

Flying saucers disappear in Whitehall 'black hole'

IT WAS JULY 1952, the height of the Cold War, and a growing number of British citizens were reporting that they had seen flying saucers. Could these incidents be something to do with the Russians?

Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, became concerned and wrote a memo to his Paymaster General, Lord Cherwell. "What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth? Let me have a report at your convenience."

Interest in unidentified flying objects had been sparked off by the 1947 sighting of a formation of strange objects by a civilian pilot in the US and was heightened by a flood of reports and publicity.

Lord Cherwell's reply to the inquiry by the then Mr Churchill referred to a study undertaken by the Air Ministry during the previous year which said that all the incidents could be explained away by one of four causes — known astronomical or

By Christian Wolmar

meteorological phenomena, mistaken identification of aircraft or balloons, optical illusions or hoaxes.

But Churchill's query had sparked concern among military personnel and a special department was set up in September 1952 to collate all information about flying saucers, or UFOs. Now called Air Staff 2, it has accumulated information about 3,000 sightings which the Ministry of Defence has refused to release to the public, despite a promise to do so in 1982.

Philip Mantle, who runs a "UFO hotline" from his home in Batley, West Yorkshire, has collected more than 100 documents relating to UFOs from public records, including the Churchill correspondence. Most of these have been released under the 30-year rule and therefore date from the 1950s, but he has

managed to extract a handful of more recent ones.

"It's Catch 22. If you know about an incident, they'll release a few details about it but otherwise they won't," he said.

However, Mr Mantle does not subscribe to the theory of some UFO experts that there is a government cover-up to hide the facts about an alien landing.

The UFO department in the MoD seems to be little more than a filing cabinet into which reports from military personnel and police are consigned to oblivion.

Mr Mantle said: "An MoD scientist I know has access to it. It's in Whitehall and even though he does not have a particularly high security classification, they were happy to let him see it. That shows there's no cover-up."

For a long time, the UFO department, which has survived several reorganisations by successive governments, was run by Giffen Peacock, but it is now in

the hands of Clive Neville. Mr Mantle said: "It's not even Mr Neville's full-time job. The whole thing is run on a shoestring."

Mr Mantle claims to be agnostic on the explanation for UFO sightings. Of those uncovered in his research, he singles out two as particularly mysterious. In 1952, a number of men at RAF Topcliffe, near Thirsk in North Yorkshire, noticed a Meteor fighter plane being shadowed by a silver disc, which eventually accelerated away "faster than a shooting star". Mr Mantle's research reveals that this sighting was taken seriously by the Air Ministry which circulated a number of reports on it.

The other was more recent. Just after Christmas 1980, three US air force patrolmen saw unusual lights outside a gate at RAF Woodbridge in Suffolk. They saw a strange metallic glowing object in the forest described as being triangular in shape and two metres high. It illumi-

nated the entire forest with a white light and manoeuvred through the trees before disappearing.

Details of the Woodbridge UFO were only released because they had already been made available in the US under the Freedom of Information Act. Mr Mantle said: "Although there is no specific cover-up, as the release of information about the Woodbridge incident shows, there is a reluctance on the part of the Government to publish details of UFO sightings. Much of the information can be found but it requires a lot of sifting through documents at the Public Records Office."

In its two years of operation, Mr Mantle's UFO hotline (0924 444049) has received more than 300 calls: "Most can be easily explained. There was a big upsurge in late 1987 caused by Mars and Jupiter showing prominently in the sky. But there is no rational explanation for between 5 and 10 per cent of them."