

SPIRITUALIST ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN OPENS ITS NEW HEADQUARTERS

After renting premises in Victoria, SW London, for several years, the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain (SAGB) has opened its new HQ. Below, Tony Ortzen interviews Annie Blair, its general manager.

The first point put to her was: "For decades the SAGB was housed in a truly magnificent Georgian building in Belgrave Square, which is one of the most exclusive and expensive parts of London. The premises had fabulous marble fireplaces and a sweeping staircase to the first floor.

"To Battersea. With great respect to the area and its residents, it's known for two things – a dogs' home and derelict power station which, to be fair, is being redeveloped. From Belgravia to Battersea? Is this really a move upwards? Convince me otherwise!

"I hate to sound negative, but Battersea sounds a long way from central London. Are people really going to trail all the way down to London SW8? Again, convince me otherwise..."

I AM pleased you asked this question, negative or not. North Battersea and the surrounding area, Nine Elms, are going through one of the greatest redevelopments in their recent history.

Nine Elms is that changing piece of London between Vauxhall and Battersea. It is 561 acres, extending from Lambeth Bridge to Chelsea Bridge, Vauxhall and a large slice of North Battersea, where we are located.

This prime central London location has attracted billions of pounds of private sector investment, transforming the area on an extraordinary scale. Over the next few years, it is set to bloom and boom as a new residential and business district.

Mary Tealby founded the Home for Lost and Starving Dogs in 1860. It moved



BANKING on success. Empty since the late 1990s, the SAGB's new premises – a former bank – have been extensively renovated inside and out.

from Holloway, North London, in 1871 to opposite Battersea Power Station to what was to become Battersea Dogs and Cats Home.

One interesting piece of information about this wonderful organisation is that during the Second World War, it fed and cared for over 145,000 dogs. This is a feat to be proud of.

To support its continuing work, we will be fundraising for the home. In fact, we are holding a Christmas Fundraiser for it on Saturday, December 15 with Pauline Mason and George Lawson. Full details will be on the website from this month.

A world-famous and iconic building, Battersea Power Station stands proud on

the embankment of the River Thames and is only minutes away from our new HQ. It is due to house the London headquarters of Apple, which has leased 500,000 sq ft in this £9 billion development. We mustn't forget either that the new American Embassy on Nine Elms Lane is a close neighbour of ours.

Now how to reach us. The Northern Line extension into Battersea Power Station will open in 2020, taking less than fifteen minutes to travel from the City and the West End. A new pedestrian bridge will link the development directly to the Victoria Embankment.

Battersea Park lies just behind us with the River Thames on its far side. It has



LET there be light. The entrance lobby of the association's headquarters has a solid oak floor, high ceiling and two sparkling chandeliers.



A TEAM of contractors worked "flat out" for twenty weeks to renovate the building.

many attractions, but most important to us is the location of the London Peace Pagoda, built by Japanese monks in 1985 to promote world harmony.

This is a perfect oasis for reflection, meditation and healing prayers. It is just a pleasant fourteen-minute walk away from us through the park.

We are served by six bus routes and two overground stations, which are one minute and four minutes away. Trains from Victoria are just one stop and again take only four minutes.

From London Bridge it is seven minutes through Clapham Junction, which is likewise minutes away. The new Underground station due in 2020 will be on our doorstep.

All in all, I would say that the association is in very good company and most definitely in an up-and-coming area. Since we opened our doors to the public in mid-July, we have had nothing but positive comments. Everyone says what a spiritual building it is, and the mediums all agree that Spirit is already everywhere.

We've had so many new visitors, which is really encouraging. We are slap bang in the middle of a very vibrant area – and what a difference it makes. We all love it!

OK. To more positive points. It is correct that your new home is a former bank? What else do you know about its history?

Yes, it became a bank in September 1879 and closed its doors as a National Westminster bank twenty years ago. The building remained empty from the late 1990s, hence the need to renovate fully inside and out.

Can you give readers a floor-by-floor, room-by-room, description of the new HQ?

We are based in a conservation area and have kept every period detail

externally and internally. It has been a huge pleasure to bring new life back into this landmark building.

Over the renovation period, we had such encouragement from local businesses and residents for turning this derelict and decaying eyesore into something to be admired once again. We are very proud of our new home.

We have taken great care to be DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant, allowing easy access to all our activities.

The wonderful hand-made glazed oak doors open into an entrance lobby, with a solid oak floor, high ceiling and two sparkling chandeliers.

The entrance lobby leads left to reception and through to the William Stead auditorium. This room was the banking hall. It has high ceilings and large windows, and the most beautiful mosaic flooring, which we have restored. A wonderful bust of William Stead watches over the proceedings.

