

Postbag

Your thoughts and theories on the problem of the panelled room

Last week, Witness published a first-hand account of the mysterious affair at White Gate by our staff reporter Karen Yu. In response to the significant interest this story has generated, Miss Yu has responded to some of the more intriguing suggestions from readers on pages 16-17. Ed.

SIR – I was absorbed and bamboozled in equal measure by your most recent issue and its lead story, *The Problem of the Panelled Room*. It may seem somewhat old hat, but I can only conclude that your reporter is mistaken in asserting that Andrew Paris' study has no secret panels, doors, tunnels or some sort of entrance out of which the assailant could have – indeed, must have – escaped.

For the sake of the nation's sanity I urge Thames Valley Police to conduct a complete and thorough examination of that room. The answer must surely lie there.

Graham Marston
Cheltenham

SIR – With regards to the unfortunate event which befell Andrew Paris: everyone seems to have assumed that the bullet that lodged in the skirting board was the first bullet, and the one that lodged in Mr Paris' stomach the second. Is there any reason for this? More to the point, is there any reason why it could not be the other way around?

Would it not make more sense if, after the first shot was fired, striking Mr Paris, the gun fell to the ground, discharging another bullet into the skirting board as it did so?

Olivia Benson
Edinburgh

SIR – I seem to remember a time when *Witness* tried to cover real events of genuine interest to the intelligent reader, not the tawdry snoopings of some tabloid hack. Can Miss Yu not find something more important to report on, and grant her readers at least some intelligence and interest in the world beyond soap opera-style scandals?

Nigel Roper
Wallingford

It's a tricky one – Miss Yu and Witness found ourselves in this case by chance, rather than sniffing it out. Moreover, if Andrew Paris was indeed shot – and by someone clever enough to do so undetected – I would argue that there is a journalistic duty to report it. Plus our last edition was the first to ever sell out completely. Ed.

SIR – I can't help thinking the late, great Roanoke Adams would already have solved this mystery by now.

Scott Wilson
Clifton-upon-Dunsmore

SIR – After reading the latest issue of *Witness* and Miss Yu's 6th June article (*Andrew Paris did not shoot himself, claims police detective*), I, like the rest of the country, was left

scratching my head at the impossibility of it all. That is, until I realised that Andrew Paris did not need to be holding the gun in order to still shoot himself. Is it beyond the realms of possibility that he was able to prop the gun somewhere in the study – perhaps on the bookshelves lining the wall behind the desk – and fire it remotely using some long pole or trip wire? Perhaps the bullet found lodged in the skirting board was a first attempt. Having managed to shoot himself, Mr Paris must then have staggered over to the bookshelves, picked up the gun – removing any traces of his device as he did so – and placed it beside him on the floor, where it was found just a few minutes later. It may not be the most elegant solution, but it does at least remove the need for any dematerialising phantom, and I consider that a significant step forward.

Fiona Farr,
Coventry

SIR – I read with interest last week's account of the so-called impossible attack on Andrew Paris. After more than fifteen years' experience studying paranormal and unexplained phenomena (UFOs, crop circles, 'ghosts,' Loch Ness and other assorted monsters, etc.), I can confidently state that whenever something looks impossible like this, the solution can always be found by reassessing our assumptions. What do we know about this case? As in, *really* know? Once you adopt this critical attitude you begin to see that almost everything considered a 'fact' in this mystery is in actuality an *assumption*. Do we

even know, for instance, that it was definitely Andrew Paris who was shot in the panelled room at White Gate?

The question isn't as outlandish as it might first appear. In fact, it goes a long way to explaining what exactly happened last Saturday. As soon as we consider the possibility that Andrew Paris didn't act alone – that *there was someone else already in that room when he locked the door* – the workings of this apparent mystery unfold with surprising ease. This is how I think it probably happened.

Andrew Paris' plan was always to do more than simply stay in the panelled room the night of Saturday 1st June. Instead, he contrived to *stage an impossible scenario* for his guests. Think back to his demeanour that night, as reported by Miss Yu: the stern, schoolmasterly air; the desire to drill certain facts into his fellow diners; his insistence that, no matter what might happen, there was no reason to think the panelled room was home to supernatural powers of any kind. He had, in short, spent the evening *teaching* his guests. And what follows a lesson? A test.

Paris' test was devious and carefully engineered. He wanted to contrive a scenario – namely, being found shot in a locked room – which, on account of its seeming impossibility, would tempt his guests to ignore the evening's lesson and reach for supernatural explanations. And that's exactly what he did.

It would have been easy for a man like Paris to create the illusion. First he would have found a look-alike – someone who, especially when wearing the same clothes as Paris, could easily be mistaken for him. It couldn't have been hard for someone as well-travelled and well-connected as Paris to find a willing and suitable confederate. On the Saturday night this doppelganger slips into the panelled room and

hides somewhere (my guess would be behind the desk) just before Paris rounds everyone up to watch as he locks himself into the study. *The look-alike is already in the room at this point.* Then, once everyone else has gone to bed, Paris shoots his conspirator (standing at least four feet away from him so as to avoid spraying him with gun residue), places the gun on the ground and quickly leaves through the door and slips out of the house. His assistant, despite being shot, quickly relocks the door from the inside – so as to maintain the illusion that no one had gone in or out through it – before falling to the floor in a faint (if he passed out before being able to relock the door it's possible that Paris could have locked the door from the outside using powerful magnets).

At this point you might ask: what's in it for the assistant? It's a fair question, but one with a pretty obvious answer: money. Andrew Paris is a wealthy man, and I'm sure his co-conspirator will receive a very large cheque as soon as they leave hospital. How much? I can't say, but enough for him to retire somewhere far away from the glare of publicity and the temptation to reveal his role in the trick. (It's also possible that Paris has paid off the paramedics who arrived at the scene, and maybe even hospital management, in order to keep the mechanics of his plan secret. It makes you wonder just how high this reaches.)

