

UK-Skeptics newsletter

■ UK-Skeptics news

There has been a plethora of conferences that have sprung up this year, however, the UK-Skeptics conference at Muncaster Castle has sold very well and is now almost fully booked.

We have a few places left and as the conference is now being promoted in the local press, those places should be filled quickly. So book now if you've been putting it off!

It looks like we'll have an ITV film crew present also who will require some space to do some filming of the proceedings so we'll have to be strict with restricting numbers once the booking is full - i.e. we won't be able to 'squeeze in' people who have left it too late.

Info here:

<http://www.ukskeptics.com/conference-2009.php>

The booking form is available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/mewz7l> (PDF)

In this issue of the newsletter we have the first article from historian Dr. Janet Anscombe who will be writing for us in the upcoming issues and showing how skepticism can be applied to historical claims and evidence.

Skepticism can be applied anywhere that data or evidence needs to be scrutinised and history is no exception.

It will be interesting to learn how many of the things we think are true about historical claims are either not supported by evidence or indeed are entirely false. The first short article looks at our conception of the Colosseum. You know, that place where Christians were fed to the lions for entertainment...

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twitter

We're now tweeting! If you're on Twitter too and you want to follow UK-Skeptics then just click the link below and choose to follow us.

It's a very convenient way to share links and keep up to date with what's happening.

<http://twitter.com/ukskeptics>

COMPETITION

We're offering the prize of a copy of "*A Treasury of Deception*" By Michael Farquhar.



In order to enter the draw, simply answer the following question:

When is it legal to drive a car over 3-years-old without an MOT certificate?

Place your answer here:
<http://ukskeptics.com/comp.php>

The competition closes on September 14th 2009. A winner will be drawn at random on September 15th

Magnetic anomalies

Can they explain haunting experiences?

JOHN JACKSON

What makes a location haunted?

A location can be said to be haunted if numerous reports of anomalous experiences occur independently in the same location and which are interpreted as ghostly. Note that this doesn't necessarily imply ghosts being present although that is a common interpretation.

There are many reasons why a particular location gives rise to haunt reports. These include: suggestibility; prior knowledge; contextual factors present in the environment (age, décor); ambience (lighting, draughtiness); and various physical properties. One factor identified in recent studies is that of magnetic fields, which have been postulated as a possible cause of some haunt-type experiences.

Magnetic fields and anomalous experience

It is known that people who have complex partial seizures, usually as a consequence of having Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE), also report aura and hallucinatory experiences (including paranormal and spiritual experiences). This type of seizure does not result in a complete loss of consciousness, more an embellishment of it. Symptoms of a seizure include: hallucinatory experiences (visual, olfactory and aural); feelings of déjà vu or jamais vu; visual distortions (objects appearing to be different in size, shape or distance than they really are); a feeling of detachment from oneself or reality; feelings of deep meaningfulness; and a heightened sense of fear and anxiety.

Magnetic stimulation to the brain, usually to the right temporal lobe, is thought to induce 'micro-seizures' in the brain that are similar to TLE. If the person's brain is susceptible to magnetic stimulation (20-40% of people) then such stimulation can invoke similar experiences to those with TLE, i.e. possible hallucinatory experiences and peculiar sensations. There is some laboratory evidence that low-amplitude, complex magnetic fields can indeed induce similar experiences to TLE (see particularly the work of Michael Persinger). Although controversial, the emerging picture from Persinger's lab is that striking experiences can be induced in highly vulnerable brains under certain circumstances.

In a recent critique of the field Braithwaite (2008) noted that it is unlikely that such magnetic fields are common

in cases of haunting; and in addition, even if such fields are present it is important to acknowledge the co-presence of other factors such as context and the need for a susceptible brain. These factors, working in concert, may underlie some of the more striking and sustained reports reported by witnesses. For example, someone sitting next to a malfunctioning electric fan that is giving out unusual magnetic fields and who is experiencing unusual sensations will interpret them differently if they are in a railway waiting room than if they were sitting alone in a reputedly haunted castle!

This means that if a person who has a brain that is susceptible to magnetic stimulation is in an environment where such stimulation occurs and the context of their location is conducive to paranormal type interpretations then we could have an explanation for at least some hauntings. These ideas are attractive as they are testable, thus falsifiable.

