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Fully
revised and
updated 2nd edition

DAVID CLARKE

THE UFO FILES

**THE
INSIDE STORY
OF REAL-LIFE
SIGHTINGS**

B L O O M S B U R Y

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REAL-LIFE SIGHTINGS**

SECOND EDITION

DAVID CLARKE

 The National Archives

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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CONTENTS

	Acknowledgements	vi
	Introduction	vii
1	Strange Lights in the Skies	1
	UFO FILE: Did Churchill order a UFO cover-up?	20
2	The Flying Saucer Age	28
	UFO FILE: 'Saucer Sam'	44
3	Cold War UFOs	55
	UFO FILE: All Balloony?	63
4	Close Encounters	81
	UFO FILE: A Visit from the Men in Black	82
5	Crop Circles and Alien Abductions	105
	UFO FILE: The Missing Files	114
6	Turn-of-the-Century UFOs	132
	UFO FILE: UFOs on Film	147
7	Closing the UFO Files	156
	UFO FILE: Their Last Word on UFOs	170
	Afterword	181
	Appendix	186
	Notes and references	188
	Resources	199
	Index	203

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INTRODUCTION

EXTRAORDINARY SIGHTINGS BY ORDINARY PEOPLE

This book is based upon the real-life accounts of UFO sightings recorded in files collected by Britain's Ministry of Defence (MoD), which are today held by The National Archives, based at Kew, Richmond. The phrase 'close encounter' was coined by an astronomer, Dr J. Allen Hynek, who acted as consultant to the US Air Force's UFO Project Blue Book between 1952 and 1969. He defined the typical UFO experience as 'a statement by a person or persons judged responsible and psychologically normal, describing an object or light in the sky' that could not be explained by any obvious physical or psychological cause.¹

In the aftermath of the Second World War some countries, such as the United States, Canada and Great Britain, established official projects to collect and scrutinise unusual sighting reports for any clues that might suggest UFOs could be a threat to national security. In Britain, these were investigated by the Air Ministry and the MoD. But for many years the only publicly available information about the British government's UFO unit was its name, Secretariat Air Staff 2 or Sec(AS)2. The MoD's UFO files are often referred to as 'Britain's real X-Files' after the popular 90s TV show *The X-Files*, which chronicled the adventures of maverick FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. The two fictional agents fought a battle with sinister forces who were determined to close down their investigations of strange phenomena. The overall theme of the series was summed up by an iconic poster in Mulder's office that featured an image of a 'flying saucer' with the caption: 'I want to believe.'

The X-Files phenomenon reflected a widespread belief in the existence of extraterrestrial life that has grown since the end of the Second World War. Flying saucers were first sighted in 1947, but just seven years later an opinion poll for a London newspaper found that 16 per cent of Britons believed in them. The Cold War saw the launch of the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) and the success of the Apollo programme that put men on the moon. By the fiftieth anniversary of the UFO, another poll revealed that one third of the 1,092 adults questioned believed aliens had visited Earth – and 21 of them claimed to have had a direct experience with E.T.!

Regardless of whether UFOs actually exist in the popular sense of flying saucers from other worlds, the subject is unquestionably part of our social and cultural history. The MoD files provide both an insight into UFO beliefs themselves and a unique database of reports from those who have seen them.

The files contain the stories, many first-hand, of ordinary people from all walks of life who have undergone extraordinary and often life-changing experiences. They usually take the form of short accounts submitted by phone or letter by those who felt they should report what they had seen to the authorities. UFO witnesses include people of all ages and professions, from schoolchildren and refuse collectors to police officers and RAF pilots.

The first surprise to emerge from the files is that although the terms ‘flying saucer’ and ‘UFO’ date from post 1945 era, the chronological spread of the documents actually begins before the First World War. They range from strange sightings made in the early 1900s and during both world wars, to the first reports of ‘flying saucers’ during the late 1940s and 1950s, to contemporary accounts of stealthy, triangular-shaped craft. There are a great variety of stories and some are far more credible than others. Some describe the classic lights and shapes in the sky that were categorised as close encounters of the first kind by Dr Hynek. Others involve close encounters of the second kind, where some form of physical evidence – such as marks on the ground or photographs – have been left behind. A small number describe encounters of the third kind: sightings of UFO occupants and even alleged ‘alien abductions’.

