

SPECIAL UFO EDITION

OMNI

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HOW MUCH DO SCIENTISTS
(AND THE GOVERNMENT)
REALLY KNOW?**

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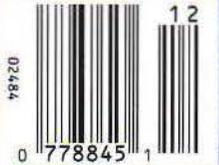
**AN INSIDE
LOOK AT A
FLYING SAUCER**

**THE
MYSTERIOUS
CORNFIELDS OF
ENGLAND**

**AND THE SOVIET
SPACE
EXPERIENCE**

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Mysterious circles etched in British farmlands may be messages from the stars

or artifacts of nature

FIELD OF DREAMS?

Not far from the mysterious ring of ancient megaliths at Stonehenge, a new phenomenon is sculpting circles in the cornfields of southern England. More than 400 times last summer, an unseen agent blew across growing crops, creating circular patterns in the fields. The phenomenon almost always occurred at night, sometimes accompanied by a warbling sound and a moving orange light.

Inside each perfectly drawn circumference, the corn lies bent but not broken, with its still-growing stalks swept into a matted pinwheel pattern turning now clockwise, now counterclockwise. Viewed from the air, many of the circles form complex patterns, arrayed as rings within rings, bull's-eye-style, for example, or as chains of giant beads connected by bars and embellished with

“Inside each perfectly drawn circumference, the corn lies bent, but not broken with its still-growing stalks swept into elaborate pinwheels turning this way and that on the ground, bull's-eye style.”



exterior arcs. If a circle is laid down early in the season, when the crop is green, the rapidly growing stalks soon pick themselves up and grow straight again, so that the circle fades from sight until it appears only faintly etched into the vegetation. Once in a while, a circle forms with such force that plants are apparently blasted out of the center. Researchers from all over the world are struggling to understand what causes the phenomenon—and have written at least half a dozen books about the circles—but no one has arrived at the definitive explanation. The conflicting theories, amassing almost as quickly as the circles themselves, cover everything from extraterrestrial visitors and the testing of star-wars weapons technology to tornadolike atmospheric conditions and plain old-fashioned hoaxing.

Previous pages: The imprint of a giant circle lies in the fields of England. Top left and right: Unusual circle formations. Below, left to right: Colin Andrews, G. Terence Meaden, and John Show. Far right: A huge circle swirls through the waves of grain.





British Army photo of two crop circles



Circle sculpted in southern England corn



A ground shot of pictograms in Hampshire



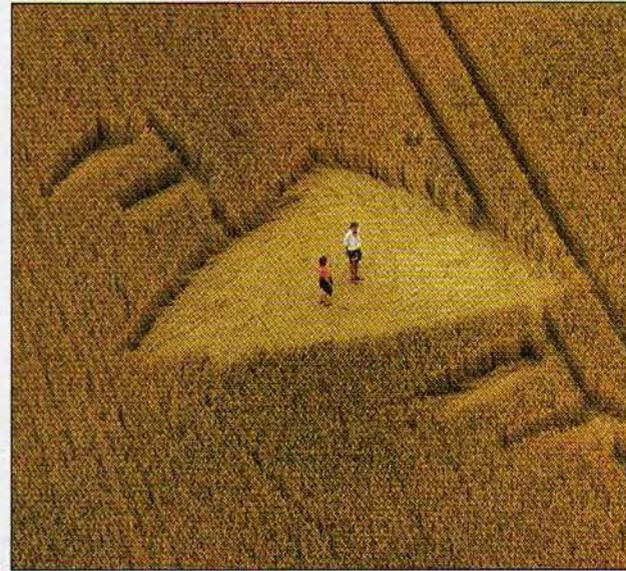
The mysterious rings attract visitors from far and wide



