

FEATURES

Unidentified Flying Objects, or Utterly Foolish Observations?

Whatever our attitude to UFOs — baloney or new beginning — the fact remains that they are back in the news.

A spate of recent sightings suggests that if the Force is with anybody at the moment, it's the people of South-East Essex.

Bright blue, green and red lights over Canvey... saucer shapes hovering over Pitsea... A Saturn shaped comet's tail tall caught on video by a Billericay novelist... Something is going on up there.

The Standard Recorder has examined the whole phenomenon of

UFOs in this part of the country in a bid to discover just how seriously we should take them.

Some sightings are just plain fanciful. Others can be explained away. But there remains a small core that can only be described as inexplicable.

One fact remains clear. Flying saucers have never yet harmed anybody. Nobody has even fallen off a bike while spotting them.

And whether or not the things themselves are real, one thing remains for sure about flying saucers — their entertainment value.

When the first UFO lands, is it likely to be in Essex?

UFO sightings seem to be concentrated in particular places at particular times. Recent areas to be favoured include the north of Italy and South Island, New Zealand.

But the Thames Estuary does appear to be very much flavour of the year in alien circles, if only because the river may act as a guideline to London and tea with the Queen.

By March 1983 there had been over 70 sightings, putting south-east Essex at the top of the national league, although the concentrated population may mean that there are simply more eyes to look, particularly during the repeat season on television.

What do the UFOs look like?

If even a fraction of the accounts are to be believed, UFO builders offer

more range and variety of models than the Ford Motor Company over its entire history.

Descriptions of the craft include the following: like a rugby ball, fish, cigar glowing at the smoker's end, half a water melon, a (whole) pear, transformer robot, and loaf of cottage bread. Oh, and saucer.

Have any UFO incidents been satisfactorily explained away?

Yes — and occasionally the explanation has proved almost as bizarre as anything that could be laid on by little green men.

In June 1979 anglers sitting around Hanningfield Reservoir were startled by a large object that plummeted into the middle of the reservoir. Fishing was reported to be particularly poor for the rest of the day.

The object was variously described as like "a flaming comet" and "an

express cannonball". But witnesses generally agreed that it had been moving too fast to see at all. It had made an almighty splash.

Essex police frogmen made a thorough search but could find nothing. Science fiction aficionados will, however, recall the Steven Spielberg produced film Cocoon, in which alien spacemen are suspended in deep sleep at the bottom of the sea until their colleagues can return to rescue them.

The Hanningfield UFO was no alien. Almost two years later water bailiffs succeeded where the frogmen had failed. Out of the water they fished — a weather balloon.

Who owned the balloon and why it had come down remained a mystery. Someone, somewhere, must have received a very damp weather forecast.

Another clearly identified UFO was the "green glowing thing" described by alarmed housewife Mrs Pat Busby of Pitsea and Mr William Jones in June 1980.

Mr Pat Miles of the British Astronomical Association also saw it. "It was a brilliant fireball, a piece of rock," he explained. "They come from minor planets between Mars and Jupiter." So minor, indeed, that unlike Southend they don't have their names all through the rock.

Who gets the prize for the most ingenious investigation of UFOs?

Undoubtedly a special team that mixed members of Basildon police force traffic control and other flight experts from Southend airport. One night in early October 1987 a spate of UFO reports arrived on their desk and they set to work.

The team were initially puzzled by the reports of large, bright lights hovering in the sky near Southend Pier, and silently rising up and down.

In fact, the mystery was the result of a military cock-up, not by invading aliens but by the British army.

Soldiers were holding a particularly vigorous night exercise over the Medway and shooting considerable volumes of flares. They had, however, neglected to let anybody know what was going on.

"By coincidence," said the team's spokesman, "it was a very clear night which meant their activities could be seen for miles around."

"Because of the considerable distance involved, the lights could have appeared to hang in the air like fireworks."

The spokesman explained that because of the distance, the explosions could be seen but not heard. Local fishermen will tell you, however, that they had no trouble hearing some of the soldierly language.

How many people really believe in aliens?

In October 1985 researchers from New Era, the publishers, beamed themselves down into Basildon town centre to do some market research.

They asked a random sample of shoppers and workers whether they believed that there was life on other planets. 75 per cent thought that there was.

Only 30 per cent thought that Earth had sufficiently strong defences against an attack by aliens.

The subject was not raised in the questionnaire, but local wags are believed to have volunteered the opinion that Basildon's nuclear free zone status would be of no help whatsoever.

Surely many of the so-called sightings are spoofs?

The UFO investigators' network check each reported sighting. Over the years, like the little green men of the cartoons, they've developed antennae. They believe that they have evolved quite sophisticated techniques for spotting a hoax without wasting too much time. Little green men in rubber suits knocking at the door are always referred to the Salvation Army.

The latest sightings

MR EDWARD Chard, of Thissell Road, Canvey, was called into the garden of his home by his wife Doreen.

It was the night of Friday, September 16, and Mrs Chard was astonished by flashing blue, green and red lights.

Tailoring manager Edward, 51, said: "I saw these lights hovering around and I got the binoculars out and it certainly was not an aircraft."

When I used the binoculars all I could see was a triangular shape and it was fairly big. I was quite taken aback."

He claimed other people had also seen the strange lights and could find no explanation for the sighting.