The most recent of these documents were opened to the public under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in a four-year programme that ended in 2012. The Ministry of Defence described the release as a major exercise that was ‘unique in MoD history’. Their aim was that greater openness would help counter what they described as ‘the maze of rumour and frequently ill-informed speculation’ that surrounded their involvement, both real and imagined, in the UFO mystery. But for those who suspected a whitewash, many questions remained. What did the files contain that justified them being kept secret for so many years? Why was government releasing them now? And how can we be sure these files really do contain the *truth*? This book is both an account of my attempt to answer those questions and a history of official investigations into the UFO mystery in the United Kingdom. During the past decade I have methodically ploughed through every surviving UFO-related file held by The National Archives, including all the records on 12,000 sightings recorded in official files since 1962. Between 2008 and 2012 I was the consultant and media spokesman for The National Archives’ project that prepared the most recent files for release. This high-profile role was the culmination of my own personal quest to discover what the British government really knew about UFOs.

I first became gripped by the UFO bug in 1978 on seeing Steven Spielberg’s movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Inspired by the true-life experiences upon which the movie was supposed to be based, I joined a UFO society and began to collect accounts of sightings. But my first close encounter with the ‘real X-files’ happened a decade later when I was a rookie journalist. In 1988 hundreds of people in the Midlands and North of England reported seeing strange lights and objects in the sky. After writing about these experiences for my newspaper, I compiled a dossier of the most impressive eye-witness reports and decided to send it to the fabled ‘UFO desk’ at Whitehall.

I was aware, from the UFO literature, that a 'UFO desk' had existed since the 1950s and knew that its name had changed occasionally following reorganisations of the MoD. Some UFO 'experts' had even described it as the British equivalent of the US Air Force's UFO investigation unit, Project Blue Book, which closed in 1969. But due to the British government's obsession with secrecy, no one really knew much about Sec(AS)2. The polite reply I received from this mysterious unit in 1988 was signed by the desk officer at the time, Clive Neville.² The letter said the MoD had only a 'passing interest' in UFO reports. There was, he explained, no department within the MoD that was solely responsible for the investigation of sightings or anyone employed full-time to investigate sightings, so any comparison with Project Blue Book was misleading. Their only concern was to decide if UFOs 'present a threat to the security and defence of the United Kingdom'. Reports were forwarded to 'specialist staff' in other branches responsible for the air defence of the UK for examination. But unless clear evidence of a threat was identified, 'and this is not normally the case', no attempt was made to investigate or categorise them.

Mr Neville said the information held in the MoD files was 'limited to the brief details of the sightings passed on to us by those who witnessed the phenomena.' Most disappointing of all, the letter claimed the MoD had never carried out any study 'into the scientific importance of these phenomena'. I soon realised that Neville's letter followed a standard template sent out to members of the public since at least 1955. It is therefore no surprise that those who suspected the MoD knew far more about UFOs than it was prepared to admit, smelled a cover-up. But before the arrival of Freedom of Information, there was simply no way that anyone from outside the MoD could check if the official line was true or false. Allegations of cover-up came not just from the small minority of UFOlogists (as those who studied UFO sightings are known). Occasionally MPs, peers of the realm and even aircrew who witnessed unexplained phenomena in the sky had gone on record to claim the public were being misled by government denials.

Secrecy provides a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. Layers of it surrounded many aspects of military operations and intelligence during the Cold War and the MoD's interest in UFOs was no exception. My first correspondence with the 'UFO desk' made me even more determined to discover if there was any truth behind the claims made by the conspiracy industry. I was convinced that persistence, along with the careful use of new legislation that made access to official documents possible, could help me to peel back the layers of mystery that engulfed government interest in UFOs.

I soon realised that for much of the twentieth century the British public had no *automatic* right to examine any government papers. Individual requests for access to files relating to UFOs were treated in exactly the same way as those for any other category of public record, from hospital records to MPs' expenses. Enquirers were told all government papers were retained for a minimum of 30 years before they were reviewed for preservation at The Public Record Office (as The National Archives was known until 2003). Any material

deemed 'sensitive' could be withheld for longer periods and, in the case of some intelligence records, this could be 50 years or more.

