

Volume 17 Number 2 & 3
Summer and Autumn 2004

The **Skeptic**



SPECIAL ISSUE: Rendlesham Revealed!

Also in this issue:

The Truth About Rendlesham

Britain's Roswell?

Lessons for Ufology

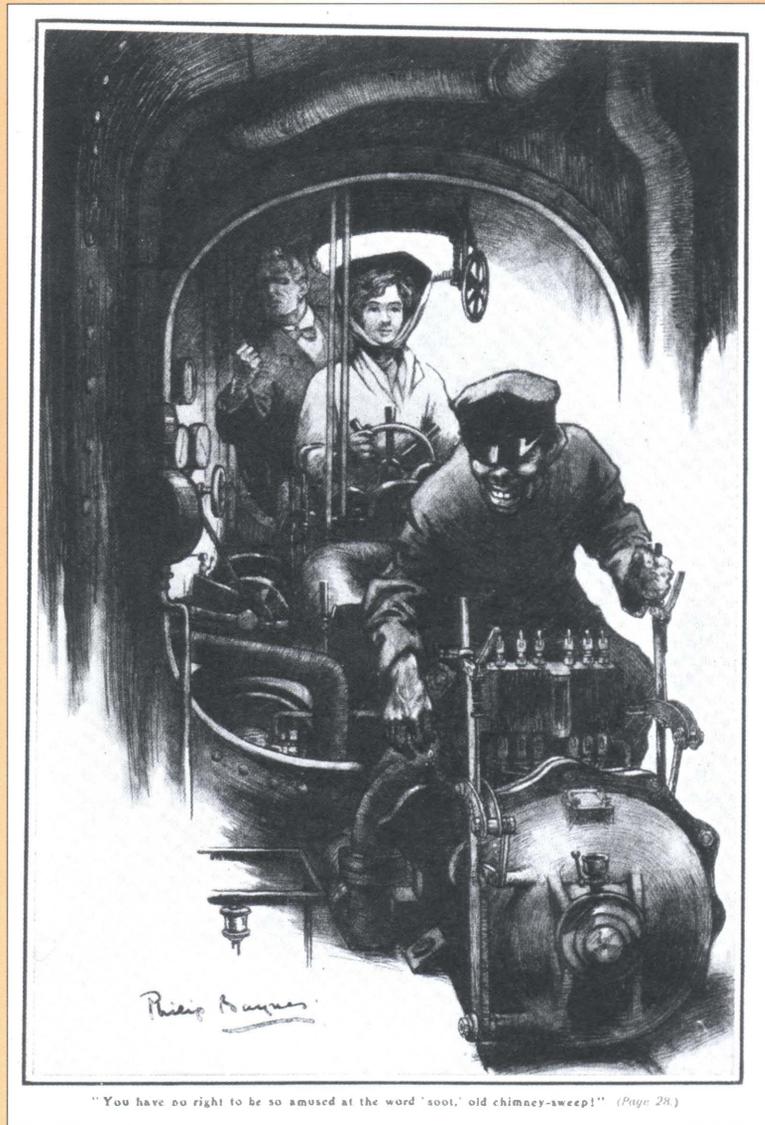
Forgive us our Trespasses

Reflections on a Rendlesham Skywatch

Plus:

News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



"You have no right to be so amused at the word 'soot,' old chimney-sweep!" (Page 28.)

SAVING OUR FUEL RESERVES

As the time draws near when the world's supplies of natural fuel run out, most scientists think in terms of alternative fuels. But author Maurice Renard offers a more economical solution: in his 1910 story 'The Fixed Flight' he sent his travellers into the air – where they remained motionless, waiting for the Earth below them to rotate sufficiently that they could land at their destination, consuming only sufficient fuel to get them aloft.

Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 OBS.



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Editorial

Chris French



HELLO AND WELCOME to this special double issue of *The Skeptic* in which all of our feature articles are devoted to Britain's most infamous 'UFO' case. What really did happen in Rendlesham Forest in the few days following Christmas way back in 1980? Did members of the 81st Security Police Squadron serving at RAF Bentwaters and RAF Woodbridge really have a close encounter with an alien intelligence – or is the true explanation of what went on a little more mundane? This case, often described as 'Britain's Roswell', has taken on such importance in the world of ufology that we felt a special double-issue was more than justified.

James Easton's opening article outlines the basic facts of the incident. Sceptics such as Ian Ridpath have convincingly argued that witnesses to this incident had been fooled by the Orford Ness lighthouse and the Shipwash lightship, and Easton's article provides further proof of the validity of this explanation. But it also goes further by providing supporting evidence for an explanation of another puzzling aspect of the original accounts – strange beams of light that had been reported as being directed downwards from the sky.

David Clarke considers the role that the Ministry of Defence has inadvertently played in fuelling conspiracy theories relating to this incident. As his analysis of recently released official documents conclusively shows, the MoD never really had much of an interest in the case at all once it had been established that it had no implications for national security.

Jenny Randles then presents a fascinating account of her own long-standing involvement with this classic case. In addition to providing an insight into the way in which

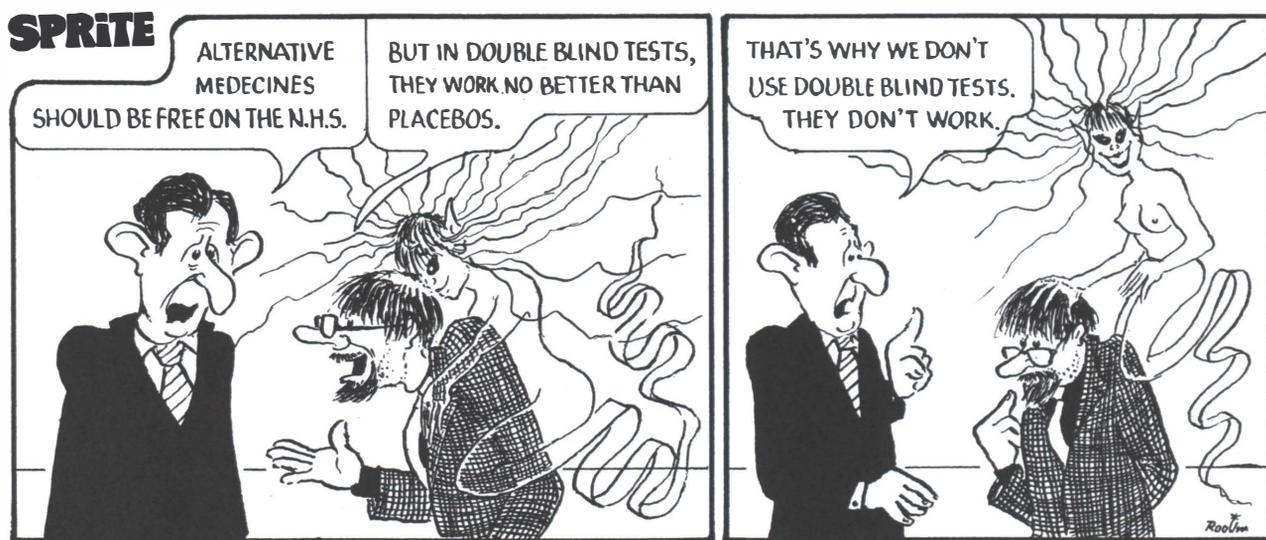
her own thinking about the case has evolved over the years as new evidence has emerged, she also discusses the general lessons for ufology inherent in the case.

Peter Brookesmith gives further consideration to the diplomatic aspects of the incident. He argues convincingly that there was indeed a cover-up – of sorts. But it was not directed at suppressing evidence of extraterrestrial contact. Instead, the intention more likely to try to minimise any potential diplomatic embarrassment relating to the reckless behaviour of the USAF personnel that night.

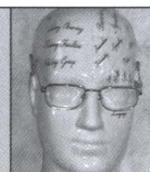
All four contributors, each with many years' experience of considering this case and others, clearly believe that the truth about Rendlesham does not involve aliens. For all that, it is still a classic case, insofar as it is a mystery for which the probable solution requires the piecing together of evidence relating to several different events which all, purely coincidentally, happened over the same few days. We believe that all the pieces are now available to solve this case in all substantive aspects. See what you think. And if you end up with your head spinning as a result of puzzling over this complex case, relax with Andy Marriott's gentle reflections on a magical night spent looking for UFOs in Rendlesham Forest last August.

As usual, there are the contributions from our regular columnists, plus the letters, cartoons, and review sections. I hope you enjoy reading this special double issue and that it will provide you with enough food for thought to keep you going until issue 17(4) appears in Winter 2004!

With best wishes until the next issue, Chris



Hits and Misses



Arnica: not what it's succussed up to be

People in this country love to recommend arnica for any injury from a mild bruise to a broken leg. We don't just mean friends, fellow club members, and casual acquaintances met on the street. We mean physiotherapists and doctors, too. Yet, given that arnica is a homeopathic formulation, the best we can say about it is that a little massage – as, say, you might have when someone rubs cream into a part of your body – never did anybody any harm and is known to help lots of different types of aches and pains. When it comes to reducing bruising, the thing arnica is supposed to be best at, you can see where massaging the affected area might help to disperse blood lurking at the site.

As it turns out, however, you can't even say that. In a study conducted by researchers at the University of Exeter and the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital and published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, arnica turned out to have no more effect than a placebo. Three groups of patients who were about to have surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome, a quite painful inflammation of the wrist caused by overuse, were given, respectively, 'high-potency' (30C) arnica tablets, 'low-potency' (6C) arnica tablets, and a placebo. The patients kept pain diaries and recorded their use of painkillers, while researchers analysed photographs of the patients' wrists, measured changes in

swelling, and used computer software to measure exact shades of bruising. The result: no discernible difference among the three groups.

Head researcher Professor Edzard Ernst suggested that arnica's reputation had come about because of "positive selection bias". In other words, people who recover quicker than others and say they took arnica give the stuff a good name. Just for counterbalance: we heal quickly, and we never touch the stuff.

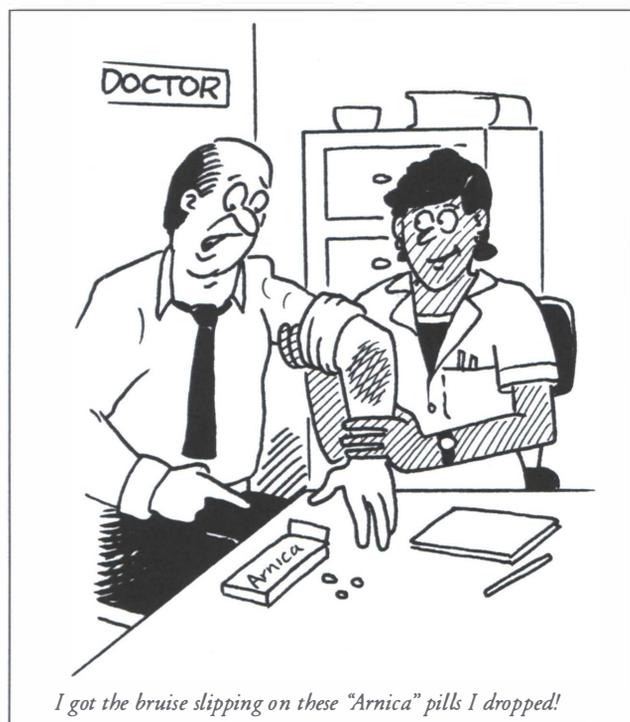
Irrational exuberance

Early February saw a new menace in the skies: the phenomenon of the hyper-religious pilot. On Friday, February 6, passengers on American Airlines flight 34 from Los Angeles to New York were alarmed when the pilot, Roger Findiesen, asked all Christians on the flight to skip the movie and begin an interfaith dialogue with nonbelievers in seats nearby. After landing and hearing of complaints in the cabin, Findiesen reportedly apologized; the airline says it is investigating the incident. In fact, the story seems to have been that he had just been on a mission in Costa Rica and was filled with what you might call residual zeal. You have to admit that pilot proselytising is technically harmless – we are reminded of Willie Nelson's famous aphorism that "Any landing you can walk away from is perfect" – but on the other hand, reports say that the mood in the cabin was extremely tense after Findiesen's exhortation, in part because a number of passengers thought Findiesen had lost his mind and was preparing them for death. In an exclusive interview with the American gay magazine *The Advocate* – which got the interview because its editor happened to be on board the plane – the pilot believed the mysterious disappearance of a problem with the braking system was a sign from God that he should use the PA system to talk about his Christian faith.

Whether his comments were against the rules depends on the exact terms of American Airlines' rule book. But the best one can say was that it was an error of judgement. And good judgement, unfortunately, is the thing you most want a pilot to have. Well, that and good eyesight.

Death comes to the homeopath

The Daily Telegraph ran an obit detailing the life of Jack Temple, "homeopathic dowser healer", who died at 86 in late February and believed he could trace 120 previous lives and his origins back 97,000 years. His clients included Diana, Princess of Wales, the Duchess



of York, and Cherie Booth. According to *The Telegraph*, central to Temple's theory (and practice) was dowsing (using a crystal pendulum), which he used to detect "weak spots" in the body's electromagnetic field. He believed that we begin with a particular energy level at birth, which is progressively sapped by illness, stress, 'unnatural' foods, vaccinations, and even bottle feeding, which he thought disconnected the baby from its birth sign. (Don't you love the way all these different beliefs get jumbled up together?) Temple had on offer a vast collection of remedies, which were to be strapped to the body along meridian energy lines, and kept samples of clients' hair and fingernail clippings in alcohol-filled bottles so he could diagnose them remotely. He had expected to live to the age of 140.

The most amusing story in the obit concerns his diagnosis that Diana, Princess of Wales, suffered from lead poisoning after seeing the way she bowed her head on TV. After he relayed this diagnosis to the Princess via the Duchess of York, the Princess confirmed that she had pierced her right cheek with a pencil as a schoolgirl, and the point had broken off in her cheek. He was able to extract the 'poison' and help her hold up her head again. Apparently he managed this without ever discovering that pencils are made out of graphite, not lead.

Bubble bath

One of the great intrigues of the late 1990s and early 2000s has been the boom and bust of the dot-com bubble. Vernon Smith, a professor at Virginia's George Mason University, won a Nobel Prize in economics for developing theories about these types of movement. Smith set up his own market in a lab in which students from Purdue University and the University of Arizona could trade a phoney security with a definite fair value, usually about \$3. Despite knowing exactly what the security was worth, his students bid the price up to create a bubble until, eventually, enough traders began refusing to pay the premium price to crash the market. Rerunning the experiment with the same group formed a second, although smaller, bubble. A second rerun had the security largely trading at its real value. Smith went on to repeat these experiments multiple times, sometimes with graduate students and sometimes with finance professionals. Financiers, you will be maliciously pleased to know, created bigger bubbles than the students did.

However, when it comes to the actual stock market, Smith points out that big drops don't happen twice in rapid sequence. Historically since 1926, he told *Forbes* magazine, downturns are separated by at least two years. He doesn't expect another bubble until memories of this one have faded.

We're tempted to say, "Past performance is no indicator of future results." If the pace of change is getting

faster – and the advent of electronic markets is making trading a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week hyperspeed phenomenon – those cycles, too, could shorten.

Dietician, heal thyself

Perhaps because the Atkins diet is currently such a cult phenomenon, the media seem to jump eagerly on any report that seems to discredit the low-carb, high-fat guru. February saw *The Wall Street Journal* check out the New York medical examiner's report and publish a claim that it pegged Atkins's weight at his death at 258 pounds – high enough, at his six-foot height, for his body-mass index to qualify him as obese. The newspaper also claimed he had a history of heart attacks and heart disease. All these claims were eagerly repeated by many other media.



Atkins's widow, however, and a doctor from the Atkins Physicians Council objected first of all to the newspaper's having obtained the report, which they claimed was illegally sourced and then sent to the newspaper by doctors opposing the Atkins diet, and second of all to the details of the report. They claimed that Atkins in fact weighed a normal 200 pounds when he had the accident that put him in the coma that eventually led to his death, and the 58 additional pounds were due to fluid retention and bloating as his organs failed. He had developed cardiomyopathy, thought to have been caused by a virus, not by diet, about three years before his death, and did have a heart attack in April 2002, which he speculated openly might have been related to this known illness.

This little incident does not reflect well on anyone. While death certificates are public record, medical records are not; Atkins's records should have been a

private matter for his next-of-kin. If Atkins were obese during his lifetime, someone would surely have noticed.

More important for our purposes, whether the Atkins diet is healthy needs to be established by good science, not by a single example, no matter how maliciously entertaining. It is undeniably true that there are seriously obese people who have lost weight on it. Which is healthier: the diet or the weight?

Conflicts of interest compromise MMR research

The general panic that the triple measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine might be a cause of autism and bowel disorders began in 1998, when Dr Andrew Wakefield published a study in *The Lancet* that raised the link. Unknown to *The Lancet* until a journalist made the allegation in February 2004, was the fact that Wakefield had also accepted £55,000 from the Legal Aid Board to investigate whether children allegedly damaged by the MMR vaccine could sue for compensation. In addition, some of the children used in his research also formed part of the Legal Aid Board study. Other than research by Wakefield and co-authors, studies conducted since have not confirmed the link. There have been several of these, including work by the Medical Research Council, a 14-year study of three million children in Finland, a major statistical analysis published in the *British Medical Journal*, and a new study at the Royal Free Hospital. Meantime, the rate of measles infection has been growing among the group usually most likely to take up vaccines – the educated middle class – as fears that the vaccine is dangerous have taken hold. The number of cases of measles reported per year has more than tripled since 1997; there were 360 in the first nine months of 2003.

Wakefield has, however, stuck to and repeated the claimed link over the years. In 2001, Wakefield left the Royal Free Hospital, where he was a Reader when he published his original research but where funding for his work had been drying up, and took up a job at the International Child Development Resource Center in Florida as Director of Research. He is still there, as Director of the Inflammatory Bowel Disorder Group.

The Lancet now says it would not have run Wakefield's original study if the editors had known then about the conflict of interest. Richard Horton, the journal's editor, told the BBC that he no longer believes there is any link between the MMR vaccine and either autism or bowel disease.

It was reported last summer that some 1,500 families that claim their children suffered health problems after taking the vaccine are planning to bring a class-action suit against GlaxoSmithKline, the largest manufacturer of the MMR vaccine.

Stupid language tricks

If you don't like something, change the name. In late January, the state of Georgia's school superintendent, Kathy Cox, proposed striking the word "evolution" from the state's biology curriculum and replacing it with the phrase "biological changes over time". You can see her point. Why take on angry parents if you can avoid the whole issue with a little judicious editing? According to CNN, the state's schools would still teach the concept of evolution, but they'd avoid the word in order to alleviate the pressure on teachers in socially conservative areas. After a week or two of increasing pressure on Cox from everyone from parents to former president Jimmy Carter, Cox alleviated the pressure on herself by recanting and saying she had misjudged the situation.



More stupid language tricks

As a second entry in the language category, we have the County of Los Angeles, which in November 2003 actually did request that vendors of computer equipment avoid the common industry term "Master/Slave" in product descriptions and labeling. If you're not familiar with this usage, it's commonly seen in explanations of how to connect up multiple hard drives and removable media drives (such as DVD and CD-ROM). The master is the primary drive; the slave the secondary drive. The fact that an explanation of these terms can be so compact makes it plain that in fact the terminology can be changed without great difficulty. The urban legend-busting site *snopes.com* went so far to check out this tale by calling the LA County

Purchasing and Contract Services division. The story is true. And the reason is that a black employee of the county's Probation Department filed a discrimination complaint with the Office of Affirmative Action Compliance after spotting these labels on a videotape machine. So they had to do it. On the one hand, it seems a trivial matter; what matters is surely not the accurate use of language to describe a relationship between hard drives, but the laws governing the treatment of human beings. On the other hand, given that the labels are so easy to change, what's the difference? Except, of course, to make the US look even more humourless and litigious to foreigners than it already did.

Being Doris Stokes

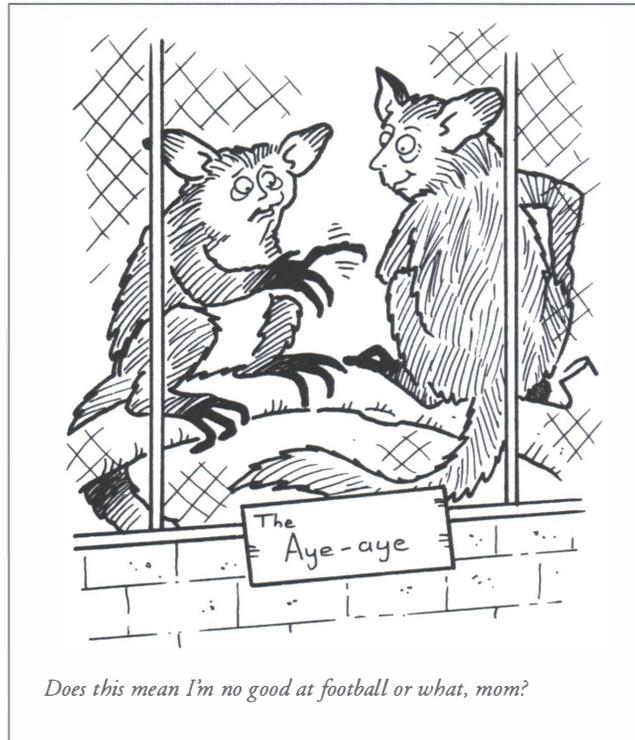
Somehow we stumbled across the web site of *The Weekly* (<http://www.theweekly.co.uk>), which seems to specialize in creative weirdness, some of it to do with science. One of the many features on its site is a sort of Doris Stokes emulator (http://theweekly.co.uk/4301/cooe_e_loves/). You think of a dead, famous person, and the site tries to guess who you're thinking of by asking a series of questions. It's clear from the questions themselves that whatever success the site has at doing this is based on that old familiar saw, population stereotypes. A lot of people must pick JFK, for example ("Has your assassination implausibly been attributed to a lone gunman?"), Abraham Lincoln, or Jayne Mansfield. 'Doris failed to spot our own pick, Katharine Hepburn, which leads us to believe that the page was created before Hepburn's death in 2003. We're not sure the site would fool anybody with its loaded questions, but working out how the questions branch through its knowledge base is a kind of mild geek entertainment. At our last visit, 'Doris's accuracy was trailing the rest of the world by 3,713 to 4,464.

Finger on the personality

As if there weren't enough spurious ways of reading personality in the shapes of body parts, a number of stories have come our way about the work of Liverpool University's John Manning, who has been measuring fingers. According to Manning, the genes which control the development of the fingers are the same genes which control the development of the testes and ovaries, and the development of the ring finger in particular is under the influence of testosterone. The consequence: men have longer ring fingers than women do. Women, he says, tend to have index and ring fingers that are roughly the same length. "Testosterone affects the development of the right side of the brain," he told Australia's ABC television. "The right side of the brain is where visuospatial ability is." Therefore, he concluded, the longer

the ring finger, the greater the inherent sporting ability in games like football, where you have to judge distance and the consequences of kicking the ball.

In other stories, such as one run by the *Sunday Times*, Manning has claimed that the relative lengths



of the index and ring fingers provide clues to reading people's personalities. Risk-taking, communications skills, verbal aptitude, assertiveness, and fertility are, he claims, all traits that can be read this way. If that weren't enough, he also says that men with long ring fingers have a reduced risk of heart attack, and there are also links between finger length and breast cancer, autism, vulnerability to depression, and dyslexia. Finally, shorter ring fingers on men's left hands tends to be correlated with their being gay.

Manning has laid out all this in a book called *Digit Ratio*, published by the Rutgers University Press as part of its human evolution series.

According to R.A. Lippa, author of an article studying the relation between finger length and sexual orientation published in the July 2003 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, research into ring-to-index finger ratios is on the rise. Lippa's article suggests that gay men do indeed have shorter left ring fingers, but also notes that this pattern does not extend to lesbian women. He also says, we think significantly, "There is so much variation in 2D:4D ratios among men and among women – and among gay men, heterosexual men, lesbian women, and heterosexual women – that 2D:4D ratios are a very poor

indicator of a person's sexual orientation. For that matter, 2D:4D ratios are also a poor indicator of whether a person is male or female." He goes on to say that the link between prenatal hormones and sexual orientation is not proven, and the factors leading to variations in finger length ratios are not understood.

The thing about a single measure that is supposed to correlate to so many human traits is that the breadth and number of the claims makes our sceptical twitch. The claim that the exact mix of hormones that wash over the developing foetus in its first trimester of growth has a profound effect on its development seems utterly logical. But the claim that this mix of hormones is reflected in ring-to-index finger ratios and lengths seems to us unprovable until or unless you have some way of sampling the *in vitro* hormone mix and correlating it to finger length later in life; you'd also need to prove the correlation between that *in vitro* mix and the various illnesses and personality traits. In addition, many factors shape personality: nature versus nurture is a long-running argument. We suspect that there will be mileage in the sex hormones theory, but that measuring index fingers will go the way of measuring brains as a method of quantifying intelligence.

Code wars

Historical novels have always had to tread a fine line between historical accuracy and telling a good story. Or, as the *New York Times* pointed out recently, in the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, a fine line between pseudo-historical accuracy and telling a good story. Much of what *Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown claims as 'fact' is in fact lifted from a group of other books, primarily *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln (whose own sales have been lifted by the popularity of the Dan Brown thriller). Reviewer Laura Miller points out that one of the keys to Brown's thriller's success is its use of bits of "non-fiction" that gives the book what she calls its "frisson of authenticity". However, she says, both books are based on the notorious hoax concerning a group called the Priory of Sion, founded in Jerusalem in 1099. A small cache of fabricated clippings planted by a man named Pierre Plantard in the Bibliothèque Nationale was responsible for this society's later favour among conspiracy theorists as a nine-centuries-old vehicle for world dominance. In fact, Miller notes, the Priory of Sion was a small group of friends founded in 1956. Several French books and a 1996 BBC documentary

debunked the hoax, but like all good conspiracy theories, apparently it refuses to die.

