

If you knew what I know, you'd know a hell of a lot!" – Gef

Although the 'talking mongoose' affair may now have fallen into obscurity, it was, during its heyday in the early 1930s, an international sensation. Sightseers, journalists, spiritualists, and psychic investigators such as Nandor Fodor and Harry Price (see FT229:28–36) all beat a path to Doarlish Cashen, the lonely farmhouse outside the little village of Dalby on the Isle of [Man](#) where the events took place. Despite this public scrutiny, there is still no widespread agreement as to whether the case was a hoax, an outbreak of poltergeist activity or something even stranger.

I recently visited the island, and began to re-examine the Harry Price archive held at the University of London's Senate House Library, together with that of the Society for Psychical Research, housed in Cambridge's University Library. Information from islanders also proved useful. As an episode that took place nearly 80 years ago, the case of the 'Dalby Spook' – as Gef was known on the island – seems half-forgotten, although the name is still sometimes invoked: "If something goes astray or seemingly moved from where it was left... 'That will be the Dalby Spook then' could be said." [1]

Harry Price's attention was drawn to the Spook in the winter of 1932, when he received a letter from the Isle of Man: "My correspondent informed me that a farmer friend of hers, a Mr James T Irving, had discovered in his house an animal which, after a little coaxing, had developed the power of speech, and was practically human, except in form." [2]

James Irving, his wife Margaret, and their teenage daughter Voirrey lived on a farm by the name of Cashen's Gap (in Manx, Doarlish Cashen). It was situated in an isolated location, on a bare hillside, a steep climb of two miles from the nearest village or road. A small, two-storied, two-bedroom house, it was illuminated by petroleum lamps, there being no electricity, no wireless, and no telephone. The interior walls had been panelled with wooden matchboarding as an additional layer of protection from the wind. Significantly, there was, between the walls and the wooden panelling, a gap of a few inches – sufficient for a small animal to move around the house at will.

'MAN-WEASEL' OR MONGOOSE?

It is perhaps surprising to learn that at the outset of his appearances, 'Gef the talking mongoose' was thought of neither as a mongoose, nor referred to by the name Gef. The strange events began in autumn 1931, when the Irvings noticed an unusual animal in their farmyard, being, as Price's correspondent described: "similar in appearance to a weasel, with small body, long bushy tail, flat nose, and yellow in colour". [3] Oddly, this animal did not appear to alarm the chickens. Later, it was seen inside the house, as James Irving described: "This eerie weasel, as I thought he might be, then began to keep us awake at night by blowing, spitting and growling behind the matchboard partition of the lower rooms..." [4]

The entity quickly progressed to something more sophisticated. Having learned to mimic various animal noises, it then began to repeat nursery rhymes, and within a short while – having built up a sufficiently wide vocabulary – it could converse with the family. Its voice is said to have been loud, clear, and one or two octaves higher than a human's. Other witnesses describe it as a "very high, screechy sort". [5]

Initial news reports spoke of the ‘man-weasel’ farm,[6] and indeed, the entity itself, when asked who or what he was, would frequently reply: “I am the ghost of a weasel, and I will haunt you with weird noises and clanking chains.”[7] It was only later on that he described himself as “just a little extra, extra clever mongoose”. [8] This identification was not as improbable as it might at first appear; some years before, in 1912, a neighbouring farm, Eary Cushlinn, had introduced mongooses to control the rabbit population. Descendants of this original group may still be in existence today; a local man described seeing a mongoose in 2007, at a location not far from Eary Cushlinn, as did Jenny Randles in 2002.[9]

A journalist from the *Manchester Daily Dispatch* visited the farm in January 1932:

Mr Irving, who opened the door, seemed a keen, vigorous, young-looking man... I told him I had come to inquire about the rumour that the house was haunted. “There are no spooks here,” he said. “Nothing that has happened is supernatural. I am being worried to death by crowds of people visiting the place. Come in, I will tell you about it... In October I and my daughter caught the first glimpse of the beast. It was a little animal resembling a stoat, a ferret, or a weasel, yellow in colour with a body about nine inches long. Its long bushy tail is speckled with black. It is thin and could get through a very small hole. It appears in the house from time to time, and I made attempts to catch ‘Jack’. In about November, we first heard a strange voice coming from behind the woodwork singing sentences of songs and hymns...” [10]