There are two staircases to the first floor. The main staircase with its oak banister leads to the chapel and on to the healing waiting area, the healing clinic and library. The other staircase goes directly from the vending area up to the first floor.

All the windows are solid wood and triple glazed. The doors throughout the building are also solid oak, the walls cream and the carpet a flecked burgundy. The chairs are also burgundy. Throughout, we have sunlight-diffusing blinds in a warm cream.

The bookcases in the Stella Blair Reference Library have been handmade in solid oak and fill every wall of this lovely room.

The stairs lead up to the second floor. The Conan Doyle room is on the corner of the building and where we will hold workshops, open circles, etc. We also have

our own purpose-built trance cabinet in this room.

This floor houses three rooms for sittings and counselling. They are named after spirit guides – Red Cloud, Grey Feather and Silver Birch. Each has comfortable cream leather armchairs, and the facility for Skype and telephone sitting connections.

I'm told the building has air conditioning and a brand new lift. What did the total renovations cost?

Yes. We made both of these a priority. We have air conditioning throughout. During the recent heatwave, the building remained cool and comfortable for all our visitors. It was an absolute blessing!

The lift is DDA compliant. Although it took six weeks to instal, it has already proved its worth in gold in the few weeks we have been open.

The renovation represented a considerable but necessary cost to the SAGB. We had an amazing team of contractors, who all worked together flat out to achieve this twenty-week renovation. They were a pleasure to work with. The standard of their work is second to none.

Sadly, over the last few years, I think most people would agree that there has been a worrying decline in top quality mediums and standards generally. What is the SAGB doing to address this problem?

You have touched on a very important issue, which needs wider consultation. Perhaps PN could take on the mantle to encourage dialogue with all the Spiritualist organisations to come together and address this decline. That would motivate and give guidance and support to each other.

At the association, we have public



MEDIUM and spiritual healer Terry Tasker is seen giving a sitting in the Red Cloud room. The rooms for private sittings are named after spirit guides.



THIS wonderful oil painting of Spiritualist pioneer Mabel St Clair Stobart was found behind a lift shaft.

demonstrations every afternoon. On Mondays and Wednesdays a second evening demonstration is held, with Thursday evenings having a more educational-based element. This is something new we have added to our programme. It is attracting new faces and proving popular.

We also offer a full range of spiritual development opportunities both for newcomers who are searching for an understanding of their opening faculties and for those who already have an understanding and wish to keep their abilities stimulated and used.

A good place to start is with open circles working under the guidance of one of our developed mediums/tutors. We also have open platforms, and working with and developing your relationship with your guides. The history and philosophy of Spiritualism are also important parts of our work.

We regularly run bereavement groups for a greater understanding of the process of death and its effects. These are taken by mediums who are trained counsellors.

Workshops are held most Saturdays and cover many diverse areas and levels, such as mental mediumship, trance and healing to name but three.

In our new premises, we are better situated to evolve into a brighter future and influence the standards for the betterment and propagation of Spiritualism in all of its wonderful facets.

Over to spiritual healing, which is an important part of Spiritualism's ministry. Is it correct that the SAGB has around 50 qualified healers?

That's correct. It's sad to say, but spiritual healing is often thought of as

the poor relation of Spiritualism whilst mediumship can command a high value, both in its practice and development.

Some people expect healing to be given freely as God's gift. We would never deny anyone access to healing if they couldn't make a contribution. However, a fair and just contribution could be made for the time and dedication healers make for the wellbeing of others.

As you said in your question, it is "an important part of Spiritualism's ministry." No one could deny its importance.

All our healers have followed a recognised programme, trained for up to three years and now give their time freely. They serve in the name and love of working with Spirit, and are greatly appreciated by us all. We offer ten walk-in clinics seven days a week.

Can you briefly outline the training the SAGB offers would-be mediums and healers?

Terry Tasker, our healing tutor, who is also a tutor for Kent Healers, takes the healing courses. Indeed, we have a new one starting this month.

The course, which has recently changed its format, consists of one year of study and classes, followed by about fourteen months as a probationer healer in one of our clinics. There is then a final assessment, which leads to a fully qualified SAGB healer certificate. We have new classes in the pipeline for 2019.

Pauline Mason will be taking an evening class for intermediate students interested in understanding trance. Minister Suzanne Gibson-Foy is starting a new beginners' level, entitled *The Foundation of Mediumship*, monthly on Sundays.

Terri Stromeyer already takes a monthly intermediate mediumship class. Now we

are settled, we will always be looking to offer more teaching opportunities.