The business of homeopathy

We hadn't heard of Boiron, which claims to be 'world leader' in homeopathy with a 20% market share, until it sent out a press release claiming that its Oscilloccinum 'homeopathic medicine', which sells in a box of six doses for \$11.65 (it says here) had been shown in clinical studies to decrease the duration and intensity of flu symptoms. You are supposed, they tell us, to take it at the first sign of flu. The press release is intended for a US audience, and so it notes that Oscilloccinum is regulated by the FDA and that it is "widely used in Europe". We looked up the product in a couple of online shops, and noted that the product information warns that because the pills contain sugar they are not suitable for diabetics.

Since the press release also advised that Boiron is a public company listed on the French stock exchange since 1987, it occurred to us that it was time we knew a little more about the companies behind alternative medicine; they are getting bigger and more influential day by day. To be sure, they're not in a class with Big Pharma: GlaxoSmithKline has 14.8 times the revenues (\$40.09 billion). Still, the company has been growing steadily – sales up 7.9% in 2002 (the last year for which its annual report is available) over 2001, with further growth in the first half of 2003. Its biggest market is France, which accounts for 68% of its sales, but it also has substantial operations in the rest of Europe, primarily Italy and Spain. The US represents about 63% of the 8.5% of its net income that derives from North America; the Caribbean and Canada divide the rest about equally. Its US income grew 12.7% in 2002, its fastest-growing market outside of France (where its net income grew by 22.5%). The Boiron family holds 64.1% of the voting rights.

So far, the market for homeopathy is small – 0.3% of the world pharmaceutical market, according to Boiron's 2002 annual report, with the self-medication (non-prescription) market accounting for 13.4%.

The company's corporate plan is simple but alarming: "For each physician in the world to integrate homeopathic medicines into daily practice." To this end, it finances the Boiron Institute, which was set up in 1985 and now counts 150 physicians in more than 30 countries. The company spends approximately 2 to 3 percent of its annual sales on research.



Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Steuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, Phil McKerracher.** *The Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p. 3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out.



Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman

The cloudy crystal ball

Last year, feeling we should face off against the psychics, we published ten predictions for 2003. Four were outright winners: the long bear stock market did end (the Dow, the FTSE, the NASDAQ, and the S&P 500 all went up substantially over the year); Hillary Rodham Clinton did make an important announcement regarding the 2004 US Presidential race (she decided not to run); and psychics' predictions were no more successful than in the past. We also get a point for abnormal weather and its attribution to global warming: remember that week of scorching heat last August? As for ecological crisis in Africa: well, looking through a few headlines, there was a huge fire on Mount Kenya in March, Zimbabwe appealed for humanitarian assistance after drought-like conditions left it with a grain deficit of almost 712,000 tons, and Haiti had lost 99 percent of its forests and therefore much of its fertile soil by December 2003, leaving it struggling to feed its inhabitants. Plus there is the ongoing crisis of AIDS, which had killed seven million farmers across southern Africa by July 2003 and which infects 29.4 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. So, take your pick. We award ourselves only half a point, since we had to look it up. Four and a half.

On the other hand: the Pope was not forced to relinquish his post, basically because he can't be, although his increasing infirmity was the subject of much discussion. No ancient British institution collapsed, although plans for reforming the House of Lords continue. But just at the end of 2003, the coroner opened the inquest into the deaths of Diana, Princess of Wales, and Dodi Al Fayed. That's almost the Royal Family, though really not a scandal, and although the inquest didn't formally open until 6 January 2004, it was announced in December. We say that's close, and demand a half point. Five. We also see that Bush did claim military victory in Iraq in May. Six points, or 60%. And that, friends, is a lot better than a lot of tabloid psychics have ever managed.

Of course, there's no secret to coming up with successful predictions – if by successful you mean accurate. You do one of three things: 1) play the statistics; 2) play the trends; 3) play the people. Statistically, the long bear market that began in the spring of 2000 was already one of the longest in history. The odds that the market would drop for a fourth consecutive year were accordingly very low; people have to put their money somewhere. Similarly, Africa has been tormented with a succession of ecological crises for so long that it was inevitable there'd be something. In terms of trends, abnormal weather events are growing in number, in part because of global warming (to which they will

inevitably be attributed, even if unprovably), and in part because freakish weather around the globe is more frequently reported now (we blame the Weather Channel for sparking off that trend). Similarly, all of Britain's ancient institutions are under much more scrutiny than in the past. As for people, it was obvious that Bush would claim victory no matter what happened. No scandal affected his family in 2003, but it was a reasonable bet, given his and his daughters' history. Unless, of course, you want to include the scandal of the missing Weapons of Mass Destruction. We would, left to ourselves, and make it seven.

But our predictions would not be successful ones for a tabloid psychic. The tabloid psychic's mission is not to be accurate but to sell newspapers. For that goal, what's needed is famous names, preferably young, hot famous names much in the news, and shocking events. The whole is a mini-melodrama. The famous names are supposed to evoke an emotional response by themselves, which is then played upon by the prediction itself. So, for example, "Bush will abandon his Presidency to become a Christian missionary" is a much better prediction in the tabloid sense even though it has a near-zero chance of coming true than our rather tame ones. The fact is, we're not playing the same game.

Of course, there are plenty of major events no one, sceptic or psychic, specifically predicted. We don't, for example, recall hearing anyone predict anything like SARS, the discovery of BSE in North American cattle, or the run of cancellations affecting BA Flight 223 to Washington.

Sceptical predictions for 2004

1. Scientific research will continue to show no negative health effects from mobile phone use or masts, but local environmental groups will continue to cite health fears as reasons why masts should not be sited locally.
2. Not including February's MMR research revelations, there will be a scandal concerning scientific fraud.
3. The stock market will end the year modestly up.
4. There will be a scandal concerning the US Presidential election.
5. Also in that election, the winner will capture less than half of the popular vote.
6. There will be more disruptions to BA Flight 223.
7. *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* will take the Best Picture Oscar.
8. A major epidemic will garner headlines.
9. Still more freakish weather will be attributed to global warming.
10. An ancient British institution will collapse or be dismantled.

The mills of science grind exceeding slow...

It's very hard to sit here year after year trying to promote the value of science and be faced over and over with the failings of scientists. The latest scandal as I write this is the saga of Andrew Wakefield's inflammatory research that he has claimed ever since 1998 shows a link between autism and bowel disorders, and the triple measles-mumps-rubella vaccine. *The Lancet* editors are now saying that had they known in 1998 about the conflicts of interest that taint Wakefield's research they would never have published his article.

Not publishing it would probably have made a big difference. It was Wakefield's work that alarmed parents into refusing to allow their children to be given the MMR vaccine. Without Wakefield, we would probably not now be seeing increasing numbers of measles cases every year or declining numbers of vaccinations. We also would likely have missed the unpleasant incident in which Blair's government refused to offer separate vaccines to parents who wanted them. Whether or not Wakefield's research was good science, this decision was bad policy that alienated many parents who believed that it ought to be up to them to make the decisions about what kind of medical treatment their children should have. One of my oldest friends has a mildly autistic child, and it's a condition you wouldn't wish on anyone.

The understandable confusion in all this is the fact that autism generally emerges when the child is two to four years old – exactly the time when children are being vaccinated. Parents who are looking around for a proximate cause to blame are likely to spot the recent vaccination and make the link, whether or not the vaccination and the emergence of autism are in fact cause and effect. As sceptics, we're familiar with this type of misattribution, but MMR critics can say that one reason Wakefield's work was persuasive is because parents were already suspicious there was a link. They are unlikely to believe that funding from the Legal Aid Board could invalidate a link they already believe exists.

Whenever this type of conflict of interest over funding sources arises, the first thing I think of is Cynthia Crossen's 1994 book, *Tainted Truth*, in which she painstakingly showed over and over again that research reaches the results desired by the people providing the funding. This is how Procter and Gamble were able, for a time, to convince people of the counterintuitive (and, as was later shown, conclusively wrong) claim that one-time-use paper diapers were less damaging to the environment than wash-and-reuse cloth ones.

The situation here isn't perfectly parallel, in that from the sounds of it Wakefield had two separate, albeit connected, research projects for two different masters, and the Legal Aid Board could not have controlled whether or not his study was published. In the case of the corporate funding that Crossen investigated, it was common for the funding company to retain the right to withhold publication if it didn't like the results. (That, too, of course, provides a powerful incentive for researchers to find the kind of results the company wants, since research you cannot publish does not add anything to your publishing record or your reputation.) Even so, clearly the £55,000 in funding paid to Wakefield by the Legal Aid Board provided an incentive to find a correlation. Even more so, because some of the children in his study had been accepted for funding by the Legal Aid Board.

None of this is enough, however, to invalidate his findings by itself – and this is a principle that seems to have been lost in the media firestorm surrounding the discovery of the conflicts of interest. After all, even a biased clock may be right twice a day. But the more damaging problem is that in the intervening years other researchers have failed to confirm his findings, even though he and colleagues have continued to defend them.

The bigger social problem is that there has been plenty of time for FUD – fear, uncertainty, and doubt – to grow among parents. And in dealing with this the Blair government is being as uncompassionate as ever: they have jumped at the opportunity to say that they were right all along, and that any parents who were reluctant before should now get their kids vaccinated. You would think that the BSE crisis would have taught these guys to be a little less smug. Back then, when scientists said they were unsure and more research was needed, politicians reacted by insisting there was no danger – and, at vast cost to individuals, country, and industry, turned out to be wholly wrong. You would think, therefore, that they might have been a shade more cautious this time round. At the very least, they could express some concern at yet more erosion of public confidence in science and scientists.

Trust in all traditional authorities has been waning ever since the 1960s. Much of that is appropriate. Trusting the pronouncements of scientists unquestioningly is as anti-scientific as distrusting them on principle. The point about science is that it is a process for establishing the truth, and it is bigger than any one scientist or peer-reviewed journal. But every bit of impropriety or fraud that's discovered makes it that much harder to convey this message to an increasingly alienated public.



Wendy M Grossman is founder and former editor (twice) of *The Skeptic*, and author of *From Anarchy to Power: the Net Comes of Age*. Wendy M Grossman also writes for *Scientific American*. Her web site is at <http://www.pelicancrossing.net>.

The Truth about Rendlesham

James Easton presents the first of a series of articles on Britain's most notorious UFO case.

MY INTEREST IN the Rendlesham Forest 'UFO' case began some years ago, when the Internet was evolving from computer 'bulletin boards'. These formative discussion forums were a source of otherwise unobtainable information and featured a serious-minded, worldwide community, interested in the eclectic subject of 'UFOs'.

Participants in Britain's 'Roswell' were members of the 81st Security Police Squadron (SPS), serving at RAF Bentwaters and RAF Woodbridge. It was a joint base, operated by the US Air Force and separated by a two-mile stretch of Rendlesham Forest. Some of the witnesses, long since returned to the United States, began to release details of their involvement *via* the fledging Internet and, gradually, I began to set in context various pieces of the puzzle.

Following Yonder Christmas Light

There were two separate incidents that gave rise to this classic 'UFO' mystery. At around 3:00 a.m. on Friday 26 December, 1980, three members of the 81st SPS, Staff-Sergeant Jim Penniston, Airman First Class John Burroughs and Airman Ed Cabansag, were on routine patrol when some unfamiliar lights were noticed as apparently within the forest, due east of the 'east gate', or 'back door', entrance to RAF Woodbridge. Receiving permission to investigate, it was claimed they had encountered a small, triangular-shaped, craft, which moved backwards through the forest before silently taking off.

On the night of Saturday 27 December 1980, there was a belated officers' Christmas party, during which the Deputy Base Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Halt, was alerted by Lieutenant Bruce Englund to yet another 'UFO' sighting within Rendlesham Forest. As Halt recalled in a previously online interview, "...it had been, how shall I say, the centre of a lot of activity and controversy within the police squadron and they seemed to be more focused on UFO activity than their primary duty". (This interview, on *The Return of the UFOs to Bentwaters, December, 1980*, was dated 13 May 1987, and was hosted by A. J. S. Rayl on behalf of the Microsoft Network.)

Many of the participants were young, had not been in England for long and were already enthralled by tales such as the ghost of 'East End Charlie', a WWII airman alleged to haunt the east gate runway. Another popular anecdote was about witchcraft in the forest.

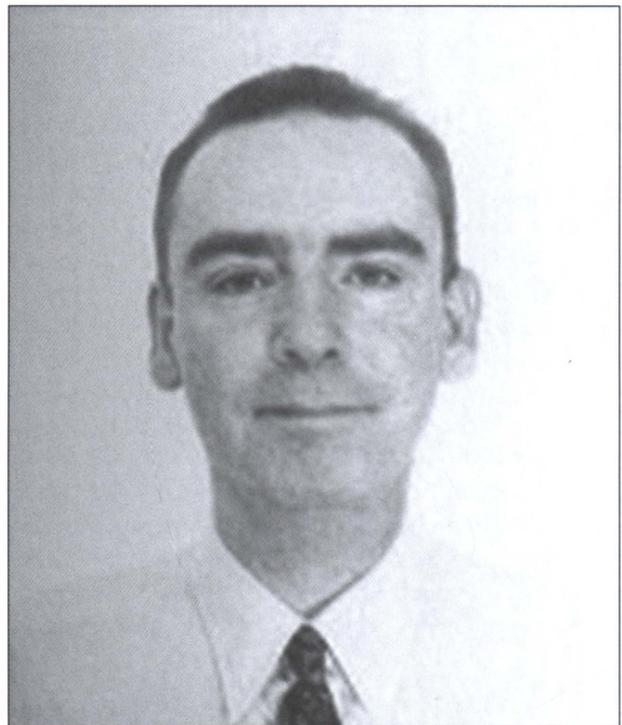
In the same interview, Halt states that he decided he would, "put the whole thing to rest" and assembled a team of five other officers. He also took his microcasette recorder, to make any necessary notes. They entered the forest near east gate and, after a while, one of the officers detected a distant flashing light. Halt was

using a 'starlight scope', or 'starscope', night-image intensifier, certainly not intended for viewing bright lights. He documented on his tape recorder:

"It looks like an eye winking at you. Still moving from side to side. And when you put the starscope on it, it sorta has a hollow centre, a dark centre, it's like a pupil of an eye looking at you, winking. And it flashes so bright to the starscope that it almost burns your eye".

Looking back towards east gate, Halt then described some puzzling 'beams of light', seemingly being directed downwards from unidentified aerial craft: "Now we're observing what appears to be a beam coming down to the ground". The shafts of light were visi-

'UFO LANDS IN SUFFOLK – AND THAT'S OFFICIAL!', proclaimed the *News of the World* front page, on 2 October, 1983.



James Easton

ble for an astonishing 45 minutes, from 3:15 a.m. until 4:00 a.m., with Halt finally recording, "0400 hours. One object still hovering over Woodbridge base at about five to ten degrees off the horizon, still moving erratic and similar lights and beaming down as earlier".



East gate, where Halt and his team entered Rendlesham Forest.

What next transpired was perhaps defining, as Halt explained in the same interview:

“The Wing Commander at that time was not present. He was at another social event. He and I discussed this incident the day after, which was a day or two after which was a Saturday morning. I remember running into him in the hallway of the building — we shared a common office building — and I told him about it. He knew a little bit, but I told him some details and told him I made the tape and he was very interested and asked to hear the tape. I gave him the tape and played it for him and he said, ‘May I take this to the Third Air Force, to the staff meeting next Tuesday or Wednesday?’ I said, ‘Certainly.’ Well, I couldn’t tell him, no. And he took it down and played it to the staff and the General looked at the staff and said ... first, the Wing Commander said, ‘Is he a credible witness?’ and the answer was, ‘Yes.’ So he turned to the staff and said, ‘What do we do now?’ And nobody knew what to do. So there was some chuckling in the room and I understand the comment was, ‘Well, it’s a British affair. Let’s give it to them.’

This timing was, in hindsight, critical.

As Halt’s adventures began on the night of Saturday 27 December, he is clearly mistaken about meeting Wing Commander Gordon Williams on a Saturday, “a day or two after”. However, if that already scheduled staff meeting was to take place the following Tuesday or Wednesday, it could be no later than Wednesday 31 December, 1980. Halt also confirmed, “Around New Year’s Eve, I took statements and interviewed the men who had taken part in the initial incident. The reports were nearly identical”. “I also took them from the Flight Commander and ... a Master Sergeant” (Rayl, 1994).

Although Burroughs’, Cabansag and Penniston’s affidavits are undated, those from Flight Commander Fred Buran and Master-Sergeant J. D. Chandler are dated 2 January 1981. The delay in obtaining formal statements, Halt explained, was due to the holiday period. As we shall see, that delay was perhaps a crucial factor why the inherent ‘UFO’ mythology evolved.

Halt’s stated recollection continues (interview dated 13 May, 1987):

“The R.A.F. Liaison Officer or the R.A.F. Base Commander, as we called him, was Don Moreland. I went and approached him, and I said, ‘You know, this happened off base.’ Well, I did discuss this through our channels and the real answer from our channels was, ‘Hey, we don’t want to touch this with a pole. This was a British incident. It happened off the installation. Let them handle it.’ So, I contacted him. In fact, I contacted him earlier and the only reason the memo was dated that late was that he was on vacation and I wasn’t able to find out what he wanted and how much detail he wanted and what he wanted to do with the information. When I finally caught up with him on the, about the 10th or the 12th, he said, ‘Well, write a brief memo ... We’ll see what happens.’ So, that’s what I did”.

On 13 January, 1981, both nights’ events were reported by Halt in a memorandum to the Ministry of Defence. Within days of the initial incident, there were local rumours of a ‘UFO’ landing and this sparked endeavours to uncover the true facts. Although the Ministry of Defence subsequently indicated their files held nothing of consequence, in the United States researcher Robert Todd made a speculative enquiry under the Freedom of Information Act. He received a response from the 513th Combat Support Group,

which provided document management services to the Third Air Force. They had located Halt's memo. As the USAF's own copy had been "properly disposed of in accordance with Air Force Regulations", the copy now provided to Todd had been obtained with the "gracious consent of Her Majesty's Government, the British Ministry of Defence and the Royal Air Force" (Fawcett & Greenwood, 1984, pp. 217 - 218).

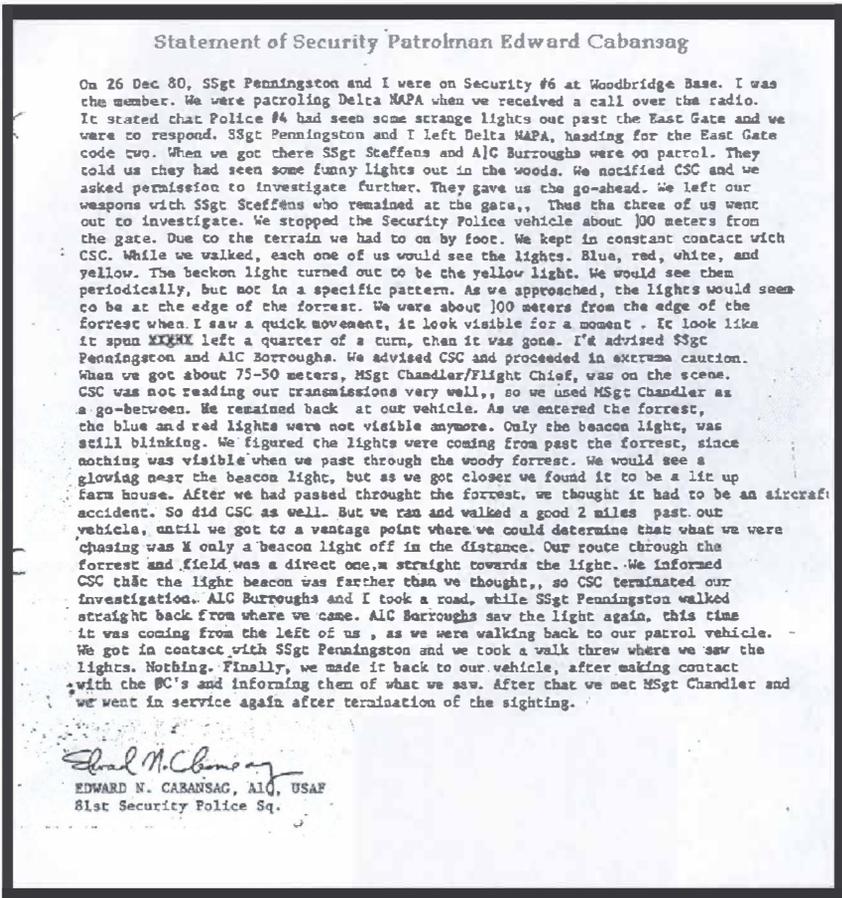
For some, such palpable reticence by the Ministry to earlier disclose the memo's existence did little to inspire

where the lighthouse was located. Yet, in his recording, the 'UFO' is sighted again and Halt states, "We're at the far side of the second farmer's field and made sighting again about 110 degrees. This looks like it's clear off to the coast. It's right on the horizon. Moves about a bit and flashes from time to time".

The riddle may have remained definitively unsolved, except for a dramatic discovery I made - copies of those five witness statements Halt had requested in early January, 1981. They were devastating to any credibility this 'UFO' legend had, as surely Halt must have recognised. These fundamental testimonies exposed that the initial 'flying saucer', a catalyst for all that followed, had, in truth, been discovered by Burroughs, Cabansag and Penniston to be Orford Ness lighthouse, exactly as Ridpath suggested.

Burroughs' affidavit affirmed: "We got up to a fence that separated the trees from the open field and you could see the lights down by a farmer's house. We climbed over the fence and started heading towards the red and blue lights and they just disappeared. Once we reached the farmer's house we could see a beacon going around so we went towards it. We followed it for about 2 miles before we could see it was coming from a lighthouse". I have corresponded with Burroughs for over a year and he acknowledges this is what truly occurred. Consequently, when on the night of 27 December, Halt personally investigated continued sighting reports, he possibly did not yet realise the deceptive role already known to have been played by Orford Ness lighthouse.

By the time he was alerted, in early January, his tape-recorded 'UFO' incursion had already merited serious consideration at a staff meeting of the Third Air Force. Worse yet, the General who attended was none other than General Charles A. Gabriel, Commander in Chief, United States Air Forces in Europe. We can imagine Halt's abject horror. What was he to do now? Absolutely nothing.



Ed Cabansag's witness statement.

confidence that 'something' wasn't being covered-up. When the 'Halt memo' eventually became public knowledge, its contents catapulted both the UFO story and central witnesses to celebrity status.

'UFO LANDS IN SUFFOLK - AND THAT'S OFFICIAL!', proclaimed the *News of the World* front page, on 2 October, 1983.

The Lighthouse Illumination

In search of a rational explanation, science writer Ian Ridpath proposed that the witnesses had been deceived by Orford Ness [aka Orfordness] lighthouse and the Shipwash lightship, both visible due east from within Rendlesham Forest. Because of the undulating terrain, these coastal lights, some six miles distant, appeared to be at eye-level when intermittently visible between trees.

Halt rejected this, claiming that all involved knew

Beam Me Up, Conde

If those strange flashing lights had a mundane explanation, then what of the 'light beams'. A rational explanation for them remained intangible, until I was contacted from the U.S. by former 81st SPS Command-Sergeant, Kevin Conde [pronounced cond-eh]. Surfing the 'net, Conde had come across my related web site and recognised a striking similarity between some aspects of the UFO incidents and a hoax he perpetrated, "just after Christmas", in 1980. Conde elucidated:



'Hot row' bunkers containing tactical nuclear weapons

"I was a Security Policeman at RAF Bentwaters/Woodbridge from mid-1978 to mid-1981. I arrived at Bentwaters as a Staff-Sergeant and departed as a Tech-Sergeant. I was a Law Enforcement specialist. While there I worked as a patrolman, desk sergeant, assistant Flight Chief, Flight Chief, training NCO and QA evaluator. My Shift Commander was Lieutenant Englund, and the Security Flight Chief at the time was Master-Sergeant Bobbie Ball. If I left QA six months before I left Bentwaters in the summer of 1981, and my Shift Commander was Lieutenant Englund ... then my incident is right in the ball park".

"Security worked the back gate during late hours even though gates were normally the responsibility of the LE [Law Enforcement] flight. That post was not a well liked one, and Master-Sergeant Ball did not usually assign his favourite troops. One particular kid was afraid of the dark, noises, etc. He was constantly calling for the patrol to swing by. That patrolman was usually me. I remember having to constantly go out to that gate and hold this guy's hand. He was a perfect target for a practical joke. Our jokes were not malicious, but they did tend to be inventive and aimed at those troops that were most likely to fall for them".

"We used at least three flashlights pointing upwards rolled up in the windows of the patrol car. These lights were red, blue, green, and possibly amber. The patrol car itself had the American style square red and blue emergency rack on top with revolving high intensity red and blue lights. It also had bright white alley lights – these are lights that point to the side in order to light up buildings

as you drive past them at night. It also had a bright white spotlight that I pointed as close to straight up as I could. I had everything except my headlights on".

"The flashlights, which were green, and maybe amber, were nowhere as bright as the red, blue and white emergency lights, which really lit up the night. One of the lights directed upwards was the patrol car's spotlight. It is a very bright light that throws a beam a long way".

"We then proceeded to drive the car in slow circles while making weird noises over the PA [public address] system. There was a light fog, which was the key to the joke's success, as each light appeared in the fog as a moving beam of light. The kid on the gate freaked. The response to his call for help was quite gratifying. Since I was the patrolman on Woodbridge at the time, I was detailed to respond to the gate guard's call. We just shut off the lights and waited a little while, to make the kid think we were coming from the main part of Woodbridge, before rolling up to the gate to see what was wrong".