Grain forms bull's-eye pattern



Crop circles at Cheesefoot head



Triangular crop markings



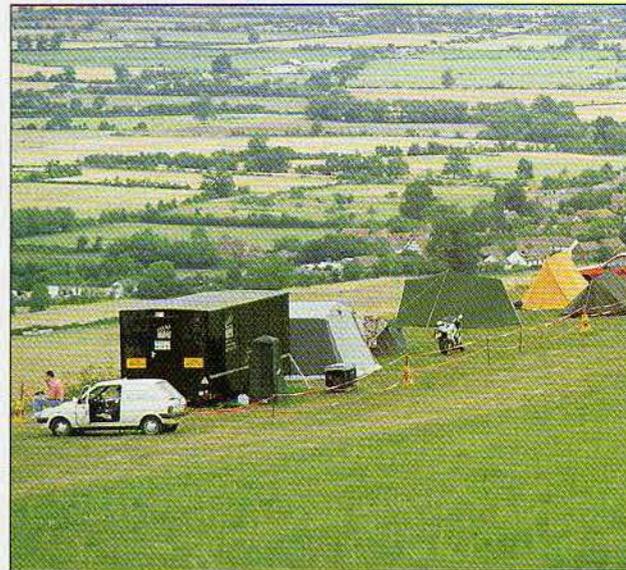
Set of circles in North Wiltshire



Westbury patterns intrigue researchers



Intricate patterns haunt researchers



Mysterious rings attract tourists and researchers alike



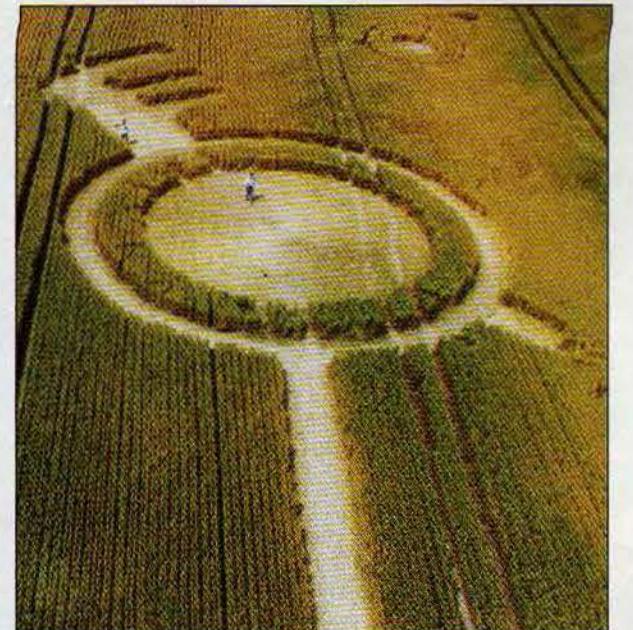
Pinwheel pattern swirls through the crop



“Crop circles are like mouths speaking to us of the strangeness of things; they speak to hearts more than heads and to souls more than hearts. To explain them is to misunderstand them.”

A prize of £5,000 is promised by the Koestler Foundation to the person who can expound the enigma fully. London's *Sunday Mirror* is offering an even larger prize of £10,000 for that insightful individual. But there's no such recompense for the farmers in whose fields the circles appear. Once portions of their corn and rapeseed crops are downed or destroyed by the phenomenon, the surrounding fields are trampled by sightseers flooding in to take photographs and view the circles firsthand. A few Hampshire farm families, apparently making the best of this unfortunate situation, began charging each visitor an admission fee of £1.

The excitement over the circles is recent, but the phe-



nomenon itself turns out to have a long history in the English croplands. Indeed, many legends from the Middle Ages refer to circles that formed in the fields overnight. Back then, pundits talked of fairies dancing through the corn, or of mowing devils who came in the night and cut the crops in rings. Over the centuries, some scientists say, circles have been laid down continually. But they have been seen only occasionally and reported rarely. Today, with journalists, researchers, and tourists literally combing the countryside for crop circles, more and more have been found.

Although circles have since been spotted in parts of the United States, Canada, and Australia, most have cropped up in an area of England called the Wessex Corridor or Wessex Triangle—a triangular tract of land about 40 miles on each leg in the southern central part

Facing page: Crop circles sweep through British farmland in huge circular patterns. This page, top: Swirling patterns from on high. Bottom, left: Complex pictograms in Wiltshire.

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DREAMS?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 67

of the country. Over the past ten summers, the phenomenon has become increasingly widespread, with the circles forming more and more frequently, in more numerous locations, and in ever more intriguing patterns.

Some of the patterns develop over time, as in the case of a large circle found last May with three concentric rings around it. Days later, airborne observers spotted a fourth ring a thousand feet wide and embracing the others in its circumference, leading some people to speculate that a peculiar fungus or virus was responsible. Others have attributed the patterns to hedgehogs, perhaps, or even hippies.

