

By Dr. Danny Penman

The last time I 'died' was in Jerusalem in 1276. Pope Gregory X's Crusade against Islam had collapsed and the city's Christians would soon be abandoned to their fate.

My final hours were filled with fear. I was besieged in a beautiful vaulted church along with 100 knights. Smoky candlelight glinted off their armour. Some knights were praying, others resting.

As dawn broke, they readied themselves for the final conflict with an implacable foe. Even the most devout were terrified. All knew that only a handful would survive the coming day.

I watched their preparations for battle. The sharpening of swords and lances; the reinforcing of shields and armour.

But most of all, I prepared for my own death. As a monk in a city of Muslims, my chances of surviving the coming assault were slim. Soon after the knights left the church, I retreated to a small side-chapel to pray. I was desperate for forgiveness.

I had travelled from a monastery in Kent to the Holy Land so that I could kill Muslims.

Although I still hated Islam, I found it hard to love my own side. The decadence and corruption of the Crusaders had sickened me. I wanted to be left alone to live in peace, but it was too late.

With no knights left to protect me, the rampaging enemy had set fire to the chapel. I watched as the flames roared up the sides of the building.

Soon I too was on fire and burning like a Roman candle. I didn't feel any pain - I knew I was going to die and that my Lord would make it swift.

Out of the blackness I could see a burning white light. A calm voice asked me what I had learned from my life and whether there was any knowledge I wished to carry to the next.

It was the voice of David Wells - a past-life regression therapist who had put me in a trance and guided me to my 'past incarnation'.

To many, the idea of reincarnation will seem like bunkum. But strange as it may seem, it is garnering a surprising degree of respectable scientific support.

Today, London hosts an international conference on the subject in memory of the late Dr Ian Stevenson, an American scientist who spent decades studying the phenomenon.

Dr Stevenson amassed an astonishing amount of evidence for reincarnation. He tracked down more than 3,000 children who claimed to have experienced a 'previous life'.

Many were able to give precise details, such as their former names and the manner

of their deaths. They could even recall the names of friends and family, many of whom Dr Stevenson was able to track down through birth records. Others knew intimate details known only to the deceased's family.

Such findings have led respected academics to startling conclusions. 'Reincarnation is the most likely explanation for the strongest cases,' says Dr Jim Tucker, medical director of the Child and Family Psychiatric Clinic at the University of Virginia in the U.S.

'The evidence points to a 'carry over' of memories and emotions from one life to another. That could be termed reincarnation.'

Reincarnation is highly controversial - not just among scientists, but between different religions too. Broadly speaking, Christians, Muslims and Jews do not believe in it, while Hindus and Buddhists do.

To most in the West, it is still seen as little more than the product of a far-fetched imagination. But given the growing interest of the scientific community, I decided to investigate whether there could be more to it.

I volunteered to undergo what's known as 'past-life regression therapy'. Practitioners of this discipline claim we have all lived before and that we can be taught to remember our former incarnations.

It sounded utterly preposterous. Yet I must admit to a certain uneasiness, also. What if I were to remember that I had been a murderer or a rapist in a former life? Or, Heaven forbid, one of Hitler or Stalin's henchmen?

Whatever the truth behind it, past-life regression is not without risks. The psychological shock of 'recovering a memory' from a former life can overwhelm some. Others feel guilty about misdeeds 'they' perpetrated.

I took comfort from the fact that David Wells, one of Britain's most experienced practitioners and author of *Past, Present and Future: What Your Past Lives Tell You About Yourself*, had agreed to be my guide.

I was led into a darkened room and coaxed into relaxing on a big, soft chair surrounded by burning incense and scented candles.

David asked me to imagine myself floating above my house. I mentally drifted off into space and turned back to face our beautiful planet.

Slowly the Earth appeared to stop turning and began to reverse direction. This symbolised flying backwards through time.

In my hypnotic state, I pictured myself returning to Earth at the time of my former life - just in time to re-live my death in that church in 13th-century Jerusalem.

My regression experience was perplexing, to say the least. I felt as if I were living in two worlds at once. I was aware of my current life, but the world of Jerusalem in 1276 was equally real.

I could feel the clothes I was wearing and the sandals on my feet. I saw my surroundings in vivid detail, right down to the moonlight streaming through church windows and the fear etched on the knights' faces.

It felt more powerful and spontaneous than a memory, more realistic than a dream, but not as solid as the waking world.

As I stayed in my trance, David started asking me questions about my past life, and things became even stranger. It felt as if someone else was replying.

The answers I gave were so spontaneous and specific that it certainly didn't feel like I was dreaming them up on the spot, or trawling through memories of films set during the Crusades.