"The joke would have had to have happened late – after all the initial patrol duties like relieving the main gate for chow [food], and getting the first round of building checks done, and before things began to pick up again, and we got bored and started looking for a way to cause trouble. I cannot say for sure, but I would guess between 1:00 and 4:00 a.m. The night I did it I remember it as slightly foggy, probably low-lying fog. The lights lit the fog quite nicely, I should think making a nice halo effect. The fog was, in fact, critical for

my prank, as you could see the light beams. Try shining a bright spotlight in fog – you get the light sabre effect. This was one of the more successful and hysterical practical jokes I participated in during my eleven years as a cop. One thing: I frankly don't remember if we ever told the guy what really happened”.

Ian Ridpath has copies of contemporary base weather records that record ground fog on the night of 27 December.

In *UFO Crash Landing?*, Jenny Randles (1998) documents a witness, Sarah Richardson (only 12 at the time), who reportedly watched enigmatic bands of light, at the same time Halt was making a similar observation. If it correlates with Conde's east gate hoax, directly adjacent to the runway, we should find the witness observed at least three multicoloured and ever-changing beams of light in that location. Sarah remembers, “Three bands of light appeared over the woods to the side of the runway”. She adds, “But the oddest thing was the colour changes, blue, green, yellow and so on”. Jenny also notes that on the same night, a local garage owner, Gerry Harris, reportedly observed, near the east gate, “three separate lights” which sometimes “moved around in circles”.

In July, 2001, Tracy Williams, Director of the regional BBC *Inside Out* local news series, asked if I could assist with a documentary concerning the ‘UFO’ events. In early 2003, Conde's confession had evidently resolved key aspects and I discussed a proposal with BBC East *Inside Out* producer, Clive Dunn. Once familiar with the overall evidence, it was clear that BBC East intended to produce a hard-hitting feature and this was duly achieved, the program being broadcast on 30 June, 2003 (see BBC online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/east/series3/rendlesham_ufos.shtml). It had a dramatic impact, with newspaper coverage including a full page in the *Daily Mail*, headed ‘UFO-OLED!’ (Wednesday, 2 July 2003, p. 10).

Sod This For a Game of Soldiers

Although there's a humorous angle, it should perhaps be remembered that the Weapons Storage Area at RAF Bentwaters contained nuclear ordnance. As former US Air Force employee at Bentwaters, Kathy Smith, was prepared to place on record, “In 1980 there were small, ‘hot’, tactical nuclear weapons at Bentwaters, as used on an F-16, not large as used on B-52s and B-1s. Bentwaters ‘hot row’ bunkers would look like small hills. They were covered with dirt and had grass growing on them sloped front to back. From the back to front, it was 30-40 feet and there were about 10 bunkers total. All of these contained nuclear weapons”.

Incredibly, Halt believed the Weapons Storage Area was under threat (as revealed in an undated previously online interview hosted by A. J. S. Rayl, on behalf on

Microsoft Network): “Then it [the UFO] moved back toward Bentwaters and continued to send down beams of light, at one point near the weapons storage facility. We knew that, because we could hear the chatter on the radio”.

However, I've located and spoken with many personnel from the Weapons Storage Area, including some, such as Kathy's husband, Sergeant Randy Smith, who were actually on duty that night. Not one of them had ever even heard a story about beams of light endangering munitions. Next day, it was ‘business as usual’.

Perhaps that's just as well, as Halt seemed oblivious what action to take. Did he call the Third Air Force for aerial support, or send an SOS to the RAF for fighter cover? He explained how the drama ended: “It was a cold winter night, the wind was blowing, we were wet and I just ordered everybody back to the base. I saw no reason to stay out there any longer. We left those objects up there” (previously online interview, undated).

Of the officers not partying, Halt and five others had travelled an astonishing two miles off-base and consequently outside USAF jurisdiction, in search of ‘UFOs’. Halt noted, “There were probably 25 to 30 security policemen there ... and all excited” (previously online interview, 13 May, 1987).

In late December 1980, RAF Bentwaters and RAF Woodbridge were on “Alert Condition” because of the Solidarity crisis in Poland. Amidst fears the Soviet Union might invade, A-10 ‘tankbuster’ aircraft, based at RAF Bentwaters, would be deployed to the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing at Alhorn, Germany.

Thankfully, the only danger arose from perceived ‘UFOs’, apparently concluded to be on a benign mission and nothing more sinister, such as crack Soviet Spetsnaz commandos making a pre-emptive strike.

During the night and early morning of 27/28 December, who, we might enquire, was minding the store?

‘Rendlesham’ was once regarded as Britain's most significant demonstration of the nefarious, global, government ‘UFO’ cover-up. A complex and eclectic episode, when unravelled, it is a landmark and provides fascinating insight, revealing infinitely more about terrestrial predilections when confronted with ‘UFO’ perceptions, especially if anticipated, than any remote substantiation why ET dropped in on Suffolk.

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James Easton is an investigative journalist and feature writer for *Fortean Times* magazine. His investigations have unearthed critical new evidence relating to many classic UFO cases including Kenneth Arnold's 1947 sighting, the 1964 Socorro case, and the 1980 Cash-Landrum case.



Britain's Roswell?

Would the release of official documents relating to the Rendlesham Forest incident reveal that a UFO really landed? Dr David Clarke investigates.

THERE ARE TWO basic categories of UFO-lore: alien abductions and conspiracies. Central to the UFO-lore is belief in a conspiracy by "the Government" – and primarily those of the USA and UK – to withhold the "secret truth" from the general public. This "truth" being an admission that the authorities have proof of the alien presence on earth, in the form of the wreckage of a spacecraft and the bodies of its crew. The ultimate expression of this modern legend is the Roswell incident, but the *idea* of an official cover-up has become widespread in popular culture. The "landed Martians" is such a well known story that it was included in Professor Jan Brunvand's list of modern legends about Governments in his book, *The Choking Doberman*.

... there are similarities between UFO cover-up narratives and modern legends such as the Vanishing Hitch-hiker

Brunvand says he received a lot of angry letters for comparing UFO cover-ups with urban legends. Indeed, many "serious UFOlogists" are horrified at attempts to study these stories as the modern equivalents of fairy tales and ancient legends. However, there are similarities between UFO cover-up narratives and modern legends such as the Vanishing Hitch-hiker: stories heard as rumour and gossip. Those who pass on the story believe it really happened to a friend of a friend, and the story is given immediacy and legitimacy by the inclusion of 'real' names and places. With the arrival of the Internet, new versions spread with dizzying speed around the world, spawning new variations upon the original theme.

While Roswell is the seminal story, the Rendlesham incident is often cited as 'Britain's Roswell.' They are composed of two distinct entities: the popular myth and the few certain facts. In both cases, the two constituents have taken an independent life of their own, and continue to grow apart in ever more distant directions.

Central to the Rendlesham incidents is the testimony of a group of USAF security policemen who reported mysterious lights outside the perimeter of RAF Woodbridge, in Suffolk, on two occasions in December 1980. The most senior officer was USAF Lt Col (later

Col) Charles Halt, who was the Deputy Base Commander of RAF Woodbridge. It was Halt who prepared an official memorandum summarizing these incidents for the attention of the British Ministry of Defence (MoD). At that time, Woodbridge and its twin base at Bentwaters were tenanted by USAF as part of their air defence responsibilities in Europe. Halt was, at face value, an experienced officer who was held in high regard by his superiors.

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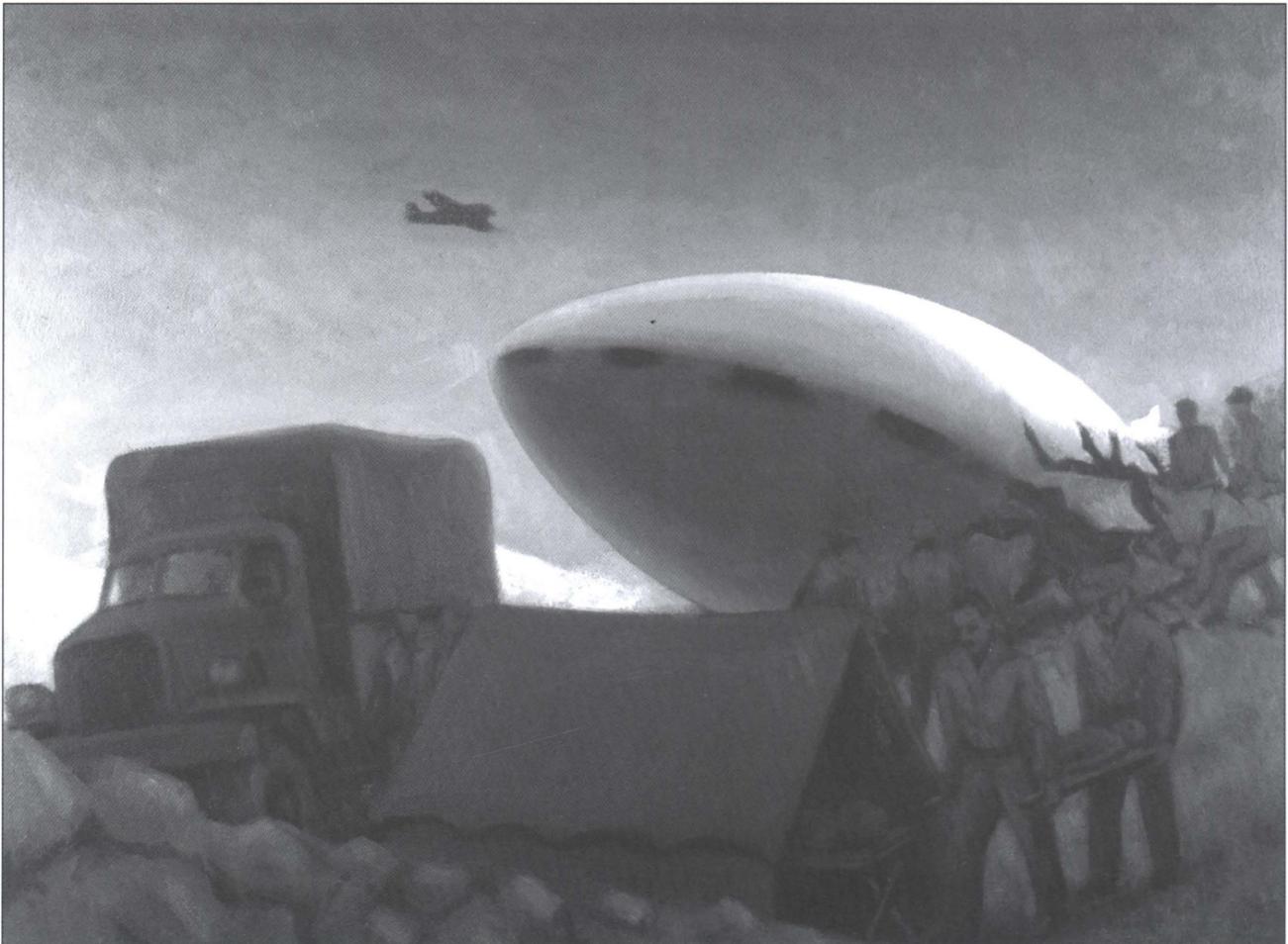
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Conspiracy theories have long been one of the basic categories of UFO-lore

The Ministry of Defence and the Rendlesham incident

UFOlogists first learned that a UFO incident had occurred in the forest adjoining the twin RAF bases at Bentwaters–Woodbridge early in 1981. Although the bases were loaned to the United States Air Force (USAF) responsibility for events offbase – and indeed defence of surrounding UK airspace – rested with the MoD. Almost immediately, speculation was rife in the



Is "the Government" really withholding the "secret truth" from the public concerning crashed UFOs?

UFO community about an official cover-up.

In 1980 an air staff secretariat known as Defence Secretariat 8 (DS8) were the only Government agency officially acknowledged as having an interest in UFO reports. Policy documents released at the Public Record Office (PRO) reveal that UFOs were the lowest priority among the many other operational duties handled by DS8. A single member of staff (usually an Executive Office or Higher Executive Officer, both junior posts) spent a small proportion of his or her time examining reports received, purely for evidence of "defence significance" (i.e. for evidence that the UFOs were intruder aircraft). Essentially this policy remained unchanged since 1958 when DS8's predecessor S4 (Air) accepted responsibility for responding to all inquiries concerning UFOs. On accepting the burden, a senior civil servant suggested that in response to questions on the subject they should "for the most part be politely unhelpful."

There has been much speculation in UFO circles that DS8 and its successors was merely a "shop window" for a more covert MoD investigation team. PRO records suggest this perception is the result of a misunderstanding. Since 1958 S4 (Air) and later DS8 routinely copied all the reports they received to two other military and scientific branches of MoD. These are a defence intelligence unit, DI 55, and an RAF Ground

Environment branch who are responsible for the air defence radar. Records show that neither were interested in UFOs outside of a limited defence remit, and rarely made inquiries of their own in recent years.

The MoD has historically said little or nothing in public concerning the extent and nature of their UFO investigations. Their policy of playing down the subject was in sharp contrast with the USAF, who maintained a highly public UFO project (Blue Book) until 1969. Even after the closure of Blue Book, American UFOlogists were able to use their country's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain access to documents produced by a variety of official agencies. It was *via* the US FOIA in 1983 that a copy of Col Halt's memo was obtained by an American UFOlogist, and released into the public domain.

Britain is set to receive a partial FOIA in January 2005. Until recently, it was impossible to obtain information from the MoD concerning what they did, or did not, know about specific UFO reports. The Ministry maintained that all correspondence with members of the public was confidential, and files could only be released after the 30 years had passed under the Public Record Act. Under the current '30 year rule' files on the Rendlesham Forest incident would not have been made public until 2011.

When UFOlogist Jenny Randles, with Brenda Butler and Dot Street, began to investigate the story early in 1981, they were informed that Halt's report was "passed to staff concerned with air defence matters who were satisfied that there was nothing of defence interest in the alleged sightings." From 1981 until 2001 this bland statement remained the standard official response to all inquiries about the incident. While adequate for media and public consumption, it encouraged some UFOlogists to believe a cover-up was under way.

As Britain did not have a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), little progress could be made with the Ministry of Defence until very recently. In 1994 a Code of Practice for Access to Government Information was introduced that provided limited access to material closed under the 30-year rule. Paradoxically, although the UFOlogists who were promoting the case claimed they were determined to discover "the truth" about Rendlesham, until 2001 no one made use of the new legislation to request access to official records. During the research for my book *Out of the Shadows* (Clarke & Roberts, 2002), I made an application under the Code for access to records that were relevant to the case.

In May 2001 the contents of an MoD Air file – 150 pages in length – were released. The file was unclassified and contained nothing 'secret' or 'top secret' as the UFOlogists had claimed. Five documents were initially withheld, two on the grounds of "defence, security and international relations" and three briefing documents because they contained "internal opinion, advice, recommendation and deliberation." Speculation was immediately rife within the UFO community about the nature of their contents. One magazine editor declared they were withheld because they contained "top secret" information about the case, or revealed the much sought-after "smoking gun."

All five documents have now been released on appeal, the first two in October 2001 and the remaining briefings early in 2003. They contained nothing remotely "top secret" and the reasons for their retention had more to do with civil service bureaucracy than they had with the desire to conceal any "secret truth." Their significance lay in the mystery that surrounded their content.

The Smoking Gun?

Jenny Randles acknowledges that the file "tells us much more about the MoD than it does about the events in Rendlesham Forest." A small amount of material relates to the official investigation of Halt's report – if it can be so described – between 1981 and 1983. The vast majority of its content consists of long and often tedious correspondence between Sec(AS)2, the MoD secretariat which replaced DS8, and members of the public between 1982 and 1994. The later material documents the MoD's often tortuous attempts to avoid answering specific questions and its desire to avoid unwelcome publicity on the subject.

The file contains evidence that the MoD were not officially aware of the incident until DS8 received a copy of Lt Col Halt's memo, forwarded by the British



While the alleged UFO crash at Roswell is the seminal story, the Rendlesham incident is often cited as 'Britain's Roswell'.

base commander, early in January 1981. By the time action was taken – in the form of circulating the paperwork to other branches – a month had passed and "the scent was cold." In February checks were made with the radar cameras at Eastern Radar (RAF Watton) and the Central Reporting Centre at RAF Neatishead in Norfolk. This found "no entry in respect of unusual radar returns or other unusual occurrences."

Unfortunately, on both occasions the MoD were reliant upon the dates of 27 and 29 December for the UFO events in Rendlesham Forest supplied by Col Halt in his memo. Both dates were incorrect, a mistake that could have been easily rectified. All the evidence suggests no follow-up request was ever made to Halt or

his USAF superiors by the MoD. This lack of official interest was confirmed by the Group Captain Neil Colvin responsible for Air Defence at MoD in 1981. In a letter dated 3 February 2003 he wrote: "I remember the alleged sightings by US airmen at Bentwaters [sic]. I recall that we could not explain them but were very sceptical of the reports. We were not privy to the actual evidence of the sightings by the personnel concerned, nor did we have the opportunity to interview the individuals involved."

Cover-up or Cock-up?

Possibly the most astounding revelation contained in the file is that it was not until 1983 – two years after the events – that the MoD obtained the correct dates. These were supplied not by the USAF but came from a member of the public! Shortly after Halt's memo was published by the *News of the World* astronomer Ian Ridpath made inquiries with Suffolk Police and was able to confirm from their records the correct date for the initial sighting by the airmen. Ridpath wrote to advise DS8 on 14 November 1983 that police had first been called to the scene in Rendlesham forest at 4.11 am on 26 December 1980. He added: "They said that all they could see was the the lighthouse [at Orfordness]. They were called out again at 10.30am on Dec 26 to examine the reported landing marks. There seems little doubt that the date of Dec 27 given in Col. Halt's letter is wrong. This also casts doubt on the second date he gives for the later events."

As a result of this, DS8 wrote to the RAF Base Commander, Squadron Leader Donald Moreland, asking if he could re-check the dates. Moreland's reply, dated 25 November 1983, compounded the errors and demonstrated the complete lack of interest the MoD had in the events of 1980. He wrote: "The incident is now almost 3 years old and no one here remembers it clearly. All we have is Lt Col. Halt's letter dated 13 January 1981."

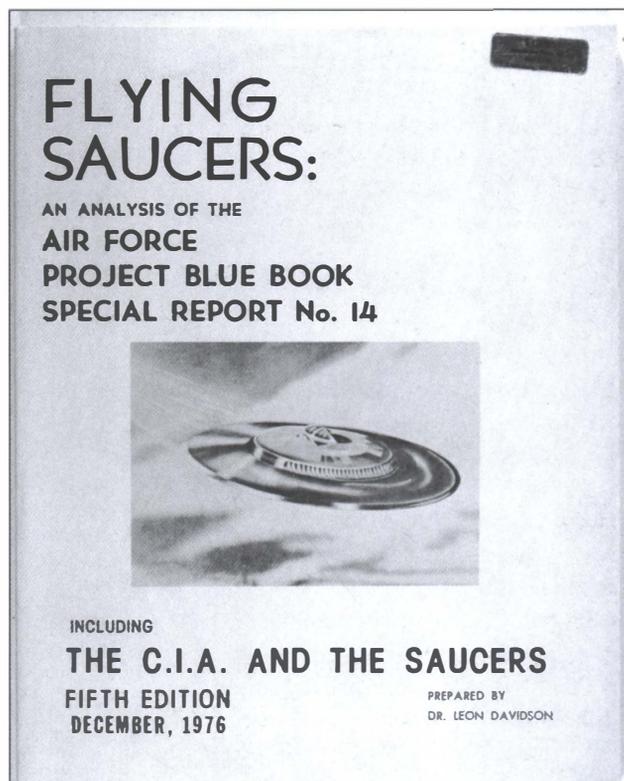
This was hardly the "smoking gun" imagined by the UFOlogists. If an event of world-changing status had occurred at the base just two years earlier it was odd that "no one here remembers it clearly."

A similar lack of interest related to claims of higher than expected levels of radiation recorded by Col. Halt in the area of the forest visited by the UFOs. Early in 1981 the MoD asked its defence intelligence specialists to comment on the data recorded in Lt Col. Halt's memo, but made no attempt to establish independent confirmation of them. R.C. Moorcroft at DI 52, responding to DS8 on 23 February 1981 to the question, noted: "Background radioactivity varies considerably due to a number of factors ... If you wish to pursue this further I could make enquiries as to natural background levels in the area." There is nothing to suggest any further action was taken.

The radioactivity issue was not raised again until

1994 when Nick Pope, who was then Executive Officer at Sec(AS) 2, took the matter up with Giles Cowling at the Defence Radiological Protection Service, a branch of the Government's Defence Evaluation Research Agency (DERA). Pope's hand-written notes of his discussion with Cowling, dated 15 April 1994, form the last enclosure in the file. Pope – who subsequently described these notes as "the first and only official investigation into this aspect of the case" – ends with the comment "The level of 0.1 is completely harmless."

Oddly, in the light of his own hand-written reservations, by 1996 Pope was describing the alleged radiation traces as "the most tangible proof that something extraordinary happened there [Rendlesham Forest]."



The USAF's highly public Project Blue Book stands in sharp contrast to the British Ministry of Defence's attitude of playing down any interest in UFOs

'UFO Lands in Suffolk – that's official!'

In October 1983 the *News of the World* broke the story contained in Lt Col. Halt's memo and the MoD Press Office began to receive calls from the world's media. DS8 prepared what it called a "Defensive Press Line" anticipating the questions that might be asked. The most amusing comment noted that the MoD and USAF "both referred callers to the other ... [this] will have done nothing but confirm suspicions held in UFO circles that we are engaged in a cover-up."

When in 1984 the retired head of DS8, Ralph Noyes, contacted his former colleagues to ask for clarification of their position he had to send two reminders before receiving a standard reply. This delay con-

tributed to Noyes' increasingly public pro-UFO stance and by 1987 he came to believe that the MoD had indeed lied about the incident. He was joined by a former Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Lord Hill-Norton. The Admiral, who became a UFO believer in retirement, also took up the case and reached the same conclusion. Ironically, whilst supporting the idea of a high level conspiracy, the Admiral asks us to believe that he was not part of it, and that the subject "never once crossed his desk" during his service as CDS!

The most recent MoD briefing on the Rendlesham Forest case contained in the file was compiled by Britain's self-styled Fox Mulder, Nick Pope, in 1994. In this Pope followed the standard MoD line that "no evidence was found of any threat to the defence of the United Kingdom and no further investigations were carried out ... no further information has come to light which alters our view that the sightings of these lights was of no defence significance ... in the absence of any hard evidence, the MOD remains open-minded about these sightings."

Pope served the standard three years as a junior officer with Sec (AS) 2 from 1991-94. After leaving this post he produced a book, *Open Skies Closed Minds* that took a pro-UFO stance. He maintains there was no cover-up of the Rendlesham incident but rather "a lack of action" by the MoD. In 2000 he provided the forward to Georgina Bruni's book on the Rendlesham incident, *You Can't Tell the People*. Although this book's author strongly believes in a cover-up by the British and US Governments, Pope failed to appreciate the contradiction in his stance. During an interview I recorded with Pope in 2001 it became clear that he had abandoned the objective viewpoint he displayed whilst working for the MoD. When asked for his current belief about what happened at Rendlesham he told us:

"As you know, despite the fact that I am a non-conspiracy theorist and a rational guy, you know that I am a believer in the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis and I will go with the ETH on this one. Am I allowed to give my answer as an extraterrestrial spacecraft? That's the answer I'm going with on this case."

Conclusion

As the MoD maintained from the very beginning, there is nothing in the file to support claims that a cover-up had taken place to hide evidence of UFO landings in Suffolk. Rather than being a "smoking gun" the file contents chart the growth of a modern legend from birth to full maturity. As is the case with Roswell, the established facts have only a loose connection with the mythology that has grown up around the case in the UFO literature.

Folklore and UFO-lore share the same kind of evidence: the testimony of narrators describing extraordinary experiences. In UFO-lore reports made by military

witnesses, particularly senior officers, are accredited special status. The existence of official documents describing extraordinary events is the UFOlogical equivalent of the "holy grail." This is where the circular arguments that bedevil UFO-lore begin.

The UFOlogists want to know the truth about a baffling subject and because the Government is involved it is assumed, wrongly, that it must know all the answers. From the standpoint of believers in alien visitors, all that has to be done is to force the Government to release "the truth" and the UFO reality would be established to everyone's satisfaction. Unfortunately, to use the words of Daniel Webster, "There is nothing so powerful as the truth and often nothing as strange." When information is not forthcoming, or when it is released but does not provide the conclusive evidence demanded by believers, a deeper cover-up is suspected and so the argument becomes a circular one.

The idea of an official cover-up of the Rendlesham Forest UFO incident is belief-driven and can never be disproved, only proved.

Official sources:

The MoD's policy towards UFO reports is outlined in three files available at the Public Record Office under these references:

DEFE 31/118: UFO Policy 1954-63

DEFE 31/119: UFO Policy 1967

AIR 2/19086: UFO Policy 1970-75

The contents of the MoD file on the Rendlesham UFO incident, file reference **D(Sec)AS/12/21**, has been made available online under the ministry's FOIA Publication Scheme at: http://www.mod.uk/linked_files/publications/foi/ufo/ufofilepart1.pdf

Selected documents and analysis by the author can be found at: <http://www.flyingsaucery.com/Rendlesham/index.htm>

References:

Bruni, G. (2000). *You Can't Tell The People*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

Brunvand, J. (1984). *The Choking Doberman and Other 'New' Urban Legends*. New York: W. Norton & Co.

Clarke, D., & Roberts, A. (2002). *Out of the Shadows: UFOs, the Establishment and the Official Cover-up*. London: Piatkus.

Pope, N. (1996). *Open Skies, Closed Minds*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Randles, J. (1998). *UFO Crash Landing?* London: Blandford.

Randles, J. (2002). Rendlesham Forest: The British MoD File. *International UFO Reporter* 26(3), 21-32.