In the last few years, you have introduced sittings by phone and Skype. Have these proved popular for those abroad and people who cannot get to London easily?

Both have had a beneficial impact for many reasons and allow clients who have visited the association over many decades to maintain contact if, for instance, they have relocated or are travelling abroad.

These services have also been welcomed by those unable to travel, due to illness, for example, or those just needing comfort in their lunch break. Skype and phone sittings give them the joy of having contact with loved ones and friends in the spirit world.

Back to the building. Can you list some of the historic statues, etc, on display at the new premises?

It has been such a delight to take the stained glass and paintings out of storage at last!

A chair used by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is housed in the library. It was bought at auction by the association many years ago.

The bust of William Stead already mentioned was a gift to the association. An exact replica of this beautiful sculpture is exhibited in The People's Palace of Peace at The Hague in Holland.

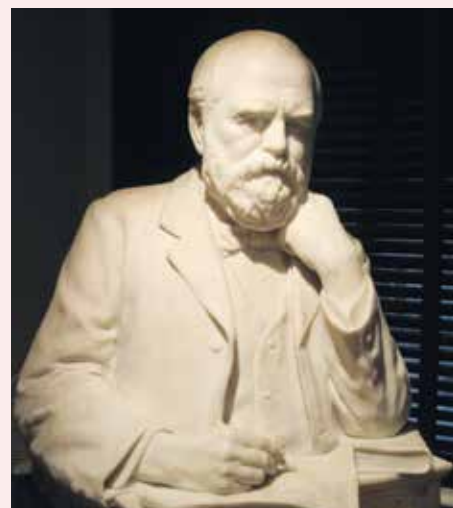
The George Craze stained glass panel is in the entrance lobby. George joined the association in 1917, became president and remained a staunch worker for 29 years.

The *Medium and Spirit Guide* statue is outside our chapel. By G. H. Paulin, it was given by his widow to the association, and once exhibited in the Royal Academy.

Inside the chapel is a stained glass



THE association's main auditorium is named after another Spiritualist pioneer, William Stead. Seen right, a bust of him was a gift to the SAGB.



tribute to Sydney Richardson, who was married to famous medium Ursula Roberts. Ray Branch, who was in the healing clinic run by Ursula for many years, designed the stained glass.

A portrait of Spiritualist pioneer Mabel St Clair Stobart hangs in the William Stead room. The painting was found under the stairs behind the lift shaft at Belgrave Square. We do not know how we came to own it, but are so happy to have it back out on display again. She was a formidable and very brave lady.

What's happened to the SAGB's library? How many books does it contain? I understand that over the years, quite a few books were, to put it bluntly, stolen, which is shameful. Will members have access to the library

again? How are you going to prevent volumes disappearing?

The library has been in storage a long time and we are so pleased that we are now preparing our new purpose-fitted library to house our books. We are currently re-cataloguing the library, but I think it will be early next year before we have completed this task.

We are still finding time to open boxes from storage, but the number of books must run into thousands. The reference library will open regularly for members only, but it's too soon to give times for that.

I would not say that books were "stolen." It was, after all, a lending library. I would prefer to say that some people just forgot to return them. The association would always gratefully consider any donation of books for the reference library.



OUTSIDE the chapel is this "Medium and Spirit Guide" statue by G. H. Paulin, which was once exhibited in the Royal Academy.

friends and so many new faces.

Since the announcement of the 2019 event to be held at the same venue, we have had a steady stream of bookings from the UK, the Channel Islands and Europe.

Due to popularity and demand, we have increased the numbers of tutors to six, which has allowed us to offer different aspects of mediumistic development and ability levels.

We have also made it available to day students for the first time, so anyone living in the surrounding areas can attend daily, but still enjoy all the weekend offers to students staying at the hotel.

■ **The SAGB's website can be found at www.sagb.org.uk Additionally, please see its advert on page 2.**



THE chapel is home to this lovely stained glass tribute to Sydney Richardson, the husband of famous medium Ursula Roberts.

Now that the SAGB has a permanent home, is there anything new planned for the future?

It is so nice to have the comfort of knowing that the association is now in full control of its destiny – no landlords, no leases, just a freehold home in perpetuity!

We have introduced many new activities which are on our website, but they will be evolving all the time. Our desire and aim is always to work with Spirit and the propagation of Spiritualism.

We are going through many changes at this time, not only in the world, but in Spiritualism too, and need to be ever aware of changing needs.

Earlier this year, the SAGB held a residential weekend in Worthing. Did it attract many students? Any more in the pipeline?

It was great to revive a weekend event in the wonderful new location of Worthing. A sell-out, it was attended by many old