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Fireball lights up the Christmas night sky

Sussex folk had a grandstand view of the fireball sighted all over the country on the evening of Christmas Day which "rivalled the full moon in its brilliance," said Mr. John Mason, of Southdowns Astronomical Society.

The society logged several hundred calls from the public reporting the sightings at 9.08 p.m.

"It was a brilliant fireball which came in from across the Channel travelling from the south-west in a north-

easterly direction, crossing the East Sussex coast near Newhaven and probably extinguished north of London," he said.

Many people saw the fireball, including coastguards and the fire crews fighting a blaze at Havant, Hants.

It was a brilliant white light, "rather like an electric light bulb. It then exploded without noise and broke up into fragments, probably up to 30.

"All of the fragments followed parallel paths as they

crossed the coast and the particles split up and slowly faded to a dull red colour as they cooled," he said.

Most reports had come from East and West Sussex but there were calls from Kent, Surrey, Hants, Dorset and from as far north as south Yorkshire.

Mr. Mason said the fireball was caused either by an artificial satellite or piece of man-made "space junk," burning up in the atmosphere at a height of 40 to 50 miles, or a piece of rocky debris orbiting the sun which

just happened to come within the influence of the earth's gravity and burned up.

It had been coming in at a speed well in excess of 20,000 miles per hour and would have disintegrated 30 miles up. There was no noise and there would have been no meteorite coming to earth.

"It was obviously a fairly soft object to have broken up so soon into so many pieces," said Mr. Mason.

The Society is interested in hearing from anyone who

was able to take accurate bearings on the fireball or photographed it.

They should contact Mr. R. F. Porter, of 10, Deeside Avenue, Fishbourne, Chichester 788490.

Footnote: The British Astronomical Association later said the fireball was "almost certainly" the third stage of a rocket used to launch Russian satellite Cosmos 749 five years ago.

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