

## Why I'm a disgrace as a trained sceptic

Here's a suitable question for April Fool's Day - do you believe in ghosts, psychics and things that go bump in the night?

If so, you're probably a fan of TV's *Sensing Murder*, which is into its fifth season and rates as high as ninth most popular telly programme. Which suggests there are lots of believers out there, people who think psychics have the power to crack unsolved murder cases.

Do I believe? Journalists tend to be unlikely converts to paranormal beliefs. We're pragmatists. I was told from day one to believe nothing of what I hear and only half of what I see.

For years, a journo mate - who'd once trained up to "defeat" a psychic in a duel the Auckland Star staged before an audience - would come in to do a session with my journalism classes. He was presented as an overseas psychic imported specially to solve whatever murder case was on the go. Almost always, every student bar one would believe him, and they would round on the sceptical one for being rude to the guest by doubting him.

Despite that, my armour-plate scepticism took a pounding after some extraordinary happenings at a house I spent 10 years renovating. It was one of the oldest in Auckland. Built in 1860 and added to at least five times, the structure when we bought it had been divided in two, with tenants living in the oldest part.

When her husband was away late one night, our tenant neighbour asked if she could join us till he came home. She was nervous. They'd often sensed a presence of some kind, and one night something had moved their clothes on a wardrobe rail from one side to the other.

My then-spouse was Scots and fey (sensitive to paranormal things). Not long after we moved in she was awoken on several nights by the sound of crying, but on investigating found the only other occupant, our son, was sleeping soundly.

One day she asked why I hadn't responded when she called out as I entered the old shed at the back. Simple, I said: I wasn't anywhere near the shed. Next there was a "sighting". She saw a woman dressed in a high-collared Victorian dress standing at the hallway glass door, peering into the kitchen.

Shortly afterwards, she spent a terrifying weekend alone in the house when our son and I went away on a Scout camp. Cloves of garlic were involved in the warding off of whatever was haunting us.

The piano teacher asked one day if something had happened in the lounge, because she sometimes had a feeling of someone watching her. The dog sensed something in there as well, often barking wildly for no obvious reason. A man who came to fit a burglar alarm scrambled out of the roof space above that room, white-faced and trembling because "there's something up there".

The fey one consulted a psychic, who said our home hosted the spirit of a woman who'd lived there in the 1880s and lost the place in a mortgagee sale. The ghost was warning us not to lay brown lino with a blue pattern because the pattern would wear.

Two odd things then happened. Our lawyer checked old property records and found there was indeed a mortgagee sale in the 1880s; my renovating uncovered a layer of lino in the oldest part of the house - it was brown with a worn blue pattern.

## JT column for Saturday April 1 – ghosts and psychics

By this time, we had the whole place to ourselves, but couldn't figure out how to reunite it. The fey person solved that by going into the most haunted room and asking our guest spirit. A plan magically appeared in her mind, we carried it out over the ensuing year or so...and we never heard from the ghost again.

Ol' sceptical journo Jim had to admit those events added up to something that cannot be explained with standard logic. Which leaves me with a slightly uneasy feeling that while Sensing Murder has so far failed to unearth a single murder-solving clue, there are things about our lives that remain inexplicable.

I have to commend former detective senior-sergeant Grant Coward for taking part in the new series. As he says, while he has doubts about psychic powers (cops are even more sceptical than journalists) there's always a chance that airing the facts of a case will lead to something that sees it solved.