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on his hands

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PARANORMAL

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Generation X-Files

The psychic schools have never been so busy, and it's not the Doris Stokes brigade who want to learn, but the young, the prosperous and the educated. *Stephen Armstrong* uncovers a paranormal boom

It's a hot evening and the west London traffic is moving at a slow, sweaty pace. Above it, in a scruffy attic room near the Natural History Museum, a small group of young women gathers to talk about life and death. One has funky dreadlocks piled high on her head, another is an earnest social worker from New Zealand who leans forward urgently when she talks, and a third – a marketing consultant – has the crisp enunciation of the very well educated. All in their twenties, they might be studying in adult education. And in a sense, they are.

The course they're on is called "Starting Your Spiritual Journey". One of these women wants to open her eyes to the spiritual world; one hopes to become a healer; and one – the social worker – wants to develop her psychic potential and use it at work to help the children she sees.

We are in the College of Psychic Studies, founded in 1884 by the spiritualist movement with support from Arthur Conan Doyle, and in



all its 122 years the place has never been busier. Ten years ago, according to the "Spiritual Journey" tutor Kay Stirling, it was offering around 12 courses to a slow trickle of students. In the past few years, the trickle has swelled to a river.

The college now offers more than 50 courses – all of them packed – called such things as "Psychic Beginnings", "Opening Psychic Sensitivity", "Heart Centred Soul Healing", "Intuitive Living for Success and Fulfilment", "Sensing Energy" and "First Steps as a Psychic and Medium". And it's not alone. In Essex, the Intuition Psychic Centre teaches tarot reading, psychic development and mediumship, while in Swansea the Academy of Psychic and Spiritual Studies offers lessons in mediumship training, spirit guides and angels. There are similar colleges in Winchester, Darlington, Leeds and Glasgow. All are booming – with a new kind of student.

"Until about five years ago, most of the people interested in psychic phenomena were basically

of a certain type," says Craig Hamilton-Parker, who runs the online Elysium Academy Psychic School, based in Stansted, and also practises as a medium. "You could call them the Doris Stokes brigade. They were usually over 50, might well have had a loved one who had died and were very keen to know what was on the other side. Over the past few years, however, we've had so much interest from people in their twenties or thirties who want to use skills such as aura reading, psychic abilities, mediumship and clairvoyance in their personal lives to help with relationships and careers and are unlikely to be wanting to contact and speak to the dead."

These students are part of a new, prosperous, younger generation whose desire for the psychic skills of mediumship and tarot reading sits comfortably alongside a range of other lifestyle choices, such as reading self-help books, going to the gym and dressing for success. Generation X-Files, if you will. In April, Selfridges made a play for their custom by introducing the first psychic concession in a leading British department store, the Psychic Sisters.

Gucci or Prada?

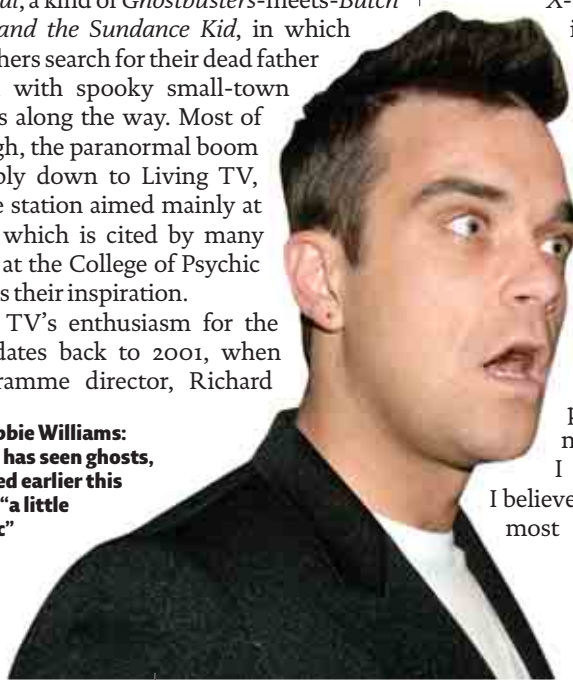
The booth, on the lower ground floor of the Oxford Street store, is framed by a wall of crystals and serviced by the same till as the Penhaligon's perfume concession. Inside, there's a screened-off area staffed by five psychics offering "an extensive range of supernatural services, including tarot, clairvoyance, crystal and psychometry readings, to customers looking for some broad-ranging lifestyle help and advice", according to a Selfridges spokesperson. "It's to help with those perennial questions – who am I? Where am I going? What should I do next? Should it be Gucci or Prada?"

With Robbie Williams declaring himself "a little bit psychic" this year, it might be appropriate to say that psychics are the new rock'n'roll.

