

# THIS MAGAZINE'S FEED

absence in early July deprived us of the chance to get in on the Great South-East England UFO scare. Every evening for a fortnight, this brilliant starlike object appeared almost overhead, as seen from London and the Home Counties. Hovering noiselessly for half an hour, it would suddenly just disappear at 9.48 pm precisely.

Those places that know about the sky, like the Royal Greenwich Observatory, assured callers that it couldn't be a UFO (after all, they don't exist). After ascertaining the object wasn't low down in the South, where the bright planet Mars happened to lie, the explanation had to be that it was a weather balloon.

But its strange behaviour and brilliance made it an odd weather balloon—and the Met Office denied all knowledge. Another organisation concerned with sky-sights eventually tracked down the culprit. The British Astronomical Association regularly investigates reports of fireballs—brilliant meteors—and the fireball team swung into action. It found that the “UFO” was a series of balloons which the Ministry of Defence was launching daily at 9.15 pm from Beaufort Park in Bracknell.

The balloons were covered with metal, so making them brilliant as they caught the rays of the setting Sun. The prevailing wind carried them gently eastward over London, and their rapid ascent made them appear almost stationary in the sky. Each balloon burst at the same time, when it reached a height of 32 km.

How did the astronomers get the clues that led them to the Ministry? Well, one of the investigators got a sight of one of the first balloons when its remnants fell to earth in the grounds of his local mental hospital. □

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