But from 1994 John Major's government introduced a limited right to access to records younger than 30 years. This legislation was known as 'The Code of Practice for Access to Government Information' and was a precursor to the full Freedom of Information Act promised by the Labour party under Tony Blair. From 1999 I began using the Code to frame specific requests for access to files on UFO sightings that had become causes célèbres. My first success came early in 2001 when, in response to a request under the Code, the MoD agreed to send me the papers they held on the Rendlesham Forest UFO incident. The Rendlesham sightings were known to many as the British equivalent of the famous Roswell incident (see Chapter 5).

This was merely the opening salvo in what would become almost a full-time crusade for the disclosure of all British government papers on UFOs. By the time the Freedom of Information Act arrived in 2005, UFOs were among the three most popular subjects for requests received by the MoD. Behind the scenes, working with a small group of motivated colleagues, my strategy of using carefully targeted FOI requests to persuade the MoD and other government departments to reveal what they knew was gaining momentum. I soon became known throughout Whitehall as the MoD's most 'persistent correspondent' on UFOs, and papers from my FOI campaign have been preserved for posterity in the files themselves.³

By 2005 more than 200 UFO files had already been opened to the public at The National Archives, but a similar number remained locked away in the MoD Main Building at Whitehall. Under normal circumstances the public would have had to wait at least 30 years before they were allowed to see them. Growing public demands for their full disclosure ultimately led the Ministry to transfer the remaining UFO files to The National Archives. How and why that decision was made is the real story at the heart of this book.

The release of 'Britain's X-files' was closely followed by the international media and received extensive coverage from national and regional newspapers, radio and TV news. During the days that followed the opening of the first tranche in May 2008, The National Archives' UFO webpage – set up to provide direct public access to the files – received more than 1.7 million visitors. This was more than double the number recorded for earlier online releases of documents, such as the Domesday Survey in 2006. Internet searches on UFOs tripled overnight across the globe and it was even reported that the bookmakers William Hill had lowered the odds of finding extraterrestrial life from 100/1 to 80/1.

Since the first media event, The National Archives UFO website has been visited more than 3 million times. Over 5.7 million pages have been viewed and more than 3.8 million documents have been downloaded. Visitors come from 160 different countries, with most from the United States (approximately 42 per cent) followed by the UK (35 per cent) and even South Korea (2 per cent) and China (1 per cent).

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Newly released UFO files from the UK government

Newly released UFO files

The files contain a wide range of UFO-related documents covering the years 1986-1992. If you want to find out more about close encounters over Gatwick Airport, alien abductions, stray satellites - and what the UK government thought of it all - then this is the place to be. The files are in PDF format.

Start by reading our [highlights guide](#) (PDF 300kb) to help you navigate your way through the files.

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Background material

Start your own UFO research by reading Dr David Clarke's guide to the newly released files. Discover the history of government UFO investigations and find out where the new files fit in.

[Read the guide](#) (PDF 103kb)

Videocast

Dr David Clarke, an expert in UFO history, guides us through the highlights of the newly released UFO files.

[Watch the Videocast now](#)

Previous file releases

The National Archives holds other UFO files that have already been released by the Ministry of Defence. You can download these in PDF format for a small fee. The files contain details of numerous UFO sightings.

[Access existing UFO files](#)

"What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth?" Winston Churchill - July 1952

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The National Archives UFO page, launched in 2008 following the transfer of MoD files to Kew.
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufo/.

As the rolling disclosure programme continued, it seemed the public could not read enough about the files. Interest reached a peak in the summer of 2010 when a further 5,000 pages of information were released, including a story concerning British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's involvement in a wartime UFO sighting (see Chapter 1). This release alone generated no less than 196 separate news items in the national and international media and reached an estimated print/online readership of 25 million people.

Currently, The National Archives hold a complete collection of official UFO documents up to the present day. This consists of approximately 400 files dating from 1912 to 2009. The more recent are arranged thematically, with chronological sequences of UFO sighting report files beginning in 1962. One series follows the UFO desk's protracted correspondence with members of the public, MPs and peers of the realm. Others deal with the evolution of British government policy on UFOs, Parliamentary questions, statistical analysis and media issues.

