

19/5/1988

ARRESTING THOSE MARTIANS

No one denies that some strange things are observed in the sky. But nine out of 10 UFOs are IFOs, reports Jenny Randles

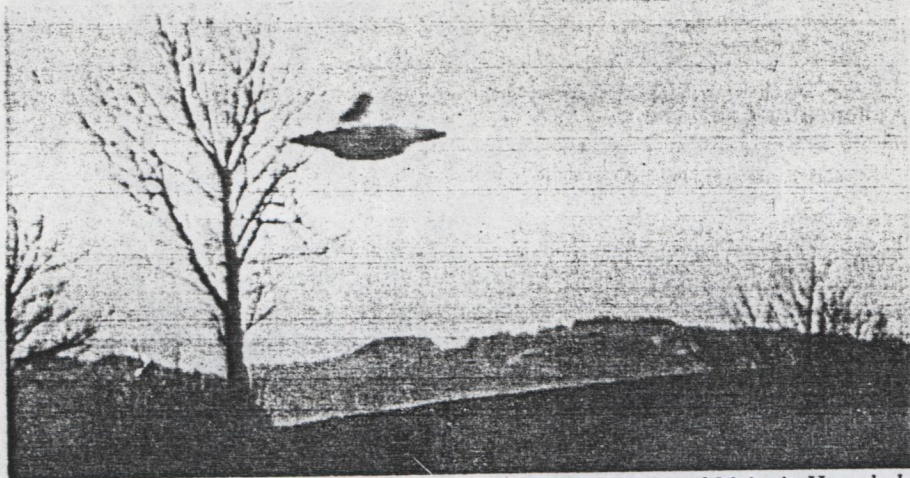
In October 1967, strange glowing lights plagued Devon and Cornwall, and police officers were not immune to sighting these mysterious aerial intruders. But were they really UFOs, spacecraft from another world? In 1975, Greater Manchester police were on the Pennine moors above Oldham, seeking a weird light that danced around the hillside in the middle of the night. Some called it the 'phantom helicopter' and spoke of IRA smugglers or gun-runners. Others, who had pursued it in their patrol cars, only to be hopelessly outpaced, came to UFO investigators and asked for help to track down the 'flying thingy'.

Five years later, in the early hours of November 28, 1980, PC Alan Godfrey of West Yorkshire was on the other side of these same moors. Patrolling the mill town of Todmorden in his Panda, he was looking for some straying cattle and found instead, he said, an oval UFO that hovered above the road, stole 15 minutes of time from his memory and led him unsuspectingly into confrontation with the media, UFO investigators, psychiatrists and, eventually, his friends.

To this day, Unidentified Flying Objects are still being seen in numbers and reported to the police. Recently, I was called by a desk sergeant in the Cheshire force. A young girl had been terrified by a glowing object that made a low humming sound. They had exhausted all options for an explanation — could I perhaps lend a hand and try to figure out what might have gone on?

This is my job, you see. Since I quit teaching in 1978, I have been Britain's only professional UFO investigator. It is often a thankless task, because I am expected to believe in things which I do not and have answers to questions that nobody yet knows how to ask. But it is important to try to discover the truth behind UFO encounters, if only because there are many frightened people who assume the answer *must* be what they read in the Sunday tabloids . . . that the Martians have landed!

A few years ago — after the Pennine 'flying thingy' of the mid-1970s, in fact — I appeared on a radio programme in which a GMP spokesperson was asked what the police would do if they succeeded in catching one of the UFOs on the moors.



SUNSET AIRSHIP: This photograph was taken in 1976 by Eduard Meier in Hasenbol. It was the last in a series of nine he took as the object approached from the west which are discussed in a new book called Light Years

'We would arrest it!', was the (presumably) witty rejoinder.

But what *should* police do with UFO sightings which, as every officer who has manned the phones will know, come in at steady intervals? There are, in fact, standard procedures.

Bizarre questions

Officially, a report should be made by telephone to the Air Traffic Control Centre at West Drayton, Middlesex, where it can be checked against radar returns. After all, it just *might* be a spy plane from an unfriendly country.

This thinking lies behind the list of questions on a report form which police officers are supposed to ask a witness and then send to a department called Air staff-2 at the Ministry of Defence. It explains why such bizarre questions are included as: 'Was the UFO seen near a reservoir?' Martians *might* fancy a nocturnal dip, but far more relevant to the MoD is the fear that saboteurs would consider this an excellent place to start their evil deeds.

Officially, the Ministry insists that it does log all reports (from airports, coast guards and military bases, as well as police). However it almost never gives out data of 'defence interest'. Since that is all it is paid to concern itself with, it cannot take the initiative — even if a sighting *does* have scientific merit, as the Ministry recognise it occasionally does.

This produces a problem. Police officers think that, by reporting the story to Whitehall, they can be sure it is being handled. Members of the public who take the trouble to share a UFO observation with their local station, also assume that

their report will not merely end up on a filing cabinet somewhere. Yet, almost invariably, they never hear another thing.

Perhaps you think that the average UFO sighter is on his way home from the 'Dog and Duck' and that flying saucers are just the modern-day version of the traditional pink elephant.

Of course, there *are* people who see UFOs while 'under the influence' and others who think it fun to waste the time of the police. But the vast majority of those who see something they cannot explain — by which I mean upwards of 90 per cent — really are sincere and simply need the friendly ears of someone who will listen without laughing.

In a sense, that is why I exist. As Director of Investigations for the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA) — 25 years old in 1987 — I help to run a kind of 'Saucers Anonymous' scheme for people to get these stories off their chest.