It will be noted that, at this stage, Irving referred to the entity as ‘Jack; subsequently, however, the “little animal” told the Irvings that he preferred to be known as ‘Geoff’, which he spelled out phonetically as ‘G-E-F’. Although Irving initially denied there was a supernatural aspect to the phenomena, he soon changed his mind. In his diaries and letters, he speculated that Gef had the power to shape-shift, and to become invisible:

Early in 1932, my daughter and I were alone in the house, broad daylight... I saw, to my surprise, a very large cat, striped like a tiger... I thought this is no ordinary cat, so I slipped a cartridge into my single-barrel gun... The cat was a little ahead of me, but easily within range, and it turned through an open gate way... into a grass field. I was there a few seconds behind, and fully expected to see the cat, but no cat could be seen, look as I liked... I detailed my experiences to my wife on her return that night, when Gef called out “It was me you saw, Jim.” [11]

A somewhat lurid news article – “House ‘Possessed’ By A Mongoose / Mystery Animal That Laughs And Talks / Stones Thrown At Family In Bed / Hymns – And Death Threats” [12] – described an early incident in which, again, Gef appeared to exhibit the power of invisibility: one night, after things had been bad, James Irving decided “to have Voirrey’s bed in my room for safety. We discussed it, and Gef’s voice came from behind the boarding, ‘I’ll follow her wherever you move her.’ When we went to bed, I barricaded the door with dressing-boxes, chairs, and a heavy weight... Soon we saw the top of the door bulging in as if some terrific force were thrusting against it. But the door held. Then Gef’s queer, high voice said, ‘I’m coming in.’”

A few seconds later, a heavy pot of ointment kept in the room crashed against the bedstead. But if Gef had succeeded in coming into the room, and was able to hurl the pot of ointment, why did none of the Irvings see him?

Irving recalled other odd incidents: on one occasion, three fishermen from the nearby town of Peel visited the farm; while in conversation with Irving, one of the [men](#) suddenly stopped speaking, saying that he had seen a white cat leaping up on to his lap – but no one else had seen a cat, and the Irvings did not own one. [13]

In another episode recorded in Irving's diary, one of a gang of road repair workers was having his lunch outdoors, close by the farm. The man threw an unwanted piece of bread into a field, and was amazed to see the bread moving of its own accord.[14] And another: a cousin of Irving's, Cyril Oates, was tilling a field near Doarlish Cashen. A stone was thrown over the hedge at him – when he looked, there was no one in the field, and nowhere for anyone to have hidden.[15]

Whether he was supernatural or animal in nature, Gef's behaviour was often surprising and capricious. Sometimes he appeared to enjoy his life with the Irvings, leaving dead rabbits for them and being rewarded with bananas, sausages and other treats. He took not just to talking but to music, singing along to the gramophone (his favourite record was *Carolina Moon*), performing the Manx national anthem or snatches of hymns and Spanish folk songs. Often, though, he appeared to delight in tormenting the Irving parents, once throwing stones at Margaret as she walked home and, on another occasion, losing his temper when Jim took too long opening the morning paper, crying out "Read it out, you fat-headed gnome!" in his high-pitched voice.

But is there any other evidence for Gef's existence, beyond Irving's letters and diaries?

FUR, PAWS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

In 1935, James Irving sent Price some hair samples, which Gef had supposedly plucked from his own back and tail. These were subsequently sent to Mr F Martin Duncan of the Zoological Society for analysis. This was his reply: "I can very definitely say that the specimen hairs never grew upon a mongoose, nor are they those of a rat, rabbit, hare, squirrel, or other rodent... I am inclined to think that these hairs have probably been taken from a longish-haired dog..."[16]

Indeed, when Harry Price visited Doarlish Cashen later that year, he managed to obtain some hairs from Mona, the Irvings' sheepdog, which, Mr Duncan stated, were "absolutely identical with the alleged 'mongoose' hairs".[17] When I visited the Doarlish Cashen site, I found light brown [wool](#) (presumably from one of the many sheep who are present in the fields) – perhaps this, too, was the basis for some of the samples?