Of course the official paper trail is just one aspect of the UFO files story. Wherever possible I have followed up information I found in the files to track down and talk to those

people who reported their experiences to the MoD and to those who were responsible for official investigations. What they had to say often casts new light on the nature of the MoD's interest in UFOs and the twists and turns of official policy.

Those files that survive contain approximately 100,000 pages and this is just a fraction of the total number that once existed. It is not possible, in a book of this size, to provide a comprehensive guide to the entire collection. *The UFO Files* is based upon a selection of the more fascinating highlights from the files and charts how the government, the scientific establishment and media have reacted to experiences that defy attempts to explain them.

CHAPTER 1

STRANGE LIGHTS IN THE SKIES

Throughout recorded history humans have observed objects in the heavens that they have been unable to identify. Until relatively recently celestial phenomena such as comets, the aurora and eclipses of the sun and moon were regarded with superstitious awe and terror. Today most people have a basic understanding of an eclipse and the origins of comets and meteors, but there remain many less readily recognisable things in the sky. Together such phenomena fall into the category of Unidentified Flying Objects, or UFOs, a term that covers anything in the heavens which cannot be easily identified but carries the heavy implication of an extraterrestrial origin. But if you know where to look, history is full of accounts that seem spookily similar to modern UFO sightings, although contemporary explanations were often very different.

In ancient times signs and portents in the sky were attributed to the activities of the gods, but the Romans entertained the possibility of voyages to the moon and other worlds. Some modern authors point to descriptions of ‘fiery chariots’ and ‘pillars of cloud and fire’ from the Old Testament as evidence of UFO activity in ancient times. In *Chariots of the Gods?*, Erich von Daniken claimed that myths and legends concerning gods and angels were really descriptions of technologically advanced aliens who visited our world in the distant past. His book was first published in 1968, the same year Stanley Kubrik’s movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* predicted the discovery of evidence of extraterrestrial life and suggested that intervention by alien intelligences may have occurred at an earlier stage of human evolution. In 1969 science fiction became science fact when Apollo astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first men to walk on the moon.

But the idea that explorers from other worlds visited Earth in the past and occasionally returned to keep a watchful eye on the human race was nothing new. Half a century before the moon landings, the American collector of curiosities, Charles Fort (1874–1932), speculated the human race was ‘property’. In his *Book of the Damned*, published in 1919, he wrote that: ‘...once upon a time, this earth was No-man’s Land, that other worlds explored and colonised here, and fought among themselves for possession, but that now it’s owned by something...all others warned off.’ Fort’s evidence was culled from accounts of unusual phenomena in the sky that he found in the archives of scientific journals and newspapers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He referred to this as ‘damned data’ because of the way the establishment attempted to explain away phenomena that could not be accounted for within the confines of existing scientific knowledge.

During the nineteenth century sightings of strange lights in the sky were occasionally recorded in the logbooks and journals of mariners and explorers. Sometimes these were reported officially to the British government. Charles Fort highlighted a sighting recorded in February 1893 by Captain Charles Norcock, commander of the corvette HMS Caroline, as evidence that Earth had been visited 'by explorers from other worlds'. On a wintry evening, the ship was steaming from Shanghai towards the Sea of Japan when the watch officer called the captain to the deck and pointed towards the 6,000 ft height of Mount Auckland. Above the horizon, but in front of the mountain, appeared a formation of strange lights, 'resembling Chinese lanterns festooned between the masts of a lofty vessel'. The lights first appeared as one mass, then spread out in irregular lines as they moved northwards. More curious lights were seen the following night from a different location. Capt. Norcock, using a telescope, described them as oval, red-coloured 'globes of fire' that hovered above the horizon in a massed group 'with an outlying light away to the right'. Occasionally this would disappear and 'the others would take the form of a crescent or diamond, or hang festoon-fashion in a curved line'. On arrival in the Japanese port of Kobe, the captain noticed a newspaper report which said 'the unknown light of Japan' had been seen by local fishermen 'as was customary at this season when the weather is very cold, stormy and clear'. Norcock learned from the captain of another warship, HMS Leander, that his officers had also seen lights they thought were from a ship on fire in the same locality. They altered their course to assist but found the lights rose into the sky as they approached.¹

