

FRIDAY PEOPLE



Randles: Ruling out UFOs, leaning towards a new whirlwind

Ringing the changes

EVERY summer, as Fleet Street's corn stocks run low, little green eye-shades are directed at the West Country where giant rings of flattened crops have been appearing overnight for the past six years. Ere July is out Jenny Randles of the British UFO Research Association is usually blue in the face from explaining that they are not the landing marks of spacecraft.

Which is why Ms Randles, the association's national investigations director, has co-authored a report examining a host of circle theories ranging from hoaxes to the mating habits of hedgehogs and parallel universes. The explanation she finds hardest to fault is almost as unorthodox as flying saucers — for which, incidentally, she believes no convincing evidence exists, preferring to talk of "unidentified atmospheric phenomena."

The exasperating feature of the circles — always slightly elliptical and 45-60ft across — is that the crop is undamaged but laid flat in a clockwise, swirled pattern. Although hoaxes have been proved, she believes this rules out heaving a long chain around the axis of a pole — a task rendered almost impossible by the crop's resistance.

A complicating factor was the appearance in 1963 of

five-ring formations — a large circle with four smaller circles ranged geometrically around. This, she calculates, would require a team of five people performing complicated manoeuvres in the dark without leaving tracks. When such a set was found near Alfriston, Sussex, in 1964 Denis Healey materialised from his home nearby to snap them. "Healey's Comet", said a headline.

Having dismissed helicopter downdraught, chemical weapons tests, force fields and drug dropping zones, Ms Randles leans towards a theory promulgated by the meteorologist Dr Terence Meadon. His "fair-weather stationary whirlwind" is apparently a short-lived phenomenon (a minute or so), almost exclusive to southern England between May and August, and capable of several wind funnels.

But last month the wind advocates were thrown into a spin by the advent of huge concentric rings. "Dr Meadon is now talking about a completely new form of whirlwind," says Ms Randles, who confesses that the circles' evolving patterns are "very suspicious."

Last year an unusual greenish-white jelly-like substance was found in a central ring. The analytical verdict was "some kind of confectionery that had gone off". A Mars Bar? She insists not. "There's not the slightest evidence to explain the circles in terms of UFOs. It is wrong to try and explain one inexplicable phenomenon with another."

All this suggests a symbiotic relationship between the elements and Fleet Street. The British whirlwind spell coincides exactly with the silly season.