"It is a mystery," concedes Colin Andrews, an electrical engineer and local government official in Hampshire, who describes himself as one of the three foremost researchers on the circles phenomenon. Andrews brings a brisk, British enthusiasm to bear on the problem, but his style of study has earned him a lot of enemies in the global scientific establishment. Some claim that his book on the subject, *Circular Evidence*, co-authored with Pat Delgado, is rife with circular reasoning. For the record, An-

draws says, "There is no question at all that the phenomenon is beyond physics and science as we know it to be."

Well, then, what is it?

"There is now an extraordinary amount of data leaning heavily in the direction of some form of intelligence," Andrews told *Omni*. "I'm not saying extraterrestrial intelligence. But I don't rule out extraterrestrial intelligence." The evidence for this equivocal comment is what Andrews calls the "precise placement" of the circles. They never haphazardly lap over the edge of a field, he points out, though some circles stretch hundreds of feet in diameter. Instead, they array themselves to within a fraction of an inch of roadways or hill-sides as though they'd been placed there by an unseen hand.

Andrews tried to get the drop on the circle makers last July and August with his Operation Blackbird—a surveillance effort he set up on the Salisbury Plain, in the heart of circle country. His scientific equipment consisted of thermal imaging cameras, infrared and low-light cameras, and tape recorders. Andrews himself was home in bed when the excitement unfolded in the form of flashing lights on one of the monitors, but a telephone call quickly summoned him to the site at 4 A.M.

At sunrise the observers could see

circles, all right, in the fields where the lights had been, but they turned out to be the handiwork of hoaxers. The thermal imaging cameras had picked up the body heat of the pranksters.

"Our location had become known," Andrews notes ruefully. (This is hardly surprising, because the British press grants ample coverage to Colin Andrews's ideas and activities.)

Shortly after the grounding of Operation Blackbird, Andrews notes, British Army researchers got film footage of an orange light in the sky moving slowly to the east, dipping down to ground level, and then picking up speed before disappearing behind a dense forest. On the morrow, several circles appeared in the path of the orange light. The film may air in a BBC circles special.

"Andrews and Delgado are a nightmare to me," laments Terence Meaden, an atmospheric physicist and a founder of the Tornado and Storm Research Organization (TORRO) as well as the Circles Effect Research Group (CERES). "Their belief in a paranormal presence not only attracts hoaxers but makes it very hard for me to convince the scientists of the world that these circles merit serious study."

Meaden first laid eyes on two corn circles some five miles from his Wiltshire home in August of 1980. He immediate-

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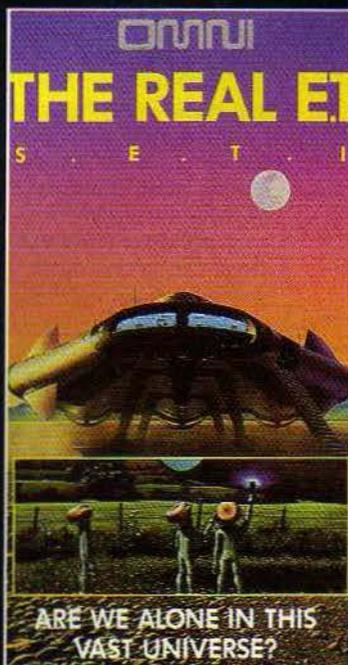
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ly fired off a short scientific paper explaining them in meteorological terms and has been refining his theory ever since: The circles are caused by whirlwinds, Meaden believes, that break down, hit the ground, and weave the crops into the tangled patterns of their spiraling winds.

Meaden had hoped to gather supporting evidence last summer with a month-long circles watch that he mounted with the help of volunteers and private funds, but the group wasn't lucky enough to find a circle in the making.

"It's a little like trying to film a road accident as it happens," Meaden says in explaining the odds against success. "It's not that the event isn't common. It's that you've got to know where to be ahead of time, and have your cameras rolling before the action starts."

After ten years of investigation, Meaden holds that the secret of the circles lies in the interplay of light oncoming winds with stable layers of air overlying the hills in and around the affected fields.

He envisions the summer air hanging motionless over these hills during the night, until the first stirring of wind toward morning starts to pick up near the level of the crops. When these winds strike the hillsides, they ricochet back, forming spinning columns of air. Usually, this sort of column, or "eddy vortex," dissipates uneventfully, but often enough, air continues to pour into the vortex from all directions, spiraling inward and upward. Then a bulge may develop partway up the spinning column, where the air is rushing in and rotating rapidly. The bulge then "relieves itself," Meaden says, by breaking down—namely, bursting and falling to the ground, where it leaves its telltale mark in the cornfields.