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Skeptical Stats

1. Amount Comcast pays per year for content to carry to TV cable subscribers: **\$4 billion**
2. Amount Comcast bid to acquire Disney on February 11: **\$66 billion**
3. Percentage accuracy claimed by Seattle's Relationship Research Institute in predicting the success of marriages: **94**
4. Number of Barbie dolls sold worldwide every second: **3**
5. Amount the typical British family spends raising a child: **£140,000**
6. Britain's rank in spending on children across Europe: **1**
7. Percentage of prints lifted at crime scenes from knife hilts, guns, and windows panes that are palms, not fingers: **at least 30**
8. Average number of crimes committed per year per New York burglar: **300 to 400**
9. Date on which a Bangladeshi tribalwoman was swallowed by a python: **21 November 2003**
10. Number of priests accused by children of sexual abuse in the US between 1950 and 2002: **4,450**
11. Number of carats in a 'diamond star' 1,500 km across, 50 light-years from Earth in the constellation Centaurus: **10 billion trillion trillion**
12. Amount, *pro rata*, JK Rowling earned last year per word of *The Order of the Phoenix*: **£388**
13. Rowling's position in the list of the UK's top 500 earners: **5**
14. Monthly cost of membership in the Astronaut Autograph of the Month Club, proceeds to benefit the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation: **\$49.95**
15. Number of memberships available: **350**
16. Percentage of the UK public who believe the UK should not implement the Kyoto Protocol if doing so would harm Britain's economy: **57**
17. Number of women who die each week in Britain at the hands of their spouses or partners: **2**
18. Year when Hubble will prematurely die, since NASA has announced it will cease servicing missions to the telescope: **2007**
19. Cost per minute of calls to Russell Grant's Interactive Astrology line: **60p**
20. Cost of Grant's packages of computerised horoscopes, psychic tarot readings, dream interpretations, and numerological analyses: **£3.99 to £29.99**
21. Amount of water available per person per year in Kuwait: **10 m²**
22. Amount available per person per year in French Guiana: **812,121 m²**
23. Rank of UK out of 122 countries surveyed for water quality and availability: **4**
24. Rank of Belgium on same survey: **122**
25. Amount by which global water availability is expected to drop over the next 20 years: **a third**
26. Number of cattle tested for BSE in the UK in 2003: **394,685**
27. Number that tested positive for BSE: **373**
28. Number of Britons who stay indoors on Friday the 13th to avoid risking danger or bad luck: **1.3 million**
29. Drop in number of pairs of house sparrows in Britain over the last 30 years: **from 12 million to fewer than 7 million**
30. Number of terrorist attacks on Israeli targets in 2003: **3,838**

31. Number of influential scientists who signed a February 2004 statement asserting that the Bush administration had systematically distorted science fact in the service of policy goals: **60**
32. New character added to Morse Code in February 2004: @ (.-.-.)
33. Number of years since last character was added: **at least 50**
34. Annual turnover of Boiron, maker of a line of 1,500 homeopathic remedies: **\$270 million**
35. Amount two New York-based companies have agreed to pay in consumer redress for claims that their devices blocked harmful radiation from cellphones and video display units: **\$85,000**
36. Amount of grant given to Lena Skarning by the Norwegian government to fund her business, Forest Witch Magic Consulting: **£4,500**
37. Distance the average American forkful of food travels to reach its consumer: **1,500 miles**
38. Number of Asians killed each year by air pollution: **more than 500,000**
39. Percentage of American adults who believe God is female: **1**
40. Speed at which retired Fife headmaster Archibald Lawrie believes the position of each sub-atomic particle is recorded in a vast universal "memory system": **14,000 times the speed of light**
41. Date when Arnaud Mussy, leader of Nantes' New Lighthouse sect, expected the world to end: **October 2002**
42. Date when former Wimbledon champion Margaret Smith Court was awarded an honorary Bachelor of Law degree by the US's Oral Roberts University: **May 2001**
43. Number of companies on New York investment house SalomonSmithBarney's 1999-2000 list of 15 companies expected to out-perform the market over the following 12 months that went bankrupt amid accusations of corporate fraud by mid-2002: **2**
44. Number of chains, out of a possible 160, completed in one of Stanley Milgram's famous "six degrees of separation" studies: **44**
45. Price of sending a message to the dead via the Web-site Afterlife Telegrams via terminally ill volunteers: **\$5 a word (five-word minimum)**
46. Number of messengers the site currently has available: **1**
47. Amount a Jesus Christian could be fined for going through with the sect's offer to donate a kidney to a stranger, for free: **£2,000 and three months in prison**
48. Amount of time by which Irving Tobin lagged in his daily reading of the entire *New York Times* in December 2003: **one year, five months, and four days**
49. Price of Craig Hamilton-Parker's *What to do when you are Dead*, a "travel guide to the afterlife": **£11.99 plus P&P**
50. Fraction of US gross domestic product that is accounted for by consumer credit: **two-thirds**

Sources:

1,2 CNBC; 3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3484981.stm>; 4 Mattel; 5,6 Centre for Economics and Business Research; 7,8 *The New York Times*; 9 Reuters; 10 the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (via CNN); 11 Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (BBC); 12,13 *Sunday Times*; 14,15 Kennedy Space Center press release; 16 Hyperphysics, Georgia State University; 17 BBC; 18 *The New York Times*; 19,20 Sky Digital, www.live-astro.com; 21,22,23,24,25 The World Water Development Report, March 2003; 26,27 DEFRA statistics; 28 Office of National Statistics (via Harrah's Entertainment press release); 29 DEFRA statistics; 30 Israeli government statistics; 31 *The New York Times*; 32,33 http://www.cjonline.com/stories/021704/pag_morsecode.shtml; 34 Boiron corporate documents; 35 Federal Trade Commission; 36 BBC; 37 *The New Yorker*; 38 *Business Week*; 39 Harris Interactive; 40 *Sunday Times*; 41 *Sunday Times*; 42 *Sunday Telegraph* Wimbledon guide; 43 Personal archives; 44 *The Times*; 45,46 <http://www.afterlifetelegrams.com>; 47 *The Guardian Weekend* 48 *The New Yorker*; 49 <http://www.psychics.co.uk/shop/shopdeadbook.html>; 50 Federal Trade Commission

Both Hits & Misses and Skeptical Stats depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please send contributions to news@skeptic.org.uk or via post to the address on the masthead (p. 3). For this issue, thanks to Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, Steuart Campbell, Rachel Carthy, and Jock Cramb.



The Rendlesham Incident: Some Lessons for UFOlogy

Jenny Randles describes her own long involvement with the case and considers its implications for UFOlogy in general

ANY SIGHTING of something strange in the sky or, better still, something that comes from the sky, lands on the ground and appears to leave unresolved physical evidence, is bound to generate human interest. It is no surprise that the events in Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk in December 1980 have attracted the attention of everyone, from the media to the sceptics. That is, of course, because of those magic letters U.F.O. which characterise the nature of such a thing.

As it is presented to the public this case is a major challenge to those who disbelieve in UFO reality and a major *coup* for those who consider UFOs to be of global significance. It is not unreasonable to find it presented as Britain's best ever case – but only if one takes its nature at face value. And in UFOlogy that is the most dangerous thing that you can do.

UFO stories attract the media in levels that are quite disproportionate to their scientific value and those who report them rarely have much grasp of what constitutes useful evidence (otherwise they would be reporting the Hessdalen, Norway, lights where spectroscopic data have been obtained of what seem to be intriguing plasma-like phenomena). But in UFO-reporting terms plasmas are boring. To most folk, 'UFO' is synonymous (though wrongly) with 'alien spaceship'. It is in truth merely an acronym for 'unidentified' (not even 'unidentifiable') 'flying object', but such a fact is usually lost amidst the hype and screaming headline copy.

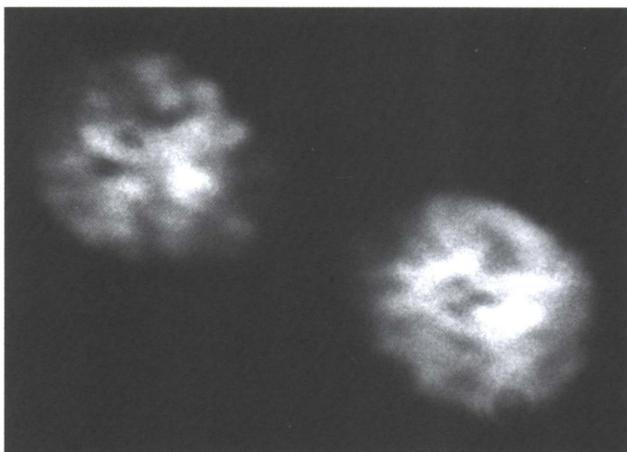
UFO stories attract the media in levels that are quite disproportionate to their scientific value

The media, of course, are there to tell a story and sell newspapers or attract viewers. They have a simple maxim that dogs virtually all UFO reporting. "Man sees aliens in spaceship" is news. "Man sees what he thinks are aliens in spaceship but it was really something explainable" is not – unless it has a good human interest angle that can be cobbled together around it. Perhaps the man was a defrocked vicar or a US military commander. Then any old sighting becomes news because of that factor alone.

Many UFOlogists, especially when chasing what

they consider to be the 'big cases' fall prey to these same motives and subconsciously switch off from any desire for explanation. It is true that they want answers. But they want the answers that they have already fixated upon before even beginning an investigation.

Most UFOlogists are enthusiasts, interested because they believe UFOs reflect something very important – nearly always extra-terrestrial visitors (even though in reality the evidence for this is remarkably scant). As such they rarely investigate a case to any objective degree or expect to find a different kind of answer. And when they do it becomes a non-case – not part of 'real' UFOlogy.



Two "UFOs" caught on camera in Hessdalen, Norway. Deserving of more media attention?

Yet, solved cases are the success stories for a UFOlogist (the unsolved ones are really their failures) and it is amazing how few seem appreciative of the processes involved in what turns a seemingly impressive close encounter into an IFO (Identified Flying Object) – or, indeed, the scientific value of examining such evidence.

A big case to most UFOlogists is a weapon in a war being fought with the powers that be, to get them to admit a truth – normally considered to be that the world's key nations know that UFOs come from outer space, are engaged in some kind of surveillance operation but are afraid to admit to this stunning reality. Again, the evidence for this is very hard to detect and, in my view, considerably outweighed by that which demonstrates how the authorities have only ever practised a cover-up of ignorance as opposed to hiding guilty secrets. They do not know the truth behind

UFOs, any more than we do, but suspect it not to be about extraterrestrials simply because the accumulated evidence comes nowhere close to demonstrating that.

In addition, many UFO enthusiasts see a big case as a powerful asset against other UFO enthusiasts. It sells copies of magazines, attracts people to conferences and lectures and gets them to join your group and not some rival society. These are important issues within the UFO movement, which is hardly ever geared up to pursue the scientific truth behind UFOs as you might expect. Rather it exists to perpetuate its own existence.

Think about it. If UFOs were ever properly understood, or revealed to be phenomena of interest to atmospheric physics, psychology or sociology (and all three are indeed intimately involved in the equation) then UFOlogy effectively commits suicide. It hands over the responsibility to people outside of the realms of the UFO Community.

Hence there is an inbuilt reason why UFOlogists actually do not want to solve its biggest mysteries. Many sincerely do not even realise how insidious is this factor at work.

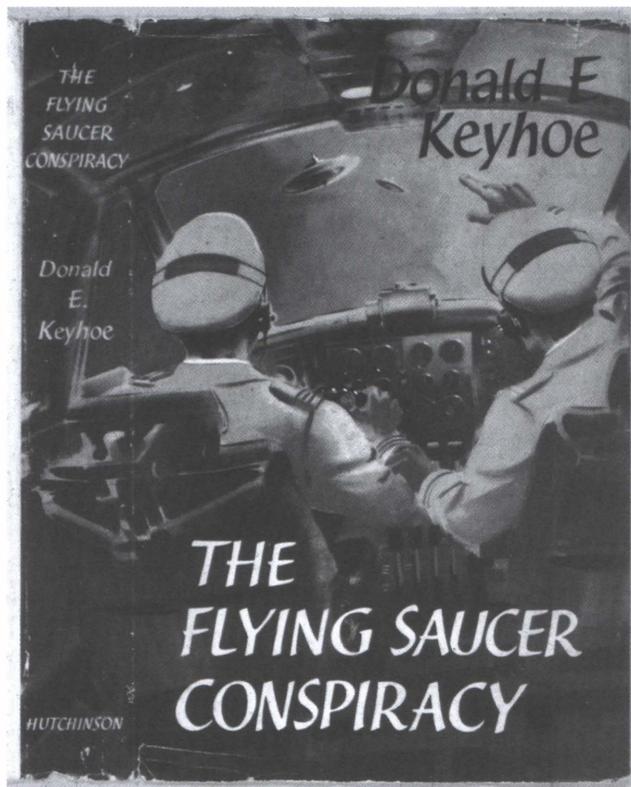
Sceptics, on the other hand, are usually only attracted to UFO cases after they enter the public domain, maybe years after first investigation by UFOlogists (as with Rendlesham). By then these cases are already massively tainted by the way they have been 'processed' by the UFO community and 'reported' by the media. Inherently, sceptics desire to explain away what has taken place, on the assumption that UFOs are *per se* explicable phenomena and so this outcome is a certainty with any particular case.

This is biased, but less wrong than the approach adopted by a majority of UFOlogists (because the vast majority of UFOs are indeed actually IFOs and so amenable to explanation if well investigated). However, this perspective often fails to embrace even the possibility that some UFO cases might offer scientifically interesting data (as in my view they do).

Moreover, sceptics also often base conclusions on various false premises, which can result from not working with the raw data but from stories that have already been contaminated by the psycho-social factors that underpin every aspect of UFOlogy and are frequently hard to distil from a complex case years down the track. This is true, for example, with crop circles, where the massive cottage industry of circle faking is normally all that sceptics see, unaware that behind it lies a mildly interesting atmospheric effect that seems to have been at work for centuries.

Alien abductions are another good example, where in my view the widespread but disastrous tactic of hypnotically regressing witnesses wrecks the evidence before one can even start to examine it. Yet there is an intriguing root phenomenon that probably has nothing to do with aliens but offers scientific interest nonetheless; it is swamped by the noise generated by the hypnosis that tends to be all that sceptics see.

I regard it as my proudest moment in British UFOlogy when I got the national group BUFORA to ban the use of hypnosis on all its cases in a move for which sceptics have never given credit, even though when it happened 15 years ago it was hugely prescient even by sceptics' standards. The decision was based on the problems generated by the evidence. Any true scientist would have made the same decision.



Do the powers that be really know the truth about UFOs?

Rules of Engagement

It is extremely difficult to remember the cardinal rules of UFO investigation when you get caught up in the excitement of a big case. But they are vital.

Firstly, 95% or so of all UFO sightings have prosaic explanations as 55 years of research has long established. These include cases that start off looking very interesting and run the gamut from mere lights in the night sky to allegedly landed UFOs with aliens nearby. Since the odds are stacked so greatly against any specific case being a 'real' UFO it is absolutely essential that a UFOlogist approach each case with the assumption that it will ultimately be solved. Unhappily most UFOlogists fail to understand this consequence of statistics and start with the expectation that it does not have a rational answer.

Secondly, you should always start off with the simplest possible explanation, then move on to look at other mundane, if somewhat more obscure options, and only at the end be dragged kicking and screaming into the belief that a case is unexplained – i.e., a 'real' UFO. It may turn out to be unsolved (in my view some

cases are) and even of scientific interest (ditto in my estimation), but you have to fight to prove that by eliminating simpler options first. Although, as you must follow where the evidence trail leads, identification of the 'simplest explanation' can often be problematic in itself. Often, however, one answer may suggest itself as a possibility for initial exploration.

Also, you need to avoid the lure of the 'unimpeachable' witness. Simply because someone is a policeman,



Any attempt to reconstruct the events of late December 1980 would be impossible since the Great Storm of 1992 flattened many of the trees in the area.

or a colonel or a government minister, does not make them any less likely to mistake an IFO. But UFOlogy offers frequent statements such as "This case is strong because the witness was a trained observer". Sadly, no UFO case is strong merely for that reason – not unless its intrinsic evidence is even stronger. Human perception (*via* a prince or a pauper) is always fallible.

Finally, never say never, with regards to an explanation. It can take months, years or decades to solve a case when the pieces of the jigsaw slot into place. No case is forever immune to explanation however strong it seems. There is always the prospect that something will emerge to make its nature obvious years down the track.

UFOlogy is littered with cases like that and the book that Dr David Clarke, Andy Roberts and I wrote together (Randles, Roberts & Clarke, 2000) is full of them. Any UFOlogist who assumes that a case is a genuine UFO because it has not yet been solved is failing to do their job. A UFO remains a UFO only so long as it continues to be unexplained. That status is constantly on borrowed time. No case is ever unexplainable.

Rendlesham

When the events in Rendlesham Forest happened I was still in my 20s and relatively inexperienced. Although I had been a member of BUFORA (the British UFO Research Association) for a few years I was not to take on the role of their Director of Investigations until

some way into the Rendlesham story.

I first heard about the case in late January 1981, less than a month after it happened. My source was a writer of a book about mystery disappearances (Paul Begg) who had by chance befriended a British civilian air traffic controller in a Norfolk pub. Knowing of my interest in UFOs Paul put the story onto me. The man was concerned for his job and required strict anonymity, but clearly took what he had heard seriously.

He reported that fellow officers at his base (Eastern Radar, Watton) had tracked an anomalous target over East Anglia the previous month, a story he knew about only second hand, not being on duty that night. But he was present when USAF intelligence agents some weeks later came to take radar tapes for analysis and in doing so gave a quite extraordinary justification for having such permission.

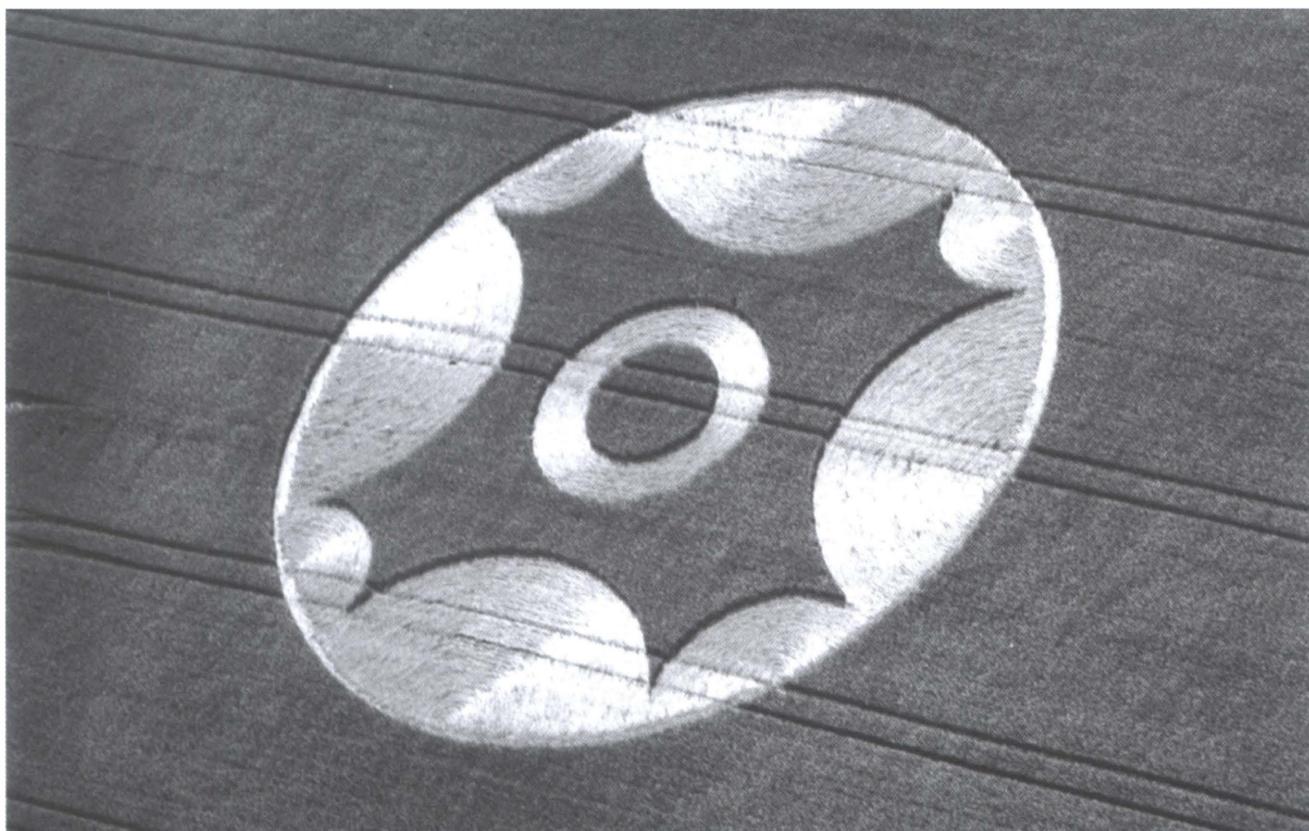
The intelligence officers said that a UFO had been reported coming down into Rendlesham Forest (approximate location of last sighting of the radar image just after Christmas) and that airmen from the twin NATO bases of Woodbridge and Bentwaters had gone out and confronted it. A senior officer had even left a base party and had a close encounter. Many aspects of the

Rendlesham story as we now know it to be (including the alleged physical traces, the live tape recording of events and electrical interference on radios and arc lights) all featured in the story as told to this radar officer by the USAF intelligence staff.

Faced with such an extraordinary report from a witness who would not go on record and whose story was partly second hand anyhow I was at a loss. I did not have the resources to travel hundreds of miles from my home in Cheshire to investigate (having just left college and not being a car driver). Moreover, I could hardly implicate my witness by being too explicit and discrete calls brought no confirmation of this story from any of the bases involved.

I did ask two trusted colleagues from my circle to make other enquiries. One was Peter Warrington, with whom I had just published a book (Randles & Warrington, 1979) and with whom I later wrote a UFO article for *New Scientist* that led to a further book (Randles & Warrington, 1985). Peter had many contacts in the radar industry (indeed because of these we had just solved a major radar case, widely reported in the media, during which a British Airways crew allegedly saw and tracked a UFO on a flight to Portugal). But he got nowhere chasing the alleged radar tracking around Rendlesham and considered it likely to be a dead end.

The other person that I involved was Kevin



Crop circles: All hoaxes or are at least some examples due to a mildly interesting atmospheric effect?

McClure, a UFOlogist noted for his skills at investigating rumour propagation (his booklet on the UFO sightings during the Welsh religious revival is a classic example; McClure, 1979). I suspected that rumours were going to be a factor in a case involving thousands of airmen at a tight-knit base. But again Kevin never got very far and soon wrote this case off, much as I was then starting to do. It looked like an unproven collection of anecdotes.

What I did do was attempt to get some sense out of the MoD. At the time I was engaged in a campaign to persuade them to release their UFO data to the public, suggesting a scientific agency or university (something for which UFOlogists have accused me of treason since recently the MoD released a few of my letters that got into the Rendlesham file, although there were others that were presumably filed elsewhere and remain unreleased). However, I got no help from the MoD between early 1981 and early 1983, leaving me to choose between natural bureaucratic lethargy or the suspicion that they were not answering any of my straight questions about this alleged event because they had something to hide.

It is often not appreciated by the sceptics (and it rarely comes out in any media documentaries about this case) but the early days of UFOlogy's involvement were not characterised by wide-eyed acceptance that Rendlesham was a massive case proving that the aliens had landed. Quite the contrary, three of us tried and failed to verify things and only I retained any belief that there might be something to it beyond the very early days.

That only happened with me because by chance I discovered that two local women (a ghost hunter named Brenda Butler, who lived near the forest, and her newly joined BUFORA friend from 50 miles north, Dot Street) had picked up independent stories about the case from residents of Suffolk.

Indeed Brenda had been befriended (again in a pub) by a USAF intelligence officer who alleged direct involvement in seeing a landed UFO and even referred to aliens, plus a one-to-one contact between them and a local commander (Brigadier General Gordon Williams). There is little evidential support for this story (nearly all the military witnesses claim it never occurred) and I have never trusted this story. However, the tale fed to Brenda contained sufficient links with that coming from Watton to suggest they were at least referring to the same set of events (Brenda and Dot were unaware of the radar story when they heard from this USAF officer).

Brenda and Dot now did an extraordinary job of trawling the local area for other prospective witnesses and offered me several anecdotes about a man met in a bar who had said this, or a local farmer who had reported something else. Whilst the evidential value of these stories was not high, together they painted a picture of odd lights seen over the woods just after Christmas 1980 that puzzled even the locals and activity inside the forest in the days afterwards, including men wandering around involved in what looked like some kind of 'scene of crime' or 'data recovery' operation wearing protective clothing.

All of this was enough to cause me to pause in being totally dismissive about the case and to do three things when invited to become Director of Investigations for BUFORA later that year.

Step one involved my holding a meeting in London, in late 1981, bringing together all involved parties in this case in order to collate what we knew. I have to report that, apart from Brenda and Dot (who were convinced that something amazing must have gone on) and myself (persuaded only that this case could not simply be written off), most of our colleagues thought it a waste of time and a story that would never go anywhere or get verified. The level of scepticism within UFOlogy may surprise you.

I regard it as my proudest moment in British UFOlogy when I got the national group BUFORA to ban hypnosis on all its cases

Armed with the data I then compiled an account of the stories, claims, rumours and hard facts (few as there were) – as an attempt to document evidence before it was lost amidst the confusion. I printed this at my expense, circulated it to about 100 people in British UFOlogy and gave permission for it to be carried by *Flying Saucer Review* (then a respectable journal edited by Charles Bowen and frequently carrying articles by scientists). This piece appeared in spring 1982 and was the first detailed record of the case.

The third thing that I did (once again note the tenor) was to encourage a group of sceptical UFOlogists, from a group in Southern England allied to BUFORA, to visit the forest, spend some time with Brenda and Dot and offer an independent assessment of the case. I trusted their judgement.