Three decades earlier the British government set up the very first official inquiry into unexplained aerial phenomena. In 1865 the Board of Trade was asked to investigate the source of 'mysterious lights' that lured many ships to destruction on the coast of northeast England. In December of that year the losses became so great that a group of sea pilots and fishermen petitioned their MP for an inquiry. A commission led by Rear Admiral Sir Richard Collinson (1811–1883) arrived in Sunderland and took statements from coastguards, mariners and residents who had witnessed the lights. In testimony preserved at The National Archives, experienced crewmen described how they had been lured towards the shore by a revolving light or lights which they mistook for the lighthouse at the mouth of the Tyne. They did not realise they were mistaken until the ships struck treacherous rocks. Coastguards and fishermen told the inquiry similar lights had been seen over the coast near Souter Point for a period of 30 years, but never as frequently as during the winter of 1865–66. The commission was unable to find any evidence that 'false lights' had been deliberately lit by anyone who could profit from the wrecks. After the loss of 20 further vessels in 1869, Trinity House built a new lighthouse on Souter Point to guide ships to safety. The mysterious lights were never seen again.²

Although the phenomena seen over the Durham coastline and the Sea of Japan were just 'lights', there are also nineteenth century examples of circular and torpedo-shaped objects seen in the sky. For example, on 22 March 1870 the crew of the barque *Lady of the Lake* observed what they described as a 'remarkable cloud' rising into the sky during a

cruise in the North Atlantic Ocean. The 'cloud' was circular, grey in colour and had a complex internal structure divided into four sections, the central dividing shaft beginning at the centre of the circle and extending far outwards. The mysterious 'cloud' was visible for half an hour and appeared to rise from the southern horizon. It disappeared in the northeast. In an entry taken from the ship's log, Captain Frederick Banner noted the strange object appeared much lower than the other clouds and added: 'It came up obliquely against the wind, and finally settled down right in the wind's eye.'³

Apart from Charles Fort, few people in the nineteenth century were prepared to speculate that Earth received regular visits from alien explorers. But journeys through the sky – and ultimately to other worlds – were now part of science fiction literature. Jules Verne's 1865 book *Round the Moon* and its sequel *From Earth to the Moon* introduced the idea of travel by spaceship to a mass readership. Meanwhile, stories describing exotic aliens who lived on the moon and Mars were published by mass circulation newspapers. For instance, Benjamin Day caused a sensation in 1835 when his newspaper, the *New York Sun*, published a series on 'Great Astronomical Discoveries' that described plants and animals living on the lunar surface and humanoid creatures who flew with bat-like wings. Later in the century, Percival Lowell scrutinised the planet Mars from an observatory in Arizona and became convinced the Martian 'canals' were evidence the red planet was home to an advanced civilisation.

If intelligent aliens existed on Mars or elsewhere in the solar system, the next logical question was: were they friendly or hostile? When H. G. Wells discussed this question with his brother Frank, the two men wondered how humans would cope when confronted by a more advanced alien race. Frank drew parallels with the trauma experienced by the native people of Tasmania when they were colonised by Europeans. This remark gave Wells the inspiration for what is undoubtedly one of the finest science fiction novels ever written, *The War of the Worlds*.

The year before Wells's book was published, there was a flood of sightings in North America of a 'mysterious airship' similar to those imagined in the books of Jules Verne. Many believed the airship was the product of an American secret inventor who was testing his flying machine in secrecy. Most of the sightings were of lights in the night sky but the 'airship' was also seen in daylight and was described as cigar-shaped, silver in colour and equipped with a variety of wings, sails and propellers. The airship wave began in California in November 1896 and the sightings spread eastwards. By the spring of 1897 hundreds of American citizens including police officers, judges and businessmen were quoted by newspapers as having observed the 'mysterious airship'. These sightings, however, took place more than five years before the Wright brothers' flimsy aeroplane took to the air at Kitty Hawk. Intriguingly, they also included many themes that would later turn up in the age of the modern UFO, including landings in remote areas, crashes that left behind strange pieces of metal inscribed with hieroglyphs and even encounters with airship crews. For example, one man in California claimed he had encountered a landed craft and its Martian crew, who tried to kidnap him and his companion.

