

Christmas 'star' just a meteorite says the RAF

By Martin Walker

A bright star in the East observed the length and breadth of England on Christmas Day was almost certainly a large meteorite breaking up, the RAF's observer centre at West Drayton said yesterday.

There was less than one chance in a hundred that it might have been one of two satellites that are scheduled to burn up in the atmosphere of the Northern hemisphere this week, according to records kept by the Fylingdales early warning centre in Yorkshire.

More than 300 calls were made to police stations from Cornwall to Norfolk and Yorkshire, reporting that a large light, followed by about 20 smaller lights, was travelling in a north-easterly direction. The bulk of the calls, forwarded to the RAF centre by police regional headquarters, came from the Thames Valley. Some police stations telephoned West Drayton direct, and so did some coastguard stations.

"We are absolutely certain it was not an aircraft," RAF West Drayton's emergency desk said. "All the radar and traffic reports were double checked to exclude any possibility of an aircraft in trouble.

"There were too many reports for it to be the work of cranks. Several of the reports came from responsible observers, such as the police or coastguards, and the reports of

what had been seen tallied remarkably well," the RAF added.

The reports began to come in at about 9 p.m. on Christmas night. There was very little cloud across England, the visibility was good.

"It was pure coincidence that it happened on Christmas Day," the RAF said. "I'm afraid we can't say it was a star in the East."

Flight Lieutenant Duncan Swift, in charge of the West Drayton emergency desk, said that the lights were seen high in the sky, and the tail of smaller lights was the classic pattern of a meteorite breaking up.

● Roy Panther has claimed the discovery of a new comet—the first from Britain for 15 years. Mr Panther, aged 54, a printer, of Walgrave St Peter, near Northampton, narrowly missed a handsome reward for his efforts.

A Fleet Street-based group of astronomical enthusiasts is offering a prize of £2,500 to anyone who discovers a new comet from Britain during national Astronomy Week next April.

Mr Panther, using a modest home-made telescope, has been scanning the skies in search of new comets for 33 years without success. The newly claimed comet is in the constellation of Lyra and is estimated to be within 100 million miles of earth.

The light fantastic

STRANGE lights in the sky seen throughout England puzzled people in Oxfordshire on Christmas night.

Three policemen saw the show of lights and bemused members of the public rang the weather men at RAF Benson for an explanation.

One of the policemen, Sgt Peter Dawson, stationed at Oxford, was off-duty and driving with

his wife on the A4095 near Witney, when he spotted a bright light in the sky heading north.

But when he stopped his car, he saw several smaller lights as well.

Meteorite

"I am not going to say it was spaceships," said Sgt Dawson, keeping his feet firmly on the ground. "I

had not been drinking. I would put it down to a meteorite."

Two officers on duty in Oxford also saw a light.

The unidentified flying object was seen by hundreds of people all over England on Thursday night and the Royal Air Force observer base at West Drayton, London, said that it was almost certainly a meteor breaking up.

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