Muncaster: The Tapestry Room



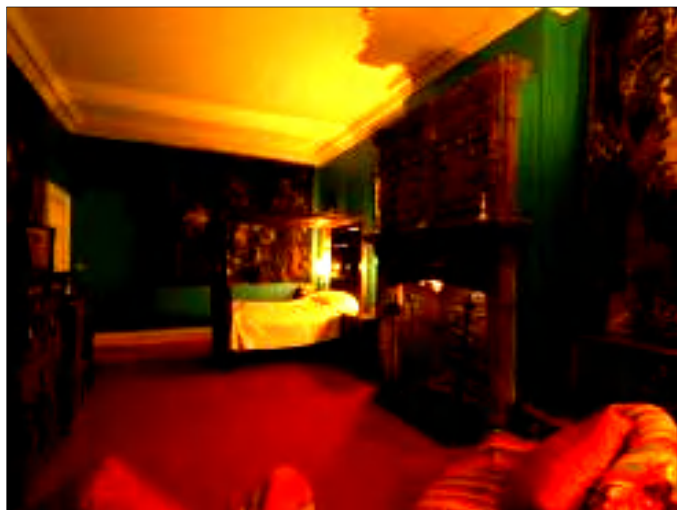
One location that can truly be said to be haunted (given the definition in the intro) is the Tapestry Room in Muncaster Castle. People who have stayed in the room have made many haunting reports independently over many decades. Common experiences reported include: a sense of presence/being watched; fleeting apparitions; hearing voices; and above all, the sound of babies/children crying.

It is interesting to note that the particular wing that houses the tapestry room has never been used for the accommodation of children, thus ruling out actual children being heard, but the tapestry room was once used as a children's nursery – a fact that augments the paranormal interpretation of hearing children crying!

In 2004, Dr. Jason Braithwaite and Maurice Townsend did a detailed field study of the tapestry room in Muncaster Castle after having ascertained that there was a strong magnetic anomaly in the region of the bed in the room. The two main findings were that there is a large static magnetic field present in the bed frame and complex temporal distortions in the alternating magnetic field produced by the castle's 3-phase mains system.

It is possible that when guests slept in the bed, small movements of their heads in the strong static magnetic field could mimic the effect of a complexly changing magnetic field being applied to a static head (as occurs in the lab).

This could lead to stimulation to the brains of sleeping guests produced by the low-amplitude, complexly changing magnetic fields inducing micro-seizures in the same way they occur in the lab. As the guests were staying in a medieval castle that has a reputation for being haunted, any resulting experiences could easily be given a paranormal interpretation.



Of course, there are a lot of other contextual factors too so why is the magnetic anomaly so important? Well, when doing research of this nature it is essential that a baseline measurement be taken somewhere else to act as a comparison.

As it happens, the very next room to the tapestry room (literally only a few feet away) is of a similar size and of similar décor yet there have been no haunting reports from this very similar room. The idea of using a baseline measurement is to look for differences between the two locations. Although there are some small differences between the two bedrooms, the one major difference is that in one room the bed is highly magnetized (and is

the location of the haunting reports) and in the other one it isn't. This makes the magnetized bed the one crucial difference between the haunted and the non-haunted locations.

Case proven?

We have some empirical laboratory evidence that magnetic stimulation to the brain can induce paranormal-type experiences; we have an excellent haunting (multiple, independent reports, etc.); we have a detailed, scientific investigation that produced empirical evidence for the magnetic anomaly exactly where the haunting reports originated; and we have an excellent baseline to control for other possible factors.

However, as good as that sounds, we also have to consider potential weaknesses in the case to avoid reaching a hasty conclusion. Although there is laboratory evidence for magnetic stimulation effects, it has not been reliably replicated by other researchers so a call has been made for independent, laboratory-based, double blind replications to be performed (Braithwaite, 2008) to test that the effect is indeed real.

This is essential as there is also a problem with the mechanism: it is not clear how low-level magnetic fields could induce enough voltage/current in the brain to cause the neurons to fire and so result in a micro-seizure; however, it may well be the complexity of the field that is important rather than its amplitude and so the mechanism simply isn't understood yet.

Conclusion

The role of magnetic fields with regard to haunt-type experiences is still not yet established. If better laboratory evidence is produced that confirms the effect then the research done at the Muncaster Castle tapestry room is a very strong candidate for a real world example of it. However, in the grand scheme of explaining anomalous experiences, magnetic anomalies as described here are not likely to account for more than a very small percentage of them.

