

Close encounter was it a 'saucer' or one of ours?

THE light seemed to come out of the sea.

Or so it looked to the man on the hill. Eric Spanner could see other twinkles appearing in the deepening dusk from his perch on Rew Down, but none like this.

The Down, towering up from the Isle of Wight coast, had magnificent views over Upper and Lower Ventnor and the great sweep of the Channel beyond.

Spanner knew the scene well. Six foot and still athletic at 43, he loved to take to the hills after a day working as a packer in the plastics factory down in the valley.

Today was a Sunday—May 19 1985—but he had spent it indoors and craved fresh air. Pausing on his climb, he surveyed the fading day.

At around 9 p.m., there was now an almost airless tranquillity and sea and sky had gelled into an unbroken grey.

Unbroken except for that light. Brighter than anything else, low on the horizon. A star maybe? More like a flare. But he could see no ship that could have fired it.

COURSE

He judged it to be half a mile out to sea. The light was too constant, he thought, for a flare. Soon he realised it was moving gently north-west, roughly towards him, approaching the shore.

Ascending to follow the contours of the rising ground from Lower to Upper Ventnor, it climbed inland at about 60 feet above ground level on a steady course at the speed, it seemed to Spanner, of perhaps 30 mph.

But after a minute or so it came down in slow motion, and hovered at gutter height over a small terrace of red-bricked houses in Down Road.

Although it had stopped nearer to the far side of the valley than to him, Spanner began to discern the object as disc-shaped, about the size of



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concludes his report on the baffling sightings of U.F.O.s

a tractor wheel, eight feet or so in diameter. It had two diffused fluorescent lights on top and an aura or halo of brightness round its rim. It seemed about to land. What was it? What was it up to?

Suddenly, as though it decided where it wanted to go, it soared vertically before continuing up the valley.

And as it progressed it began curving more west than north-west, tilting towards him so that he could see the blurred top-lights more clearly. The aura, too, was brighter, yet transparent.

The object itself was a dark colour, probably black, and as it veered in his direction, to within perhaps 200 feet, he heard for the first time a faint whining.

He thought the thing was rotating but he couldn't be sure. Suddenly it seemed to swerve towards him. "My God!" he thought. "It's seen me! It's coming towards me!"

He was relieved when the object passed within a hundred feet of him and disappeared behind a boundary hedge, about 12 feet high, that cut off his view to the west.

Running downhill, hoping to resume his surveillance, he finally crawled through the hedge to the next field. But the object had vanished and, subsequently, he could trace no one locally who had shared his uncanny experience.

A month later he wrote to

the British Unidentified Flying Objects Research Association (Bufora).

Bufora investigator Paul Fuller, of Romsey, appealed in the Isle of Wight County Press for witnesses, but the only fruitful response came from the secretary of the local Astronomical Association, Mrs Kathleen Smith.

From her Fuller learnt that no astronomical objects or phenomena had been visible that evening to account for the sighting, while other possibilities excluded were hang gliders, model aircraft, or kites. The local airport, too, gave a negative.

Kathleen Smith also established that there was no Coastguard exercise that evening, and that no vessels were reported firing distress rockets or flares.

RADAR

But a letter from Ventnor Police, in answer to Fuller's enquiry, opened up a fresh avenue of research. In it they said:

"Nothing unusual was reported during May 1985. However, during this time the Royal Navy were engaged with special radar tests on St Boniface Down, Ventnor.

"This involved a Naval helicopter at times flying from the sea to St Boniface Down, sometimes at night."

These tests must, indeed, have been unusual for the police to have been warned of them.

But from Eric Spanner's description the object could hardly have been a helicopter, nor could it have hovered a few feet above a residential area without causing annoyance.

How reliable a witness is Spanner? His story, and his manner of telling it, certainly carries conviction. And it is significant that those parts of his account which can be checked seem accurate.

His estimate of the object's speed, 30-40 miles an hour, agrees very well (but not too precisely) with his estimated duration of the sighting—about three minutes—and the progress it made.

KEY

Equally persuasive is his description of the weather. It agrees exactly with that recorded by H.M. Coastguard at The Needles for that period of the evening: sky overcast, cloud-base high, visibility good, calm and windless.

Spanner himself does not believe that what he saw was a space-craft, but ventures no alternative theory.

Like other chance witnesses of credibility, he simply maintains that he saw what he saw.

But ufologist Paul Fuller believes that the object, like over 90 per cent of so-called U.F.O.'s may eventually prove to have a rational explanation.

The key could well lie in the police report of special radar



Eye-witness Spanner . . . puzzled by a 'saucer'

tests around St Boniface Down during that month, in which the two Ministry of Defence radar stations on that part of the island—both within two miles of the sighting—would have been closely involved.

On November 13, 1985, Fuller wrote to H.M. Naval Base at Portsmouth posing a number of questions.

TESTED

The Secretary to the C-in-C Naval Home Command at Portsmouth replied by return regretting he could not answer Fuller's questions "because the activities you enquired about are not the responsibility of this command." He did not deny knowledge of them, nor that they existed. He suggested that Fuller write to the Head of the Naval Staff Secretariat at Whitehall.

Fuller immediately did so.

Today, more than two years later, he has received neither acknowledgement nor reply.

Our own queries had no better luck. "The department concerned," we were told, "has no record of any of these sightings in its files."

Fuller believes that what Spanner saw was a Remotely-Piloted Vehicle (RPV) or "drone," possibly launched earlier by one of the helicopters of which the police were warned, or by a submarine.

Such devices are known to be manufactured—and presumably tested—in the south of England. Low-flying and virtually noiseless, they are constructed of substances designed to give the faintest of radar echoes.

The secrecy that shrouds these experiments would account for the reticence of the authorities.

It could even be that the U.F.O. cult sometimes provides welcome cover for this clandestine work.

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