Imprints of Gef's teeth and claws, made in modelling clay, were also sent to Price. Upon inspection, it became apparent that there was quite a disparity between the size of the front and rear paws, with the front paws measuring between eight and ten centimetres, remarkably large for an animal only 30cm in length! Nevertheless, this was consistent with the Irvings' description of Gef's over-sized, human-like hands. . More plausibly, perhaps, it may depict the Irvings' re-creation of an original incident.

The paw imprints were sent to the Zoological Society for analysis, whose response was that no extant animal evinced such a disparity between the size of its front and rear paws. It was also pointed out that the imprints displayed none of the folds and textures that would have been expected from a real animal's skin. It has been suggested that perhaps one of the Irvings

made the imprints with a stick. Certainly, it's hard to see these samples and fur and paw prints as anything other than a crude hoax.

However, photographs allegedly depicting Gef and held in the University of London's Harry Price archives, and in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research, provide arguably stronger evidence. Gef seemed reluctant to be captured on film. Irving wrote: "Gef is averse to being photo'd & if it were not for my wife's insistence & persistence, there would be no photos as Gef obeys my wife only, & that, just within certain limits." [18] He gave various reasons why he did not wish to be caught on camera; saying at one point "I am a freak. I have hands and I have feet, and if you saw me you'd faint, you'd be petrified, mummified, turned into stone or a pillar of salt!" [19]

Some have said of one of the photos that it shows a log of wood or mass of vegetation. In fact, having examined the original print, I can confirm that the oddly serrated head to the left is actually an effect produced by blades of grass in the foreground. James Irving produced his own sketch, resembling the artist's impression above, intended to show what we are supposed to see.

Photos from the Society for Psychical Research's archives vary in quality. One photo calls to mind a Steiff stuffed toy. Another shows quite distinct stripes, while another perhaps resembles a cat; although bearing in mind the proportions of a typical five-bar gate, the animal or object shown here would be much smaller than a cat, as is the creature in another photo which appears to have a long tail hanging down.

It has been suggested that this and other photos depict artfully arranged fox fur stoles, which would have been common in the 1930s. Nandor Fodor, the psychoanalyst and paranormal investigator who stayed with the Irvings for a week, surreptitiously went through all the drawers in the house while the Irvings were out, but failed to find any stoles. While it is unlikely that the poverty-stricken Irvings would have been able to afford a stuffed toy, it is possible to conceive of Voirrey fashioning a toy or 'fur piece' from rabbit skins (either those she hunted with Mona the sheepdog, or those supposedly left by Gef).

DISTANT VOICES

In 1970, 40 years after the affair, Walter McGraw, a journalist for *Fate* magazine, managed to trace Voirrey, and persuaded her to be interviewed. She still maintained that Gef had not been a hoax, but did not look fondly upon him: "I was shy... I still am... he [Gef] made me meet people I didn't want to meet. Then they said I was 'mental' or a ventriloquist. Believe me, if I was that good I would jolly well be making money from it now! Gef was very detrimental to my life. We were snubbed. The other children used to call me 'the spook'. I had to leave the Isle of Man and I hope that no one where I work now ever knows the story. Gef has even kept me from getting married. How could I ever tell a man's family about what happened?"

In response to McGraw's query as to whether Gef had been a mongoose, Voirrey said: "I don't know. I know he was a small animal about nine inches to a foot long. I know he talked to us from the wainscoting. His voice was very high-pitched. He swore a lot... At first he talked to me more than anyone. We carried on regular conversations."

McGraw asked her outright whether it had been a hoax. Voirrey insisted: "It was not a hoax

and I wish it had never happened. If my mother and I had our way we never would have told anybody about it. But Father was sort of wrapped up in it. It was such a wonderful phenomenon that he just had to tell people about it.”

And finally: “Yes, there was a little animal who talked and did all those other things. He said he was a mongoose and said we should call him Gef. But I do wish he had let us alone.” [20]

One might contrast Voirrey’s steadfast refusal to alter her story with that of the Cottingley Fairies girls, who many years later admitted that their fairy photographs had been faked. [21]

Some locals maintained that the whole thing had been a hoax, perpetrated by the mother and daughter. In the Harry Price archives, two letters to Price from two different sources [22] concurred, arguing that “poor old Irving” had been taken for a ride by his wife and daughter, who did not enjoy life on the lonely farm, and were attempting to frighten him into selling up and leaving (although it must be said that if this was their aim, it was singularly unsuccessful – Mrs Irving and Voirrey only left Doarlish Cashen following James Irving’s death in 1945.)