Magnetic anomalies (or Experience Inducing Fields - EIFs) are theoretically plausible, empirically demonstrated in the lab (although not confirmed), and have ecological validity (occur in the 'real world' outside of the lab). Because of this, magnetic anomalies are worthy of further serious study. They may only account for a small percentage of cases but may well prove invaluable when researching haunted locations.

Further reading:

Sleeping with the entity: <http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=pdf1> (PDF)

Putting magnetism in its place: <http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=pdf2> (PDF)

Position or process?

Understanding skepticism

JOHN JACKSON

Recently I was in conversation with a woman, a very intelligent woman (PhD, several degrees...), and we were talking about psychology. The conversation got around to psychology and the paranormal and I explained that when looking at such claims we have to treat the claims as experientially true (people really do have peculiar experiences) but that, in my opinion, the best way to investigate these experiences is through (anomalistic) psychology. i.e. don't dismiss people's experiences, don't even rule out paranormal explanations, but let's assume that such experiences have normal, psychological explanations before we start looking for paranormal ones.

Then I revealed that I am a skeptic!

This led to the all too familiar enquiry as to how you can take an open-minded, balanced approach to such claims when you're a skeptic!

This, of course, was because of the almost universal misunderstanding people have of what skepticism actually is. Consider the following questions:

- Do you believe in ghosts or are you a skeptic?
- Do you accept that homeopathy works or are you a skeptic?
- Do you believe in psychic abilities or are you a skeptic?

Obviously, people who don't believe in these things would consider themselves skeptics and indeed most people, whatever their stance on these issues, would consider those who don't believe or accept these things as being true as 'the skeptics'.

That all seems to be consistent and causes no problem! What about the following examples though:

- Do you believe that we went to the moon or are you a skeptic?
- Do you think that vaccination works or are you a skeptic?
- Do you accept evolution or are you a skeptic?

Again, most people would consider that others either believed these things or if they didn't, then they're 'the skeptics'.

However, anyone who considers themselves a skeptic will have spotted a problem now. Because there is overwhelming evidence to support this second group of claims, skeptics *do* accept them as true (provisionally, at least). The discrepancy arises because of what most people think of skepticism as being: *the position of non-belief*.

Skepticism is actually an approach (a methodology) to claims whereby they are scrutinised through rationalism, empiricism, logic and critical thinking. In other words, skepticism is a *process*.

So when I say something like "I am a skeptic", what I mean is that I (at least try to) assess claims and issues carefully and base my conclusions on what the evidence supports. It does not mean that "I do not/will not believe."

Now, skeptics often concern themselves with issues like the paranormal or alternative medicine, which are areas where the evidence doesn't usually support the claims, so the process of skepticism often does lead to rejection (non-belief) of the claims – so the process and the position are congruent. This can give the illusion that skepticism *is* the position of non-belief; but there are many other areas where skeptical inquiry leads to the acceptance of claims.

It is very important to understand the difference between the general (mis)understanding and usage of the term skepticism and the actual meaning of it as used by skeptics' societies such as UK-Skeptics.

Without understanding this distinction, the quality of debate and exploration of ideas suffer greatly due to skeptics' position and approach being mischaracterized, particularly by people's tendency to class anyone who disagrees with them (for any reason) as 'the skeptics'. Many non-believers are not skeptics!

In summary: *Skepticism is not defined by the conclusion you reach; it's the process you use to reach it.*

What is Skepticism? http://www.ukskeptics.com/what_is_skepticism.php

On skeptics, skeptics and skeptics: <http://www.ukskeptics.com/cms/on-skeptics-skeptics-and-skeptics/>

The Colosseum

Symbol of brutality or ancient PR?

DR. JANET ANSCOMBE

Skeptical inquiry is not just confined to the likes of the paranormal. It can be used to investigate any area where a general view is taken as read, and where re-examining evidence is considered unnecessary or even inappropriate. In terms of history, it forms the basis of the subject's methodology, and this can be demonstrated by a brief look at a very famous monument—the Colosseum.

The widely held and now traditional view is that it is the arena where Christians were thrown to the lions; where the Emperor's whim, and thumb, determined the life or death of a gladiator; and where the ancient world reached its social and cultural nadir. A skeptical or historical methodological look at textual and archaeological evidence, inscriptions and art, however, suggests a rather different function, and a very different perspective.

