At the end of the day, you want it to be as real as possible, so you don't

she admits, an unfortunate occupational hazard of investigating the

want people shaking bits of cloth and making dust so you have orbs

While some people mislead deliberately, she notes there are also some that are simply too suggestible for their own good. For example, she and Timmins hosted a Halloween event several years ago at the Concord Sports

Centre, during which they told a number of ghost stories, both real and

fabricated. "One of the people there decided that the ghost story we made

she says, laughing. "So now the Concord is haunted by an imaginary ghost."

up was real because they were convinced they saw that particular ghost,"

But if you fancy joining the group and trying your hand at it, there's bad

news. Sheffield Paranormal Investigations has gone from a group that once boasted hundreds of professional and amateur ghost-hunters to one that is as dead as the subjects of its investigations. Diskin is focusing on her career as a medium for the minute and says the site remains up as a reference only, although she's not ruled out the idea of resuming the group's work in future. In the end, what killed it was not the hijinks of the deceased but surprise, surprise — the bad behaviour of the living. "People started taking

liberties," Diskin says, clearly unwilling to raise these disagreements from

their grave by divulging too many specific details. "It all got a bit political."

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