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Mystery white light has the sky watchers all at sea

by NORMAN BATCHELOR

IT WAS a chance glance that drew the attention of Malcolm Littlejohn, an experienced yachtsman, to the mysterious light in the night sky.

Although Mr Littlejohn was looking out over the sea he was not at the helm of his ocean-going yacht in which he has crossed the English Channel to the Continent on several occasions.

Horizon

Instead he was bemoaning his bad luck that he was engulfed in a massive home-ward-bound traffic jam on the coast road. Then he spotted the light. It was no ordinary light, he decided.

It was bright and whiter than any star he had seen in all the hours he had sailed under a night sky and it hung well above the horizon to the south west.

What Mr Littlejohn, 39-

year-old former commodore of Lancing Sailing Club, on the Sussex coast, did not know was that he was just one of many people who had reported mysterious white lights recently.

Police and coastguards along a 25-mile stretch of coast-line between Newhaven, Brighton, and Littlehampton have received dozens of calls — some have even been made to the Old Royal Observatory at Greenwich.

And on one occasion at the height of a storm, a lifeboat was launched following reports that a light had been seen, although the crew found nothing in the sea.

Mr Littlejohn, who lives in Queens Road, Lancing, said: "As I sat in my car heading west out of Brighton I saw this light over the sea.

"At first I thought it was a plane with its landing lights switched fully on. But then I

realised that no aircraft could be landing in that spot.

"Then I thought it might be a flare. It was very, very bright and it seemed to hang low in the sky. Then it suddenly disappeared. It puzzled me."

The calls have persisted for several days with people reporting sightings from around 6pm to midnight.

One couple on Worthing seafront reported seeing five white lights encircling a single big white light. Then, they said, they vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

To add to the mystery the lights were always seen to be over the sea about 15 miles out in the Channel in an area often used for exercise by NATO warships.

The calls reached their climax when Selsey lifeboat was put out after a report of a bright white light seen

many miles out off Bognor Regis.

The crew searched for four hours without finding anything and finally returned to base.

What is the source of the strange lights? One man who thinks he may have the answer is coastguard Peter Cherriman, who has spotted them on several occasions.

Mr Cherriman said: "We have certainly had a lot of calls and we have logged them all. We think the light in the sky is the planet Venus, which is very low and bright at the moment."

One of his colleagues at Shoreham said: "If you look at the planet through powerful field glasses you can see several smaller lights encircling it. This would explain the smaller lights seen by some people."

But in stormy weather with thick cloud cover?

Astronomer Mr Gordon Taylor, of the Greenwich observatory, is not so sure. "We have had calls from people on the Sussex coast and I do not know what to make of them," he said.

Bright

"Certainly Venus is visible for an hour or two after about 6 pm at the moment but I understand there have been sightings much later than this when the planet would not be visible.

"And Venus would certainly not be seen if there was thick cloud. It most certainly does not appear to be anything astronomical which is causing the sighting.

"Venus does not have small satellites encircling it. It is very bright and if your field glasses are not too clean you can get an appearance of smaller lights because of the refractions."

Star note: Venus is slightly smaller than Earth and from now until about the end of this month it will move slightly nearer to us. By the end of December it will be about 30 million miles away.