

Mysterious Circles In British Fields Spook the Populace

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Locals Blame UFOs, Yanks
And Mad Hedgehogs;
The Queen Is on the Case

By CRAIG FORMAN

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CHEESEFOOT HEAD, England—For 83 years, John Scull's family has grown wheat on the rolling farmlands near here. Now, his wheat fields have holes.

Well, not exactly holes. They are large, near-perfect circles of flattened wheat, swirled to the ground in a precise spiral pattern. They appear overnight in the middle of otherwise ordinary-looking fields. And nobody knows what's causing them.

"It's the most unusual thing to happen on this patch, that's for sure," says the lanky Mr. Scull, tugging reflectively on his short beard.

What's happening in Mr. Scull's wheat field is happening in farmlands all over southern England this summer, and it's creating an uproar throughout the country.

Investigators and scientists are slogging through fields, lugging video cameras, fancy infrared scopes and other high-tech detection devices. Curious tourists and reporters from around the globe are descending upon the peaceful villages, sometimes wreaking more havoc than the circles themselves. They trample the ripening wheat. They set up ladders in fields to take pictures. They get into auto accidents. Pastoral Cheesefoot Head (population: six) now has traffic jams.

Questioning Thatcher

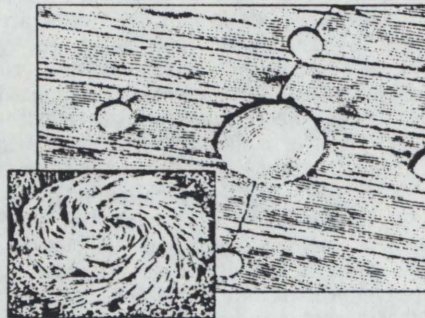
"Loads of people are looking for the circles," says a woman selling strawberries at a roadside stand near another circle-prone field. Is her location a good one? "It is now," she says.

British agriculture and defense officials want to know more. So does Queen Elizabeth, who is said to have sharply questioned Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher about the circles recently. While those

talks are kept secret, a Buckingham Palace spokesman says the Queen took a hurriedly published book about the circles to her summer palace in Scotland this month; as Britain's biggest landowner, she has every reason not to be amused.

The largest circles are about 100 feet in diameter. Sometimes groups of circles seem to resemble giant crucifixes and Celtic crosses stretching across the undulating hills. Inside the circles, the wheat is leveled completely. But the crops are undamaged and continue to grow. Horizontally.

At first, many thought the whole thing a hoax, in the proud tradition of such well-known British oddities as the Loch Ness monster and the Piltdown man. (Indeed, the bones of the Piltdown man were found in the early 1900s in a field only a few



Wheat circles, with close-up (inset).

dozen miles east of here. For decades he was thought to be prehistoric forebear of man, only to be exposed as a complete fake in 1953.)

But the circles' precision and number—they weren't widespread until recently, with more than 250 recorded this year—have dispelled most talk of hoaxes. Whatever makes the circles leaves no tracks. Many of the circles can't easily be seen unless you are in the middle of a wheat field, which more or less undercuts the point of

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North latitude, said the report.

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faking them in the first place.

Nor is it the first time unexplained phenomena have been found around here. One of the greatest concentrations of circles is near the mysterious standing stone formations at Stonehenge and Avebury. No one has fully explained them, either.

Still, farmers and scientists are abuzz with theories. One is that the circles are caused by hedgehogs gone mad, or by buck deer in rut. Another blames mysterious whirlwinds never before encountered here. Other theories include bizarre insect infestations or a new strain of virus. Or over-fertilization. Or under-fertilization.

Then there are high-tech explanations. Some people believe the circles are caused by helicopters. Aviation experts point out, however, that helicopters would have to fly upside down to carve such flawless circles. Others contend the circles are made by a mysterious magnetic force, or by a Star Wars space-defense beam run amok. And, of course, there's the inevitable flying-saucer theory: Alien ships flatten the crops when they touch down to visit Earth. Indeed, a mysterious white substance that laboratories haven't identified has been found near some circles.

"I reckon it's one of them UFOs," says Edley Ware, a weathered farmhand. "You never know what is going on in this world." He pauses for a moment, as a new thought strikes him. "You know, it could be the bloody Yanks. They always have something up their sleeves."

One of the biggest circular formations is near a stone-age burial ground in Silbury Hill. Seven circles stretch across hundreds of feet of prime British farmland, rolling golden fields of wheat gently baking in this summer's unusually warm sun. Near a distant farmhouse, a wisp of smoke

rises from burning stubble. A harvester drones at the bottom of the field, methodically scooping up the ripe crop. Wind blows, gently rustling the wheat still standing.

Carved with almost surgical precision, the largest circle in the formation is a 100-foot-wide ring of flattened wheat stalks. The still-growing grain is darker than surrounding crop because it has gotten less sunlight. Outside the circle, the stalks of wheat stand straight, about three feet tall.

At the center of the circle, the wheat has been spun together to form a thatched mound a few inches high. From this point, the stalks are spun out clockwise, as if a giant fist has powerfully, but gently, twisted them into the ground.

A Cry for Help?

Colin Andrews, an electrical engineer who is one of the two authors of "Circular Evidence," the book the Queen is reading, argues that a rotating field of high energy is creating the circles. "It may well be some form of intelligence," he says. Pat Delgado, his co-author, thinks there may be a message in the circles. "It could be a cry for help," he says. "It could mean, 'If you destroy this food, your planet is finished.'"

"That's bunkum," says Terence Meaden, a local meteorologist. "The idea that there is some intelligence operating is pure fantasy." Whirlwinds, he contends, are the only explanation. Cool sea breezes mixing with hot air above the fields are forming spinning wind vortexes that touch down and twist the wheat. Many other scientists and government officials also subscribe to this view.

But not the farmers. "It's a load of rubbish. I don't believe a whirlwind could do that," says Simon Brown, who has had several circles on his farm. They are carved too neatly, he says, and the fields bear no traces of moving winds. One of the formations, a large circle ringed by four smaller ones, could fit the imprint of an alien spaceship with four pods for feet, some say—though Mr. Brown has no truck with the UFO theory, either.

But Mr. Brown believes the appearance of the circles does prove one thing: "It means we have absolutely no bloody idea of what goes on around us. It's one of those eternal mysteries. Long may they continue."