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How It failed to come from outer space

By Alan Rusbridger

Philip Lewis and Philip Allen from Cornwall — men who have been known to make a spider disappear into thin air — unrolled their sleeping bags and settled down into their vigil for The Thing.

It was 8 pm on Thursday and a hazy red dusk began to shroud Cley Hill, Warminster. Beneath the pair of watchers gleamed the yellow sodium lights of the A305. Above them stretched a skyful of the unknown — a sky which had previously yielded a galaxy of flashing cigar shapes, discs, lights, balls and zigzags.

They re-told the 1976 spider story to pass the time until nightfall. "It was on a metal plate," said Philip A, a china clayworker from St Austell,

"We put an electric field around it with the motor from a washing machine and it vanished." It was, said Philip L, comparable to the 1958 brick experiment in which an American scientist threw a brick through an electrified door. That vanished, too.

A West Country voice near them suddenly broke out: "There's one." Stores of binoculars swung round and focused: "That's a motorbike, stupid." — "Well it must be bloody Evel Knievel then," countered the voice.

There was some laughter, then a distant sound gripped the group of watchers. The noise — somewhere between a roaring and a clattering — grew and grew until it was identified as the Westbury to Trowbridge train. It was a few

minutes late, said one. There were groans of disappointment.

"Some people expect to see Star Wars every five minutes," said Philip A, in some distaste at his hilltop companions. There were now about 150 of them, drawn by the mystical lure of The Thing, whose eerie roar was first heard by Roger Rump, the postmaster, in 1984. It is said to have been seen many times since — especially in late August in odd-numbered years.

Cley Hill is the Loch Ness of the ufologist. Flying saucers, it is claimed, cannot keep away from its flat top overlooking three counties. Nor, on late August nights, can UFObores. Festooned in binoculars, telephoto lenses and CB receivers, they swap stories and glaze one another's eyes. "I don't

believe in little green men, but the stories invariably begin. Or: "Put it down to imagination if you like, but . . ."

Those were the vintage years before the UFO recession came along, with a dearth of sightings in 1979-80. But the hard-times are bottoming out now, according to Ken Rogers, a 32-year-old BBC studio manager, who can be found sitting in a triangle of light any time between now and tomorrow.

Mr Rogers is chairman of the British UFO Society, which has its headquarters in Warminster. It is run by Mr Rod Smith, a welder, who believes that the Second Coming came and went some little time ago. "I don't believe that," said Mr Rogers. "What I think is that they are mounting a subtle public relations exercise to

prepare people, so there's no Orson Welles thing when they come."

Welles's 1938 US radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds caused a widespread panic when many listeners mistook it for a news broadcast.

Another possible part of the plan happened just before midnight when a 26-year-old army corporal on sentry duty at Battlesbury Barracks rushed up to a UFO Society official and reported that he and three colleagues had seen a white rigger ball in the sky.

No one on Cley Hill saw the rigger ball. But so impressed was the corporal with his vision that before dawn he had returned with his cheque book and the UFO Society's membership had swelled by one.