The amphitheatre's architecture, for example, follows Vitruvius' paradigm for modern Roman design based on Greek structural ideals. Combined with the latest in concrete versatility it produces a work which symbolically argues for a fresh start based on traditional order, imagery particularly attractive to the new Flavian dynasty which constructed it. It was openly intended to underpin and give visual meaning to both a new beginning and a return to tradition after the degradations of Julio-Claudian regimes, particularly Nero, on the site of whose Golden House the Colosseum was erected. Its grandeur and scale, moreover, were politically symbolic, for the building was constructed in the wake of, and to celebrate, the quelling of the Jewish revolt, and its sheer visual impact gave physical meaning to Rome's power in the outside world. This was emphasized by the first show staged in the arena, comprising one hundred days of entertainment involving the display of thousands of Jewish prisoners of war.

The events themselves cannot be taken simply as brutal and cruel, either, for the symbolism was repeated in the games, with Rome being displayed both as a cultural unit and an Imperial power. Whether wild animal hunts, executions or gladiatorial combats, the performances served a function far beyond mere entertainment. Beasts were contained and physically overpowered; emphasizing Rome's civilizing power and the protection it afforded its inhabitants from the wilderness outside the city walls. Executions took various forms, but

whether criminals fought against gladiators or animals, or in mythic representations, they were first and foremost public offenders, and their deaths provided public reassurance in the way that criminal trials do today.

In cultural terms, punishments were proportionate. Criminals had put themselves beyond the bounds of society, and as such had forfeited any social protection. Thieves would have a hand removed, arsonists would be burnt, etc. For those found guilty of the ultimate crimes, their executions showed the emperor in full and final control of social order, and also therefore of those who violated fundamental cultural values. Further, mythic re-enactments, often involving divine figures, brought legends to life and provided the ultimate justification for the punishments being carried out.

For gladiators, however, death was anything *but* the normal outcome of a contest. They were an expensive commodity for their owners and trainers. They had to be fed, clothed, and trained. Some were free men, and professional fighters. Some had armies of fans like modern wrestlers. A mere glance at how small the gate of death is compared with the arena as a whole demonstrates that only those who were entering for execution were guaranteed to die. Rather than fight to the death, the gladiators provided a demonstration of fundamental Roman values: courage and endurance, stamina, facing adversity, strength, ingenuity, and indomitability. Alongside the blood and guts that fill our own view of the Colosseum, its events showed Rome's capacity to civilize, to govern and protect, and to create a moral society.

To the vast majority of Romans, the Colosseum was not so much a place of horror, but a focus for moral education and social cohesion, a place that underpinned society's values even as it spoke to the world of Rome's culture and power. In antiquity, objections to the games were most likely to centre on the potential of the bloody spectacle to desensitize the audience. Even Christians, who clearly objected to being an occasional part of what went on in the arena, complained most about the pagan roots of shows rather than any religious prejudice or victimization. Indeed, apart from the occasional pogrom, Christians were only rarely involved in the arena. The evidence shows that the archetypal modern image of the arena as a killing field for the devout, of the faithful thrown to the lions by mad Emperors in front of a baying crowd to satisfy the worst kind of bloodlust, is far from the truth, and largely the result of the Colosseum's location through centuries of official Christian PR at the heart of the Roman Empire, of a post-modern and anti-imperialist guilt ... and Hollywood.

AN INTERVIEW WITH UKS CONFERENCE SPEAKER NICK POPE

Nick Pope used to run the British Government's UFO project at the Ministry of Defence and now continues his research in a private capacity. He is recognised as a leading authority on UFOs and the unexplained and carries out extensive media work. He will be appearing at the UK-Skeptics conference at Muncaster Castle on the weekend of 18th-20th September.

**What were your first thoughts when you were asked to run the UFO project at the M.O.D.?**

I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was sure that the job would be fascinating. On the other hand, I had my doubts as to whether it would be the sort of posting that would be good for my long term career prospects in the Department. I had no knowledge about UFOs before taking up my post and no particular beliefs about the true nature of the phenomenon.

Why would the M.O.D have a UFO project? Does the M.O.D take the idea of extra-terrestrial intelligence seriously?

