

notebook

ANDREW STEPHEN

Riddle of the perfect rings

IT WAS a conversation with friends in Wiltshire which first caught my interest. 'It is really weird,' they said. 'You must look into the phenomenon of these circles that keep appearing in fields near us. No one can explain them.'

Then they sent me a copy of the front page of the *Marlborough Times*. 'Speculation and rumour heightened this week after a second set of mystery circles appeared,' its front-page splash said.

Beside it was a photograph of what looked like two perfect 40ft circles of flattened wheat in a field — each surrounded by four smaller, satellite circles. There were now 70 such circles sighted in England this year, said the news story.

Being cautious, I thought I ought to discuss these reports with colleagues first. One pointed out that new natural phenomena are being discovered all the time: in the last few days,

for example, we have been told that there may be a hundred billion stars in our own Galaxy that we did not know existed.

A second then suggested I speak to Professor Archibald Roy, his old tutor at the University of Glasgow and a scientist who apparently casts a stringent academic eye on such matters.

What Professor Roy said made me even more determined to solve the mystery. 'I simply don't understand these circles,' he told me. 'I'm totally convinced that it's a very — how shall I put it? — a very interesting mystery. I mean, I've visited a large number of these circles and they are perfect.'

'When you get to the edge, you're in flattened crop. An inch further on, they're untouched. None of the explanations seem to fit.' There were simply too many for them all to be hoaxes, he added.

There was not a cloud in

the sky when Jane Bown and I set out to investigate next morning. We wanted, above all, to establish why there seemed to have been such a proliferation of the circles this summer. Were they man-made? Or did they have some cause beyond our earthly understanding? Why all the sudden publicity?

For hours we clambered over ditches, carefully avoiding barbed-wire fences, and trekked to wheat fields to see for ourselves. There was not a moment to be lost, because harvesting was already underway and circles were fast disappearing.

We went first to Andover in Hampshire to see Colin Andrews, an electrical engineer who works for the local council and who the *Marlborough Times* described as a 'circles expert'. It turned out that he is 42 and runs a group he calls 'Circles Phenomenon Research'.

It takes up so much of



In Hampshire with Colin Andrews, circles expert: 'There's something here that is quite extraordinary — there's no hoax.'

his time, he explained, that his wife pleads with him to give it all up. A bedroom in their house is devoted to circles data, and he has a fortified shed outside with countless circles details entered into a computer.

'We have categoric evidence that we're looking at a genuine phenomenon,' he told us straightaway. 'There's something here which is quite extraordi-

nary — nothing that is going to be easily explained away. This is the sort of thing,' he went on, showing us blown-up photographs of circles of crops dramatically flattened to the ground.

'We're getting single circles, doubles, triples, straight lines like this one, equilateral triangles, quintuplet sets. The anti-clockwise swirls, the clockwise

swirls, the radial bursts — you see this is, in itself, we believe, conclusive evidence that there's no hoax.'

The computer, he said, had concluded that such effects could not be replicated by man. Helicopter downwash and herds of stampeding hedgehogs — other explanations put forward — could also be safely discounted.

He then showed us a picture on his wall of 'a double annular ring, seen in Warminster last year. Since then four others have shown up. This is what is happening. The whole thing is evolving at a rapid rate for reasons unknown at the moment.'

'We're now getting two or three new reports a day.' Inside the rings, he said, electrostatic crackling sounds could sometimes be heard soon after they appeared. It almost always happened at night, too.

Circles have also been reported in Japan, Italy, France, Canada, Brazil, Australia, and the US — but southern England has 'by far' the most.

Sites tended to be clustered around military installations — that might be significant in itself — and ancient archaeological sites — ditto. The first report of a circle was in 1946, but they have only been 'sprouting like mushrooms' for one or two years.

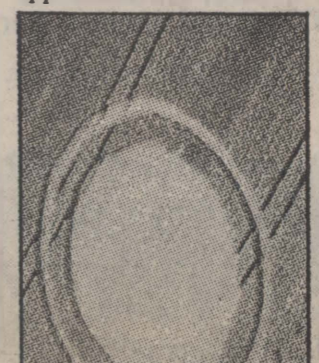
Now there were 15 in his group, Mr Andrews told us, and they were mainly engineers and scientists — including Professor Roy as well as a former NASA man.

They finance it all themselves, and make two aerial reconnaissance flights every week (the pilot lives locally). They go to every

me with unmistakable authority. The mystery was deepening.

But what I did not know at this stage was that Mr Andrews, who keeps the media informed about new circles, is an enthusiastic contributor to *Flying Saucer Review*. I discovered this only after speaking to Dr Terence Meaden, an academic meteorologist who runs an organisation called the 'Tornado and Storm Research Organisation' based in Bradford-on-Avon.

It was Mr Andrews himself who had actually given me Dr Meaden's phone number. Meaden, he had told us as we drove across Wiltshire, had been a member of the research group until he suddenly announced that he had solved the mystery. His views subsequently even appeared in *The Observer*.



understand what is going on.'

