



An endless phantasmagoria: a complex formation near Andover in southern England



Examining the gentle swirling pattern

BRITAIN

Around and Around in Circles

Who—or what—is creating those mysterious 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 how they got there. These puzzling circles—large sweeping areas 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 on how to explain the occurrences. The search for answers has even sparked interest in Parliament, where two M.P.s have called for the government to investigate.

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 occurrences 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 is no coincidence that this area of southern England is also home to the simi-

larly mysterious stone formations at Stonehenge and Avebury.

Whatever the cause, the circles are particularly intriguing because they are beautiful geometric formations that level crops in a precise pattern. The plant, usually a grain, although mustard, soybeans and sugar beets have also been affected, is flattened in a distinctive swirl; nonetheless, it continues to ripen until ready for harvest. The 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 opposite directions, and the "tadpole," a single circle with a long curling tail.

The recent upsurge in circle sight-



Strange but true: a carefully sculpted and rare double zero

Explanations range from UFOs to "spinning balls" of air.

ings 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 disturbances 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. But how could something as wild as a vicious wind produce such carefully sculpted creations?

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 luminous apparitions and UFOs. Some observers support such supernatural notions, claiming that one of the groupings might be formed by landing pods from a spaceship.

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 phantasmagoria come up with a totally convincing explanation. Indeed, some suspect that 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.
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