This surge of interest has been encouraged by the gradual rise of psychic television. E4's big summer drama series – bought to play alongside *Big Brother* – has been *Ghost Whisperer*, starring Jennifer Love Hewitt as a pale and beautiful maverick who can see dead people. It joins ITV's *Supernatural*, a kind of *Ghostbusters*-meets-*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, in which two brothers search for their dead father and deal with spooky small-town mysteries along the way. Most of all, though, the paranormal boom is probably down to Living TV, a satellite station aimed mainly at women, which is cited by many students at the College of Psychic Studies as their inspiration.

Living TV's enthusiasm for the subject dates back to 2001, when its programme director, Richard

Singer Robbie Williams: he says he has seen ghosts, and claimed earlier this year to be "a little bit psychic"



"A psychic show is very fashionable right now. As soon as I took over, I looked for one"

other side. He starts throwing out information – "I'm getting the colour blue... and a cat..." – until someone from the audience claims the spirit as a friend or relative. Edwards then passes on messages, the audience member beams, and he starts all over again.

Woolfe quickly found himself three British equivalents – Colin Fry, Tony Stockwell and Derek Acorah – who were youthful and looked good on television; and in 2002 he effectively relaunched Living TV as Spook TV. It mixed new home-grown *Crossing Over*-style shows, featuring his three mediums, with "reality" offerings, such as *Haunted Houses* and *Unsolved Mysteries* and spin-offs such as *Street Psychic*, in which a paranormal version of David Blaine takes psychic showmanship out on the road.

It caught on, to a degree that other broadcasters could not ignore. "It's just very fashionable to have a psychic show right now," says Scott Solder of the talk-radio station LBC, which has just gone national. "As soon as I took over about a year and a half ago, I started to look for one. We hit on Becky Walsh earlier this year and her show's been on air for about three months, going out on Friday nights at 10pm. You get all sorts of people calling in for readings over the phone, but we also send her out to talk to groups attached to the movement – psychic groups, mediums, spiritualists." And the audience is not the Doris Stokes brigade, says Solder. "Our target demographic is 35- to 54-year-old ABC1s – professional, intelligent and involved – and this show hits them right on the button."

Ofcom regulations limit psychic shows to one of two sorts – balanced investigations or entertainment. Living and LBC's shows are pitched as investigations, which means that, just like *The X-Files* stars Mulder and Scully, mediums must always have sceptical co-presenters to challenge their views. However, Walsh's co-presenter, Chris Hawkins, seems more open-mouthed than doubting, stunned by her explanations of the spirit world.

Perhaps a more appropriate sceptic would be Professor Chris French, head of the Anomalist Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College, University of London. "I've been a believer in psychic phenomena for over half my life," he says. "But the more I learn about psychology, the less I believe. Broadly speaking, you can divide most psychic work into two main ▶

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CHANNEL 4 PICTURE PUBLICITY

Mystic mugs: Aisha Tyler and Jennifer Love Hewitt star in the TV drama *Ghost Whisperer*



► areas – the Barnum effect and cold reading. “Both involve making apparently insightful statements that have a broad application to many people in the population, and then adding other statements and questions – like ‘there was an accident during teenage years’. They usually qualify this by saying they are just getting general feelings so can’t be too specific – maybe the accident wasn’t you, maybe it was a friend, maybe it wasn’t actually serious but you thought it was at the time, and so on. I’m not saying these

people are all frauds. Most of them genuinely believe it, and are very surprised when you test them under laboratory conditions and they can’t reproduce the results.”

In a sense, of course, it doesn’t matter whether there actually is contact with the other side. This is the apotheosis of the self-help generation. If we feel ill we turn to herbalists or homoeopaths. If we feel depressed, there’s St John’s wort or internet sites that will sell us happy pills without a prescription. If we’re overweight, there’s the

Atkins diet. If we’re tired, there are energy drinks. This is just another area of control.

The crumbling of politics and religion has helped spur the growth. Kay Stirling, the “Spiritual Journey” tutor, came to spiritualism via anti-Vietnam protests in Australia and radical feminism in the 1970s. “As the movement splintered, I became more interested in finding solutions in personal responsibility,” she explains. “I think that drew me towards channelling my energy, and on into spiritualism. You’ll find lots of people my age came through that route, but these younger kids are turning towards it because there’s no sense of God in a world where people kill each other over religion the whole time.”

Living TV’s paranormal ratings back her up. On its main show, *Most Haunted* – now in its eighth series – mediums investigate hauntings in famous buildings. Almost half of the *Most Haunted* audience is aged 16-34, while only 7 per cent of those who watch BBCi’s *Songs of Praise* are in that age group. Even in terms of numbers, the spooky minority channel is gaining ground – the total *Songs of Praise* audience has halved since 2001, averaging under two million, while *Most Haunted* has more than half a million, despite being limited to multi-channel homes.

Of course, this may just be another fad. Perhaps in five years’ time, Scientology will take over as the groovy route to the godhead. It’s hard to predict. The only people who should know are the psychics themselves. After all, isn’t that their job? ●

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