

When a UFO really isn't 1980

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A decade ago one of the most convincing UFOs was 'photographed.' Now it turns out to have been a hoax, by a British physicist. Page 16



The UFO that wasn't

By Robert C. Cowen

A decade ago near Warminster, England, a flying saucer appeared in the night sky with a burst of purple light, according to some 30 witnesses who regularly gathered on nearby Cradle Hill to watch for such phenomena. A detector sounded, indicating the presence of a strong magnetic field. And photos taken at the time showed the saucer moving across the sky.

This was the Warminster event, destined to gain fame in UFO circles as one of the best-documented of saucer sightings.

Research notebook

Experts judged that the photos could not possibly have been faked. But they were faked, as part of a series of "controlled hoaxes" perpetrated by David I. Simpson, a British physicist, in a study of the competence of UFO investigators and UFO investigations.

Summarizing his findings recently in the magazine *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and using the Warminster incident as an illustration, Simpson gives an important warning to those who may forget that the human mind tends to see what it wants to believe. Even otherwise competent scientists or engineers have let themselves be led astray. As Simpson notes: "Occasionally, individuals with relevant technical backgrounds become involved; it is disturbing to witness the abandoning of their mental disciplines and common sense."

There was indeed a purple light to be seen near Warminster Saturday, March 28, 1970, at 11 p.m. Simpson shone a purple spotlight toward the Cradle Hill watchers — switching it on for 5 seconds, off 5 seconds, and finally on for 25 seconds. The "magnetic field" detector was bogus, operated by a confederate to sound a phony alarm. The photos had been pre-exposed to show the saucer. Thus, although they were carefully shepherded from camera to developing tank "so no hoax could occur," they were already compromised.

Supposedly careful investigation by UFO organizations and even skilled (but UFO-inclined) experts found no evidence of this trickery. Yet signs of fakery were purposely left in the photos. Some of the streetlamps in the town were dropped out of one frame, for example. Such indications were overlooked, while eyewitnesses later talked of seeing a red light in the midst of the purple glow (where there was no red) and of seeing the saucer itself drift over the town.

Such gullibility is typical of what Simpson says he found among UFO investigators. This is worth remembering when enthusiasts accuse skeptics of "bias." The "irrational thinking [of ufologists] is infectious and has often provided the media with entertaining headlines," Simpson warns, adding, "As a result, certain members of the general public, on seeing something in the sky that is strange to them, describe not what they saw but what they think they ought to have seen."

As of spring 1980, no scientifically credible evidence of visitations from outer space has been brought forward. But the credibility of ufology still leaves much to be desired.

A Wednesday column