Other geographic locations have the right mix of conditions to produce such eddy vortices, Meaden concedes, but not the undulating miles of crops to record their passing. A circle etched in sand or snow disappears with the next gust of wind.

Electrical forces are also involved, Meaden adds. As the vortex sucks in air, it strips electrons off the molecules, turning them into ions that glow in the dark.

Airborne particles of pollen, dust, and sea salt hovering over the fields accelerate the buildup of electric charge inside the whirlwind, making it hum and shimmer with orange, yellow, or red light. From a distance, the bulge in the whirlwind may look like ball lightning, and its noise may sound similar to humming, buzzing, or even a siren's wail.

Meaden began work on a serious scientific book about the circles in 1983, which is due to appear in print sometime next year. Meanwhile, he has writ-

ten two shorter works, largely in response to the fantastic claims of Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado, called *The Circles Effect and Its Mysteries* and *Circles From the Sky*.

Numerous other researchers embrace Meaden's theory, including Jenny Randles and Paul Fuller of the British UFO Research Association, who are the authors of *Controversy of the Circles* and, more recently, *Crop Circles: A Mystery Solved*. Fuller is also the editor and publisher of a new scientific journal called *The Crop Watcher*, which keeps a weather eye on the circles phenomenon and takes a staunchly meteorological stand.

As far as Fuller and Randles are concerned, Meaden's theory also accounts for a good number of UFOs sighted in Wiltshire. This is because the strong electrical effects that are thought to charge the circle-making whirlwinds can set compass needles spinning, stall cars, stop watches, cause power failures, and fill the air with cracking, buzzing noises.

These kinds of events are also the stuff of UFO reports. Indeed, Randles points out, circles appear at sites of reported close encounters. But in reality it is the circle phenomenon that produces the illusion of the alien spacecraft, Randles maintains, not some extraterrestrial beings whirling their messages over the ground.

"We now have twenty-four eyewitnesses who all report an atmospheric vortex—similar to a tornado or a whirlwind," Randles says. This is an astounding number of firsthand accounts, given that 90 to 95 percent of crop circles are thought to be formed between three and five o'clock in the morning. (Other, more mystically oriented crop watchers holding vigils in the cornfields have observed no such vortex but instead reported hundreds of "black rodlike things," or "thongs," according to one account, "that jumped up and down above the top of the crop.")

As for the fact that the circles seem to be increasing in quantity and complexity, Randles offers a number of down-to-earth possibilities that could affect circle-making conditions, from pesticide spraying to the removal of hedgerows, to chlorofluorocarbon buildup in the atmosphere, to the depletion of the ozone layer. Meaden claims that the number of circles is not increasing, although the number of newly discovered circles is.

"We've been called the greatest party poopers in history," says Randles, who finds the geometric regularity of the circles no more astounding than the complex formations to be seen among snowflakes. "People would rather come up with the daffiest solutions possible."

Some of the most sober solutions were aired publicly last June 23, when

Meaden chaired the First International Conference of the Circles Effect, which drew scientists from as far away as Japan and the United States to a one-day parley at Oxford University. Animated exchanges between the presenters and the audience, which included Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado, were the order of the day. At the end, Meaden told the gathering that decades more research might be required to pin down all the details of the full answer. In the meantime, he said, the phenomenon would continue to manifest itself in hundreds of different patterns, most of which have not yet materialized and none of which could be predicted.

"Just listening to these people was such fun," commented American attendee John T. Snow, professor of atmospheric science at Purdue University. "There was lots of discussion, but very little real study reported." Most of the "crop circle studies," he said, entailed visiting the sites and speculating on the sights there.

Snow's own conjecture is in line with Meaden's—that most of the circles are the artifacts of whirlwinds. He agrees that whirlwinds form in the lee of hills, possibly swirling crops into circles, just as they form at the corners of tall buildings in New York City, where swirls of dust and litter form but quick-

ly disappear. However, Snow thinks many of the more elaborate patterns in the cornfields are hoaxes, perpetrated to keep news media interest in the crop circles alive.

"The British press is having a great time with these circles," says Snow. "There's probably an interesting meteorological phenomenon behind them that should be studied, but it's tough to do serious science in such an atmosphere of sensationalism."

