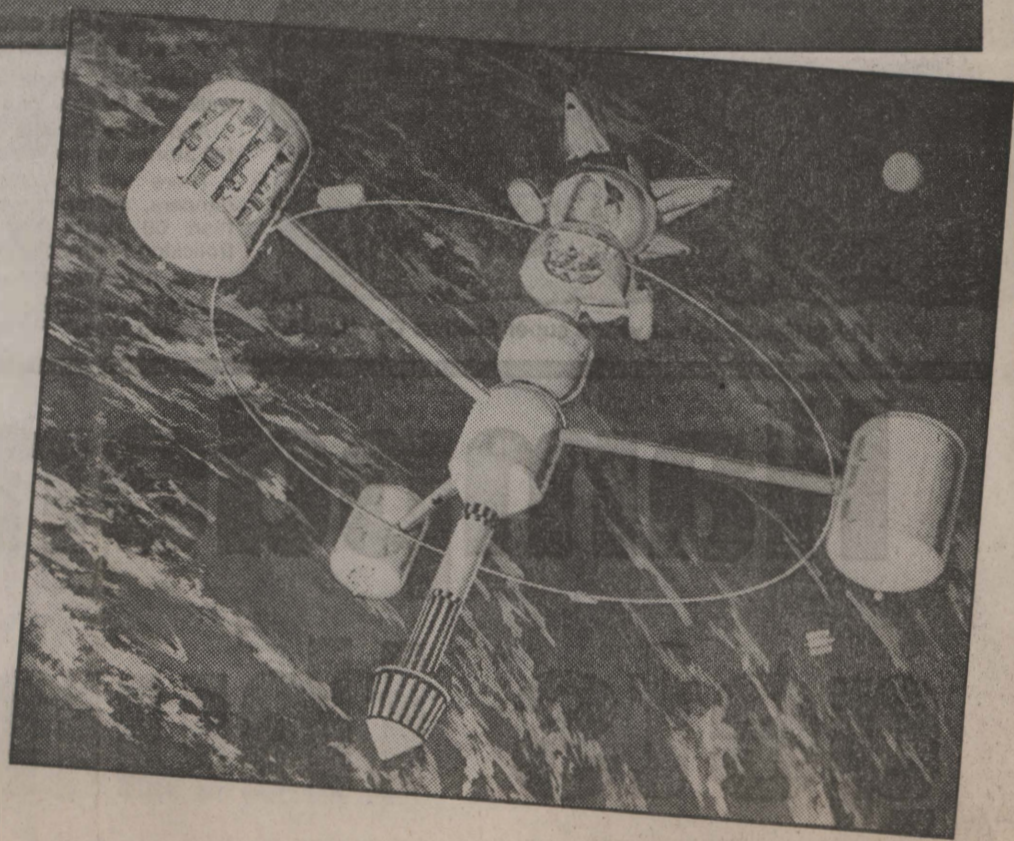




□ EVERY year in Britain 400 people report the sighting of an unidentified flying object. Experts think that many more people do not report sightings for fear of ridicule. Jenny Randles

(pictured) is director of investigations with the British UFO Research Association. It is her job to find out what lies behind all those sightings. Most can be explained away, but what of the others?



Are they really space invaders?

THERE you are driving down the road at night, minding your own business, when suddenly you catch sight of something in the sky.

It's not like any aircraft you've ever seen; it's flashing colourful lights and moving erratically at enormous speed.

As it passes over your radio goes dead. Then the object vanishes.

Scoff not... this kind of thing seems to happen to several hundred apparently sane and respectable Britons every year.

Many of them shake their heads in disbelief and swear never to drink again; others are so frightened that they dare not tell a soul; and a small percentage enjoy a brief moment of glory in the spotlight of the Press.

Such a story invariably prompts similar, often embellished revelations and 'experts' dust off the old theories about little green men from Mars. But is the invasion of Planet Earth really imminent? Or is there a simple explanation?

There have been mysterious sightings in the sky for as long as written records have been kept — for example, The Bible appears to contain several references in the chapters of Ezekiel.

Modern sightings appear to date from 1947 when an American businessman reported seeing nine silver objects flying very swiftly near Washington.

Julie Cockcroft reporting

Take the incident in London last year when eight policemen swore they had seen a 'saucer' through the telescope of a teenager. It later turned out to have been the planet Jupiter, and in fact nine out of ten sightings can be explained away fairly easily.

Saucer shapes are frequently formed naturally in the atmosphere by pollution, pulverised dust and water particles, and lights can be caused by many things.

Ball lightning is a favourite among the natural phenomena and it is now known that moving lights often occur in the months before an earthquake, emitted by rocks under pressure.

Otherwise a 'spaceship' could really be an aircraft, weather balloon, meteorite or burned-out debris from satellites and other space junk falling to Earth.

Scares have even been started in America by what turned out to be loads of illegal marijuana, blasted over the Mexican border by a rocket launcher to beat the border patrolmen.

And it is possible that some supposed UFOs are really top secret military or scientific experiments that have been seen accidentally but cannot be officially explained away.

are reported each year although UFO societies believe that ten times as many more go unreported because people are afraid of being ridiculed.

Yet some are not afraid to speak out. Twenty years ago, Peter Hough was a schoolboy doing a morning paper round when he spotted something unusual.

"I saw an object that looked very crudely like an aircraft. It resembled two pieces of wood nailed together like a cross. I thought it was something caught in a tree until I realised it was quite some distance away.

"It was blunt at either end and the wings were at right angles to the fuselage. There were two rows of white lights winking on and off like Christmas tree lights. It did a very strange right-angled turn that I've never seen an aircraft do before or since.