That report, published in summer 1982, concluded that it could not be said one way or another whether any sighting had occurred, but expressed caution about some of Brenda and Dot's anecdotal stories and argued (as with most other UFOlogists) that this case was likely to remain a dead duck in so far as gaining any meaningful evidence was concerned.

What did I think?

What was my opinion about this case during these early years? I was open-minded, but far from persuaded that we should treat these events at face value. There seemed scant reason to conclude that an alien contact had occurred at a NATO base.

However, I was deeply suspicious about the way this case had entered the public domain. That two sep-

arate people with military connections (both also linked to USAF intelligence sources and one actually a base intelligence public affairs officer) should leak this extraordinary story to the UFO community made no sense. Not if this story was true.

These days I might be more inclined to consider that this was all meant as a joke (even though the radar officer at Watton clearly never treated it as such) and what happened was that the tall tales on base were spread out with less than serious intent. But at the time the manner with which these stories seemed force fed (within four weeks of the events) and complete with extraordinary details, the like of which British UFOlogy had never seen before, made me suspect that the story was a mask for something else – especially as the MoD continued to say nothing at all about the case in replies to me. They just ignored every question that I asked about the matter and tried to deflect me onto other things.

Indeed at one stage they even released case files only weeks old about sightings from elsewhere in Britain in what seemed designed to set me off chasing these new stories and away from thinking about Rendlesham.

My dilemma was that I was increasingly convinced that an event had occurred in December 1980, but increasingly unconvinced it involved base commanders chatting with aliens beside a landed UFO. So why were stories saying this leaked out so casually? Clearly if these events had happened the radar tapes would have been taken from Watton without convoluted explanations to junior staff. Moreover, Brenda's source had bolstered his credibility by offering to us a sketch map of the route to the forest landing site written on the back of what he said was a top secret memo he had taken from base. This memo was a communiqué during the time when President Carter tried to get NASA to take over UFO investigation work – and suggestive that there were forces trying to prevent this from happening.

Although of modest import in and of itself, this memo had never been released before under the then-active US Freedom of Information laws that had already generated thousands of government UFO records. The manner of its release suggested that Brenda's source did have access to high-level data. Far from convincing me about his story, however, this actually made me more suspicious about the alien UFO story. I suspected that disinformation was at work and we UFOlogists were being set up to spread a tale so tall that it would never be believed by any sensible commentator and would stifle any serious investigation into what else might have occurred.

What else might that be? I knew that there were strong grounds to suspect nuclear weapons were on base. The stories about the case suggested that anomalous radiation levels had been recorded (although as yet we had no details of this). Witnesses told us about seeing men in protective suits on site after the events. The Cold War was at its height and there were mounting protests about moving American cruise missiles into British bases (such as Greenham Common).

So I began to ask myself what incident at an air base might be such a hot potato that it would be preferable to spin out a UFO-related cover story that was sufficiently absurd to kill any sober investigation into the base.

I concluded that if there had been a mishap involving a nuclear weapon, perhaps lost from a plane (not unheard of in 1980), then the subsequent clean up involving helicopters and security teams would be impossible to hide in a civilian forest. Yet it would be a political catastrophe for the UK and US at the time when they were committed to siting cruise missiles and promising how well they were protected from anything going wrong.

It would not have been difficult to allow reports of such covert activities to fester in the minds of those who inevitably stumbled across them as a UFO encounter, especially if given a helping hand by feeding out stories to hopefully gullible UFOlogists. Indeed there was even a movie doing the rounds at the time (*Hangar 18*) in which a military base, a crashed UFO, little aliens and a cover up feature. This might have given the idea to someone creative at the base public affairs office.

To me at the time this made more sense than senior USAF officers chatting to little aliens whilst the USAF helped them to fix their broken UFO (which was one version we had been offered). I suggested the nuclear mishap theory in the first public articles on the case (for the Orbis magazine *The Unexplained* in summer 1982) and soon after in an interview with popular science journal *OMNI*, that was published in early 1983.

Dr David Clarke has achieved what I failed to achieve all those years ago and obtained release of the file on Rendlesham. This shows how my decision to suggest a nuclear mishap theory struck fear into the MoD. Whilst nothing they say suggests that it was true, they were clearly more phased by the idea than by any of the wild tales placing Rendlesham into a UFO context.

In fact, one memo between the British commander at Bentwaters and the MoD actually says with relief that most other UFOlogists will not pursue an interest in this case if it is suspected of being anything but an alien UFO. The MoD were certainly adept at reading most UFOlogists.

The turning point

Although, of course, it has to remain a possibility that there is some hidden reason like the nuclear mishap theory behind the Rendlesham incident, I increasingly came to doubt this possibility.

After the *OMNI* article, the MoD suddenly made a major about-face. Within days of its release, my umpteenth request for an official statement about Rendlesham bore fruit. Presumably now that their own base officer (Squadron Leader Donald Moreland) had verified the case in his interview with *OMNI*, it was futile to try to say nothing any longer.

So, in a letter dated 11 April 1983, Pam Titchmarsh of the MoD told me that there had been unusual lights

seen over the forest in December 1980 and that the MoD had come up with no explanation for them. It is hard to realise now to what extent that letter, minor as its admissions were, galvanised this case. For it was the proof in writing that there had been an incident and a public admission by the MoD that it was still unexplained. That was unheard of in 1983.

Very quickly American UFOlogists could now use their Freedom of Information Act to obtain the infamous Halt memo (the one-page statement of the case sent by him, as a deputy commander and USAF Lieutenant Colonel, to the MoD in London on 13 January 1981). Its release came in June 1983.



It would have been a political disaster if there had been a nuclear mishap in Rendlesham Forest at a time when anti-nuclear sentiment was running high.

I had, of course, asked for this file the minute the MoD had affirmed the existence of the case to me. I never got it. But it was released to Americans, allegedly through the MoD. In August 1983 I was able (alongside Brenda and Dot) to take this file unannounced to the MoD main building in London. There had been no publicity for its existence anywhere and so our arrival was a total shock. A fascinating exchange took place. Although we half-suspected that we were breaking the Official Secrets Act by possessing this file, no action followed. Two months later it was plastered across the front page of the *News of the World* newspaper (although not at our initiative, I should add).

The world now knew about Rendlesham and the sceptical movement began to try to find answers –



How big a role did the Orford Ness Lighthouse play in this famous case?

although, as I hope the above demonstrates, the UFO community was not entirely without caution in its two years prior involvement.

Of course, all that was lost amidst the maelstrom that followed (the case was a *cause célèbre* in the UK media for several days). I was hardly ever interviewed in that time, by the way, and do not feature at all in the *News of the World* reports (although I spent several hours with their reporter). My less than committed belief that this case had anything to do with aliens and spaceships was no doubt a factor.

Even so, the day before the *News of the World* story broke I was blitzed by calls from a rival tabloid. They offered me a fortune to talk to them exclusively and try to get one up on what they thought was a massive story about to break in a competitor. Of course, I was not going to get embroiled in this. The paper tried to blackmail me, literally claiming that if I did not talk they would make it up and ascribe it to me! They only went away (after several attempts) when I threatened to call in the police.

I spent much time in Rendlesham Forest over the next few months, now that the case was unavoidably big news. The radiation trace details were in the Halt memo and one of the first things that I did was get them analysed by an expert (Dr Michele Clare, a plant biologist). It is often reported that UFOlogists were over-excited by these radiation readings until sceptics proved them to be dubious. The later work by people such as Ian Ridpath and James Easton was invaluable but I had learned not to take these data too seriously right at the start, when Michele indicated that the fig-

ures were not way above background level. She also pointed out that in pine forests levels can build up due to the accumulation of fallen pine needles – especially if, as here, a nuclear power station is close by.

This was one reason why I had begun to doubt the nuclear mishap theory. Another came from my talks in the forest with forestry commission workers. They all doubted that any kind of dropped weapon was feasible or that helicopter recovery could have occurred in a dense forest or that they would be unaware of these things taking place. That said, one forester did intriguingly refer to a large hole in the tree canopy found in January 1981 close to what we believe was the alleged landing site. He considered it unusual, as if something heavy had passed through. Whilst UFOlogists might argue that it was a UFO ‘taking off’, something falling from a plane is a more likely culprit, especially as there was a trace of a shallow crater in the ground beneath. Unhappily, the forester says that he reported it and within 24 hours that area of forest was felled, as part of a planned operation ordered by the regional headquarters in Cambridge.

The lighthouse

When the *News of the World* story was causing ripples I was actually busy on another case. A UFO had been reported by radio presenter, David Jacobs, who happened to be in a car with MP Shirley Williams. Although the ball of fire that they had briefly seen was of no importance, the witness factor came into play here again and made this case seem bigger than it deserved. There was never any question that what these

witnesses had seen was a bolide, a bright meteor. But I had to fight a hard battle with NATO defence committee member, Major Sir Patrick Wall, to prevent him from connecting the incident with Rendlesham in questions that he was planning to ask in parliament to push the government to come clean on what it knew about the incident in December 1980. Predictably they told him little and that was that.

Although I prevented Patrick Wall from getting carried away by this new sighting, ironically, years later I met David Jacobs when we both did a TV chat show in Ireland. I went out of my way to try to explain to him what he had seen and how it could be explained. He seemed interested, asked me how to spell bolide and I thought I had scotched further coverage, at least. But a year or two later David appeared on the quiz show *Countdown* and he described the story of his UFO sighting to the enthralled audience. There was no mention of any explanation.

When Ian Ridpath, along with forester Vince Thurkettle, proposed their solution to the Rendlesham case in the wake of the press frenzy it was startling. They argued that a meteor known to have been seen from parts of the UK had attracted the military personnel into the forest where they were then fooled by the lights of the Orford Ness lighthouse. The first thing that I did was go to the forest at night and check it out. I had never been to these woods in the dark before, as such conditions were hardly conducive to doing meaningful research. Now, of course, it was essential. This is an example of factors that can transform a case years later when something arises that has simply never been considered before.

There was no doubt that from the site you could see the pulsing light of Orford Ness out across the field where the UFO supposedly came down. Alignments were broadly correct as well. Moreover, there was a second light (the Shipwash lightship) off to the right, although less obvious. The most noticeable lights were really those from a research building on Orford Ness where in the 1970s experiments involving atmospheric ionisation were conducted and whose role in this case has been a source of much interest on my part ever since.

Whilst it was obvious that these lights were visible in 1983, though easily explained if you knew what they were in advance, it was far less apparent how they might seem if you were not expecting to see a lighthouse from a forest. Could they have been the cause of the reported sightings three years earlier? A problem was that the forest at this point had been heavily felled since the sightings and so at the time of the events there would be far denser tree coverage. The lights even now were merely distant points of no real prominence. TV images tend to exaggerate their impact. I doubted that these lights would be strange enough to trigger a major encounter, but we now know that to some extent they did because of the abortive chase of what turned

out to be the lighthouse on the same night as the UFO sighting. This was made by the very same witnesses.

Although these witnesses seem not to consider that encounter to be with the same lights involved in the UFO episode one has to be mindful of the possibility. Unhappily the American UFOlogists who were aware of these statements years ago had for some reason never published any record of their existence. I did not discover this until 14 years after that first nocturnal visit to the forest – by which point it had changed again out of all recognition.

It remains debatable whether the lighthouse and/or Shipwash or perhaps the building lights on the Ness could have triggered a complex close encounter. Did the tree coverage and intermittent visibility this afforded make these lights appear more mysterious? I have my doubts that the lighthouse, on its own, could be strange enough to be the primary cause of the encounters in the forest, although we seem forced to accept that these lights must have had a part to play in this complicated set of encounters. It is too much of a coincidence otherwise.

I was deeply suspicious about the way this case had entered the public domain

My doubts about the lighthouse as a primary culprit grew when over the years more military witnesses came forward, often only after they had left the military and no longer feared retribution. Principal of these was John Burroughs, whom I met by surprise in Arizona in 1989. Our long conversations gave me a vital key to the case – a direct witness to the events in Rendlesham Forest who was objective and willing to listen to sensible possibilities. John never claimed to have seen a spaceship, or any kind of machine, or indeed to have met aliens. He denounced most of the fanciful tales associated with the case but was adamant (as one of the three men who had the initial close encounter) that he saw something weird that was like a fuzzy, opaque mass of light. When asked directly about the lighthouse he said this was not the answer – pointing out that he had picnicked in the woods, knew about it, had seen it before and, in any case, lighthouses did not fly and the lights that he saw that night clearly did move vertically upwards at one stage.

One should never be over-reliant on a witness and, of course, John never mentioned to me then, or in 1994 interviews he gave for a TV documentary that I set up, his aborted chase of what turned out to be the lighthouse. However, I consider John Burroughs a strong

witness and I trust his basic version of events. I should add that he reports what appears to be a strong electrostatic field in close proximity to this fuzzy light, causing his skin to tingle and hair to stand on end. He was certain this was a genuine energy field of some sort but was perfectly willing to consider that it was generated by some kind of natural atmospheric energy rather than an alien craft.

After what John Burroughs told me in 1989 I was inclined to consider the lighthouse theory hard to justify. Hence my interest in the ionisation experiments that had been going on from Orford Ness, dead ahead in line of sight from where Burroughs reported this close encounter.

As with any famous case, 'wannabees' and tall-tale-tellers have proliferated

But there is little hard evidence that such research might have been occurring as late as 1980. The records show that the experiments ended five years earlier, but also that an enlarged project was being developed and that Orford Ness was a preferred site for this new set-up. The government files relating to this research are still banned from release for many years to come owing to their alleged sensitivity. So we only have scattered clues, such as claims from a sailor aboard *HMS Norfolk* sailing past Orford Ness that men were ordered below decks because something was going to occur off shore they were not supposed to see.

Around Orford Ness is where radar was developed in secret in the run-up to World War Two, where experimental telecommunications sites were later created, and where the original home of radar (Bawdsey Manor) has become a cover British military base. It is also where there are many local stories, unconnected with Rendlesham, about humming noises, strange electrical effects and green glows (described by one witness as looking like a cathode ray tube – which is pretty suggestive of ionisation). There also exists an MoD warning to shipping about electrical interference when passing Orford Ness which indicates that at some stage such research was considered likely to manifest the sort of physical effects that are connected with the claims from Rendlesham Forest in 1980.

What do I believe now?

I could write thousands of additional words about what is undoubtedly the most complex UFO encounter in British history. I have, since *Sky Crash* (Butler, Street, & Randles, 1984), written two other full books about

it (Randles, 1992, 1998) and a lengthy chapter for *The UFOs that Never Were* (Randles, Roberts, & Clarke, 2000). On each occasion there has been significantly more additional evidence available to me and witness testimony in need of analysis, because this case has been characterised by its slow emergence from confusion into clarity.

Many sensible heads have of late applied their reasoning powers and it is almost impossible for those seeing the wealth of data and the abundance of vociferous witnesses going public these days to think back to the first three years when all we had were second-hand stories, dubious witnesses, and a total lack of any written statements or official confirmation that anything had happened at all.

I believe that I tried to steer the case in a sensible direction, but once it became a mega-story thanks to the media intervention of 1983 there was always going to be a limited prospect of sorting truth from fantasy. As with any famous case, 'wannabees' and tall-tale-tellers have proliferated and from no evidence we now have a plethora of 'evidence' which is often next to impossible to make to fit together.

My view is that parts of this case have gradually become explained as time has progressed. I am now of the view that much of what happened on the night when Colonel Halt led a team into the forest and tape-recorded sightings is resolved. There were misperceptions of what are clearly stars (stationary lights, moving in box motion – a classic effect known as autokinesis) which then stayed in the sky as dawn broke, vanishing when the sun came up. Any UFOlogist with experience would recognise these for what they are almost immediately.

Similarly there is every chance that the lighthouse/lightship was involved in the equation somewhere – since this case is clearly not the product of a single IFO source but a combination of different things that are adding to its complexity.

The radiation is, I believe, not an issue. The score marks on the trees have simple answers connected with the practices of the forestry workers in marking trees and even Halt on his live tape expresses doubts saying these marks seemed not to be recent. There is no absolute certainty the landing site identified is exactly where the UFO was located. Therefore the contentious ground traces may be one giant red herring. After all, these were airmen from another country in a forest at night where it would be difficult to tell one clump of trees apart from another. They could have found the ground marks on retracing their steps (as we know they did) and assumed that because these were in the same general area to that in which they saw the strange lights, these were marks left by the lights. But that is very much an assumption, which few researchers into this case seem to appreciate. The link between ground traces and close encounter is often raised as a key reason to believe in its credibility.

What still stands out to me from Halt's encounter is the reference to beams of pencil-like light that came down from the sky and touched the ground nearby. Halt told me that it was these laser-like beams that convinced him that something inexplicable was going on. And there is partial independent witness support from a civilian in a house just across the forest who saw bands of light coming down from the sky.

It may be that these relate to the claimed prank by Kevin Conde, using the bright lights of his 1979 Plymouth Volare to create a hoax, but a good deal of work needs to be done to demonstrate a clear cause and effect link between these two events.

As for the first night, when a three-man security patrol, including John Burroughs, encountered that smoky light and the allegedly associated electrostatic field, what happened then? Were they fooled by the lighthouse?

Importantly there are references in witness testimony to the lights seen hovering on a carpet of mist. Weather records suggest ground mist could have been present. I have investigated cases where ground lights seen through mist have generated very odd-looking UFOs, especially if there is also a temperature inversion layer in the atmosphere. These conditions can trigger a mirage effect, where a ground light is smeared into a fuzzy blob and appears to move as it passes through the inversion layer.

Indeed I once myself witnessed a star rising over a lake through ground mist and an inversion layer. Only several minutes later, when the star finally rose above the mist and inversion layer, did its true nature become obvious. Before then it had resembled a yellow light that had a fuzzy shape and that moved suddenly in a burst of speed at one point, presumably when its rays of light were distorted by the inversion layer. A similar effect causes light from the sky near ground-level to bend on hot days creating what looks like a pool of water on the road ahead.

Is it possible that the lighthouse shining through mist and an inversion layer produced a spectacular mirage that turned this otherwise innocent light into a much stranger looking blob that seemed to rocket skywards? However, on this assumption, the reported electrostatic effects remain more of a mystery. I discuss this mirage theory in more detail in *The UFOs that Never Were* (Randles, Roberts, & Clarke, 2000).

In conclusion I would say that this case is a fascinating one because it is a true test of UFO analysis. Even now it is far from obvious what caused these events, and there are multiple possibilities.

If you are willing to regard it as a detective mystery to be unravelled then it is possibly the best example in UFOlogy, because the clues are there – just so many of them, often rather contradictory in nature, that you will struggle to piece together a coherent whole. The task is made more difficult because Rendlesham Forest in December 1980 was such a fascinating place with many things going on that could have had a part to play. A number of them may have chanced to come together to create a mystery.

I am now of the view that much of what happened on the night when Colonel Halt led a team into the forest and tape-recorded sightings is resolved

What this case does better than almost any other is to reveal the many groups of people who become entangled in any major UFO sighting – each with their own, often very different, agenda. It identifies the social forces that weave these people together into the forging of a UFO legend out of many disparate effects, only some of which have any chance of being truly unexplained.

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Forgive Us Our Trespasses

Peter Brooksmith considers the diplomatic aspects of the Rendlesham 'cover-up'

TO THE DEVOTED connoisseur of skeptic-*versus*-believer debates, the argument over the Rendlesham 'UFO' of December 1980 looks like turning into a classic of its kind. The latest phase (October 2003) of this decades-long guerrilla campaign revolves around the suggestion – and it *was* only a suggestion, not a 'claim' – by the former USAF law enforcement officer, retired Senior Master Sergeant Kevin Conde, that while on patrol at Woodbridge he played a prank that may have been the cause of one feature of the case. Briefly stated, Conde – then a Technical Sergeant – adapted a USAF police car's fancy lighting system to throw a brilliant display of coloured illuminations into a misty sky, and so could have created the impression that mysterious beams of light were being shone not up from, but down onto the Woodbridge base from above. It seems possible that Conde perpetrated his jape at the same time Lt Col Charles Halt and his party were stumbling around in the dark in Rendlesham Forest. If so, these exchanges, on the tape-recorded commentary that Halt made at the time (see transcript of the 'Halt tape' at www.rendlesham.com/halttape.htm), make sense:

LT COL HALT: Now we're observing what appears to be a beam coming down to the ground.

M/SGT BALL: Look at the colours ... shit.

LT COL HALT: This is unreal.

[Break in recording]

LT COL HALT: 3.30: and the objects are still in the sky, although the one to the south looks like it's losing a little bit of altitude. We're turning around and heading back toward the base. The object to the sou ... the object to the south is still beaming down lights to the ground.

[Break in recording]

LT COL HALT: 0400 hours: one object still hovering over the Woodbridge base at about five to ten degrees off the horizon. Still moving erratic and similar lights beaming down as earlier.

Interestingly enough, two other witnesses – local residents – saw coloured lights moving around in the region of the East Gate at the same time. James Easton has noted (in a post to UFORL email list, 1 September 2003):

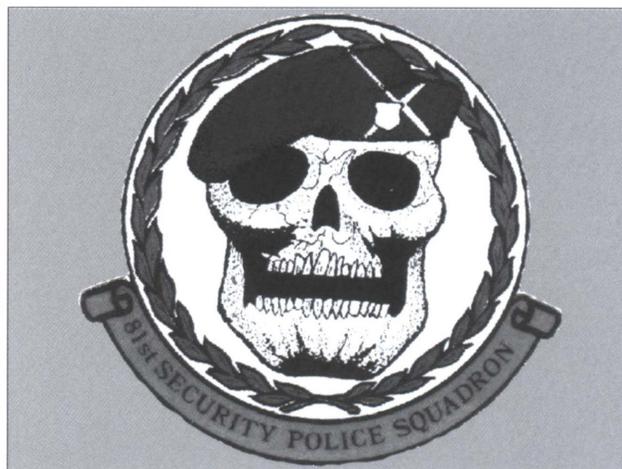
In *UFO Crash Landing?*, Jenny Randles documents a witness, Sarah Richardson (only 12 at the time), who reportedly watched enigmatic 'light beams', when Halt was making a similar observation. ... At the time, she was at her mother's home in Woodbridge. It was between 1 and 3 am into Sunday, 28 December.

'From (Mum's) house you could see the river and the

forests and the bases. You could hear the revving of the engines. You became familiar with all the spotlights and other activity.

'This night was different. Three bands of light appeared over the woods to the side of the runway ... They were star-like and they were bright, coloured red, blue and yellow ... the oddest thing was the colour changes. Blue, green, yellow and so on.'

Jenny also notes that on the same night, local garage owner Gerry Harris claimed to have observed near [the] East Gate, and apparently emanating from within the forest, 'three separate lights' which sometimes 'moved around in circles'.



The badge of the 81st Security Police Squadron.

So Conde's practical joke, or one like it, looks like a good explanation for that small but otherwise puzzling aspect of the case.

I mention all this simply to give Kevin Conde his due *locus standi* in the Rendlesham affair. Inevitably, if now perhaps to his chagrin, Conde was drawn into what one can only call an argy-bargy on the Internet with Georgina Bruni, author of the True Believer's Bible on the Rendlesham incident, *You Can't Tell The People* (Bruni, 2000), over his possible part in the events of the second night. Equally inevitably the question of a 'cover-up' arose in the course of the exchange. In responding to that idea in an email to Georgina Bruni dated 17 July 2003 (quoted in a post to the UFORL email list of 20 July 2003), Conde wrote:

Knowing the USAF as I do I am still convinced that if the USAF was covering anything up, it was a vice base commander leading a search for UFOs off base accompanied by people responsible for guarding nuclear weapons. The fact that senior leadership did nothing to Halt can be attributed to their desire to keep the situ-

ation low key. Relieving Halt would have made a splash, especially if he threw a public fit, coupled with a lack of firm evidence. They may have believed he was a wacko, but could not prove it.

In April 1998, when my brain was still able to keep track of the various claims and counter-claims in this case, I became intrigued by this question of USAF personnel wandering around on duty, *en masse*, in the Suffolk woods. It struck me as strange that they should feel free to do so. I lifted the electric telephone, and spoke at length with the RAF and British Army press officers at the Ministry of Defence. I didn't mention the Rendlesham case. I merely asked, *à propos* any RAF base leased to the USAF, where the USAF's territorial responsibility ended and who would defend the perimeter if it were attacked.

The answers were interesting, for they suggested that Lt Col. Halt had put himself in a potentially embarrassing position. They were:

- USAF responsibility starts (and ends) with the fenceline of an RAF base leased to the USAF.
- Beyond that, i.e. outside the base, responsibility for security rests with the local police.

That's the strict legal position: No less a person than Mr Plod himself is in charge. Imagine the scene. Hordes of Red Army *Spetsnaz* troops parachute into the Suffolk countryside as Soviet ICBMs rain down on Birmingham, Manchester, Stowe-in-the-Wold, Charlton Marshall, &c.

For those unaware of the term, 'Spetsnaz' is an abbreviation of *Spetsialnoye Nazranie* – 'troops of special purpose'. As one authority explains (John Keller, 'Spetsnaz', <http://www.systemauk.com/spetsnaz.htm>):

Although Spetsnaz units may be used for other purposes during peacetime, their primary role is to carry out strategic missions during the final days prior to war breaking out and in war itself. These wartime tasks would include: deep reconnaissance of strategic targets; the destruction of strategically important command-control-and-communications (C3) facilities; the destruction of strategic weapons' delivery systems; demolition of important bridges and transportation routes; and

the snatching or assassination of important military and political leaders. Many of these missions would be carried out before the enemy could react and some even before war had actually broken out.