Christopher Church, an expert in tornadolike flows at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, also attended the circles conference and also goes along with the vortex idea—up to a point.

"I think the very bizarre features, such as the rectangular patterns and arcs that look like pictographs or sand paintings," Church says in a phone interview, "can't be explained by natural causes. You could call it hoaxing, or you could call it an artistic challenge."

Church says he's sufficiently stimulated by the problem to do some laboratory testing. He plans to construct a model of two to three square miles of the surface of the Hampshire countryside, where many circles appear. His tabletop model will miniaturize the area's horseshoe-shaped depression surrounded by hills. Then he'll put the model in a wind tunnel, blow smoke at it

from half a dozen directions, and see whether vortices appear. The key question, he says, is not whether vortices could create the circles in the corn, but whether they actually form as frequently as the vortex model suggests.

"I stayed on in Manchester for a while after the conference," Church adds, "and a crop circle appeared near where I was living about two weeks later. The circle was approximately ten meters in diameter, with a satellite ring running around it, but it was nothing to get excited about. It looked like something kids had done. I remember thinking that my son and I could have made one as well or better by anchoring a rope at the center and running around with a board." On the grounds of this unspectacular display, Church says he would positively rule out any extraterrestrial involvement.

The vortex theory, however, is not the only scientific explanation. Eyeing the circles from across the English Channel, optical engineer Jean-Jacques Velasco of the CNES (the French counterpart to NASA) declares that "no known meteorological phenomenon will produce rings on the ground, much less double rings, without touching the vegetation in the middle of the rings." Instead, he suggests, the circles may be the result of military tests of ad-



vanced star-wars-type weaponry.

Indeed, when Velasco observed the genuine article under a microscope, he found that bent stalks plucked from crop circles looked as though they had been twisted and subjected to some form of heating.

The heat source, he speculated, could be an infrared or microwave beam of high intensity. Such a beam could be produced by the powerful lasers used in experimental defensive weapons under development in the United States, the Soviet Union, and possibly the United Kingdom as well. The proliferating patterns in the cornfields, by this argument, are the fallout from testing a new defense strategy.

"It's all done with mirrors," Velasco explains. "You test the beam from the ground by directing it at a pilotless aircraft flying overhead." A mirror affixed to the test aircraft reflects the beam back to Earth, where it marks the crops. Indeed, Velasco asserts, "the English are really using the cornstalks as microwave detectors." The bent corn is evidence of the beam's power. (If the beam were to strike the aircraft, instead of being deflected by the mirror, it would destroy it, Velasco claims, and this is why the test craft would have to be pilotless.) He will be testing the idea in his laboratory, he says, on a small

scale, by conducting experimental test shooting of plants with microwave and infrared guns.

Velasco bolsters his argument with the fact that the area of greatest circle intensity coincides with a large British military installation. His speculations, which he describes as still private and untested, were roundly rejected by the British and American researchers interviewed for this article.

