

Virgin

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BRANSON'S FLYING SAUCER LANDS HIM IN BIG TROUBLE

Balloon goes up as prank causes chaos

By ROBERT MCGOWAN

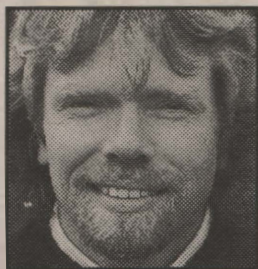
TYCOON Richard Branson's April Fool's day UFO rehearsal went down like a lead balloon with motorists, scared householders and the police yesterday.

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.

Branson admitted: "I though everybody would



Branson: Dry run

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 the silver coloured sonar.

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, police 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.

"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.