Faced with such an outrage, the protocol, at face value, would go as follows. The US base commander complains to the RAF base commander, who passes on American expressions of distaste to the local police who, duly incensed at the Soviets' offence of armed trespass, request (in suitably clipped tones) the Army to give military aid to the civil community. Note that formula: the strict legal and constitutional position is that the British military would come to the assistance of the police



Was advanced alien technology responsible for the mysterious beams of light seen during this incident? Or perhaps something a little more mundane?

Conde's practical joke, or one like it, looks like a good explanation for that small but otherwise puzzling aspect of the case

and thus to the defence of the British sovereign, her subjects, and her realm – *not* to the aid of the US military *per se*.

This ritual may seem quaint and curious, even Byzantine, to those unaware of the delicate constitutional position of the British Army. This swears to serve, and is commanded by, the sovereign. But it exists only by consent of parliament, which annually enjoys the opportunity to decline to raise taxes to support it. The arrangement has its roots in the causes of

the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of the 17th century, and revolves around the British distaste for standing armies, which historically have been seen as potential instruments of regal tyranny. As part of a series of safeguards against the politicization of the Army on the one hand and the abuse of power by the Crown on the other, the separation of military and police powers is taken rather seriously by the British. And consequently, as will become clear, it is important to the 'Rendlesham Incident' and the nature of any cover-up by the authorities.

base. USAF security police are also trained as infantrymen, fulfilling the same role as the RAF Regiment does on a British air base. As Kevin Conde explained it in a post to the UFORL email list (21 July 2003):

In the event of real tensions, and the belief that the Russians were coming, we would ... have operated freely off base. The exercises that have figured into some of this controversy are an example. The majority of the hard core 'combat' occurred off base.

When in the air base ground defense mode we knew that if we waited until we had Russians in the wire we were already too late. It was our mission to go off base and engage them as far from the flight line as possible.

In the prelude to what turns out to be a shooting war, the preliminary stages from political crisis to outbreak of hostilities generally take a long time. According to Lord Birdwood's account of a briefing at the House of Lords, by the mid-Sixties it had been calculated that an international crisis would pass through some 40-50 discrete stages before an exchange of nuclear missiles became inevitable. During that time US bases in the UK would have ample opportunity to prepare their defences. This would happen even despite the probability that they might be the object of pre-emptive

nuclear strikes rather than of invading paratroopers. And there is nothing in law to prevent the British Army or police from requesting assistance from the USAF in undertaking precautionary defensive moves. Indeed, given the habitual overstretch of British forces, this is the obvious thing to do. Any necessary diplomatic niceties would, in one form or another, have been observed long before any shooting started.

Such US exercises as occurred off-base would also have been cleared with everyone concerned in the proper order, including the British police. Constitutionally, 'clearance' would, after all, take no more than a telephone conversation with the local Chief Constable to become legal - that officer is sufficiently autonomous - and thereafter it's up to him whom else, including no one, he might choose to tell about it.

One circumstance in which it is legal and most definitely moral for US forces to move beyond base perimeters in formation is to deal with downed aircraft. I suspect that the responsibility of USAF police for finding downed aircraft is also covered in the leases and treaties



DUTY AND PLEASURE

Don't panic! Outside the fenceline of an RAF base leased to the USAF, Mr Plod himself is in charge.

Wars and Rumours of Wars

It's not hard to see that the intricacies of the British constitution could create problems, unforeseen in the 17th century, for those wanting to defend an American air base against a common enemy. But in the interests of pragmatism much may be done by way of laws, leases and treaties when a country enjoys an unwritten constitution. Even the egregious Nick Pope, devotee of an ET interpretation of the Rendlesham incident, recognizes as much in a post to UFO Updates (*Re: More Bentwaters Information*, 30 August 2003):

The legal position with regard to United States Visiting Forces (USVF) is complex, and there are a number of different laws and treaties governing what USVF personnel can and cannot do in the UK. The general rule is that US jurisdiction ends at the perimeter fence, though there are a number of circumstances where it would be quite proper for on-duty USVF personnel to go off-base.

One such circumstance is certainly the defence of the

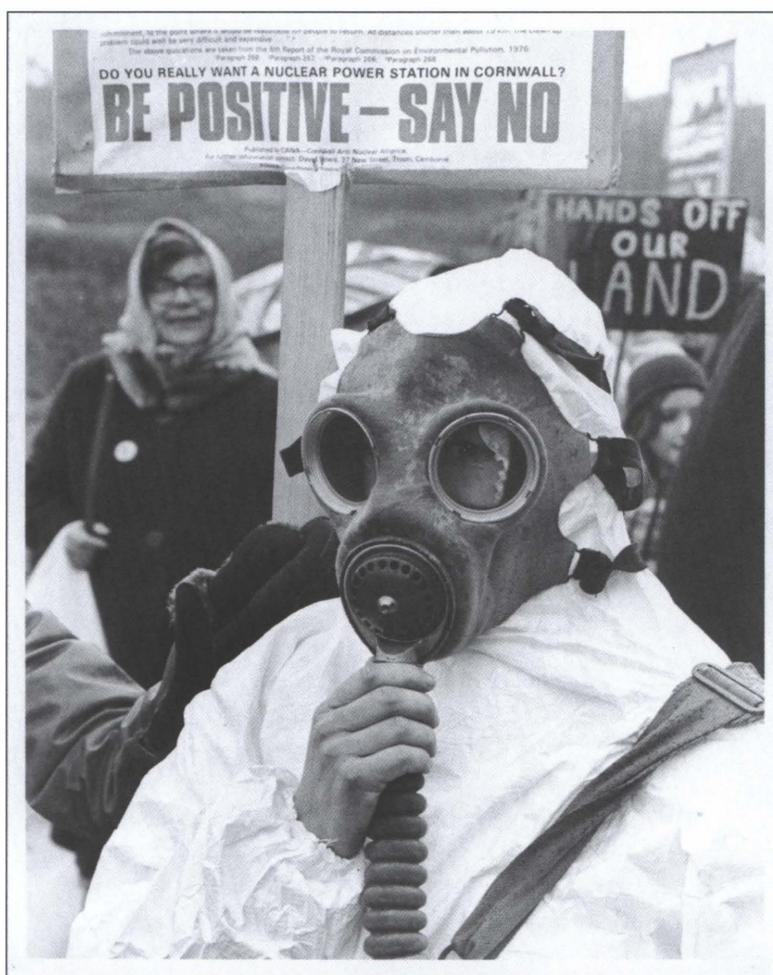
to which Pope refers, and involved some kind of standing licence to cover such emergencies. In any case, in such a circumstance, it would clearly be mad to have to go through a diplomatic rigmarole before getting rescuers to twisted metal and roasting flesh. (If anyone wanted to go nosing around the PRO again, or use such FOI as we have in this furtive little country, there is the starter for a bit of research. Just what were (and are) the arrangements, agreements, contracts or treaties by which (even allied) foreign troops could go into action on British soil?) But on the second night of the Rendlesham saga, the night Lt Col. Halt went poaching in the woods, there was no such triggering misapprehension about downed planes to inspire (or justify) an off-base expedition. According to Halt himself (interview for *Strange but True?*, UK ITV, 9 December 1994),

The duty Flight Lieutenant [Bruce Englund] came in, and he was quite shaken, and insisted upon speaking to myself and the base commander about a matter of utmost urgency. He said, "It's back," and I said, "What's back?" and he said, "The UFO is back." I assembled a small team of experts and we set off in the forest, ready to debunk it.

Two points emerge from this revelation. In the first place, it suggests a high degree of psychological priming among the airmen involved in favour of some anomalous occurrence, deriving (one presumes) from reports or rumours of the events of the previous evening. In fairness, Englund may have been using the term 'UFO' in the strict technical sense in which it's employed by aviators and air traffic controllers. But Halt's retrospective claim that he "set off in the forest, ready to debunk" the UFO suggests that he, at least, didn't take the term in that sense. Second, Halt's formulation here fits the traditional template of believers' rhetoric – the claim to have started as a sceptic but to have been slowly converted to a belief in a favourite anomalous or paranormal phenomenon by the overwhelming nature of the evidence, etc. The intention, conscious or otherwise, of this ploy is to endow both the evidence and the adherent with authority; but implicitly, it depends on the fragile notion that personal 'authenticity' and experience outweigh the forces of logic and rational examination.

Be that as it may: given Lt Col. Halt's position and responsibilities, it would be surprising (or anyway depressing) if he hadn't been apprised of the subtleties of the British constitution. At the very least he should have known enough to be aware of the possible conse-

quences of going for a mass hike off-base, on duty and in uniform. Sqn Ldr. Moreland, the British base commander, should have known that better than anyone. US forces overseas are subject to local law for crimes committed on the host's territory and, legally speaking, Halt and his men were trespassing. Even under the law of trespass as it stood at the time, had they caused significant damage in the forest, they would have been committing an offence, albeit minor, and could have



The Rendlesham incident should be viewed against the backdrop of the general political situation at the time, including such factors as the rise in militant anti-nuclear protest.

been prosecuted. For diplomatic reasons it is perhaps unlikely they would have been hauled up before the local beak, but it is not impossible. Either way, one can see a public relations problem.

On the face of it, this may seem rather a minor issue, but really it is not. I believe Kevin Conde has quite accurately pinpointed the nature of such 'cover-up' as there was, and the key to it is this question of territory, who was responsible for what, and the natural and legal obligations of the guest nation (the USA) to respect the laws and constitution of the host (the UK).

Halt's disregard of British customs and conventions should have been vexatious enough by itself to have caused his commanders and his hosts to want to keep

his aberrant behaviour out of the public eye. It could hardly have mitigated their dismay that he blatantly flouted US law into the bargain. Under the Posse Comitatus Act (18 USC 1385, originally proposed in 1878) the US military has no power to enforce, or to assist in enforcing, civil law, except in certain rigorously defined circumstances entailing a prescribed protocol not unlike that obtaining in the UK. (For the background to the Posse Comitatus Act, see Bonnie Baker, 'The Origins of the *Posse Comitatus*', originally published in the USAF magazine *Airpower*, available at URL: <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/cc/baker1.html>)

USAF responsibility starts (and ends) with the fenceline of an RAF base leased to the USAF

Military law enforcement officers have no jurisdiction outside a 'national defense area' except over troops in uniform. Later clarifications of the *Posse Comitatus* law prohibit direct participation of Department of Defense personnel in law enforcement *including* searches. Kevin Conde (in a personal communication to the author, received 2 October 2003) notes that:

Halt, and every other military member, is briefed routinely on the prohibition against attempting to act off base. ... By definition, the area of and surrounding a military aircraft accident site is a national defense area, and we can and do exercise authority within that area. This goes back to my contention that only in the case of an aircraft crash would we immediately go off base and act as if we were in charge, because we were. ... Halt had no excuse – he could not have done what he did in the States, and doing what he did in a foreign country is much worse, and he knew that.

Even if it could be argued that Halt was not precisely in breach of the US law, he was certainly mocking its spirit. And that calls his competence severely into question.

Red Peril, Red Faces

This interpretation of the 'cover up' at Rendlesham is borne out by various accounts Halt himself has given of what happened when his senior officers learned of what he had been up to and listened to his tape. One version is in James Easton's article in this issue. According to another version (Dillon, 1997; see URL: <http://www.ufology.org.uk/cgi-bin/ratel/article21.pho>), Halt maintained that when one of the US Third Air Force's staff officers enquired "What do we do now?",

You could have heard a pin drop and then somebody answered. "This occurred on British soil so let's turn it over to the Ministry of Defence," [Halt] said.

Halt was told of the decision to hand the matter over to the British MoD and he had no choice but to inform them of the incident. He asked if they wanted a complete report of the events, personnel involved and measures taken, but all that was asked of him was a concise memorandum that detailed briefly what happened over those three [*sic*] nights.

"I was very surprised but I attended to it," [Halt] said. The summary was taken by Squadron Leader Donald Moreland, British Commander at the adjoining RAF/USAF base at Bentwaters and sent to the Ministry of Defence. And so forth [*sic*] was born the notorious Halt memo[.]

Halt's apparent incomprehension is incomprehensible, and remarkably naïve, if his version of events is accurate. What else *but* a stunned silence might have greeted his tape recording of his caper out of bounds? Of course no one wanted the lurid details. It is not clear how much of the rumour surrounding the Security Police's various sylvan expeditions reached the ears of that staff meeting, but its members would surely have been unnerved had they heard the various tales of firearms being taken into the forest (and even discharged), or the story from the first night's events – so sublimely vulnerable to a Chinese whisper – that Sgt Jim Penniston had the mistaken impression that his cohort John Burroughs was still armed, so that "When we got close to whatever it was, Penniston thought I was armed and told me to open up on it." (see James Easton's post *Re: Rendlesham Revelations*, to the UFORL mailing list, 24 October 2003). USAF police routinely carried Smith&Wesson Model 15 Combat Masterpiece revolvers with a 4in barrel, loaded with military ball ammunition. British law is quite straightforwardly draconian about carrying firearms in public places without due authority, not to mention armed trespass. More to the point, sections of the British press would have had hysterics at the mere thought of the US military wandering about the countryside, tooled up, and carrying live ammunition.

Looked at from a certain point of view, Halt's famous memo can now be seen as a disguised apology, or rueful admission and explanation of why he had abandoned his legal responsibilities. He did indeed have "no choice" but to explain himself, bizarre as that explanation was. It says something about the lack of political *nous* of the campaigning Left that when the Halt story hit the *News of the World* in 1983, CND and its fellow-travellers missed the opportunity to raise hell about the ease with which USAF officers could be deflected from their duty.

The relevant authorities' response in 1981 to news of Halt's foray should also be viewed in the general political context of the time, and against the backdrop of the presence of nuclear weapons at the Woodbridge/Bentwaters complex. At the end of 1980, there were US hostages still held in Iran (for whose release, on 21 December, the recently self-installed ayatollahs had demanded \$10 billion), and the Iran–Iraq war was in its opening stages; there was an IRA mainland bombing campaign in progress; the USAF base at Greenham Common was infested with ladies protesting against stationing US cruise missiles in the UK, while there had recently been a rise in militant anti-nuclear protest in general (for instance, the Sharpness incident of 8 July); the Soviets had renewed jamming of Western radio broadcasts to the USSR; Poland was in upheaval, threatening the integrity of the Soviet empire, and there was a real possibility of invasion by the Red Army; the Gang of Four was on trial in China; and Ronald Reagan, whose rhetoric promised an end to *détente*, had just been elected President of the United States.

Halt's apparent incomprehension is incomprehensible, and remarkably naïve, if his version of events is accurate

These were fairly jumpy times, even by Cold War standards. In their light, there was potentially a huge embarrassment for the USAF and for the US itself in the discovery that a bunch of American airmen from Woodbridge/Bentwaters had been distracted from what they were supposed to do – guard their base. The heart of the USAF police task was to guard the weapons systems – and not to go for a ramble in the forest in search of a 'flying saucer', as it surely would have been dubbed by a gleeful press.

None of this bears on what 'really' happened in the forest, or what ultimately caused anyone to mill around in it with precious little military discipline, no apparent understanding of night-vision equipment or radiation detectors, or any of the other incompetencies that Halt's "team of experts" displayed, and from which believers so carefully avert their eyes. But it does reasonably, Occam-like even, explain why both the UK Ministry of Defence and the US Department of Defence were very

shifty about what no one disputes happened – that a bevy of US airmen, at the behest of a deputy base commander who should have known better, went blundering about where they should not have been. (No wonder the forest wildlife was in uproar.) It should be no great surprise that – in the interests of good relations, and most particularly good *public* relations, between long-standing allies – there was a cover-up. Of sorts, that is. For there is a fairly large distinction between concealing a profoundly embarrassing if minor infraction of English law, and a perhaps more serious one of US law, because of what it revealed about the calibre of certain senior USAF personnel, and covering up the arrival of an extra-terrestrial craft.

In sum: Lt Col. Charles Halt should have considered the law, the constitution and the conventions of two countries before initiating his foolhardy expedition. If he did not, he was out of order; if he did, he was even more out of order. The USAF may be forgiven for wishing to draw a discreet veil over what may have been ignorance or foolishness on the part of a senior officer at a strategic air base. Unfortunately, as with many another attempt at covering up a cock-up, this one backfired massively. The smoke is with us still, and an unnerving number of people seem to prefer breathing its mystifying fumes over the refreshing oxygen of rational thought.

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Note on Internet References

Archives of the UFO UpDates mailing list may be found at URL: <http://www.virtuallystrange.net/ufol/updates/>

Archives of the UFORL mailing list may be found at URL: <http://www.ufoworld.co.uk/>

Thanks most especially to Kevin Conde, for clarifying a number of points in an early draft of this article, and especially for drawing my attention to the Posse Comitatus Act; and (in alphabetical order) to David Clarke, James Easton, Jenny Randles, Ian Ridpath and John Stepkowski for various discussions of the Rendlesham incident over the years, and for keeping my interest in it alive.



Peter Brookesmith lives in the depths of rural Wales with a wife, a cat, and a plethora of equines. He spent three years learning to be incredulous as editor of the Orbis partwork *The Unexplained*, and has since written numerous sceptical articles for *Fortean Times* and *Magonia*, several less than dewy-eyed books on UFOs, and other titles on firearms and medical science.

Reflections on a Rendlesham Skywatch

Andy Marriott offers us his whimsical recollections of a beautiful night spent in Rendlesham Forest in August 2003 on a UFO-watch.

THE SCEPTIC CONTINGENT gathered in the corner of The Cherry Tree pub. As we sipped our beers we overheard snippets of conversation about what to do in the event of an alien encounter, and started to wonder what exactly we were doing there, and whose bright idea this had been. I feared it might have been mine.

At Rendlesham Forest car park, while a beautiful, crazed white German Shepherd called Mason darted between our legs, we were given a quick history of the area. More than twenty years ago

the forest was host to the UK's most celebrated UFO sighting, by US Army personnel at a nearby base. Ever since, there have been a vast number of reported phenomena; lights, noises, otherworldly spirits, and even stranger stories of 'beings' in the woods. We were here to see for ourselves and listen to some of the tales. As the chill air settled in for the night we branched off into the forest where Brenda Butler, guardian of Rendlesham's mysteries and owner of the dog, told of how she had frequently encountered mists, how rods had passed through her body, how orbs had clung onto Mason's back as they walked along. She doubted that we would see much tonight because people didn't know how to keep quiet and kept flashing their torches around. And indeed, whenever

we stopped, people were firing off camera flashes like it was paparazzi training day. The whole evening had something of the feeling of a surreal coach party tour; marching in crocodile formation through the bracken and halting at various points of interest. Our first stop was a tranquil clearing where a friend of Brenda's had set up a multi-coloured crystal ball on the forest floor, next to a tape recorder playing soothing music which I unfortunately kicked over. Mason immediately went berserk, jumping and barking as he rushed through the woods. Brenda explained that there were strong spiritual forces in this area that Mason was picking up on. This clearing turned out to be a place where some sort of alien craft may have made an appearance. As proof we were shown the broken branches of the trees around

us where a spaceship may have flown, clipping the trees as it passed;

'But the treetops look all right,' someone pointed out, and indeed a mass of healthy foliage blocked out the sky above us.

'Yes, that's because it didn't come down, it came *through*.'

Excited murmurings broke out as people with digital cameras found round splodges on their screens – the



Mysterious orbs of psychic energy caught on camera by Dr Anne Richards on the night of the Rendlesham skywatch. Uninformed sceptics might offer different explanations ...

famous orbs seemed to be plentiful in this part of the forest. Here we were told by Jack – a Rendlesham regular – that only last week he had seen a small being, about three feet tall, standing in the distance wearing some sort of hood. He felt it was either an ET or the ghost of a dead monk. At this point the awed silence was broken by members of the sceptic party cracking open welcome cans of lager.

Onwards we went to a crossroads of forest paths where Brenda recounted how one day she had come across a yeti who looked really sad. Later, and for several nights, she had heard mournful cries in the forest, and other people had reported seeing huge bears. There was then a story about a ghost girl called Sofia who had accompanied Brenda one day. As the tales became more

and more fantastical my concentration drifted upwards, not in search of First Contact, but in awe of the closeness of Mars and the stunningly clear night sky.

At the next clearing, marked with an 'X' on a map by one of the US military alerted to the UFO, Brenda told us that nothing seems to grow, but that one day she found a six-foot tree where there had been nothing before. A week later it was gone. Jane, a psychic amongst the group, confirmed that there was a lot of spirit energy in this spot. I started imagining not alien visitors, but a group of giggling drunken wags, planting trees and then removing them, dressing as midget monks and shining torches through the trees to perpetuate the myths of Rendlesham.

Next stop was Ground Zero, the Mother Lode, the field of dreams where the craft landed over 20 years ago. Here small beings had emerged from the spaceship to be met by American airmen who had asked them, telepathically, 'Who are you?' and received the mind-blowing reply, 'We are you.'

It was a dialogue obviously well known by many amongst us, who nodded sagely. An excited voice called out, 'What's that?' and all eyes followed the beams of torchlight to reveal a huge metal shape in the field, barely 50 feet away. 'Oh, that's some farm machinery' came the deflating reply and what had at first looked

like part of an alien craft was revealed to be merely a huge industrial hose drum, possibly used for spreading fertiliser.

We moved on to another clearing where Brenda gathered us around a pale tree; "This is known as 'The Alien Tree'" she told us, due to a six-inch carving near the base, thought to represent an alien's face. How sad, I thought, that a species so unbelievably more advanced than our own should travel countless miles through space to visit us and leave as their legacy not the wisdom of the universe but instead a childish graffiti on the bark of a tree. Jack then told us what he called a 'funny' story of how, just nearby, he and two friends were meditating one night when a massive dark shape, emitting only a low hum, passed over them, bending back the trees and moving on into the night. After freaking out

for a while, they found that they had lost 45 minutes of time, and all the batteries in their camcorders were dead. For the next few weeks Jack suffered terrible dreams of blood loss, and the female in their party gave birth, almost exactly 9 months to the day, even though she had been told by a doctor that she didn't have a womb.

It was now three in the morning and our final stop was to contemplate the heavens and look for lights in the sky. I happily settled onto a patch of grass but a few people took this as their cue to break out the sand-



A descending UFO can be seen at the top of this photograph by Dr Anne Richards, again taken during the Rendlesham skywatch – or might it be the photographer's finger?

wiches and flasks of tea and to chatter away while pointing their torches at the trees. Ten minutes silent contemplation would have been a wonderful thing, but tonight, as Brenda had predicted, it wasn't to be, and we headed back to the car and home.

Any rustling in the trees or strange noises emanating from the bushes that night were likely not to be beings from another world or spirits of the dead, but instead a member of the party relieving themselves after a few pints of beer. While I couldn't doubt the sincerity and conviction of those who had experienced these strange phenomena, I couldn't in any way bridge the gap between their experiences and my doubts. I think we would all agree that Rendlesham Forest is a magical place, but for very different reasons.

Andy Marriott is a freelance writer specialising in screenplays and travel writing and has a sceptical interest in all things paranormal.

Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

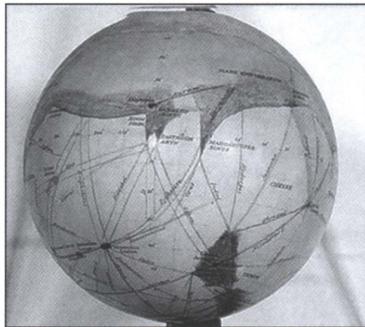


A Mars a Day . . .

It struck me when perusing a set of photographs of the surface of Mars from the NASA Spirit and Opportunity rovers that this planet has loomed large in the minds of not only scientists but also pseudoscientists for many years. So I thought I'd devote this column to providing an update on three of the major areas in which the red planet has featured over the last hundred years or so.

Water on Mars

In 1858, Angelo Secchi used the word 'canali' (channels) to describe linear features that he had seen on the surface of Mars; however it was the detailed map produced by Giovanni Schiaparelli in 1877 that gave rise to great discussion amongst the astronomical community as to the reality and the possible origins of these Martian channels.



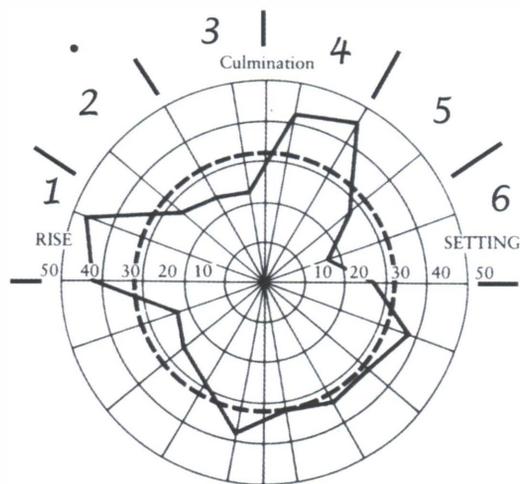
Until Percival Lowell entered the debate in 1894, even those astronomers who accepted the reality of the features were thinking in terms of natural origins but Lowell mis-translated the word 'canali' as 'canals' thereby imbuing the features with an artificial origin. In 1901 he produced a globe of his observations (made at his observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona), which is illustrated above. Soon afterwards he published his books *Mars and its canals* (1906), and *Mars as the abode of life* (1909), in which he presented his theory that the canals were built by intelligent beings. These ideas may seem quaint from a 21st century perspective but were taken seriously to the extent that Lowell was asked to provide an entry on the subject in the 1910 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which included the following: "In steady air the canals are perfectly distinct lines, not unlike the Fraunhofer ones of the Spectrum, pencil lines or gossamer filaments according to size". And referring to the purpose of the canals as a planet-wide irrigation system: "These seasonal changes have been carefully followed at Flagstaff, and the law governing them detected. They are found to depend upon the melting of the polar caps. After the melting is under way the canals next to the cap proceed to darken, and the darkening thence progresses regularly down the latitudes. Twice this happens every Martian year, first from one cap and then six Martian months later from the other. The action reminds one of the quickening of the Nile valley after the melting of the snows in Abyssinia; only with planet-wide rhythm".