The MoD's UFO project has its roots in a 1950 decree by our then Scientific Adviser, the great radar pioneer Sir Henry Tizard. He said that UFO sightings ought not to be dismissed out of hand, without some sort of proper, scientific investigation. While MoD states that it remains "open minded" about the possibility of extraterrestrial visitation, it's a corporate belief in Russians - not Martians - that drives our interest. In other words, might any UFO sightings be attributable to foreign military aircraft or drones intruding into the United Kingdom Air Defence Region.

What sort of work did the UFO project involve?

My brief was to investigate UFO sightings to see whether any of them involved evidence of any potential threat to the UK, or anything deemed to be of any "defence significance/defence interest". We used to receive 200 - 300 reports each year. The methodology of an investigation is fairly standard. Firstly, you interview the witness to obtain as much information as possible about the sighting: date, time and location of the sighting, description of the object, its speed, its height, etc. Then you attempt to correlate the sighting with known aerial activity such as civil flights, military exercises or weather

balloon launches. We could check with the Royal Greenwich Observatory to see if astronomical phenomena such as meteors or fireballs might explain what was seen. We could check to see whether any UFOs seen visually had been tracked on radar. If we had a photograph or video, we could get various MoD specialists to enhance and analyse the imagery. We could also liaise with staff at the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System at RAF Fylingdales, where they have space-tracking radar. Finally, on various scientific and technical issues, we could liaise with the Defence Intelligence Staff, though this is an area that I can't discuss in any detail.

What are your thoughts on the reasons for UFO sightings?

Around 80% of UFO sightings could be explained as misidentifications of something ordinary, such as aircraft lights, satellites, airships, weather balloons or planets. In around 15% of cases there was insufficient information to draw any firm conclusions. Approximately 5% of sightings seemed to defy conventional explanation.

What is the most mysterious UFO case you've personally investigated?

A wave of sightings that occurred over the UK over a period of 6 hours in March 1993. Witnesses included numerous police officers, together with military personnel at RAF Cosford and RAF Shawbury. A cluster of sightings at 1.10am may have been attributable to the burning up in the atmosphere of a Russian rocket (though interestingly, Professor Ian Morrison at Jodrell Bank observatory was sceptical about this) but most of the interesting sightings remained unexplained. The MoD's 22nd April 1993 brief to the Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (one of the UK's most senior RAF officers) stated: "In summary, there would seem to be some evidence on this occasion that an unidentified object (or objects) of unknown origin was operating over the UK".

In your years of investigation have you come across many UFO hoaxes?

Perhaps surprisingly, I haven't. While misidentifications were commonplace, hoaxes were comparatively rare. People may try to hoax civilian UFO organisations and researchers, or the media, but perhaps (quite rightly and sensibly) they think twice before wasting Ministry of Defence time on such foolishness.

Website: www.nickpope.net



Would you wear a cardigan from a second-hand clothing shop? Would you wear a cardigan that was once owned by serial killer Fred West?

How much would you pay for an ordinary one hundred year old pen? How much would you pay for an ordinary one hundred year old pen that was once owned by Einstein?

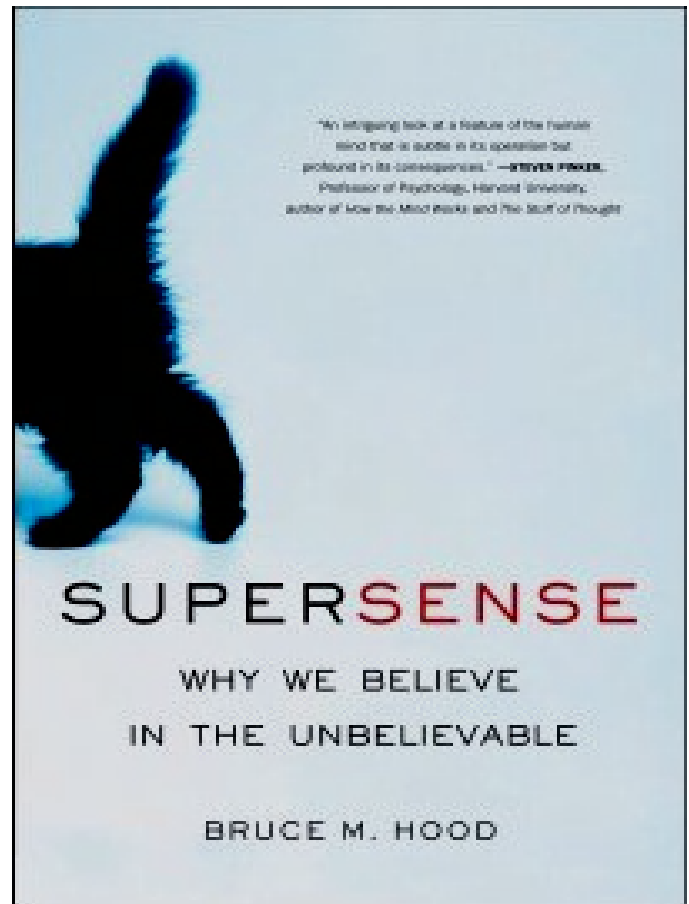
Your answers are probably different for each of both pairs of questions but why? What is the difference between a cardigan previously owned by someone and one owned by Fred West, or a pen owned by someone and one owned by Einstein? What is the "it" that makes the difference?

