



The balloon: 'Virgin on the ridiculous'

Balloon goes up as Branson joke starts UFO alert

Police slam flying saucer prank

By ROBERT MCGOWAN

TYCOON Richard Branson's April Fool's day UFO rehearsal went down like a lead balloon with motorists, scared householders and the police yesterday.

Branson sparked a major alert when he flew a hot air balloon, disguised to look like a flying saucer and complete with flashing lights, just before dawn.

After landing he told a policeman "it had been a dry run" for an April Fool's day prank.

Early risers rushed into their gardens in Surrey, drivers on the M25 motorway panicked, and the police were swamped with alarm calls.

Tea

Branson admitted: "I thought everybody would be sound asleep for my test run.

"But it was only when I was in the air that I realised hundreds of people were coming out of their houses."

Branson, boss of Virgin Records and the Virgin Atlantic Airline, had two spaceman outfits on board

He said: "The whole thing was

supposed to look like a UFO and it obviously worked."

The balloon terrified 82-year-old widow Edith Russell, who got the fright of her life when she got up to make a cup of tea and saw it flying above her home.

"I thought the world was coming to an end."

Mrs Russell, who lives at Merstham, Surrey, added: "It was quite a long time before I could bring myself to tell the police."

At Reigate, Surrey, angry Chief Inspector Andrew Neilson said: "We got the first call at 5.50 a.m. Then they poured in.

"The incident was entered on our official log as 'Virgin on the ridiculous' and that's putting it mildly.

"It was lucky a serious accident did not occur," said Mr Neilson adding: "A report is being prepared with a view to Mr Branson being prosecuted."

But lawyers are not certain which laws Branson, who landed on a dirt road near Redhill, Surrey, broke.



Bumpy landing: Virgin boss Richard Branson and his 'spacemen'