In short, the mystery of the panelled room is nothing more than a very devious, very audacious trick. And it very nearly had us all fooled.

Jim Bowman, Paranormal Investigation Society for the Study of Unexplained Phenomena
West Wallington

I'll get the tin foil. Ed.

SIR – Regarding the locked room

mystery of Andrew Paris: it seems we've all been so hung up on the 'how' that we've forgotten to ask 'why.' I understand that Paris took a boorish delight in rubbing people up the wrong way, but was that really enough to make someone want to murder him? Having read Miss Yu's account of the night in question I feel confident in saying that none of the guests seem like the murdering type, and certainly not so curiously twisted as to conjure up some unfathomable plot involving locked doors and haunted masks. Could it be an outside job? Either way, it seems to me that the motive is the most mysterious part of this mystery.

George Perry
Sheffield

SIR – I hate to cast aspersions, but I feel compelled to point out that we've only seen 'the problem of the panelled room' through the eyes of one person: Karen Yu. Is one perspective reliable enough? Might not the others involved in this case offer different – and perhaps more enlightening – angles on the mystery? Would it be possible to secure interviews with them?

Margaret Dunning
Inverness

A fair point, but one I feel compelled to refute (not that Miss Yu needs any help defending herself). If I didn't trust Miss Yu I wouldn't employ her. It's as simple as that. Ed.

SIR – Having read a few locked-room mysteries in my time, I'm sad to say that *The Problem of the Panelled Room* has so far fallen far short of expectations. To enumerate:

1. It is not set in the 1930s.
2. The police do not seem to be accompanied by a brilliant but unorthodox amateur

- sleuth, which is clearly essential if they are to have any hope of ever solving the case.
3. The Paris family seem genuinely shocked by the attempted murder of a loved one, rather than simply fixing themselves a gin-and-it and getting on with their lives as if nothing had happened.
 4. No one involved in this case has any obvious motive for trying to kill Mr Paris. Normally by now at least three people would have calmly and coolly declared their willingness to commit the crime.

In short, life has clearly not imitated art; too bad. I wish Mr Paris a speedy recovery, and it's back to the Carlton Lindrick novels I go.

Frank North
Rugby

SIR – Let's not forget the creepy similarities between the attack on Andrew Paris and the death of his brother John almost twenty years ago. Both were found in the same room at White Gate. Both were shot. Both times the room was sealed shut from the inside and people had to break in to get to the bodies. Shouldn't we at least consider the possibility that these events are related in some way? No, I'm not suggesting the 'haunted' mask is involved. Instead, let's consider some more prosaic ways all this could have been engineered. For instance, might the panelled room be booby-trapped in some way? I think it would be worth further investigation.

Colin Turner,
London

SIR – Once Mr Paris recovers I can't help thinking he'll be laughing his head off when he finds out how his little trick has infuriated us all. For it must surely be a trick, and

Andrew Paris must surely be the perpetrator. Regardless of how he did it, I salute him for a remarkable performance.

Roy Planer
Doncaster

SIR – In this sceptical electronic age it's deeply unfashionable to talk about anything spiritual, and any individual brave enough to do so faces ostracism as a 'nut' and a 'hippy' by a society that loves to think it's got it all worked out. Nowhere is this conceited attitude is on fuller display than in the various 'solutions' to the Andrew Paris 'mystery' that are currently doing the rounds. They say his wine was laced with a powerful hallucinogen. They say the gun was held in mid-air with powerful magnets. They say, it seems, just about anything so long as it is 'logical' and 'rational,' regardless of how ridiculous or impractical it might otherwise be. Anything but acknowledge that something of a supernatural nature was at work here.

The elephant (or should I say mask?) in the room here is that the events that took place at White Gate last weekend were the clearest example of supernatural forces at work since the Enfield poltergeist of 1977-79. A man spends a night alone in a locked room with a mask known for its powers of telepathy and a taste for blood. Lo and behold, he is found shot in a manner that is entirely consistent with the mythology of the Hungry Corpse.

I am, of course, well aware that in Karen Yu's 4th June article, *The Problem of the Panelled Room*, she recounts how Andrew Paris dismissed the folklore surrounding the mask as fiction. I do not doubt he said this, but I do doubt whether he was telling the truth or not. I would not put it past Mr Paris – whose belittling braggadocio epitomises the modern attitude towards the spiritual – to lie about the mask.

This man built his entire career on thumbing his nose at the spiritual; how do you think he would react when faced with something, like the Hungry Corpse and its powers, that he could not explain? He would dismiss it as nonsense, just as he did on Saturday night, rather than concede one inch to those who believe in higher powers.

Not only is this explanation the simplest and most obvious solution to the 'mystery,' it helps explain a few features of the case which have been puzzling more 'level-headed' investigators. Take the desk pushed across the door: everyone is assuming that that it was there to stop someone getting in, which seems rather odd given that the door was already locked. But what if it was to stop something getting *out*? The spirit of the Hungry Corpse, say? It also explains the curious similarities between the attack on Andrew and his brother John back in the 1970s. And then consider that Mr Paris' last act, before falling unconscious, *was to point at the Hungry Corpse*. Do we really need a clearer indication of what took place in that room than that? Clearly he was trying to tell us – to warn us – about that mask and its destructive powers.

Lona Powell
Carmarthen

SIR - Ice dagger.

Nick Brown
Newcastle upon Tyne

What replaces communism?

SIR – Now that the USSR is on its last legs, have the West's leaders really given enough thought to what political system will replace it in Russia and its satellite states?

The obvious answer is democracy, but such hopes seem to