

A crop of fanciful theories springs from fields of corn

From PATRICK HARPUR
in London

DURING a summer night last year, dogs in the village of Huish, in Wiltshire, southern England, began to bark and roof tiles rattled. Daylight revealed a sensational sight: a line of six circles, 80 metres long, had been impressed on the corn in a nearby field.

They were all of different sizes, some surrounded by narrow outer rings, others with strange key-shaped protuberances. The four largest were in the shape of a double dumbbell.

"They were perfect," wrote a Mrs Lyckett-Green, a local villager, "as if they had been made in one fell swoop. I mean there was no possibility of a human doing that, it was far too geometrically exact." Crop-circle enthusiasts named it the Alton Barnes double pictogram; and, as if to prove it was no fluke, a similar configuration appeared — probably on the same night — a little way down the Vale of Pewsey.

Such spectacles were a fitting climax to 1990, a year in which crop circles had

to 1990, a year in which crop circles had proliferated all over England, but especially in Wessex. They came by night, small or huge, accompanied by multiple rings, by parallel rectangular "stripes" or by as many as seven evenly spaced satellite circles.

By the end of August, more than 1000 circles had been spotted compared with around 300 for 1989. Sightings began to filter through from the cornfields of America's Mid-West and the paddy fields of Japan.

Who or what is making these circles? The leading journal for crop-circle studies, the *Cereologist*, entertains all theories, regardless of their eccentricity, because its editor, John Michell, considers that the key to the circles' mystery is as likely to be found in the sum of ideas and associations surrounding them as in any single notion.

Pesticides, fungi, rutting deer, hedgehogs and helicopters have all been advanced as causes — but all discounted.

Hoaxes are harder to rule out, but even the best of them, such as the circles that appeared near Wiltshire's Bratton Castle last year, have been too circular and too ragged at the edges — the genuine articles are slightly elliptical and always precisely defined.

More tellingly, hoaxed circles cannot avoid some damage to the corn, whereas in real ones crops are meticulously flattened, without any trace of breaking or trampling, in effortless swirls or spirals. A clockwise whirl is sometimes overlaid by an anti-clockwise one; sometimes the ears of corn are plaited. No two circles are identical.

Among the most popular explanations are "summer whirlwinds", even though there are no records of any being

though there are no records of any being violent or stationary enough to leave such deep stamps on a field. However,

meteorologist G. Terence Meaden, who has studied the phenomenon for over a decade, postulates a sophisticated version of the whirlwind — a vortex of air “ionised to the point at which it is better regarded as a species of low-density cool plasma producing a high-energy electromagnetic field”.

But, ask the dissenters, if such “plasma vortices” exist, why were crop circles so scarce before 1980? Because, replies Dr Meaden they were unreported and often invisible without aerial reconnaissance.

If this does not sound altogether convincing, the case for the plasma vortex is strengthened at least by the claim that it may account for some of the anomalies that frequently surround circle formation — mysterious lights in the sky, strange sounds and the reactions of animals, which have been linked with UFO sightings, which, Dr Meaden suggests, may be plasma vortices too.

This notion doesn't cut much ice with those enthusiasts who have seen disc-shaped objects in broad daylight over circle-rich areas. Nor would it impress Pat and Jack Collins, who saw a huge circular object, like a funfair's big wheel, hovering over Stockbridge Down in Wiltshire.

“It had lots and lots of yellowy white lights all around the edge and more lights along spokes leading to the centre of it,” said Mrs Collins. The following morning two separate “quintuplets” were found situated on a straight line from their sighting.

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Triangular shapes

Nevertheless, the plasma vortex hypothesis was not seriously contested until last summer when fewer and fewer people could believe it capable of producing such a plethora of complex patterns, including scroll-like rectangular and (in one case) triangular shapes.

"Unstable vortices" were responsible for those "imperfect cases", Dr Meaden claimed bravely; but it was the theory that looked the more unstable. Then a ringed circle on a remote Wiltshire farm was photographed by Cereologist researcher George Wingfield. When he compared the result with a photograph taken of the same circle a month before, he found that it had acquired an extra ring. He, like many others, drew the line at a plasma vortex that could form a circle and then return to alter it.

John Michell suggests that it may be more profitable, therefore, to ask what the circles mean rather than what is making them. He reminds us that traditional country lore would have no trouble in attributing corn circles to such mischievous personifications of nature as Robin Goodfellow, that arch-hoaxer.

Perhaps the circles are simply nature's way of interacting with humans through a common imagination.