"I didn't tell anyone about it for months. I wasn't afraid, but very intrigued. I was trying to explain it as an aircraft in my mind."

Today he is chairman of the Manchester UFO Research Association. "I'm very interested in the way things can be perceived by people. Most of the sightings we have reported to us are easily explained away as satellites, aircraft or weather phenomena. We're not in the business of promoting myths. We are seriously investigating the phenomenon."

Jenny Randles, director of investigations with the British UFO Research Association, co-ordinates the team of investigators who look into reported sightings.

She has been interested in UFOs for many years but first began investigating them in 1973 when she was teaching

discovered to have been landing lights from aircraft in a holding pattern.

She said: "You must realise that 90 to 95 per cent of UFO sightings turn out to be identifiable."

BUFORA works closely with the police, the Ministry of Defence and Jodrell Bank, to whom most UFO sightings are usually reported. "They ask us to follow through anything they can't explain."

"UFOs and spaceships are not the same at all. That is an extreme hypothesis. And cases of people undergoing alien contact are an entirely different issue."

Such cases, she said, generally involve respectable, intelligent people whose credibility and sincerity can easily be established. That such 'contacts' occur around the world, she said, was the subject of several theories.

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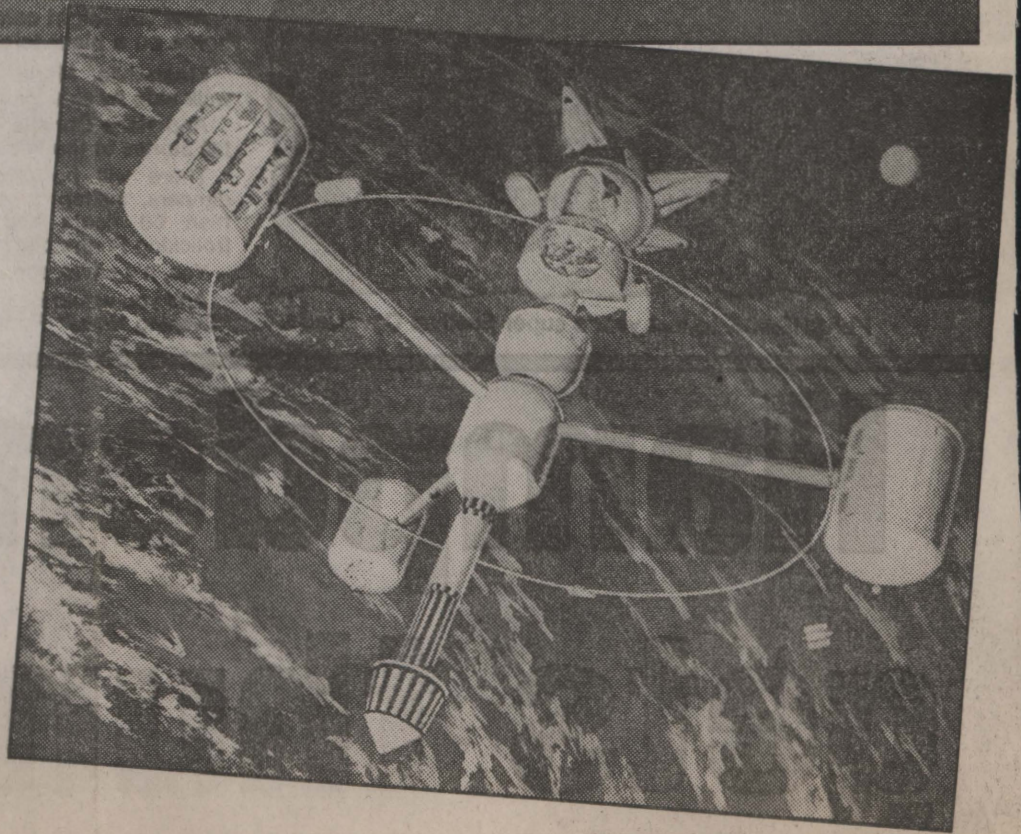
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Writer David Barclay, from Shipley, West Yorkshire, also thinks there is a psychological explanation for the phenomenon — that we are compensating for the lack of romance and mystery in our modern lives.

He says of watching inexplicable shapes and lights in the sky: "There's an unreality about the thing. Your eyes are trying to make it turn into something else, like a jumbo jet, which it isn't. There is a dreamlike quality to the whole experience."



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Modern sightings appear to date from 1947 when an American businessman reported seeing nine silvery objects flying very swiftly near Washington.

His description prompted the tag 'flying saucers' and similar sightings have been made by supposedly serious, well-trained professional people like police, servicemen and even ex-President Reagan at frequent intervals ever since.

Julie Cockcroft reporting

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Yet a survey in America as long ago as 1966 indicated that five million Americans claimed to have seen a UFO or to have met aliens. Six out of ten say they believe in the phenomenon as do 20 per cent of Britons.

In Britain as many as 400 sightings

are reported each year although UFO societies believe that ten times as many more go unreported because people are afraid of being ridiculed.

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She has been interested in UFOs for many years but first began investigating them in 1973 when she was teaching science at a school in Cheshire.

After a series of reported sightings in a nearby wood, and after several of her pupils told her about unusual experiences, she turned the mystery into a school project. Most of the lights were

discovered to have been landing lights from aircraft in a holding pattern.

She said: "You must realise that 90 to 95 per cent of UFO sightings turn out to be identifiable."

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"I have a theory that it is an electromagnetic phenomenon that appears in places. You can't see it and if you walk into it, it short circuits your brain so the contents of your subconscious seep through in some way."