

Grain circles: Britain's new Stonehenge?

By **PETER SLEVIN**

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LONDON — Swirled circles are appearing by the score in the fields of southeastern England. From the aerial photographs, it looks as though a renegade cookie cutter is at work in the summer wheat and barley.

The circles appear alone and in patterns. The smallest are less than two feet across. The largest span more than 100 feet. Some look like dots on a pair of dice. Others come with rings like Saturn, complete with moons in evenly spaced orbit.

Extraordinary is one word for the phenomenon that has spawned three books this summer, one a British best seller. *Hoax* is another. The truth remains a mystery.

Physicist Terence Meaden believes that whirling balls of wind touch down in the fields, flattening the crops in circular patterns. His rivals suggest the presence of a force from another galaxy, a theory that even the British UFO Research As-

PLEASE SEE CIRCLES, 8A

Alan M. Stracy

Patterns in grain have the English going in circles

CIRCLES, FROM 1A

sociation considers loopy.

"It seems as though an intelligence is offering us something to ponder," says Pat Delgado, co-author of the best seller, *Circular Evidence*. "The pollution you are causing. Please don't destroy the planet. It's like a cry for help."

Meaden reckons that's a load of bunk, best seller or not.

"The crackpots are the ones who start talking about intelligence behind this and paranormal sources of energy," Meaden says. "There is just no need to look for extraterrestrial explanations when you have such a good Earth-bound explanation ready."

Delgado on Meaden: "It's all wind, really."

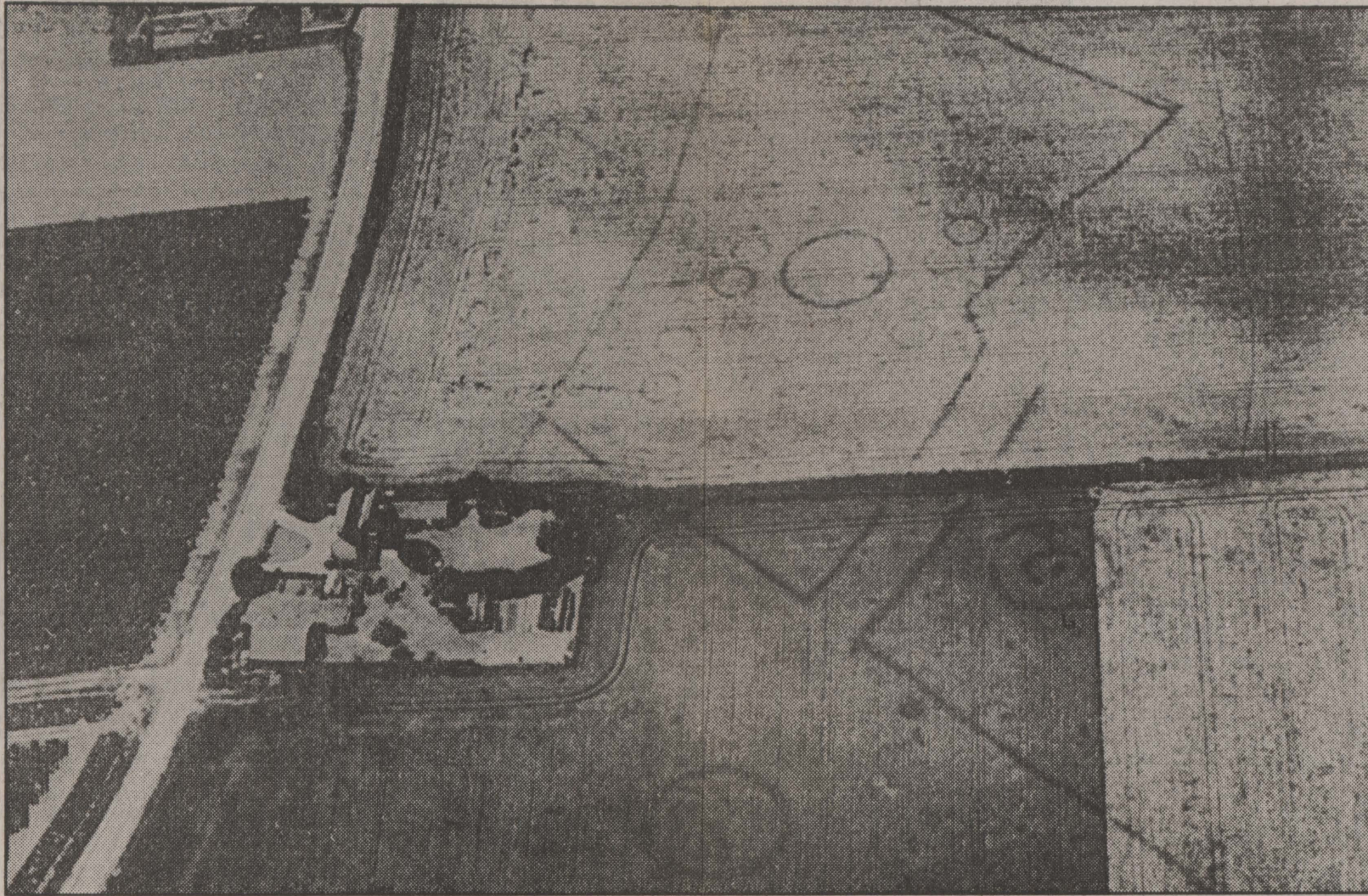
The circles first were documented in the 1970s, but formal studies didn't begin until recently, as the circles proliferated. Concentrated in Hampshire and Wiltshire, 238 figures of increasing complexity were reported this year, compared with 105 in 1988.