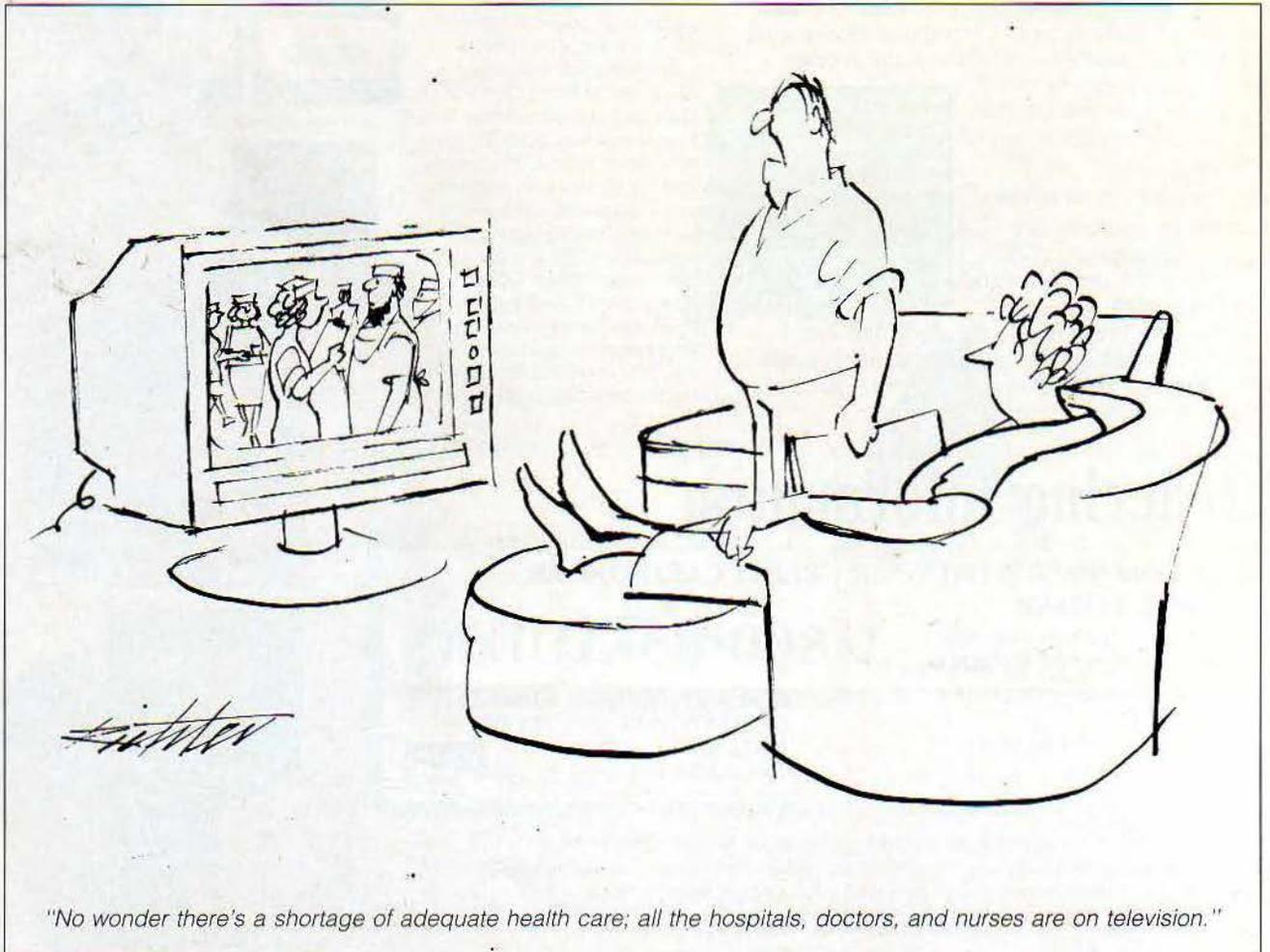
Other theories range from the mischievous (tracks left by helicopters flying upside down) to the mysterious (warnings of ecological disaster chiseled in the corn in ancient Sumerian script). Some modern observers cling to the notion that the circles are the work of fairies or nature spirits.

"I've been studying these circles for five years now," notes Archie Roy, honorary senior fellow in physics and astronomy at the University of Glasgow, a researcher well-known for his interest in the paranormal, "and I don't believe we have any real idea of what they are or what causes them."

Roy is president of the newly formed Centre for Crop Circle Studies, which is charged with building up a national computer database of relevant facts about all the crop circles found to date, such as the types of crops they inhabit, their size, and the meteorolog-

ical conditions in the areas where they form. One of the center's first official acts was to meet with the National Farmers' Union and draw up a "Code of Practice" for researchers wishing to inspect circles on private land. (Investigators are expected, for example, to ask farmers' permission before entering the fields, to keep the gates closed, and to refrain from littering.)

The first issue of the center's fledgling journal of crop circle studies, called *The Cereologist*, appeared late last summer and ran true to its editorial policy of standing "receptive to the news, views, and theories of any group or individual who is engaged in these studies, subject only to their courteous expression." Beyond the usual suspects (atmospheric effects, fairies, extraterrestrials, hoaxers), *The Cereologist* gave reports from dowzers, channellers, and mystics. Novelist Patrick Harpur, a student of alchemy, offered this view of the crop circles. "They are like dreams," he said. "To interrogate them is to force them to lie; to interpret them is to diminish their richness; to explain them is to misunderstand them.... Crop circles are like mouths that speak to us of the strangeness and depth of things—speak to the heart more than the head and to the soul more than the heart." **DD**



"No wonder there's a shortage of adequate health care; all the hospitals, doctors, and nurses are on television."