In an interview, broadcast by Manx Radio in 2001, [23] Kathleen Green, a childhood friend of the Irvings’ daughter, stated that Voirrey had been an accomplished ventriloquist, with the ability to throw her voice, something also suggested by a reporter for the Manchester Daily Dispatch. [24]

However, ‘distant voice’ ventriloquism (whereby the voice is seemingly projected to a location elsewhere in the room) is nothing of the kind, instead being achieved by misdirecting the audience. The voice is muted, so that it appears to be coming from farther away, behind a wall, for instance. The ventriloquist then directs the audience – “Where are you? Under the floorboards? In the next room?” The ‘art’ of throwing the voice is a myth. [25]

In any case, there are at least two verified instances of Gef’s voice being heard when Voirrey was not present. Price sent one of his National Laboratory of Psychical Research investigators to the Isle of Man to examine the Irvings’ claims. Captain Dennis, a businessman and racing motorist, described by Price as “very shrewd and not easily hoodwinked”, [26] made three trips to Doarlish Cashen. On one of these visits (May 1935), he was inside the house when he heard Gef’s voice saying “Plus fours. Oxford bags” – a description of Dennis’s attire. The voice was seemingly coming from behind the wainscoting in the front room. At the time, Mr and Mrs Irving were in full view, and Voirrey was visibly 100ft away, outside the house in an outlying stockyard, feeding the hens. On another occasion, Dennis and James Irving were outside, 80 paces away from the house, and knowing Voirrey to be indoors. Gef’s voice could be heard, calling to them, close by. “That’s Gef,” Dennis had observed, “and he is quite close to us.” [27]

GEF TAKES THE BUS

The explanation that the whole thing was a hoax or prank perpetrated either by the teenage daughter, alone, or in cahoots with her mother, is initially an attractive one, especially if one believes accounts suggesting that James Irving was something of a domestic tyrant. However, I do not believe this to be satisfactory. Several times in his extensive diaries and letters, James Irving makes the claim that Gef spoke to him while he was alone. Elsewhere still, Irving describes how all three of the family had – at different times – actually seen Gef: “We have all three seen him, both before he ever spoke to us, and of course afterwards at different

times, in different places and under varying conditions, both indoors and out of doors, in the immediate vicinity of the house, and as far away as Glen Maye village (1 mile)...” [28]

So what had James Irving seen if his wife and daughter were playing a long-drawn-out hoax on him? It would have been very hard to maintain such a charade over a period of years, in the close confines of a small house, without being detected. Elsewhere, Irving writes of actually touching the creature: “Thurs, May 12, 1932. Took hold of my fingers with his hands several times. Mam [Mrs Irving] had her fingers in his mouth and could feel his teeth.” [29]

So what had grasped Irving’s fingers? Of course, it remains a possibility that James Irving was himself involved in perpetrating a fraud, together with his wife and daughter, as some have suggested. But, if this was the case, there must have been further co-conspirators. A 1932 article from the *Isle Of Man Examiner* stated that: “Mr Irving submitted a voluntary statement signed by three young men that had heard and witnessed strange happenings at the house, and 15 people altogether to vouch [for] this unique experience.” [30]

Apparently, Gef was fond of hitching a lift on the bus to Peel, and then spying on the bus depot workers. [31] One of the drivers became so fed up with Gef’s eavesdropping (“this animal, or whatever it is, knows a darn sight too much”) that he attempted to set a trap by means of an electrified metal plate fixed to the chassis of the bus. [32] Amongst the people interviewed by Fodor during his investigation was a bus conductor, Jack Tearle, who indignantly described how his sandwiches had been stolen: “‘Yes, I am the man whose dinner was pinched,’ he said... The dinner was six sandwiches in a brown paper parcel. The paper was slit open as if by a knife or sharp claws. The sandwiches were missing. ‘I should like to get my hands on that Gef,’ he said, with clenched fists, as he jumped back on his bus.” [33]

