

More than 7,000 people took part in the study designed to test people's ability to "see" distant locations. During the 1970s the CIA spent £12.5 million looking into remote viewing with a view to conducting "psychic spying" missions against the Soviet Union. But the "Twitter" experiment led by psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman, from the University of Hertfordshire, found no evidence that such an ability exists. During the study, the first to be carried out via the instant messaging service, Prof Wiseman travelled to four target locations in the UK and asked participants to "Tweet" their thoughts and impressions about the spot he was visiting. Volunteers were then messaged with the address of a website on which they could see photographs of five locations – the target location and four decoys. People were asked to vote for the location they believed to be the one visited.

If any kind of psychic ability emerged from the group, the chosen location would be the right one more often than by chance.

But this did not happen, said Prof Wiseman, who has a reputation for "debunking" psychic phenomena.

"In the first trial I was looking at a striking modern building, but 35 per cent of the group thought that I was in some woods," he said.

"On another trial I was sitting under an unusual looking canopy but only 15 per cent of the group selected this option, with 24 per cent thinking that I was in a graveyard. The same pattern emerged on all four trials."

Once people knew the location, those who believed in the paranormal were more likely than others to be convinced there was a high level of matching between their thoughts and the target.

Among the group, 31 per cent of "believers" indicated a considerable correspondence between their thoughts and the target, compared with just 12 per cent of sceptics.

"This type of creative thinking might make people see illusory relationships in the real world, and could, for example, help convince them that there are uncanny matches between their dreams and subsequent events," said Prof Wiseman.