Similar visions were also reported from the Pitsea area where anxious residents described five or six saucer shaped objects fly-

ving from left to right around 9pm.

Police made checks with Southend, West Drayton and Stansted air traffic controls but none of them could provide any explanation.

A Basildon police spokesman said: "The only explanation I can think of is that it is probably aircraft stacking."

The police will be forwarding a report to the Defence Ministry with details of the sightings.

Five days before that, romantic novelist Anthony Jenkins of Billericay was startled by a particularly striking UFO which appeared in the night sky above his head.

Anthony said: "Before this hap-

pened I did not really believe in UFO sightings."

"It was one o'clock in the morning and I was saying goodbye to a relative of mine."

"There were things flying across the sky with lights shooting all over the place."

"I first saw something with a tail. It was bright and shot across the sky."

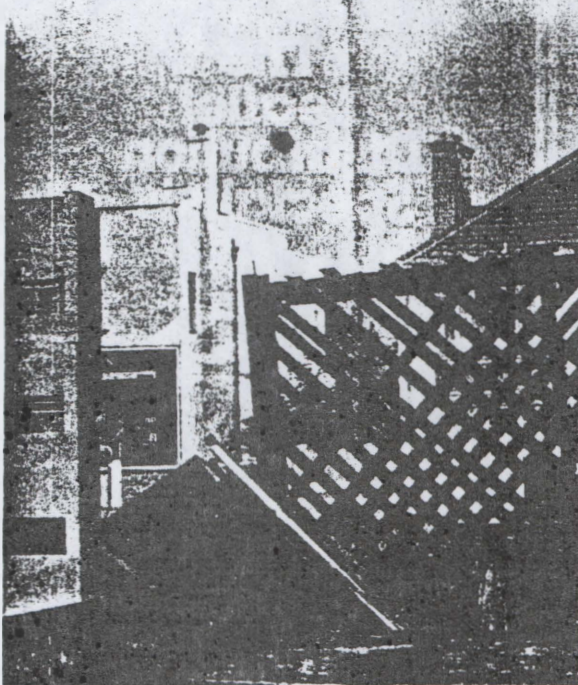
"You could be forgiven for thinking it was a comet."

Anthony described the aircraft as domed on top and underneath with a disk running around the edge — like Saturn.

He stood poised, video camera in hand, for more than three-quarters of an hour, watching the objects 'dance' around each other.

Wife Teresa, 33, had earlier seen the strange objects but had been too embarrassed to say.

Do UFOs appear to those who really want to see them?



NO. There is every evidence to suggest that the things are perverse in this respect. And there is little to suggest that many sightings are the result of wishful thinking.

If there is one person who can be said to have devoted himself more than most to chasing UFOs in Essex it is author Andrew Collins.

From the age of 16 he has been devotedly logging all sightings in the area. At a young age he put his savings into a magazine dedicated to the subject.

Over the years he had talked to countless witnesses. But ungrateful aliens resolutely refused to make any appearance before

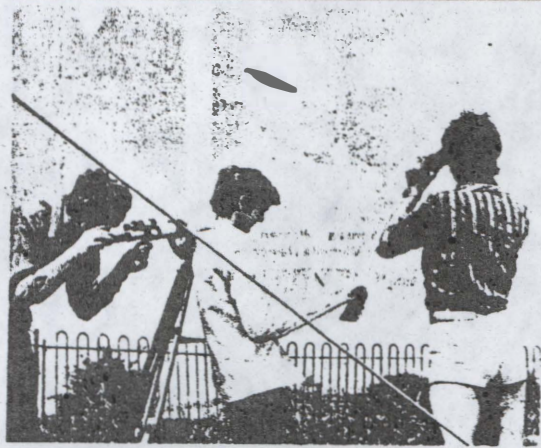
the eyes of this, one of their greatest enthusiasts.

Then, in 1981, in Rhyl, North Wales, it looked as if the moment had come. Idly gazing through the viewfinder of his camera, Andrew spotted the spiralling phenomenon above.

The UFO obligingly remained in sight while he snapped it and, to Andrew's delight, was still there when the film was developed.

But Echo Newspapers' Chief Photographer Ron Case recognised the object for what it was, — highly identifiable flying dirt that had become embedded in the film emulsion.

Eight years on Andrew Collins is still looking.



What should I do if I see a UFO?

DO not be bashful. Many a person who has had a close encounter has been too embarrassed to talk about it.

The police look kindly enough upon UFO spotters, always with the proviso that their time is not being wasted by a hoax. They will do their best to trace a rational explanation for the sighting.

However, the most satisfactory way to lodge information is undoubtedly by ring the local UFO hotline, Basildon 286078.

Members of the UFO Study Group have been collecting information for many years, as well as holding regular watches on Langdon Hills.

They have access to gelger counters, chemical sniffers and other scientific apparatus to test out the proximity of alien objects.

In the photograph above, members of the Society can be seen preparing for a 24 hour watch on Galleywood Common.

Virtue has not been rewarded on this occasion. The "flying saucer" is in fact a paper plate, thrown from behind the camera.

HAVE YOU SEEN A UFO?

If you have had a close encounter of the first, second or third kind, don't keep quiet for fear of being called a crackpot! Write to UFO, Standard Recorder, Newspaper House, Chester Hall Lane, Basildon, Essex.