Charles Morrison, a lifelong friend of James Irving’s, who steadfastly defended Irving’s integrity, heard Gef speak on two occasions, and was convinced it was no hoax. In his ‘Amplified Statement’ to Harry Price, [34] Morrison described hearing a loud, clear voice from behind the boards in the kitchen – “‘Tell Arthur [Morrison’s son] not to come. He doesn’t believe. I won’t speak if he does come, I’ll blow his brains out with a 3d cartridge’” – together with “heavy thumping on the ceiling and behind the boards in the kitchen as much as a strong man could do”. Morrison was impressed by the fact of the noises seemingly coming from all over the house, with some rapidity. For example: “...at 3pm, came a voice from the porch, ‘Charlie’. Very loud and clear... At 3.5 a voice: ‘Is Arthur coming?’ this in the kitchen. A screech, and then a loud thump the other end of the house!” [35]

Arthur did indeed come, and, five years later, described his experiences in a letter to Fodor:

To start with, during February & the beginning of March 1932 I heard a good deal about what was termed, at the time, as a “Talking Weasel”. I ridiculed the whole affair at first. Interest of the people concerned, with amusement in the foreground, I decided to visit Doarlish Cashen with the main object of exposing the whole joke, if there was one – on the 7th March 1932.

On my arrival at Mr Irving’s farmhouse a screeching voice said, “Hullo Arthur.” To which I replied, “Hullo.” It then said, “Call me Gef. I am an earth-bound spirit. Before I saw you I was going to blow your brains out with a 3d cartridge, but like you now.” Quietness for a few minutes, then loud knockings on the walls in various parts of the house. Suddenly it said, “Vanished.” All this happened between 5pm and 6pm.

At about 8 o'clock, Gef reappeared. "I'm going to keep you awake all tonight."

"You are not going to keep your promise, I hope. What have I done to deserve it?" I asked. "You are a doubter."

In the vicinity of 9 o'clock, while dozing in bed, I heard something moving about underneath and thought it a rat or mouse. Peering underneath the bed, I perceived a pair of piercing eyes. They seemed smaller than a cat's eyes look like in the dark. An uncanny voice said, "Now do you believe? Don't you dare to upset Jimo with any sceptical remarks," at the same time making a spitting noise. Jimo referred to Mr Irving.

All that night I was kept awake at intervals by animal noises. The next morning I apologised to Mr Irving for previously disbelieving in the stories of extraordinary manifestations taking place. I positively had all the Irving family at home at the time under observation. There was absolutely no fraud of any description. [36]

On another occasion, Irving and Charles Morrison were walking in the town of Peel, as the bus came past. The driver got out and they began to talk to him. Morrison asked the man whether he believed in Gef. The driver replied: "I cannot help myself. I've got to believe, when Mr Irving here can tell me all the contents of my house even in rooms that cannot be seen from the outside & there has not been any strangers in my house." [37] He lived in rooms on the first floor, which were impossible to see into from ground level.

Captain Dennis, again, despite not having seen Gef in person, believed the phenomena to be genuine. During a visit to Doarlish Cashen in February 1935, he witnessed a large packing-needle being thrown at the teapot from somewhere behind the match boarding, and heard plates being moved in the scullery, which he then ascertained to be empty. [38] In a report written for Price, he recounted his experiences during a later visit: "The voice then started in earnest, and the noise in the house was amazing. Shriill screams, accompanied by terrific knocking, loud bangs, emanated from all parts of the house in quick succession (as if the perpetrator moved with lightning speed)... The noise continued for about 15 minutes culminating with tremendous bangs as if something had been thrown with great violence upstairs." [39]

Dennis climbed the stairs to Voirrey's bedroom on the first floor; a fastener on the outside of the door meant that the girl was locked inside, and could not, presumably, be responsible for these noises. "As I was returning down the staircase and just entering the kitchen, a bottle and a china tray were flung from the top of the staircase – the latter being smashed in the fall – this was accompanied by a derisive laugh. I again examined Voirrey's door – it was fastened." [40]

The knocking and banging continued until 3am, and when Gef was asked to desist: "The voice then said 'I'll throw pebbles now at the window' and almost at once we heard the rattle against them just as if gravel and sand and small stones were being hurled at them. Mrs Irving got rather perturbed and... told Gef to stop, as she did not want the windows to be broken." [41]

Had all this been Voirrey's doing? While inspecting Voirrey's room, Dennis had requested that the door be fastened from the outside. He found it impossible to exit.