The "it" is a property known as an "essence". The most remarkable property of essences is that they are nonexistent! It's the fact that we believe that, or act as if, essences are real that affects our behaviour toward such things. Welcome to the world of superstitious thinking!

In this book, Professor Bruce Hood explains how we make sense of the world, particularly as children, and how superstitious or magical thinking is a normal process whereby we make inferential links between cause and effect based on non-physical connections and nonexistent properties/essences.

This is all explained using everyday examples that everyone can relate to and it is written in non-specialist language so you don't need a degree in psychology to grasp the concepts.

In chapter 2, Hood says that this book will not be of interest to skeptics (an interesting mischaracterization of skepticism – see article above!) but he has since realised that this is not true.



This book is *exactly* the sort of book skeptics will be interested in as it deals not only with superstitious beliefs, but the source of superstitious beliefs.

This book is a 'must read' for those interested in the origin and process of 'irrational' superstitious thinking – particularly for skeptics!

BRUCE M. HOOD

Bruce Hood is currently the Director of the Bristol Cognitive Development Centre in the Experimental Psychology Department at the University of Bristol. He has been a research fellow at Cambridge University and University College London, a visiting scientist at MIT and a faculty professor at Harvard.

This book is available via the UK-Skeptics Amazon Store: <http://www.ukskeptics.com/bookstore.php>

Or directly from here: <http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=ab2>

TERROR IN THE NIGHT

Sleep paralysis is a period of transient, consciously experienced paralysis either when going to sleep or waking up.

During an episode the individual is fully conscious, able to open their eyes but aware that it is not possible to move limbs, head or trunk.

Julia Santomauro and Christopher C. French examine this strange phenomena in the August edition of the Psychologist magazine available online at:

<http://tiny.cc/sleepparalysis>

A TALE OF TWO PSYCHOLOGISTS

It was reported in the Daily Mail that TV reality show *The X Factor* announced that they were going to "bring in the psychologists". This led the British Psychological Society to write to the Mail. See:
<http://ukskeptics.com/r.php?r=ttc>

This is because of concerns raised by the proliferation of self-serving, publicity-seeking pop psychologists appearing on shows such as *Big Brother* doing 'celeb analysis' etc. and making a mockery of the BPS's guidelines regarding psychologists' conduct in the media.

A great article explaining the lure, and lack of consequences, of this practise is provided by Dr. Petra Boynton.

<http://www.drpetra.co.uk/blog/?p=873>

JUNE COMPETITION WINNER

Congratulations to Matthew Hardy on winning a copy of "Trick or Treatment" by Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst in the UK-Skeptics June Newsletter competition!

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Sheffield

There is an inaugural meeting for Sheffield Skeptics in the Pub on Saturday the 29th of August starting at 7.30pm. The venue is the Fat Cat pub, which can be found here:

**The Fat Cat
23, Alma Street
Sheffield
S3 8SA**

This first meeting is a general get together to gauge the level of interest with a view to becoming a permanent meet up.

Bristol

The first Skeptics in the Pub meeting in Bristol is scheduled to take place in early October.

For details see: <http://tinyurl.com/msz2ys>

London

**The Penderel's Oak
London
21.09.2009
19.30 h - 23.00 h**

Voodoo histories.

<http://tinyurl.com/nfedcu>

John Jackson, Jason Braithwaite & Wendy Cousins.

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