Was I merely describing scenes from my imagination or from facts I had gleaned during my real life?

Professor Chris French, a psychologist at Goldsmiths, University of London, thinks it was a combination of the two. He is deeply sceptical about past-life encounters, and says: 'Often people who undergo hypnotic regression conjure up false memories. It's not a magical key for unlocking hidden memories.'

'There's mountains of experimental data which shows that people produce a story for themselves based on their own beliefs and expectations. People come out with a Hollywood version of historical events, such as life in Roman Britain or medieval Europe.'

Even so, the evidence for reincarnation remains tantalising. Dr Stevenson's team at the University of Virginia documented possible cases of reincarnation involving children over a 40-year period.

They focused on children because they thought their stories were less likely to have been contaminated with false memories.

Most of the team's evidence was gathered in the Middle East and Asia, where a belief in reincarnation is generally accepted.

One case was of a Lebanese girl who could accurately recall the names of 25 people from a previous life. She also knew the precise relationship between the individuals.

Intriguingly, researchers believe children can have birthmarks or deformities at the site of the injury that killed them in a former life. The case of Semih Tutusmus from Turkey is typical.

Semih was born with a serious deformity in his right ear which, from the age of two, he claimed resulted from being shot by a man called Isa Dirbekil. Semih gave his name from his former life as Selim Fesli. He also gave the names of his wife and six children.

At the age of four, Semih made his way to a neighbouring village and found the house he had lived in during his past life, and introduced himself to 'his' family.

When he saw Isa - the man who he claimed had shot him – he threw stones at him. A short while later, Isa confessed to the shooting (he claimed it was an accident) and was jailed for two years.

Even more astonishing is the case of Jenny Cockell, 55, who lives near Northampton. Jenny was a toddler when she began recalling a past life.

Visions of a village in Victorian Ireland repeatedly flashed into her mind. As she grew older, the details became more vivid, and by the time she was an adult, she became convinced that she'd lived in the village between 1898 and the early 1930s, that she had seven children, and had died giving birth to an eighth.

During regression therapy, she was able to draw maps of her home village. She marked shops, main roads, a station and the cottage she had lived in. After studying a map of Ireland, she felt drawn to the village of Malahide in County Dublin.

In the early 1990s, Jenny visited Malahide and followed a trail of clues that led to the discovery of her 'former identity' - Mary Sutton, a farm labourer's wife.

She learned that upon Mary's death, her eight children had been given to orphanages across Ireland. This prompted Jenny to embark on an odyssey to track 'her' lost children.

Sonny Sutton, her eldest 'son', was the first of the children traced.

'I didn't know what to think,' said Sonny, of their meeting. 'We were all Catholics, and Catholics don't believe in reincarnation. But when she got out of the car I could see my Mother in her. There was a bond between us from the beginning.'

Jenny, to dispel the inevitable doubts about her story, took the step of contacting Dr Stevenson before she approached Sonny.

A BBC researcher, Gitti Coats, also interviewed Jenny and Sonny before they met each other so that any evidence would be uncontaminated.

'The two sets of memories tied together very well,' Gitti reported. 'Nearly everything tallied.'

After meeting Sonny, Jenny focused her efforts on tracking down her 'daughter', Elizabeth, whom she'd died giving birth to in her former life. After months of looking, she was traced to the Dublin Mountains.

Elizabeth, brought up by an aunt and uncle, was totally unaware of being adopted until Jenny told her.

She had more doubts about reincarnation than her brother, but later accepted a priest's explanation that her mother was working through Jenny to reunite the family. Elizabeth subsequently embraced Jenny as part of the family.

'I can't see her as our mother,' she said. 'But I do think my dead mother is causing her to have these dreams. Some people might say she's making these things up, but she's proved they're real. Sonny told me she knows things nobody else knows.'

So do cases such as that of Jenny Cockell and the children identified by Dr Stevenson provide proof of reincarnation? As far as some scientists are concerned, they just might — but there are several other equally odd explanations.

Some believe that Jenny and those like her may possess a psychic ability known as 'super-psi', which allows them to reach back in time to access other people's memories. In other words, they are not recalling their own former life.

Others believe there is a more disturbing possibility: that Jenny is possessed by the spirit of Mary.

Dr Peter Fenwick, a neuropsychiatrist at King's College, University of London, says: 'The phenomenon seems real but its origins are open to interpretation. We simply do not understand it yet.'

From my own experience of regression therapy, all I can say is that my 'former life' - and death - felt eerily real.

I do not claim to know for sure that I was once a monk at the time of the Crusaders. But, equally, I cannot believe the 'memories' I described in such detail were pure fabrication.