A “PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAUD”?

Harry Price himself concluded that Gef was a hoax, but not one designed for financial gain. Despite the family’s straitened circumstance, James Irving refused a national newspaper’s offer to purchase one of the ‘Gef’ photos for three guineas, explaining that he did not want to part with such a rare memento. An American theatrical agent offered Irving a deal of 50,000 dollars, half to be paid in cash up front, in return for exclusive rights over Gef. Again, Irving refused. Instead, Price argued for a psychological motive. In an unpublished letter to one of his readers, a Reverend Hayes, he wrote: “I agree that the whole family must be mixed up in it but there still remains the question of motive. It certainly is not to draw people to Cashen’s Gap, because they do their utmost to keep them away. I know two men who, quite recently, have signified their intention of visiting the place, and Irving will not have them... The motive for the imposture lies much deeper than mere publicity. And that is what makes the case so interesting.” [42]

Price seems to have believed that the loneliness of the Irvings, particularly Voirrey, had led to their sharing in a collective delusion. But how, then, does one explain the packing needle thrown at Captain Dennis, his witnessing of the loud bangs and knocks all over the house in swift succession, the pebbles thrown from outside, and his hearing Gef’s voice inside the house, while seeing Voirrey some distance away? How did Irving come by such detailed knowledge of local gossip and goings-on? Who, or what, left the dead rabbits outside the house?

Nandor Fodor reached quite different conclusions. He dismissed the idea of a hoax, finding the Irvings “sincere, frank and simple”, and discarded the poltergeist theory because Gef appeared to possess no genuinely supernatural powers: “Gef never claims to be without an animal form. He eats, drinks and sleeps... he leaves his teeth marks in the butter in the larder and in the fat of the bacon. He catches rabbits and performs various other services for the family. Poltergeists are an unmitigated affliction. Gef is an asset”.

Fodor came to believe, having “examined the evidence [and] tried all the possible solution I can think of”, that Gef was indeed “a talking animal” – or, in Gef’s own words, “an extra, extra clever mongoose”.

He later revised this opinion, offering a more psychoanalytically inclined reading of the case in which Gef was not merely an extraordinary creature but at the same time a split-off part of Jim Irving’s personality, a compensatory factor to the thwarted ambition and “mental starvation” to which Irving’s lonely life at Doarlish Cashen had doomed him. Irving’s unconscious had created “the strange hybrid of Gef, fitting no category of humans, animals or ghosts, yet having common features with all of them”. [43]

HAUNTING OF DOARLISH CASHEN

If Gef really was some kind of supernatural entity, had he been present long before the Irvings’ experiences began? Gef told the family: “For years, I could understand all that was said. I tried to talk, but couldn’t, until you taught me.” [44]

A piece of local folklore suggests that the Doarlish Cashen farm had previously been the setting for weird phenomena: “Some men digging here many years ago unearthed a flat stone

covering a funerary urn which contained black ashes. They buried it in the hedge-bank. A long time afterwards, and not extremely long ago, a young man hunting rabbits... thought he saw a rabbit bolting to the hedge. He began pulling away the stones and soil, and while doing so he felt something invisible pushing him back. When this happened a second time, a sudden fear took him and he ran down the hillside till he reached his home. A white stone in the hedge still marks the spot where the urn was buried.” [45]

After having purchased the farm in 1916, but prior to moving in, James Irving engaged two workmen, Callister and Kelly, to do the necessary repairs and renovations. He was surprised to discover that the two men refused to stay in the house overnight, for, as one of them had explained to the other: “Look here, John, I cannot sleep in that room; I have heard strange noises, and there is something uncanny about the place.” Irving described these men as “respectable, sober individuals”. [46]

Thirty years on, Charles Morrison, writing about his old friend James Irving’s protracted illness (“pernicious anæmia”) and eventual death in 1945, described more uncanny activity in the house, seen by Mrs Irving and Voirrey, and also – perhaps significantly – by the elder daughter Elsie, who had hitherto been sceptical about Gef. The whole family had returned to care for Irving, who, for the last 12 months of his life, had been bed-ridden and helpless, “rambling at times when his voice assumed enormous power for such a frail body”.