Sculpted from fields of grain, the circles viewed from above resemble photos of the eye of a hurricane. The stalks are flattened in swirled layers, variously clockwise and counterclockwise, and they usually remain unbroken. The soil is not churned. The figures are generally tidy and quite round.

"Each one has its own fingerprint," says Busty Taylor, a driver's education teacher and casual pilot whose hobby is scouting the circles. "You think you've got it licked, and then the next one comes along."

The circles have a supporting ring of enthusiasts who discount the notion that they are man-made, although Taylor says elliptically, "When we're ready for an answer, I think it might be given to us."

As for his own theories, he's sav-



EDWARD A. CLACK / Special to The Herald

PUZZLING PATTERNS: Scientists and others are at a loss to explain what is causing these designs in fields of summer wheat and barley.

ing them . . . for a book.

"You can't trap what is going on like you would trap a rabbit," says Delgado, an electromechanical design engineer who once tracked spacecraft for a living. He became a consultant to Flying Saucer Review on the strength of his interest in the circles.

"It's a kind of will-o'-the-wisp, something you're tracking and can't pin down. It won't stand still to be analyzed."

That much Meaden, the scientist, accepts, but he is convinced that the secret of the circles can be found in electromagnetic fields and vortices: "I have proved conclusively that

meteorology is what does it."

The way he sees it, wind whips around hills and creates spinning masses of air that descend onto the fields, disappearing almost as soon as they arrive. Concentric circles and other patterns are formed by accompanying balls of wind aligned in electric fields.

"I'm talking about a short-lived vortex moving downward," explains Meaden, who edits *The Journal of Meteorology*. "It screws itself into the crop and destroys itself very quickly. It has no time to move off sideways."

Meaden thinks that these "spinning balls of electrified air" might

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BUSTY TAYLOR,
pilot who studies the circles

explain sightings of UFOs elsewhere in the world.

"It's not certain," he says, "but in some cases, they may be luminous."

But the British Meteorological Office has concluded unofficially that the weather is not a likely cause of all the circles, particularly the most round and most complex patterns.

"Really, what we're looking at is something like a dust devil. It descends into the corn, flattens it and retracts before moving on," says meteorologist Barry Parker. "This seems possible to us on occasion but is not likely on all occasions."

"Small vortexes do exist sometimes in association with somewhat larger ones, but regularity is not the name of the game as far as the atmosphere is concerned. The perfection of the pictures drawn out in the corn is not a meteorological phenomenon."

If accurate, the Meteorological Office theory leaves two possible sources: man and E.T.

Delgado sees an opening there.

"If conventional science can't find any answers," he asks, "what are you left with? Why shouldn't there be a paranormal existence? Who are we to say that no such thing is possible?"

Sure of his approach, Meaden scoffs: "It is the medicine man talking to the modern Western scientist."