Of course, we now know that the canals were figments of Lowell's and other astronomers' imagination but I feel sure that Percival would have been delighted to read the words of Steven Squyres, the lead scientist for the current Mars rover missions as quoted in the *New Scientist* Christmas edition last year: "The scientific focus is to try to determine whether or not Mars ever had conditions at its surface that would have been suitable for life. The surface today is dry and barren, yet you have these tantalising clues that it might once have been different – river beds, mineral deposits associated with hot springs." I can't help thinking that, even if things don't come round in a full circle, they do sometimes perhaps make it through 270 degrees – from ET to nematode worms (or whatever) and from canals to river beds. (For further information on this topic see Paul Chamber's article *Behind the Red Planet; The Skeptic* 12-3 & 4.)

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The Mars Effect

The idea of a 'Mars effect' in astrology was put forward in 1955 by the French psychologist Michel Gauquelin. The hypothesis was that Mars is in certain positions in the sky more often at the time of birth of sports champions than at the birth times of other people – and it arose from an analysis of the birth data of several hundred French sportsmen. To analyse his data, Gauquelin divided the path of Mars through the sky, from rising to setting into six equal sectors, with the start of sector one where Mars rises; that of sector four when Mars crosses the north-south meridian (culmination), and sector six



ending when Mars sets. The period when Mars is below the horizon is similarly divided into sectors 7-12. Given that the rise time of Mars can be at any time of the day (and is unrelated to the seasons) then unless the position of Mars at the time of birth is causally related

to one's sporting prowess, the expectation is that when a statistical plot of the position of Mars at the time of birth is made (of the type shown at the start of this section) the data will give a roughly circular shape. In fact, as shown in the figure, there was a departure from randomness in Gauquelin's data with the number of champions born in sectors one and four being significantly greater than that expected by chance. Although the effect was most marked for Mars and sports champions, Gauquelin also found correlations between the positions of individual planets and prominence in other professions.

Since Gauquelin's results were first published there have been many similar tests of his and other data by a number of different groups – and much discussion and argument with Michel Gauquelin himself before his untimely death in 1991. The entire Mars Effect saga has been closely followed by Dutch mathematician and skeptic, Jan Willem Nienhuys, and is detailed in an article by him that is available on the website of the Dutch group, Skepsis, and from which the quotations below are taken (<http://www.skepsis.nl/mars.html>). In general, where tests were carried out independently of Gauquelin, no Mars Effect was found – and resulted in discussions *ad nauseum* about what does and doesn't constitute a sports champion. Such a test was one carried out by the *Comité Français pour l'Etude des Phénomènes Paranormaux* (CFEPP) using, in part, Gauquelin's data. According to Nienhuys, this test was particularly important: "The value of the French test is its protocol. The test determined what remains of the Mars effect when one starts entirely from scratch, without the help of Gauquelin, and the answer is: "nothing"."

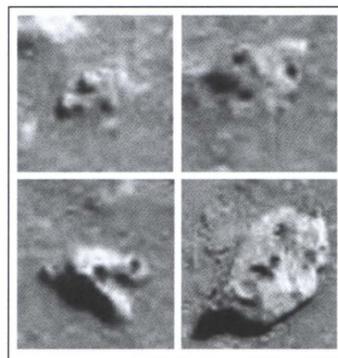
Historical data on birth dates and times inevitably contain errors and discrepancies and Gauquelin made proposals to correct the data used by CFEPP with a view to re-analysing it. However, Nienhuys found that: "Regrettably, Gauquelin's proposals to amend the CFEPP's database revealed a severe selection bias on his part". Full quantitative detail of this bias is given in Nienhuys' article, but among other things it involved dealing with the necessity of removing unreliable data from the database. Nienhuys conjectures that (unwittingly): "Gauquelin systematically threw away 'unreliable' data of champions that weren't born in a key sector" but was less assiduous in throwing away similar data for champions who were born in a key sector.

Nienhuys' overall conclusion is that: "The Mars Effect hypothesis was based on data collected by Gauquelin. The evidence for Gauquelin's massive bias is compelling. No value can be attached to the hypotheses these data gave rise to. This does not imply any willful deceit on the part of Gauquelin". So the Mars Effect, like the canals, when examined more closely simply disappears.

Martian artifacts

I would have thought that since the advent of planetary probes with high-resolution cameras on board, the days

of imaginary artifacts on Mars would have come to an end when the canals 'evaporated'. But, boy, how wrong could I be? Since the 2 km wide formation shown here was recorded by the Viking spacecraft on the Cydonia plain on Mars in the late 1970s, the whole issue of ancient Martian civilisations and the artifacts they left behind has returned with renewed vigour. (The similarities between the canals saga and the issue of the 'Face on Mars' (FoM) was discussed in Paul Chamber's article in *The Skeptic* (12-3 & 4). Subsequent images from



the Mars Surveyor probe in 1998, which dispelled any idea of artifacts in many peoples' minds, have just added fuel to the fire as far as FoM enthusiasts are concerned. We now have not only the FoM itself, but also pyramids, cities, major conspiracies, cover-ups, and even the recent discovery of a ramp leading to an opening in the side of the original face. (As a civilised people, the Martians clearly also had wheelchair access to all public buildings.) The main exponent of all this fascinating stuff is Richard Hoagland, whose book *Monuments of Mars: A City on The Edge of Forever* is avail-

able from Amazon – but you might want to request it from your library. I recommend that anyone interested also take a look at the website of the *Enterprise Mission* (<http://www.enterprise-mission.com>) where there is endless detail on all this.

But since images have started arriving from the latest Mars rovers showing detail below a millimetre in size, we now have the capability of resolving not only Martian monuments, but also everyday objects. Who can now doubt the reality of an ancient Martian civilisation given the clear images (clockwise from the top LHS) of a partially buried human skull or mummified head, an alien skull, an android head and a (small) weapon of mass destruction.

For these pictures and others of similar quality (taken directly from the NASA images without any apparent processing) of objects ranging from alien anchovies, through cigarette packets and beer bottles to fossilized Martian condoms, I recommend a visit to the [fffast.com](http://www.fffast.com/mars/) website (<http://www.fffast.com/mars/>).

Steve Donnelly is a physics professor at the University of Salford.

Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



SCEPTICS ARE LIKELY to agree that rationality is good. At the same time, trying to organise all aspects of human life according to rigorous rational rules and principles is almost certainly doomed to failure.

The obvious examples here are the state socialisms of the old Soviet Union and South East Asia. Let me instead offer as a cautionary tale London Underground's fight against fare dodgers and one of its victims: me.

It would be tempting to think that a rational solution to the problem of fare dodging requires rules that are transparent, consistent and treat everyone equally. This is not how the system works when it relies on prosecuting fare-dodgers to enforce payment. Why? Because not all failures to pay the right fare are the same and prosecution is only appropriate for those who are deliberately and systematically trying to avoid paying. You don't want to haul in front of the courts passengers who make a mistake or, in a hurry, without change and facing a long queue, think "sod it" as a one-off. So when the choice is between a slap on the wrists or prosecution, you need to apply discretion and judgement.

Since the good sense this requires cannot easily be codified, this means you lose transparency and you inevitably do not end up treating everyone the same. Indeed, given human nature, you will almost certainly introduce injustice into the system, as we know people are more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to well-dressed white professionals than they are grungy youths or those with different skin pigmentation.

Given these facts, the penalty fare system, under which anyone found not to have the right ticket must pay a £10 fine, may appear both fairer and more rational. It is consistent, treats everyone the same and, importantly for rationalists, eliminates unreliable personal judgement and discretion. Brilliant.

Except, of course, that it isn't. The problem is that the penalty fare system – now abolished on London Underground but operating still in various regional railways and bus routes – does not allow for the rectification of innocent errors, as my own story shows.

One day, a good few years ago, I found myself at King's Cross without a ticket, for perfectly innocent reasons. I tried to put the mistake right but was instead issued with a penalty fare. Not to worry, I thought. A quick letter explaining my error would put things straight. So, bullishly, I sent London Underground what I thought was an unanswerable letter of defence.

Dear Sir/Madam,

On occasion I have made a mistake and left a café without paying, or been given too much change in a shop, or have even walked out of a shop with some-

thing I have not paid for. A crook does these things deliberately. A dishonest person, on realising the mistake, considers himself lucky. The honest person returns and rectifies the error. This is what I always do and invariably I am thanked by the proprietor for my honesty. The one exception to this rule is London Underground. If you make a mistake on LU, you are rewarded for your honesty with a £10 fine. Imagine if I went back to a shop saying that I had been given too much change and was then fined an extra £10! Total nonsense, of course. But, London Underground actually operates in such a way as to make it impossible for the customer to rectify an honest mistake. This must make it unique.

But it is even worse than this. Your staff operate with no discretion whatsoever. Worse than this, they make the customer feel that they are obliged to pay the fine on the spot, which, as we all know, they are not. Only when challenged will they offer to issue a penalty fare notice instead. In other words, your staff deliberately and willingly mislead the public as to their rights when issuing penalty fares. I find this unacceptable.

All these general complaints would not matter a jot if my error was not, indeed an accident. What would a sensible person conclude? Well, if I were trying to deliberately avoid paying a fare, I would not choose a heavily manned and gated station like Kings Cross as my terminus. Secondly, I have seen many people tuck in behind someone else at the gates and go through behind them without paying. The fact that I did not try to do this shows I was not trying to avoid paying. Thirdly, a fare dodger does not voluntarily queue up at the window-formerly-known-as-excess-fares to try and pay. Fourthly, I started my journey at Finsbury Park, where I never see staff at the gates, which means I do not have the habit of checking my ticket as I enter, making such mistakes possible. Fifthly, I have tickets from previous days (enclosed), which shows I am not in the habit of not paying.

Given these circumstances, I cannot see what justification you have for issuing this fine. If you do not withdraw the fine, I can only conclude that you operate the penalty fare policy without any thought as to fairness or justice. Is it just an easy means of clawing back lost revenue, by fining innocent and honest customers for their occasional mistakes, or is it a serious anti-fare-dodging measure? If it is the latter, which I hope it is, then you will withdraw my fine.

The reply was short and not, to my mind, to the point. It simply stated the terms of the London

Regional transport (Penalty Fares) Act 1992, which makes a customer travelling on LU without a valid ticket liable for a civil debt of the penalty fare. The manager, Paul Naylor, concluded, "in the circumstances you have described, the penalty fare was properly charged."

Clearly London Underground was sticking to the line that as they were legally permitted to impose the fine, that was the end of the matter. But, ignoring the rationalistic logic of the penalty fares policy, I thought good-old British common-sense, discretion, and fair play might have a role. So in my next letter, I attempted to appeal to their better nature.

Dear Mr Naylor,

Thank you for your letter of 10 January concerning my penalty fare notice. I am writing a second time because I am still baffled by your insistence that I pay the penalty. Your response hinges on the fact that the law allows London Underground to charge a penalty fare to any customer travelling without a ticket, whatever the reason. My response to this is simple: Can LU exercise any discretion in the exercise of this law?

If the answer is no – which I am certain it is not – then the law is even worse than I thought.

If the answer is yes, the question now is, why do you refuse to exercise that discretion in this case? You say, "We are not questioning your honesty." So tell me: if you do not exercise your discretion when an honest mistake is made, when do you exercise it? I would be intrigued to see your policy on this matter.

I shall wait until I receive your reply before taking any further action on this matter.

Alas, my attempt to snare Mr Naylor was unsuccessful. The reply came this time from a certain Julia Haley. She admitted that discretion was permitted, but still refused to budge on my case. She wrote, "Each appeal is dealt with on an individual basis, taking all points raised by the customer into consideration. I am not able to provide details of these guidelines or circumstances where appeals against Penalty Fares are upheld. If this information was [*sic*] made available, there is a possibility that the appeal procedure would be open to abuse."

So, London Underground could act with discretion, but only if it knew the circumstances when it would do so, to stop sneaky people like myself finding out and tailoring our appeals accordingly.

By this point I was angered and impressed in equal measure by London Underground's obstinacy, which to my mind seemed unreasonable but perhaps should

really have been seen as too reasoned. My only objective now was to get them to admit what their absurd practices boiled down to. Thus, I despatched my final letter, in which I asked:

Do you agree that:

If a passenger, entirely by accident, starts on a journey on London Underground without the correct ticket, if they realise their mistake, there is nothing they can do to put it right and London Underground will issue a penalty fare of £10. In other words, there is no way in which such a customer can put right their honest error. If the passenger, at the end of their journey, attempts to pay the correct fare, they will be issued with a penalty fare. This will happen even though there is no evidence at all of deliberate fare-dodging, such as attempting to pass through an exit barrier without a ticket. Although LU has the power to exercise discretion, it will not do so in the case I have described above unless further, unspecified conditions are also met. These conditions are not made public by London Underground, so an appellant cannot know why it is their appeal has been rejected.

My synopsis was not disputed. In her reply, Ms Haley wrote, "I can confirm therefore, that if a customer makes a genuine error resulting in them not being in possession of a valid ticket, then a penalty fare will be payable". This implicitly confirmed my statement that "there is no way in which such a customer can put right their honest error."

This to me showed the bankruptcy of the penalty fare system. London Underground's problems with fare dodging are perennial. But instead of targeting the fare dodgers, their tactic was to collect tenners off thousands of honest travellers who didn't have the correct fare. Meanwhile the real fare-dodgers passed through gates behind ticket-holders, or simply vaulting the barriers.

The moral of this story is, I think, a profound one. It is not that rational systems can be less fair and effective than less rational ones. It goes deeper than this. It is that the penalty fare system was not rational precisely because rationality cannot be reduced to the following of fixed rules. Good reasoning requires good judgement and can't be defined purely by algorithms. Excessive rationalism, which tries to strip away this element of judgement, is thus the enemy of true rationality.

Of course, my story does not prove this point. But I invite you to consider the possibility that it does illustrate it. And if I'm right, that leaves the whole idea of what rationality is much vaguer and less precise than we champions of reason may desire it to be.



Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* (www.philosophers.co.uk) and author of *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press). See www.julianbaggini.com.

ASKE News

From the chairman of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry, Michael Heap



AS THIS IS a double issue of the *Skeptic* the Editor has asked me to do a double-sized feature on ASKE news. Well, this would be fine if there were double the quantity of news to report. But there isn't. I shall therefore (but only this once, I promise) also use this column to discuss some issues of interest to sceptics.

ASKE News: Subscribing to ASKE

Now is the time to subscribe to ASKE for 2004, with four newsletters planned for this year as well as another issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* (see below). The annual fee is still only £10.

The Skeptical Intelligencer 2003 (Volume 6)

This has now been distributed to members but there are a few copies left. The subject of this issue is 'Reported Sightings of Unusual Creatures' and featured contributions on big cat sightings (M Heap), cryptozoology and linguistics (M Newbrook), 'the Devil's hoof-marks' (DLF Sealy), the giant squid (CGM Paxton), and, briefly, the moa (B Spittle). David Sealy also puts in an appeal on behalf of cryptozoology. There is also a cryptic crossword for sceptics, a short one-act play entitled *The Frontiers of Science*, and predictions for 2004. Readers of *The Skeptic* may purchase the *Skeptical Intelligencer* for £3.50 (incl. p&tp). There are, incidentally, still a few copies of the issues for 2001 (*Delusional and Anomalous Beliefs*) and 2002 (*Science, Health and Medicine*), which cost £3.50 and £4.50 respectively (incl. p&tp). Send a cheque with your order payable to ASKE to Mike Heap, 10 Woodholm Road, Sheffield, S11 9HT.

The Skeptical Intelligencer 2004 (Volume 7)

This will appear towards the end of the year and concerns pseudo-history and pseudo-archaeology. David Sealy, Mark Newbrook, John Wall, Mike Brass, Doug Weller and Lee Keener have all expressed an interest in contributing papers. Additional articles are invited from anyone else with an interest in and knowledge (amateur or professional) of this field. Papers are usually reviewed by the Editor only, unless an inspection by someone with special knowledge in the field is deemed appropriate. In addition, humorous and anecdotal contributions, however brief, are welcome on any subject.

'Mortal Minds' by GM Woerlee

Those of you who attended the 11th European Congress in London last September may recall a very scholarly lecture by Dr Woerlee, who is an anaesthetist in Leiden, entitled *The Physiology of "Tunnel" and "Darkness" Experiences*. This presentation concerned the physiological basis of 'near-death experiences' that

Dr Woerlee has studied for many years. He has now written up his observations and ideas in a book entitled *Mortal Minds: A Biology of the Soul and the Dying Experience*. The information given in the book about the publishers is in Dutch (the book itself is in English) and is as follows: Uitgegeven door De Tijdstroom uitgeverij, Postbus 775, 3500 AT Utrecht; Email <info@tijdstroom.nl>. The ISBN number is 90 5898 057 X.

Incidentally, I wonder if any readers can throw some light on the following? In the 1960s my English teacher told the class about someone who had a theory that when a person dies there is a chemical reaction in the brain that creates a feeling of ecstasy that appears to last for ever, and this is 'heaven'. Does anyone know who this person was? (I think we were studying John Donne's *Death be not Proud* at the time.) The idea appears very similar to modern explanations of 'near-death experiences'.

The Fifth World Skeptics Congress, Padua, Italy, October 8-10, 2004

Just in case readers of *The Skeptic* miss out on any publicity concerning the next World Skeptics Congress, I am giving it a plug here. The location is excellent for those who would like to include a trip to Venice in their itinerary. The congress is organised by CICAP (the Italian Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) and CSICOP. James Randi will be attending and in fact will be in Europe from September 24 until October 11, although as yet I know of no arrangements for him to come to the UK. The congress website is <http://www.cicap.org/congress/>.

The official language of the conference will be English but as some presentations can only be delivered in Italian, they will be translated in English. The programme starts on Friday morning with opening addresses by Professor Steno Ferluga of CICAP and Professor Paul Kurtz of CSICOP. Congress symposia include *Parapsychology and skeptics: is dialogue possible?*, *Hoaxes, fakes and myths*, *Investigating mysteries*, *Magic and the psychology of deception*, *Alternative medicine can be hazardous to your health!*, and *What future for scepticism?*. Speakers with whom readers will be familiar include Willem Betz, Barry Beyerstein, Edzard Ernst, Chris French, Robert Morris, Joe Nickell, Massimo Polidoro, James Randi, Wally Sampson, Amardeo Sarma, and Richard Wiseman.

There are some exciting additional events, as follows: *The World of Galileo Galilei*. Hosted by Piero Angela, with special guests, live experiments, films and demonstrations.

Ian Rowland: *Mind Reader and Mind Motivator*. *That's Amazing!* A magical evening with James Randi and his friends. Hosted by Massimo Polidoro with mag-

ical performances by Luigi Garlaschelli, Joe Nickell, Ian Rowland, Richard Wiseman, and Ray Hyman.

Lunch at the Skeptics' Opera House. Opera singers will present 'sceptical' arias from famous operas.

The Symposium of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations (ECSO)

At the time of writing, according to the ECSO website (<http://www.ecso.org>), 'The 2004 ECSO Symposium is still under discussion. It will either be part of the upcoming 5th World Skeptics Congress in Padua, Italy, or be postponed to a later date'.

The Motivation for Scepticism

I hear that Mr Uri Geller has come to the defence of Mr Michael Jackson. He has announced that he has hypnotised Mr Jackson and obtained his denial that he has ever abused children. But before I give my own reaction to this ...

As I have declared in one of my previous contributions, ASKE is hoping to expand its membership in this and future years, and while applicants are welcome regardless of their educational or professional background, we are particularly keen to include people with expert knowledge from as wide a range of academic and scientific disciplines as possible. But what is it that we suppose all these people have in common that persuades them to part with their annual £10 subscription (and sometimes, out of generosity, rather more)?

First, there is a common acceptance that there is such a thing as objective reality or truth, at least so far as the material world is concerned. Second, I believe there is the (at least implicit) acknowledgement that true, reliable knowledge about this world is very difficult to acquire. It demands careful and often painstaking observation and the willingness and ability to communicate faithfully what one has observed. It requires adherence to rules of logic and occasionally mathematics to explain one's observations and the discipline to frame those explanations, whenever possible, within the limits of existing knowledge, foregoing any temptation to indulge in unnecessary flights of fancy. Finally, there is the willingness repeatedly to check one's observations and the validity of one's explanations and theories (and have others check them) and to modify or discount them when further evidence requires this.

Although some would have it otherwise, I believe that the above process is not so different from what takes place in everyday life. My favourite way of illustrating this is the 'noise in the night' example. What does one do when one hears a sudden noise in the middle of the night, other than roll over and go back to sleep? You can construct a scenario that takes you through all of the above stages, one that everyone would understand and would find neither special nor unusual.

Is it not the case that many people earn their living

(or are supposed to) in varying degrees by seeking or communicating 'the truth'? Scientists, teachers, scholars and writers of non-fiction are obvious examples. Certainly we would also include people working in medicine and professions allied to it. Do not car mechanics, and indeed anyone responsible for determining what is at fault with any piece of machinery, also qualify? What about policemen and other investigators of crime? Lawyers? And, dare we say it, journalists, politicians and, wait for it, estate agents?

Now, I imagine the reader is protesting, 'But seeking the truth, or at least communicating it, is exactly what many of these people do not do: they tell lies!' And this is exactly my point: real truth is very difficult to acquire. But presumed truth and knowledge endow the claimant of such with power. They also sell.

Now it is true that the law, for example, provides some redress for those who have suffered at the hands of professionals who, wilfully or negligently, have not adhered to the process described above, with its inbuilt system of accountability. Nevertheless it is easy enough for people not to commit themselves to this and still to reap the benefits of power, status and wealth that their professional activity or trade brings them. Hence each one of us has constantly to interpret the ideas and claims of others, much of which are either false or only approximate to reality. 'We see through a glass darkly'.

It is for these reasons that I believe committed sceptics are, at least in part, motivated by moral considerations. And I believe, again in part, that this is why they can at times be so angry and hostile. But this is obviously not the whole story.

In an article entitled *Stupid Sceptic Tricks* in a previous edition of *The Skeptic* (16-3), David W Owens presents a catalogue of tactics that sceptics use to attack and belittle the ideas and beliefs of others. No doubt what he says is true, but as I was reading through these I could not help but be reminded of everyday life. At least my own experience has been that whenever I or anyone else comes out with some unusual observation or unconventional idea, resistance, disbelief and ridicule are not uncommon reactions. I must confess that I have always managed to take this in my stride (I can give as good as I take). It's a healthy risk that anyone runs when going out on a limb.

Actually, the abuse that scientists reserve for one another when they disagree makes Mr Owens's list of sceptics' misdemeanours look exceedingly benign. I have heard stories about rival theoreticians who would not even remain in the same room together. But good ideas will out. In the 1920s and 30s a minority of scientists were lampooned (on one occasion in no less an organ than *The New York Times*) for advocating the development of spaceships. Conventional wisdom said that space is a vacuum so there is nothing for an engine to thrust against. But who had the last laugh?

Now, what was I going to say about Mr Geller? ...



Michael Heap is the Chairman of ASKE and a clinical and forensic psychologist in Sheffield. ASKE email address = general@aske.org.uk
ASKE website = <http://www.aske.org>

Reviews



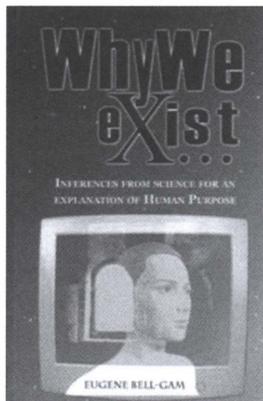
COSMIC GUINEA PIGS

Why We Exist: Inferences from Science for an explanation of Human Purpose

by Eugene Bell-Gam

Pen Press Publishers Ltd, £9.99, ISBN 1-904018-86-6

Judging by the title alone I thought this book might be an interesting read even if I disagreed with the author's conclusions. Unfortunately, when I read the blurb on the back warning bells started to ring when I saw questions like "Where did our life force come from?" and "Where does it go when we die?". The mention of a "life force" suggested some kind of quasi-religious viewpoint, but Bell-Gam's thesis is far worse than that though – it's bizarre.



Early chapters in this slim volume (it's less than 200 pages) focus on origins, and it's here one starts to groan when anti-evolutionary, creationist, and intelligent design arguments are trotted out. It's curious why he's sympathetic to young earth creationism because it's not crucial to his thesis, but it is to some brands of biblical literalism.

Bell-Gam believes that we are part of a cosmic experiment, what he calls the Solar Laboratory Theory. His evidence for this comes from arguments for intelligent design and several spurious analogies between the brain and computer technology. By the time he got round to explaining his view of human purpose I'd lost interest; he doesn't have anything original or especially insightful to say about it anyway. One is left with the impression that a modest knowledge of science has been mixed with pseudoscience and a hefty dose of muddled thinking.

A quick investigation showed that Pen Press is a self-publishing outfit which charges authors to publish and market their work. I can only conclude that Bell-Gam should have saved his money, and that readers save their money by avoiding this over-priced nonsense. The only positive thing about this book is that the writing is quite good and there are references at the end of each chapter.

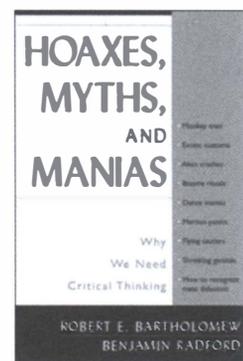
Dene Bebbington

WHAT IS NORMAL?

Hoaxes, Myths and Manias

by Robert E Bartholomew and Benjamin Radford
Prometheus, ISBN 1591020484

Readers of this journal will hardly need to be instructed in the need for critical thinking, of course, but you could usefully put this book into the hands of a bright youngster who shows disquieting signs of tending to believe what he is told. By following the guidelines lucidly set out in the introductory chapters, he will learn to avoid the pitfalls of credulity and grow up to be as leery a doubter as you or me. Discussion of general themes such as "what is normal?" and "memory reconstruction" will open his eyes to the wider picture, teaching him that normality is a relative concept, and that witness testimony is a fragile commodity to be handled with care.