He knew all about Mr Andrews. The man had certainly seen a lot of circles, he said — 'but he is a UFO believer'. Mr Andrews and some of the others in the group are hoping 'that by looking at the data they will see the hand of some intelligence at work.'

'They're looking for something extraordinary, possibly extra-terrestrial.' They were, he went on, linking the crops with reports of UFOs in the area — and coming to extraordinary conclusions.

And his explanation? It was disappointingly prosaic. 'The wind can do more things than it has been given credit for,' Dr Meaden said, struggling to find words I could understand.

'This is where I come in, speaking of a spinning column of air, a vortex, that's descending — an eddy effect, just like eddies of leaves you might see by the corner of a building whirling around, if the wind is right.'

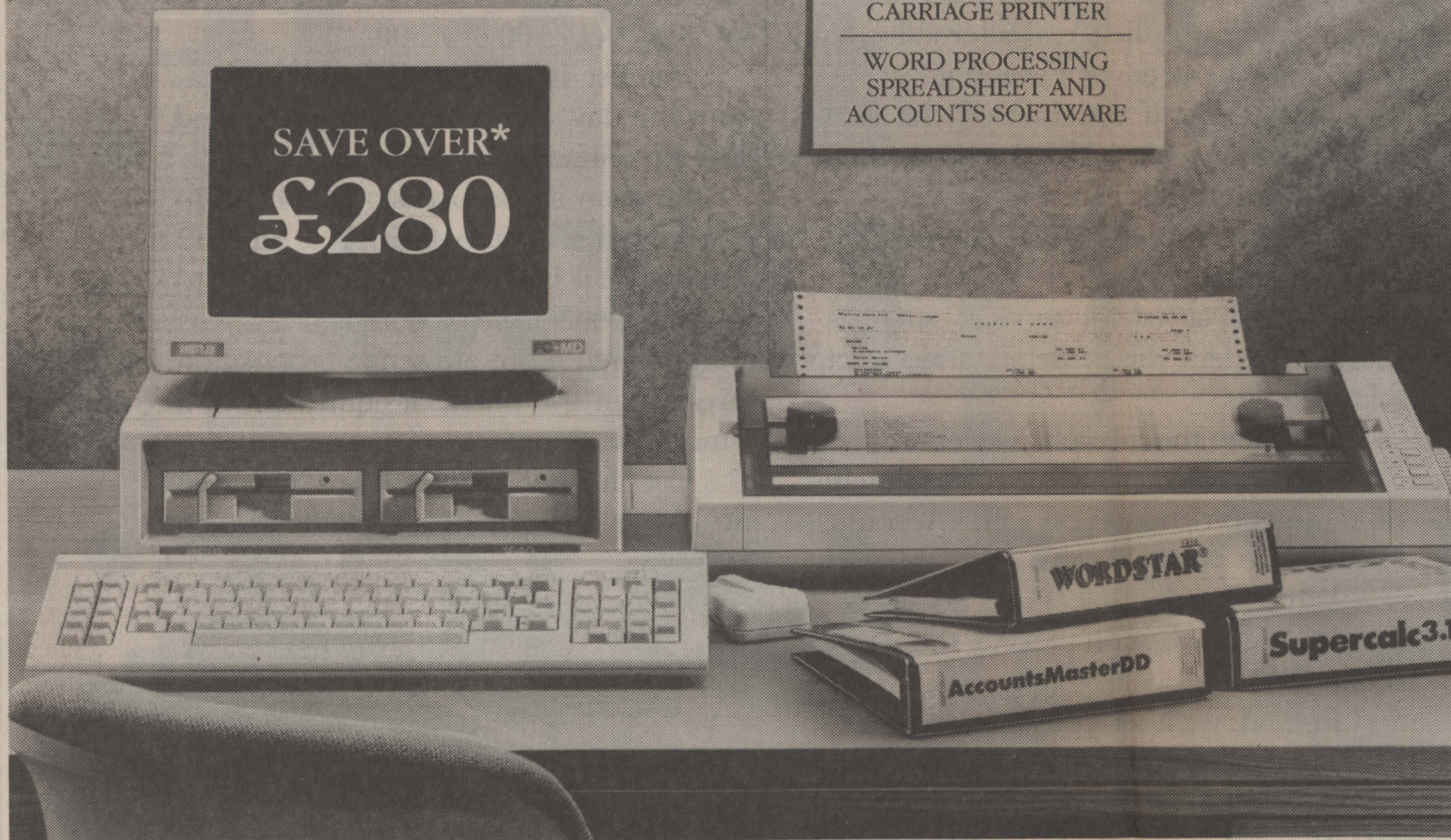
'Yachtsmen know what I'm talking about,' he went on. Vortices of air could either suck up or press down. He did not think the circles were a new phenomenon, nor were they mostly confined to southern England. It was just that people like Mr Andrews were taking a relentless interest in them and that therefore they were now being reported all the time in their area.

