



BLOOMSBURY—SIPA PRESS

BLOOMSBURY—SIPA PRESS

BRITAIN

Going Forever Around on Circles

Who or what is responsible for those puzzling crop-field rings?

Finally Britain has an issue that cuts across social, economic and political lines: something very odd is going on in the farmlands of southern England. Strange circular depressions, up to 100 ft. in diameter, have appeared in crop fields throughout the area, leaving no clues about what made them or even how they are made. These puzzling circles—large sweeping areas of a crop neatly flattened in a swirling pattern—do not exhibit the kind of rough damage caused by harsh weather, animals or humans. Researchers studying the phenomenon have convincingly ruled out man-made hoaxes, yet they differ bitterly on how to explain the occurrences. The search for answers has sparked interest in Parliament, where two M.P.s have called for the government to investigate the bizarre formations.

The first recorded sighting of the circles took place in 1976, when a farmworker at Headbourne Worthy in Hampshire noticed a large circular pattern in a field near the A34 highway. Since 1980, when serious research into the mystery began, more than 600 circles have been reported in Britain, including almost 250 this year. While there have been reports of circles from as far away as the Soviet Union, Japan and New Zealand, by far the greatest number have appeared in Hampshire and Wiltshire. To some, it does not seem to be coincidence that this area of southern England is also home to the similarly

mysterious stone formations at Stonehenge and Avebury.

Whatever the cause, the circles are particularly intriguing because they are beautiful geometric formations that sweep the crop flat in a precise pattern. The plant, usually a grain, although mustard, soybeans and sugar beets have also been affected, is laid down in a distinctive swirl; nonetheless, it continues to ripen until ready for harvest. The circle formations range from single rings to more complex quintuplets and even a "Celtic cross" of four circles linked by one large ring. This year two new patterns were spotted: a ringed circle with swirls in op-

Strange but true: circular depressions dot southern England; top left, examining a gentle swirl; right, a complex formation; bottom, a rare double ringer



BLOOMSBURY—SIPA PRESS

posite directions, and the "tadpole," a single circle with a long curling tail.

The recent upsurge in circle sightings coincides with the publication of two new books on the subject. The most carefully documented is *The Circles Effect and Its Mysteries*, by Dr. Terence Meaden, a physicist who has been tracking the puzzling formations since 1980. Meaden speculates that the circles may come from what he calls the "plasma vortex phenomenon," a previously unknown form of atmospheric disturbance with associated electrical effects. He contends that a "spinning ball of air" that is highly charged with electricity hits the crop field and marks out the circle.

The other book, *Circular Evidence*, by Pat Delgado and Colin Andrews, is handsomely illustrated but largely anecdotal. It attempts to link the circles to such paranormal events as UFOs and luminous apparitions. The authors, founders of the Circles Phenomenon Research group, speculate that the circles could be the result of an intelligent force being directed toward earth.

Humbug, responds Dr. Meaden. "Those who like to fantasize that something from outer space is responsible can be excluded," he insists. "What *does* cause these circles is better than fiction." But with or without government research funding, it may be a while before students of the phenomenon come up with a totally convincing explanation. Indeed, some suspect that circle researchers and the locals may enjoy their novel oddity so much that another ring is more interesting than a conclusive answer.

—By Sally B. Donnelly. Reported by Lisa Distelheim/London