These general themes are illustrated with a fascinating diversity of case histories which demonstrate those principles in action. Drawing largely on articles previously published in *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and solidly backed with extensive references, they range from the flying saucer myth to shrinking genitals panics, from mad gassers to invading Martians. The astonishing chronicle of England's black helicopters, contributed by that doughty investigator David Clarke, admirably shows how the media and witnesses between them conjure up a mass delusion which impresses by its extent – until it is disassembled item by crumbling item.

The book is evidently aimed at use in an educational context, to judge by the set of questions at the end of each chapter. But readers of any age – this elderly reviewer included – will learn much from this excellent manual, which I strongly recommend.

Hilary Evans

A VISION OF SUSTAINABILITY

Inamorata

by Joseph Gangemi

Viking, \$24.95 ISBN 0-67-03279-4

I suspect that many of us who are intrigued by paranormal phenomena also enjoy a good mystery. *Inamorata* satisfies both appetites.

In his first novel, Joseph Gangemi takes us to Philadelphia during a revival of the Spiritualist movement. It's 1922 and the *Scientific American* has offered \$5,000 for conclusive evidence of psychic phenomena. Our protagonist, 23-year old Harvard psychology graduate student Martin Finch, works for a professor who is the head of judges for the *Scientific American* contest. Finch's job is to investigate the contestants' claims of psychic ability. After exposing several frauds, Finch is assigned to Philadelphia in his professor's stead to investigate a medium, Mina Crawley, who has come highly recommended by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.



Upon arrival and exposure to Mina's feminine charms, Finch must fight to keep his investigative objectivity. The story's suspense intensifies as Mina's abilities are tested and her relationship with Finch develops. He explores several possible explanations for Mina's ability. Is it supernatural as claimed? Is it an extremely well-executed magician's trick? Or does his own field of study, psychology, hold the answer?

Readers who are familiar with paranormal history may recognize many of the characters names from real-life. The allusions to the sexual behaviour of Mina's husband, Dr Arthur Crawley, may however seem over-the-top for readers not familiar with English magician and occultist Aleister Crowley.

With references to the Catholic church and a dying sceptic's admission that he wanted to be proven wrong, we are reminded how powerfully the human psyche needs to believe – to project itself into an eternal existence. Finch and his professor primarily, and other characters to some degree, each struggle with the tension between believing and not believing. I like that Gangemi stays true to this tension, deftly weaving evidence for multiple explanations for Mina's seeming success as a medium. Ultimately, he lets the reader decide what or whether to believe.

Gangemi's degree in psychology is put to good use with specific descriptions of mental disorders and psychological theories. It's always nice to accidentally learn something while reading for pleasure. And a pleasure it was.

Alicia Hill Ruiz

HOAXES, FRAUDS AND DELUSIONS

Pseudoscience and the Paranormal

by Terence Hines

Prometheus Books, \$21.00, ISBN 1573929794

Is there no limit to the number of strange things people believe? This updated edition of Terence Hines' 1988 book offers an intriguing and sometimes dispiriting

introduction to the strange world of pseudoscience. Hines covers a wide range of topics including so-called psychics, life after death, psychology and parapsychology, astrology, UFOs, faith healing, alternative medicine and other fads of the past two centuries. All the usual suspects are here – the Bermuda Triangle, the Turin Shroud, the Roswell 'aliens' and many more. Hines gives an admirably concise summary of each, and sums up the main arguments against them.

The inevitable drawback is that there is insufficient space for a detailed discussion of each subject, but Hines gives a useful and wide-ranging bibliography which will help readers explore any or all of these topics further.

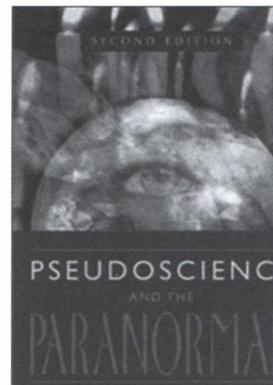
The section on faith healing is particularly fascinating, exploring the sad truth behind so-called 'cures'. Hines cites the case of one cancer patient who suffered severe spinal injuries as a direct result of her 'miracle cure'. She was one of many who died despite their supposed 'cures'.

Some of Hines' topics are more controversial. He casts doubts on many aspects of Freudian psychology and on some environmental health scares.

Perhaps a third edition could include a better index. For example, given that the first illustration in the book is one of the Cottingley fairy photographs, it's frustrating to find that the index has no entry for "Cottingley Fairies". (The case is indexed under "Doyle" instead.) Some of the illustrations are very poorly reproduced.

But these are minor quibbles with a useful and interesting book, which serves as a valuable examination of a wide range of hoaxes, frauds and popular delusions.

Chris Willis



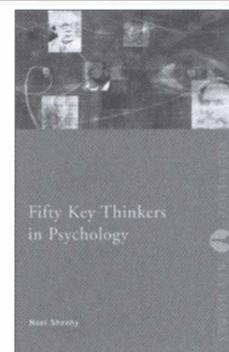
KEY TO WHAT?

Fifty Key Thinkers in Psychology

by Noel Sheehy

Routledge, ISBN 0 415 16774 4 (hbk), 0 415 16775 2

Psychologists will recognize the usual suspects, and a few less expected ones, among these 'key thinkers'. Each gets a page or so of biography, and four or five of exposition. These will be useful to students who have already done say a year of psychology, and want summaries, and to teachers who want a few personal



details. The problem is that, first, the thinkers are presented alphabetically rather than chronologically, and second, too little is said as to why they tackled the problems they did, and how, and what it all meant – at least in terms understandable by the lay person. What, in fact, are they the key to?

Psychology, like all science, is cumulative, but more than most, it is reflexive, part of its own subject matter. Understanding needs some grasp of its social, cultural and scientific setting, and of the progression of enquiry. These I did not find here. The reader may be left with an impression of unrelated bits and pieces.

John Radford

REAL SCIENCE FOR REAL PROBLEMS

The Scientific Study of Society

by Max Steuer

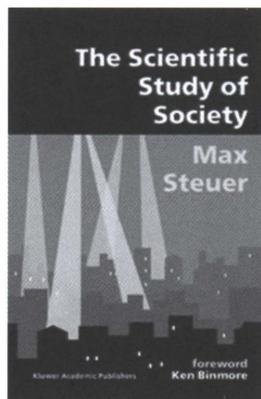
Kluwer, £38.50, ISBN 1402073216

There has been much noise from postmodernist quarters and other niches claiming that social science is an impossible quest. Steuer aims to show the error of this view, not by engaging in philosophical dispute, but by systematically displaying a wealth of research in the five social sciences: anthropology, economics, sociology, social psychology and political science.

In exactly the same way that a proper scientific approach to natural phenomena can rescue us from the delusions and fancies of mere speculation and figmentalism (my word for “belief in figments”), a strong case can be made – and Steuer makes it – for the value of real social science. Sceptics who may be suspicious of the goings-on in sociology and the other disciplines should be reassured by the huge amount of serious empirical investigation into the workings of society. Steuer writes that “the book could have been called *Social Science: What It Is, How It Works, and How to Spot the Impostor.*”

The main part of the book comprises chapters on crime, migration, the family, money, housing and religion, and each chapter shows how each science has thrown light on these areas, covering research carried out during the 1990s.

In the chapter on religion, Steuer reports on a study by economists that makes “a persuasive case that the introduction of the doctrine of purgatory by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages can be reasonably understood as a profitable product innovation to take to the market.” One of the researchers in political science argues that the phenomenon of churches beginning to champion the poor rather than propping up



hierarchical regimes is best explained in terms of competition from other religions.

This book is a substantial undertaking, and the author, an economist at the LSE, has done an unusually good job of summarizing a vast range of material in clear jargon-free English

Paul Taylor

GORE AND LORE

How Mumbo Jumbo Took Over the World

by Francis Wheen

Fourth Estate, £16.99, ISBN 0007140967

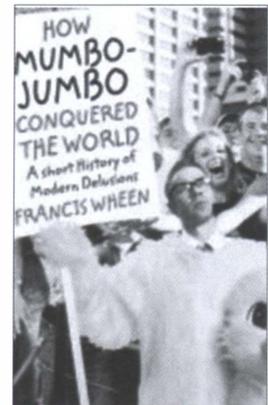
This is a book full of tales of the irrational. Throughout three hundred-odd pages you feel the weight of far more material and erudition than can possibly be squeezed into one volume.

You won't forget the image of the Blairs rebirthing within a 'Mayan' pyramid while smearing each other with mud to the rhythm of ancient chants. Thinking of Edward de Bono using 'water logic' to shave (moving his head instead of the razor) conjures up one bloody mess that should raise a smile.

In amongst the great yarns however is a serious purpose. Wheen believes that the achievements of the Enlightenment have been overthrown by a mess of economic fundamentalists, holy warriors, mystics, and sensationalist historians.

The real and devastating consequences he illustrates in the contrast between America's presidential elections of 1800 and of 2000. The former was contested by Adams and Jefferson, two major Enlightenment thinkers. In 2000, Al Gore identified Francis Bacon as “the greatest villain who ever lived because he assumed that human intellect could safely analyse the world without reference to ... God”. George Bush proclaimed his dependence on Jesus at every possible turn.

Wheen quotes Jefferson approvingly “Truth will prevail unless by human interposition disarmed ... Errors cease to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them”. Yet, in 2000, free peoples enthusiastically elect Mumbo Jumbo. Wheen seems unsure whether Jefferson was plain wrong and the attractions of simple nonsense are too great, or if some political and economic form of Jefferson's “tyranny and kings” is at work in society holding reason at bay. He has made the case that nonsense is a great force in the world and that it has awful consequences. How and why he has left to another book.



Gaius Vincent

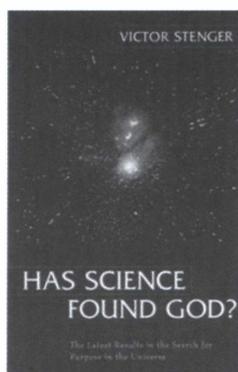
THE ANSWER IS A DEFINITE, UNCOMPROMISING NO!

Has Science Found God? The Latest Results in the Search for Purpose in the Universe

by Victor J Stenger

Prometheus Books, £16.30, ISBN 1591020182

In recent decades authors with scientific training have asserted that science is compatible with the existence of God. Some have asserted that science has proved the actuality of the Divine. The Templeton Foundation devotes millions to showing the compatibility of science and religion and awards an annual prize larger than the Nobel. Stenger examines these claims for the god of science, and more generically for any transcendent, non-material element in the universe. "If God or any other transcendent entity affects physical events and human affairs as significantly as most of their believers think they do, then these effects should be empirically detectable and confirmable by established scientific methods." (p. 339)



Stenger is an emeritus Professor of Physics who has contributed to cosmology, and specifically to understanding of the neutrino. He is thus well qualified to deal with the origin and nature of the universe and its laws. He also considers the beginning and nature of life, and other direct empirical claims for God or the supernatural. He finds all of these claims "not proven" at best, and unproven in most specific instances. The book is very much limited to factual religious claims labelled "scientific" by their authors.

Stenger gives an introduction to present understanding of Big Bang cosmology, and why this does not allow positing a creator-god. Although he keeps it simple, Stenger does require some understanding of mathematics, and without this his argument is not always easy to follow. He can also be quite funny when considering the use of the word "quantum", which appears in virtually everything written on quack medicine, by authors who have no idea of its precise meaning.

Stenger finds no evidence for God or other supernatural forces. This very much rules out the god of Christians, Jews, and Muslims who intervenes directly in human affairs. His evidence questions the need for any god.

Wolf Roder

ENGINES OF FOLLY

Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid

by Robert J Sternberg (Editor)

Yale University Press, £12.50, ISBN 0300101708

The title alone triggers a cascade of questions. Is smart the same as intelligent? Does that mean that stupid is a synonym for unintelligent? What kind of behaviours are stupid anyway? These are tricky questions to answer, even though we all have an intuitive idea of what smart and stupid are, just as we all know smart people who behave in ways that are irrational (does that mean that rational and smart are the same thing?).

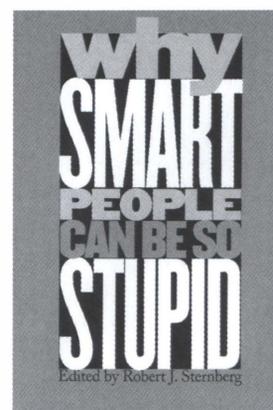
The contributors to this interesting and eclectic collection of papers attempt to unravel the ins and outs of the topic and to cast some light on an issue that is rarely addressed in anything but colloquial terms. The tone of the pieces here, in contrast, are decidedly on the academic side, though not to the extent that they are inaccessible to all but the expert. A couple of papers stand out in particular.

One case of a smart person acting dumb that is analysed in some detail is that of Bill Clinton. Diane Halpern does a good job of deconstructing the Monica Lewinsky scandal. This is, most people would agree, a case where someone nominally quite smart engaged in a behaviour that was incredibly dumb. Rather than adopt a moralistic tone, the author analyses Clinton's behaviour in terms of his previous history. He had been getting away with similar activities for years and had survived. One of his errors, according to Halpern, is that he had not adapted to the changed circumstance of being in the Whitehouse. In this respect stupid behaviour is related to a failure to adapt to the environment.

In contrast David Perkins, in *Engines of Folly*, analyses the problem using the tools of complexity theory. In this fascinating paper he uses the ideas of self-organised criticality and emergent properties of complex systems to propose a theory of behaviour that encompasses various forms of folly. In identifying changes in patterns of activity as of prime importance, Perkins suggests that it may be possible to address folly. Perhaps, he suggests, people do not necessarily have to be so stupid so often.

In any case, this book makes for an intriguing read.

Pan Pantziarka



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LETTERS

Youens' response to Keen

In his letter (*The Skeptic*, 16.3), Montague Keen boasts about the "detailed enquiries" made by himself and Guy Playfair which, as far as I can tell, amounts to speaking to three people: Tony Batters, the officer who originally interviewed medium Christine Holohan; the detective who accompanied him; and lastly, Holohan herself. As for "examining the original records" I take this simply to mean Batters' personal notes of the interview, because the actual police files of the investigation are not available to the public and have never been made so by the Metropolitan Police.

Since my previous letter I have been contacted by another *ASKE* member, Adrian Shaw, who was also interested in the case. Adrian was to prove an invaluable ally. As a serving police detective he was able to gain access to other officers connected with the case, which has enabled both of us to piece together the alternative non-paranormal explanation that proved so elusive to Keen and Playfair.

During our investigation Adrian and I spoke to the following people:

Detective Chief Inspector Norman McKinlay, who was in charge of the two-year investigation which began in 1999 and eventually lead to the conviction of Anthony 'Pokie' Ruark; ex-Detective Superintendent Tony Lundy who headed the original investigation in 1983; and finally the detective who first brought Ruark in for questioning (whom I have not named here).

In addition I have also exchanged numerous emails with Tony Batters, the ex-police officer who wrote the original story in the *Police Federation* magazine.

All the above police officers, with the possible exception of Tony

Batters, are agreed on one thing. Nothing the medium Christine Holohan said or did had any effect on how the case was conducted and no action was taken as a result of her information. Neither did she ever provide them with any information of which they were not already aware.

To his credit Tony Batters was extremely helpful. He kindly sent me copies of his notes along with examples of how Holohan's information related to the case. The date these notes were taken was recorded as "on or about the 17.2.1983". This would have been Thursday; the body was discovered the Sunday before.

Adrian Shaw contacted DCI McKinlay who said that it was "common knowledge" within the area that Ruark was a very prominent suspect. He also mentioned that Tony Batters was a police constable whereas Keen had previously described him as a detective. Interestingly McKinlay couldn't remember anything about the pullover which was supposed to have played such a pivotal role in Ruark's eventual conviction. He maintained that it was a semen sample together with skin taken from under the victim's fingernails that succeeded in proving Ruark's guilt.

My conversation with Tony Lundy also proved very enlightening. His first impression was that Ruark was arrested within 24 hours of the enquiry starting, and therefore his premises would have been searched long before Holohan came forward. However, Tony Batters said that this was not the case, as Ruark first attended the police station voluntarily and left later the same evening. I put this to Lundy, who said he was prepared to accept this version of events although his recollection was different.

However, he was quite emphatic that the detective who first inter-

viewed Ruark was immediately suspicious and started checking his alibi straight away.

Adrian managed to contact this detective who told him that in 1983 he was the local 'Pub Liaison Officer' and had started making enquiries at local pubs including one called *The Windmill*. It was here that someone suggested he should speak to 'Pokie' Ruark and as luck would have it, Ruark came in while he was still there. The detective immediately took him in for questioning and has confirmed to Adrian that he did indeed strongly suspect Ruark at this point. There is some confusion as to what day this occurred; it may have been Monday but now seems to be more likely to have been Tuesday, in which case this would still only have been the second full day of the investigation.

As the true facts mounted up an alternative explanation became not only possible but probable. A brutal murder had been committed and a petty criminal taken from a local pub by the police: can anyone guess what the hot topic of conversation will be in that pub? A pub not only often frequented by the victim and her boyfriend but also by Ruark and his girlfriend! In Keen's letter he tells us that Holohan did not live within ten minutes walk of the murder but "well over two miles away". However, he entirely misses the point. Holohan not only lived in the area but most important of all *less than a mile and a half away from The Windmill*.

Having read the notes taken by Tony Batters during his interview with Holohan, I find much of it sounds remarkably like cold reading – except, that is, for the details about Jacqui Poole and Anthony Ruark, which are somewhat more precise. There are also a couple of details regarding the murder scene

that impressed Batters and which he feels Holohan could not possibly have known about. But just how precise was this information? In Batters original article he writes, "Some of the details Christine gave were of a trivial nature, like the fact that the victim had just made coffee, the position of some crockery in the kitchen ..." but if we look at what Tony Batters actually recorded Holohan as saying it was, "Two cups in kitchen. One washed up. She made cup of coffee." Referring to the actual crime scene he says that two cups were on view, others stored and one cup was washed up and another a quarter full of coffee. Was this just cold reading or did she come by inside knowledge? Either is possible. The trouble is, although Tony Batters recorded the notes as best he could, they cannot be regarded as a full verbatim account of what was actually said. It is just not possible to write that fast. In fact he has told me that he didn't remember some of what was said until after he had returned to the police station. Thus there remains the prospect that, due to his familiarity with the crime scene, he tended to remember the facts that had the most significance, i.e. remembering the hits more than the misses. Note that Holohan did not mention an unwashed cup, merely that a coffee had been made (who knows when) and that a cup had been washed up. To avoid the chance of accidental bias creeping in it would have obviously been better if the interview had been conducted by someone unfamiliar with the crime scene.

Holohan apparently knew what Mrs Poole was wearing at the time of the murder and gave a description. Tony Lundy said it was quite possible they would have given out this information when asking for help, e.g. "Did anyone see this woman?" etc. Holohan also mentioned a St Christopher. Curiously this detail was mentioned in the local paper along with comments about Jacqui Poole's personal life, such as her separation from her husband. The paper was issued on the day Batters says he first interviewed Holohan.

As already mentioned Holohan never supplied any information that wasn't already known to the police. She did supply information about the missing jewellery – information marred only by the fact that it was incorrect. She was also wrong on the significant point about the date when the murder took place. It was Friday and not Saturday. Therefore Holohan was of no material use to the investigation whatsoever. Facts that probably every customer visiting *The Windmill* knew, Holohan knew. Of facts nobody knew she was similarly ignorant. For example, she never mentioned how the murderer was dressed, which was surely a serious omission if discovery of the pullover was so significant. There is also no mention of the murderer using a light cord as a ligature, another fact that had not been made public.

I understand that Keen and Playfair's own investigation has now been 'peer-reviewed' and will be published by the SPR some time in the near future. Meanwhile they have dismissed the idea that Holohan could have gained the knowledge through local gossip or information. In a bizarre reinterpretation of Occam's Razor, they actually regard communication with the dead as offering the simpler explanation.

Adrian and I hold a different view. We were never expected to provide an explanation that was beyond all reasonable doubt, merely to discover a *possible* non-paranormal alternative. In this we believe we have succeeded, although we accept that other, as yet undiscovered explanations, may one day present themselves and prove us wrong. For now though, as Thomas Huxley may have noted, Montague Keen's beautifully crafted psychic theory has been comprehensively destroyed by numerous ugly sceptical facts.

**Tony Youens,
Derbyshire**

Sense of staring

In his article about detection of staring (*The Skeptic*, 16.4), Sheldrake argues that the implicit learning hypothesis (and the subtle cue hypothesis) should lead to chance scores in the non-looking trials. I am not sure whether this necessarily follows but a way it could be tested (for the implicit learning hypothesis) is to conduct an experiment in which the subject has to guess with the help of feedback whether the 'random' numbers say the subject is being 'stared at' or not. Then see if the scores match the staring experiments. (Assuming the Sheldrake sequences are still available.) It would also be useful to test if above chance scores can be obtained without feedback using Sheldrake's sequences.

An alternative hypothesis I would like to suggest is that the subtle cue hypothesis is operating in non-remote staring experiments where pseudorandom numbers are not used and that flawed randomisation is operating in remote staring experiments.

This hypothesis could be ruled out by experiments that are both remote and do not use pseudorandom numbers or other flawed randomisation procedures.

**Robert Corfield,
Birmingham**

Still much to do ...

How very brave of you to publish the letter from Jonathan Poe under the heading of *Another kind of Scepticism?* (*The Skeptic*, 16.4.) You have done us a great favour once more in showing us just what we are up against.

Apart from being riddled with question-begging, there was the implied insult in the letter from Jonathan Poe that unless the reader agreed with the views being put forward, he or she is neither a true nor honest sceptic, whatever an untrue or dishonest sceptic is, which, of course, was not defined!

The first task for Jonathan Poe, and those like him, is to prove beyond doubt that God, being a single God, a twin God or triune

God (or gods), exist. For this purpose only direct evidence will do; circumstantial evidence will not do at all. As much greater men than Jonathan Poe have been struggling for centuries with this proof, without success, there is little hope for Jonathan Poe.

If the proof of the existence of God fails than all of the rest of the edifice of theistic belief fails as well. To just keep repeating 'I believe in God' is not enough. The burden of proof lies entirely with Jonathan Poe and those of his kind.

Once again, thank you editor, you have brought home to at least one of your readers what a difficult task we all have.

**Anthony Quinn,
Grange over Sands**

Another kind of scepticism?

Congratulations to Jonathan Poe on getting a theological essay published in *The Skeptic* letters column (issue 16.4). He will not be amazed that his essay provokes dissent.

He asserts truly, that the meaning of life is a question which has been addressed by many a philosopher, but he writes as if the question philosophers ask is "what is the meaning?". Some of the wisest (for instance Hume) have asked the prior question "is there a meaning?" and concluded that none is discernible.

The criterion of meaning, according to Mr Poe, is choice. I make choices, you make choices, Mr Poe makes choices, therefore we all have meaning. But there is no evidence I know of that life makes choices. It exists, but by the criterion of choice it is meaningless.

As for "the state of the universe", Mr Poe does not define the universe, so let us for the sake of argument equate the universe with the whole of existence. Then let us ask whether God exists. If the answer is yes, then God is part of the uni-

verse, and it is not an explanation of the universe to say part of it is responsible for another part. Many a philosopher (for instance Russell) has argued that it is logically impossible to explain the whole of existence, not because of the nature of existence, but because of the nature of explanations. To explain something is to explain it in terms of something else, and by definition there is nothing else than the whole of existence. Therefore there can be no explanation for existence as a whole.

It may also be doubted whether "any rational, normal-working mind posits the existence of evil". People normally think some activities ethically reprehensible, and other ethically commendable, without positing that evil and good are entities in themselves. Perhaps Mr Poe suffers from a tendency to posit entities that do not exist.

**Donald Room,
London**

Or provocation?

If he is not merely being provocative, Jonathan Poe (*The Skeptic*, 16.4, letters column) believes that scepticism leads to God: that we should be sceptical of evolution and the idea that the universe has neither meaning nor design. It is true that many live by 'blind faith'; but they include creationists like Mr Poe.

I am not sure what a 'credible historian' is, but I do know that historians in general have no view about Jesus' teachings (that is not their field). On the other hand, biblical scholars are generally sceptical about the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels; they are as likely to reflect the views of the evangelists or the Early Church (but see my book on that subject).

Then we have Poe's philosophical blunder: 'where choices exist and will exist, meaning exists'. From that flawed postulate, he pro-

ceeds to deduce that there is purpose and meaning to life and that this implies a creator. As evidence, he claims (wrongly) that many scientists reject evolution on the grounds of 'mathematical impossibilities' (unexplained) and the universal constants that necessarily underpin our universe. On the latter point, he seems unaware of the probability that we live in one of many universes, all with different values for the physical constants, and that we exist only by chance in a favourable universe (The Anthropic Principle). A true sceptic would employ Occam's razor and conclude that it is simpler to believe that we are here by chance and evolution than to believe that some super-dimensional being created the universe (and everything in it according to Genesis).

It is certain that Jesus himself knew nothing of the real universe. His cosmology was primitive and science an unknown future discipline. He certainly never claimed divinity or to have created the world. He did believe in good and evil, but defined them only in absolute behavioural terms. We now know that they are relative and subjective aspects of human nature.

It is certainly not true that 'only an infinite, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being is capable of proclaiming the non-existence of an infinite, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being'. Anyone can do it, especially sceptics. In fact, as a sceptic and atheist, I do it frequently.

Poe's concern to share biblical quotations with us is touching – and useless. We are the kind of sceptics that suspect that the Bible is neither inspired nor 'inerrant'. I urge him to abandon his superstition and try true scepticism.

**Stewart Campbell,
Edinburgh**

Please send your letters to: **The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW** or e-mail edit@skeptic.org.uk. Email communication is preferred. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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