When he eventually died, both Mrs Irving and her daughter Elsie told Morrison how “...they were both sitting before the fireplace and on the mantelpiece was a branch they used to sweep the fireplace, when lo! and behold, this very brush started to move backwards and forwards which amazed them! It stopped just as Irving died. They afterwards tried to discover how it happened but could not find anything. Elsie said there were strange noises in the beams whilst she stayed there for six months and when Voirrey came for a day or two from Douglas to stay, these sounds were accentuated but there was no talking; nor had there been for four years.” [47]

However, the subsequent owner of Doarlish Cashen, an ex-army man named Leslie Graham, poured scorn on the whole “talking mongoose” case, denying that he had witnessed any “manifestations” in the house. [48] The farmhouse itself has since been demolished. This is odd; firstly, because there are many abandoned and ruined farm buildings to be seen elsewhere on the island, and secondly, because Doarlish Cashen’s lonely location – off-road, on top of a steep hill – would presumably have involved an arduous and costly demolition. Nothing has been built on the site. Was it destroyed due to its reputation?

Gef’s fate seems to have been tied up in some way with that of James Irving, the onset of whose illness coincided roughly with Gef’s disappearance. Gef had described himself as an earthbound spirit, and this was something that Mrs Irving came to believe, regarding his supposed clairvoyant gifts as proof that he was no animal. James Irving recounted a curious plea repeated by Gef during his earlier appearances: “In the early days, 1931–1932, Gef would suddenly cease talking (late at night) and say, in what I would describe as a pleading and pathetic voice, ‘Oh let me go Jim. Let me go.’ As if I were detaining him by some power or force, other than physical. I asked where he wanted to go, and he always answered, ‘I must go back to the under ground...’ I said, ‘Well, be off. I’m not keeping you.’ He would then call out ‘Vanished’ in a long drawn out manner, and he could be heard to jump either up or down... and there would be silence afterwards...”[49]

I am inclined to think that the case will not now be resolved. Certainly, Gef, during his heyday, was happy to remain a mystery, at times describing himself variously as a weasel, a mongoose, the Holy Ghost, an earthbound spirit – at other times denying he was a spirit or poltergeist. Just as he had a great dislike of being seen,[50] allowing himself to be photographed only reluctantly, Gef sought to remain elusive, refusing to be pinned down or categorised.

When a spiritualist lady from South Africa visited the farm, she demanded, imperiously: “Come here. Gef, I want you!” Gef’s reply was succinct: “No damned fear! You’ll put me in a bottle!”[51] In response to Mrs Irving’s enquiries as to his true nature – refusing to believe he was a mere animal, but rather, an “earthbound spirit” – Gef replied:

“Of course I know what I am, and you are not going to get to know, and you are only grigged [a Manx word, meaning ‘vexed’ or ‘disappointed’] because I won’t tell you. I might let you see me some time, but thou wilt never get to know what I am.” [52]

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The Harry Price Library of Magical Literature, held in Senate House Library, University of London is available for members of the public to consult for reference; if interested, please refer to: www.shl.lon.ac.uk/specialcollections/hpl.shtml.