Mistaken identity

We have, indeed, often 'helped the police with their inquiries', but the majority of our cases come direct to us or via other establishments to which UFOs are reported (eg the Jodrell Bank radio telescope, which has channelled puzzling cases on to us for many years).

We have a team of trained field investigators around the country, who know how to seek out the truth behind UFO sightings but in their working lives are everything from scientists to housewives and astronomers to police officers. Our task is simple. We work on the premise that there *will* be an explanation. That might seem odd, since you would no doubt expect us to be firm believers in

little green men. But statistics show quite conclusively that nine out of 10 reported UFO sightings turn out in the end to be IFOs (that is, *Identified Flying Objects*).

Although it can sometimes take real detective skill to sort out the IFOs from the UFOs, there are occasions when the job is easy. Most of the Cornish UFOs mentioned earlier, for instance, turned out to be misperceptions of the planet Venus. Every so often, this is exceptionally bright in the night sky. For those untrained in astronomy, and if the atmosphere is particularly clear, there is a tendency to see it as a much stranger thing.

This is the kind of mistake everyone makes. I have even had highly qualified scientists do it. Indeed, one of the most bizarre cases of mistaken identity came from an eminently qualified engineer, who reported to Jodrell Bank that he was chased in his car by a UFO that shone a beam into his lap. It took some time to persuade him (and me, I might add) that what he described was unquestionably the full moon. But it was!

For every mundane solution, though, there are just as many amazing ones. Once we spent some time after a UFO in the Midlands, witnessed by fishermen frequenting a wooded bank. It turned out to be an owl that had eaten some infested fungi and was literally glowing in the dark as it went on its prowl.

Then there was the case of the 'alien' wandering the streets of Shipley in Yorkshire. Investigation uncovered the unlikely (yet true) tale that this was a trained dog that walked on its hind legs, had traipsed through a puddle, and now provided the ultimate in shaggy dog stories.

But my favourite came from Jodrell Bank again. A very nice elderly gentleman had seen a light in the sky. The



CHASING UFOs: PC Roger Willey (left) and PC Clifford Waycott, Devon and Cornwall, found themselves in a car chase with an unidentified star-shaped glowing object in the early hours of an October morning in 1967. They chased it for 30 miles before it disappeared at Okehampton. Other people reported similar sightings — most of them were later explained as misperceptions of the planet Venus

astronomer at the research centre told me: 'I am sure this one will be explained, but we don't have time to convince him.' Indeed it *was* an IFO — in this instance, a very bright and spectacular meteor (a chunk of rock that burnt up miles above the earth, as it plunged from space into our atmosphere and was consumed in flames).

Scant evidence

Of course, I'm not being dismissive of everything. Amid the mistakes and illusions, *real* UFOs are seen. The case of the West Yorkshire bobby falls into that category, in the sense that we were never able to ascertain what it was he saw. Equally obvious to us was the fact that he *had* seen something most unusual.

But need these things be spacecraft? While no self-respecting UFO researcher would be daft enough to rule this out, I'm afraid that most careful investigators consider it to be an idea supported by rather scant evidence. There are other, much more down-to-earth but no less

exciting possibilities.

Geologists have found that certain types of rock, when put under pressure, can squeeze out signals into the air that induce a kind of electrical charge and ignite the gasses. They have even produced these 'earthlights', as they call them, in their laboratories in front of fast action cameras. The conditions in the Pennines (as in many parts of the world where UFOs are common) are precisely correct for such phenomena to happen.

Earthlights are one variety of what we call 'UAP'. This stands for Unidentified Atmospheric Phenomena — a term we prefer to UFO because it presumes less.

Another is a strange kind of energy called 'ball lightning' which, as its name suggests, comes in rounded shapes and floats around before silently exploding. It does *not* only occur during thunderstorms and has even turned up *inside* houses! One woman in Smethwick was quite seriously burned when a blue tennis ball-sized object materialised over her cooker and melted her oven gloves. So some UFO cases should be taken seriously, however sceptical the investigating officer might be.

But my favourite ball lightning case (reported as a UFO of course) came from two women on a verandah swatting flies with one of those wire mesh swatters. A glowing ball appeared and the woman with the swatter automatically whacked it without thinking. As soon as the metal touched the ball it exploded in a brilliant flash of light (fortunately without causing any ill effects — except to the rather badly damaged fly swatter!).

If you would like to pass on any witnesses to us then please do, by all means. We will do our best to investigate their sighting. Please phone or write to my address and I will pass on details to the nearest trained investigator in the nationwide network: BUFORA, 37 Heathbank Road, Stockport, Cheshire SK3 0UP. Tel: 061-480 1492. ○

Fact or Hoax?

Swiss Labourer, Eduard Meier, claims to have taken photos, film, and sound recordings of 'beamships' and to have spoken to the crews of these UFOs. For two years, author Gary Kinder worked with Meier, and in *Light Years* published this month, he presents the evidence for Meier's claims, together with photographs of what Meier claims to be 'beamships'. Scientists and engineers who have examined the photos and sound recordings do not think they have been faked. The man who created the special effects for the film *2001* said that Meier's photos could possibly have been faked, if he had about 15 experienced technicians, and a studio with some \$50,000 worth of equipment.

Meier has also been able to produce samples of the metal used for building the 'beamships'. Some of those samples have been analysed at an independent laboratory, without scientists being able to identify the materials. There is also evidence that he has the ability to melt metal by touch. A number of his friends have seen him hold a spoon which dissolved into liquid, and melt a coin by holding it in the palm of his hand.

Light Years, Gary Kinder, Viking Books £10.95