Quite unwittingly, I soon realised, I had also stirred up a hornet's nest in the British UFO movement. For Dr Meaden put me in touch with Paul Fuller, a statistician who has himself carried out detailed research into the circles.

He is also a member of the 'British UFO Research Association', a serious body which investigates UFO reports but which has fallen out with the more flamboyant *Flying Saucer Review* wing of the movement.

Not all of the circles were circular, said Mr Fuller. What appeared to be the centres were often actually displaced. Flattened crops were layered, which showed that whatever is causing it is 'moving around'.

Half the swirls were clockwise and half anti-clockwise, he said. It all showed that vortices of air were responsible. There was much more, too, but he recommended that I read *The Guinness Book of Weather Facts and*



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They finance it themselves, and make two aerial reconnaissance flights every week (the pilot lives locally). They go to every circle and check its molecular structure, radiation, and the PH levels of the soil. Individual circles could range in diameter from five to 15 metres.

By now we were very keen to see some of them for ourselves, so Mr Andrews drove us to what he called a 'double ringer' in a remote field outside Goodworth Clatford.

It was so isolated that the three of us must have been a good mile from anybody else. Jane Bown took the picture of him at the top of the page, and we lazily ate one or two ears of wheat — apparently courtesy of Waitrose, who (Mr Andrews said) own the field. Sure enough, the crop was mysteriously and inexplicably pushed firmly to the ground in neat concentric circles.

Then we drove to an ancient, renowned archaeological site — I agreed with the farmer not to reveal its exact location — and looked down from a hill on two more sets of quintuplet circles.

Two large ones, each with four circles of smaller ones of the same size neatly surrounding it: it all looked rather like an extravagant Christo art project, though by this time we were convinced that neither artists nor hoaxers could have been responsible for the rings we had seen. It was time to return to London to decide the next phase of our investigation.

Later, though, I took the precaution of talking to a wider range of people. To the wife of a farmer, who told me that 13 circles had gradually appeared overnight on their 800 acres. It was very, very strange, and nothing like it had ever happened during three generations of farming there.

Or to a helpful Army Air Corps officer, who said he had seen the circles from helicopters and found them 'totally mysterious', adding that he would be 'most interested' if I could shed any light on what was happening.

Then I spoke to a retired Lieutenant Colonel who had been based at the Middle Wallop airbase in Wiltshire, and who told me he had 'no reasonable explanation' and was satisfied the circles were not due to any of the proffered explanations.

And finally to a Hampshire landowner, who also owns 800 acres and who reported that some farmers were now keeping quiet about other circles lest their land be trampled upon by sightseers and investigators. 'It's not wind, I can tell you that — or hoaxers,' he told



All done by wind?

But Meaden was most definitely wrong, Andrews had said with some vehemence, and he had moved the goal posts in the investigation. They had all fallen out with him as a result.

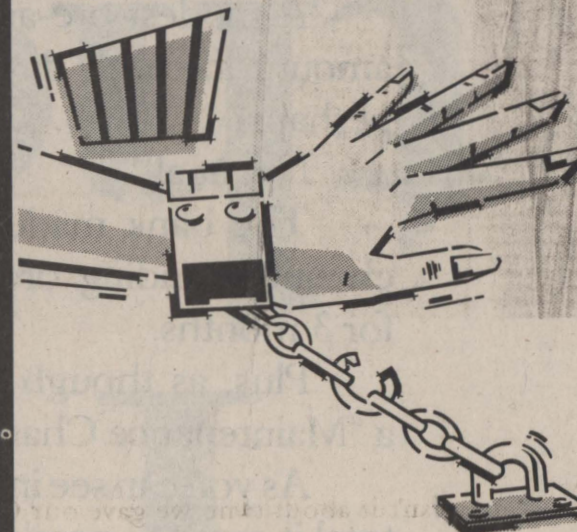
That, of course, made me want to contact Dr Meaden (an expert on tornadoes, waterspouts, and whirlwinds, I read) all the more. Was he 100 per cent satisfied, I finally asked him, that he now knew the explanation for the circles? 'Absolutely,' he replied. 'You've got to be a physicist and meteorologist to

showed that vortices of air were responsible. There was much more, too, but he recommended that I read 'The Guinness Book of Weather Facts and Feats'.

Before the end of the week, nevertheless, it was clear that our great circles investigation was drawing to a close. I duly went round to the public library to get the book out, and next day Fuller sent me some impressive material he had written on the circles. I could not speak to Mr Andrews himself, because his wife had dragged him off to Ibiza.

But by now I needed no convincing about the origins of the circles. The instinct to make our lives exciting, relevant, crucial to history, is a strong one — overwhelmingly so for some. For Jane Bown and me, at least, the circles were no longer a mystery. I phoned my friends in Wiltshire to tell them what I thought.

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