

Silver suits, flying saucers and ET

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HUGO DAVENPORT explains why the UFOria about mystery objects in the sky is waning

NOT a single silver-suited alien dropped in to join the British Unidentified Flying Object Research Association in London yesterday as it celebrated 21 years of sky watching.

And if an extra-terrestrial had turned up and parked his spaceship outside Kensington Central Library, the UFOlogists would, on the whole, have been more surprised than the crowds of Saturday shoppers.

According to research by Shirley McIver, a postgraduate sociology student at York University, only 44 per cent of the research association's members believe that 'physical extra-terrestrials travelling in vehicles' are the most probable UFO cause.

Although no full public survey has been conducted in Britain, she points to a US poll which indicated that about half the population believe in flying saucers.

Her survey, carried out two years ago, still places extra-terrestrials at the top of the possible explanations league, while 19 per cent of her respondents favoured 'unknown natural causes'; 12 per cent 'psychic events'; and 8 per cent hadn't

the faintest idea.

The decline in the standing of aliens seems also to have coincided with rapid shrinkage in the association's membership, down from 550 two years ago to about 350. The association says numbers rise and fall in concert with 'flaps'—waves of UFO activity—and British skies have been fairly empty during the past year. There are, however, more mundane reasons.

Mr Lionel Beer, a founder member and organiser of yesterday's conference, blames the earthly recession. 'When we had our inaugural meeting in 1962, people were spilling out of the doors . . . you might say the UFOria has somewhat waned.

'We did a survey to find out why we had lost so many members, and a lot of people said they had been made redundant and could no longer afford the subscription.'

The present eclipse seems light years from the first flush of cosmic rapture which brought together eight small independent bodies to form BUFORA.

In the 1970s, it drew up a list of 147 different phenomena which had been misidentified as UFOs. The current

estimate of reports worth following up is between two and 10 per cent.

Jenny Randles, Liverpool investigator, found what could be number 148 after she received a promising UFO report. On closer inspection, the 'UFO' turned out to be a luminous stuffed owl abandoned in a bush.

Alternative explanations have proliferated. The arcane science of 'socioUFOlogy', for example, has attracted a growing number of adherents, including Miss Randles. She distinguishes firmly between what she calls UAPs—unidentified atmospheric effects—and 'close encounters', in which people claim to have met aliens.

'The more closely you look at these experiences,' she says, 'the more closely they become aligned with dreams, visions and hallucinations. It's not as simple as that because they have a sort of quasi-reality—they are on the threshold between dreams and reality.'

Another school is the ball lightning theory. Its main, indeed only, proponent is Steuart Campbell, an Edinburgh architect.

He said: 'Ball lightning isn't properly understood, so I'm accused of

substituting one unknown for another. It's very unfair. Ball lightning is a natural atmospheric phenomenon, thought to be electro-magnetic, consisting of an ionised plasma.

'UFOs don't exist—they are all ball lightning. Aliens don't exist either—they are only tricks of the light, or wishful thinking, or hallucination.'

An interesting theory has been proposed by Paul Devereux, a writer in Wales, who claims a 'remarkable correlation' between UFO activity and geological faultlines.

He says some so-called UFOs may be produced by rocks rubbing together under pressure which can emit light and has succeeded in producing coloured lights from a small granite core in a rock-crusher.

Traditionalists have not been totally routed. Founder member Graham Knewstubb, now in his mid-seventies, states confidently: 'The most likely hypothesis is that technological civilisations have risen elsewhere in the universe and that contact has been going on for a long time, probably on a very small scale because of the vast distances involved.'