Notes

1 Pers. corr, 26 Jan 2010.

2 Harry Price: *Confessions of a Ghost-Hunter*, Putnam, 1936, p85.

3 F Milburn: Letter to H Price, 12 Feb 1932, Senate House Library (SHL), University of London archives, HPC/4B/169.

4 HT Wilkins: “History of the talking mongoose”, *Fate*, June 1952, pp58–69.

5 H Carrington & N Fodor: *Haunted People: Story of the Poltergeist Down the Centuries*, Dutton, New York, 1951, p199.

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- 21 Nevertheless, the younger of the two insisted that the fairies had been real, and that the photos had been produced to convince sceptics, such as their father.
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- 25 V Vox: *I Can See Your Lips Moving*, Kaye & Ward, Tadworth, 1981, p162.
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- 32 H Carrington & N Fodor: *Haunted People: Story of the Poltergeist Down the Centuries*, Dutton, New York, 1951, pp200–201.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p201.
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- 37 J Irving: Letter to Harry Price, 14 Apr 1936, SHL, HPC 4B 121a.
- 38 J Dennis: Letter to Harry Price, 28 Feb 1932, SHL, HPC 3F 4.
- 39 J Dennis: Letter to Harry Price, 3 Oct 1935, SHL, HPC 3F 4.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 H Price: Letter to Rev. JW Hayes, 8 April 1936, SHL, HPC 4A 48.
- 43 See N Fodor: *Between Two Worlds* and H Carrington & N Fodor: *Haunted people: story of the poltergeist down the centuries*, Dutton, New York, 1951.
- 44 J Irving: Letter to Capt. Dennis, 12 Aug 1934, SHL, HPC 3F 2.
- 45 WW Gill: *A Manx Scrapbook*, Arrowsmith, Bristol, 1929; online at isle-of-man.com. Credit is due to Anna Hinton, of the Gef the Talking Mongoose Facebook group, for unearthing this reference.

- 46 J Irving: Letter to Capt. Dennis, 2 Nov 1934, SHL, HPC 3F 2.
- 47 C Morrison: Letter to Capt. Dennis, 26 Jan 1946, SHL, HPC 4C 19.
- 48 L Graham: Letter to Harry Price, 16 Feb 1947, SHL, HPC 4B 86.
- 49 J Irving: Letter to Capt. Dennis, 24 July 1934, SHL, HPC 3F 2.
- 50 “Very strange is this aversion to being seen. At the end of 1931 and beginning of 1932, before we knew what Gef was (even now we are in doubt) I would be in bed, and Gef would be ‘holding forth’ 20 to the dozen, and I would be looking about the room (all matchboard lining) wondering just exactly where he was speaking from, and all at once (evidently my eyes had, unknown to me, located the spot) Gef would stop talking and exclaim ‘You’re looking, stop looking. Turn your head you b---,’ and until I averted my gaze, he would not resume talking. Months afterwards, when he became friendly, I referred to this incident, which was of frequent occurrence, and asked why he ceased talking when I looked at a certain place and he answered, ‘I can’t stand your eyes.’ *Ibid.*
- 51 J Irving: Letter to Capt. Dennis, 13 Nov 1934, SHL, HPC 3F 2.
- 52 J Irving: Letter to Capt. Dennis, 24 July 1934, SHL, HPC 3F 2.

Web resources

[Gef – the Eighth Wonder of the World.](#)

Gef the Talking Mongoose Facebook page.

THE WIT AND WISDOM OF GEF

“I am not a spirit. I am a little extra, extra clever mongoose.”

“I am a ghost in the form of a weasel, and I shall haunt you with weird noises and clanking chains.”

“I was born near Delhi, India, on June 7, 1852. I have been shot at by Indians. I am a marsh mongoose.”

“I am a freak. I have hands and I have feet, and if you saw me you’d faint, you’d be petrified, mummified, turned into stone or a pillar of salt.”

“I’ll split the atom! I am the fifth dimension! I am the eighth wonder of the world!”

“I am not evil. I could be if I wanted. You don’t know what damage or harm I could do if I were roused.

I could kill you all, but I won’t.”

“If you knew what I know, you’d know a hell of a lot!”

“If you are kind to me, I will bring you good luck. If you are not kind, I shall kill all your poultry. I can get them wherever you put them!”

“I have been to nicer homes than this. Carpets, piano, satin covers on polished tables. I am going back there. Hahaha!”

“Well, Jim, what about some grubbo?”

“I like Captain Dennis, but not Harry Price. He’s the man who puts the kybosh on the spirits!”

“Nuts! Put a sock in it! Chew coke!”

“I have three attractions. I follow Voirrey, Mam gives me food, and Jim answers my questions.”

“I have three spirits, and their names are Foe, Faith and Truth.” “Put the bloody gramophone on!”



One of Voirrey's Gef photos.

SPR Archive, CambridgeUniversity Library



One of Voirrey's Gef photos.

SPR Archive, CambridgeUniversity Library



Jim Irving points to Gef's hiding place.

SPR Archive, Cambridge University Library



The Irvings inside their farmhouse.

SPR Archive, CambridgeUniversity Library



Voirrey Irving.

SPR Archive, Cambridge University Library



Gef on the Ballacallin Hotel sign.

Christopher Josiffe



The bus depot at Peel.

Christopher Josiffe



Doarlsh Cashen today, the house long since demolished.

Jennifer Smith