

# In the outer sanctum



Denis Plunkett, your average pensioner, is way too normal to be an alien hunter... isn't he? JANE KELLY reports

**S**USPICIOUSLY, it all looks terribly normal. An estate in a Bristol suburb, mostly with new plastic windows and porches. In his house, Denis Plunkett, 70, looks like an average pensioner. Neat grey hair, grey sweater, neutral trousers and brown lace-ups.

"Looking normal is all part of a facade," he says laughing. But it is partly true.

Denis (pictured left), who once taught computer skills to the unemployed, has dedicated his life to tracking unidentified flying objects or UFOs. Outer space, to him, is as well charted as his own back garden. He is certain aliens exist and pay us visits. In fact, he is desperate for them to visit more often.

In 1953, aged 21, he founded in Britain what is now the world's oldest UFO society. Last month he announced that it is closing due to lack of members prepared to turn out to meetings. They would rather join UFO clubs on the Internet than sit in draughty halls watching slides. And, worse still, there is a lack of flying saucers to spot.

"We are in a trough," Denis says. "Sightings are half what they were in the 1960s. They just aren't coming here any more." He means club members and aliens.

He takes me to his "den", a narrow section of room next to the kitchen, where he records sightings. Shelves are crammed with titles such as *Flying Saucers Top Secret*, *We Are Not Alone* and *1956 UFO Arrival*.

There are plastic models of aliens with the huge slanting eyes and tiny noses who rather resemble Ally McBeal, and a few brightly coloured paper spaceships made by some of his six grandchildren.

His phone keeps ringing. As he asks: "Where are you speaking from?" you almost expect the reply to be Alpha Centauri or Sirius, the Dog Star.

While I was there he received distressed calls from Australia, Bolivia, Belgium and Wales. The whole world seems to be distraught that his little group, with its weekly gatherings in a Quaker meeting hall, is about to disappear.

The closing of those hall doors marks the end of an epoch. After World War II, flying saucers were suddenly as common as magpies. They derived their name in 1947 after an American airforce pilot reported "skipping discs" — saucer-like shapes — in the sky.

When the US tested the hydrogen bomb a couple of years later, sightings increased again because — according to ufologists — the blast could be seen from Mars, which alerted our extraterrestrial cousins to look at us more closely.

Between 1950 and '60, particularly during the Korean War, and the inter-Vietnam conflict, the US Air Force could not handle the thousands of reports of UFOs — more than 100,000 sightings from 140 countries.

"The aliens came as observers over the battlefields," Denis says.

But now the Cold War is over, the terrestrials have buzzed off in their interstellar craft to view better scenes of death

and destruction. Indeed, there seem to be many possibilities why the little green men are now being so stand-offish, or have "reasons for non-contact", as Denis puts it.

"It could be just that their surveillance program has ended," he says. "There might be a communication problem or they're afraid of destroying us."

Denis also speculates that they might also, with good reason, be reluctant to visit Earth in case they catch a disease. "But," he says hopefully, "when the time comes, they'll be back."

He started his UFO group after seeing an advertisement in a British newspaper placed by Al Bender, who ran the International Flying Saucer Bureau in Connecticut. Bender wanted to establish representatives around the world.

Denis answered his request and set up a group, but only just in time. Minister forces were at work.

"A few months later, Al was visited by three men wearing black," he says. "They could have been aliens or men from the CIA. I don't know why, but Al lost interest overnight."

Denis's branch of the Flying Saucer Bureau carried on meeting — at first in pubs, then in a hall — every Thursday night, \$5 at the door, tea and custard creams inclusive.

**F**OR 50 years all went well. "We used to have very good evenings," Denis says sadly. "They'd come by bus, even on wet nights, sometimes more than 400 a time. We couldn't get them all into the hall."

"Members were mostly men, between 16 and 80. We did have a few people in duffel coats who'd sit with their hoods up all evening. In the '70s, there was a chap who used to wear cardboard ears to ridicule us. But when he actually saw a UFO he took them off and apologized."

Meetings were addressed by such luminaries as American George Adamski, co-author of the 1953 book *The Flying Saucers Have Landed*. Adamski claimed he was visited by two "space brothers" from Venus, who invited him aboard their craft. "He was the first man to take photos inside a mother ship," Denis says.

Denis says he has seen a distinct change of attitude towards aliens over the past 50 years.

"In the '50s, about 11 per cent of people believed in them and thought they were bug-eyed monsters with tentacles," he says.

"Now more like 60 per cent of people accept they exist, particularly the young, so they have a better image. This is reflected in films such as *Star Wars* and *E.T.*"

Denis has had only one sighting himself. In the summer of 1968 he was going to bed when he saw through his window nine lights hovering for an hour in the sky at the end of his garden, changing position slightly, but so quickly that he could not see them do it.

"I didn't take a photo as I was scared that if I looked away they would disappear," he says. "And I was really quite transfixed."

"I know that there are extraterrestrials and one day I will be proved right."

— DAILY MAIL

## Is your head in the clouds?

**S**POTTED a flying saucer? Before telling the world, it may be wise to answer a few simple questions:

Did you see the object through glass, such as a car window? A simple reflection often solves the mystery.

Does the object have shape? A point of light in the sky could be anything.

On the other hand, a bona fide spacecraft should reveal some distinctive features, especially if it hovers close enough for the crew to invite you in for tea and a standard tour of the ship before probing your internal organs.

If the unidentified object is a point of light, does it really move? Look carefully. Passing clouds can make a fixed light seem to be in motion. One astronomer in New York State recently witnessed a group of cars parked by a cornfield, where several people were staring intently upwards at a strange light. The light turned out to be Jupiter; fast-blowing clouds created the illusion that it was changing position.

If the point of light is stationary, does it flicker and change colour?

By BOB BERMAN

People sometimes think UFO when they see the rising or setting of the night's brightest star, Sirius. It normally appears a steady blue-white, but when Sirius sits close to the horizon, its light is refracted by a long passage through the Earth's atmosphere.

Like a prism, the air splits the starlight into a kaleidoscope of vivid colours. If the unidentified light in the sky shines brighter than any star, it is probably a planet.

If the light moves, does it follow a slow and steady path? Then you have most likely spotted a satellite.

Satellites often change brightness dramatically as they orbit, because of their uneven shape or because of sunlight glinting off solar panels. The International Space Station passes prominently through the heavens several times a week.

A brilliant, slow-moving white light or a formation of two or three — especially low in the sky — is usually caused by landing

lights from aircraft headed in your direction. They can remain almost stationary, persist for several minutes, and appear yellow or orange due to light absorption by the intervening air.

Does the light follow a rapid, straight line and vanish within seconds? If so, it is undoubtedly a meteor, a flock of space rock glowing white-hot as it races through the upper atmosphere.

In the process, meteors may produce exciting surges of brightness and may even explode. A meteor bright enough to cast shadows is called a fireball; one that blows itself to bits is known as a bolide.

Does the light follow long circles or zigzags in an overcast sky?

Searchlights illuminating the bases of clouds can produce this spooky effect.

Ninety-five times out of 100, asking these basic questions will probably turn your UFO into something wholly identifiable — and save your blushes.



Flights of fancy: One of many ideas of what flying saucers look like.