AIRSHIPS AND SCARESHIPS

The optimism and wonder that sustained the North American craze for seeing advanced flying machines similar to those imagined by Jules Verne was replaced in Europe by fear of invasion and attack from the air. In 1908 H. G. Wells's novel *The War in the Air* predicted a future war in which German airships and aircraft would be used to bomb civilians in New York and other cities. In Britain Wells's fiction appeared to take a step nearer to fact in the spring of 1909, when stories began to reach London of weird lights and cigar-shaped objects seen lurking in the heavens at night. Startling accounts soon appeared in the press. Among these was one volunteered by farmhand Fred Harrison from King's Lynn, Norfolk, and published in the *Daily Express* on 14 May 1909. Harrison said: 'I heard a whirring noise overhead, and when I looked up I saw that the fields round were lit up by a bright light. The light came from a long, dark object which was travelling swiftly overhead. It was low down – only a little way above the trees – so I could see it plainly... The searchlight lit up the road, the farm buildings, the trees and everything it touched, so that it was like day.'

Some reports came from respectable sources. One of the first was made by a serving officer of the Peterborough police force who was pounding the beat in the early hours of 23 March 1909. According to a story published in the *Daily Mail* two days later, PC Kettle heard 'the steady buzz of a high-powered engine' and on looking up saw a powerful light high up in the dawn sky and 'a dark body, oblong and narrow in shape, outlined against the stars'.

It is not hard to imagine these accounts making headlines as the latest UFO or flying saucer sightings. In 1909 they were interpreted not as evidence of alien craft that had crossed vast interplanetary distances, but of enemy airships that had travelled to Britain across the North Sea. The monstrous German Zeppelin was less than a decade old but had in its various incarnations come to symbolise German technical superiority in the air. With rivalry between the two countries growing, these sightings were taken by some as incontrovertible evidence that Germany was spying on Britain from the air.

As with the late nineteenth century American sightings there were even allegations of 'contact', as found in the tale of the Cardiff man who encountered what he thought to be a landed airship on a remote hillside in South Wales. Mr Lethbridge, a Punch-and-Judy showman, was riding across Caerphilly Mountain late at night in May 1909 when he turned a bend and saw 'a long-tube-shaped affair lying on the roadside'. Two men dressed in heavy fur-coats and caps were busy at work on their flying machine. As he approached they jumped up and 'jabbered furiously to each other' in a language he didn't understand. Before he could say anything, the men (whom he assumed were German spies) jumped into a cabin beneath the airship, which then 'rose into the air in a zig-zag fashion'. It disappeared towards Cardiff, showing two brilliant lights as it rose into the sky.⁴

A Punch cartoon by Bernard Partridge published at the height of the 'phantom airship' scare in 1909



AN EARLY SILLY SEASON.

THE SEA-SERPENT. "WELL, IF THIS SORT OF THING KEEPS ON, IT'LL MEAN A DULL AUGUST FOR ME."

As headlines questioned 'Whose is the airship?', some members of the press used these alarming stories to pressurise the British government to increase spending on aircraft. Others asked 'does it really exist or is it a figment of our imagination?'. It was, as many recognised at the time, highly unlikely that any extant German airships would have been capable of such a journey. After all, it was only in July 1909 that French aeronaut Louis Blériot completed his famous aeroplane crossing of the English Channel, a feat that led the newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe to proclaim 'England is no longer an island'.

Sceptical journalists dubbed the nocturnal visitors 'scareships' and asked why they seemed to vanish at dawn. At 1,000 miles each way, the round trip from the Zeppelin hangars at Friedrichshafen in Germany to the east coast of Britain would also have been impossible to complete under cover of darkness and would have taken the giant airship over parts of Belgium and France in daylight, where it would have been seen by thousands of people.

THE SHEERNESS INCIDENT



Winston Churchill in 1910. Two years later, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he ordered the first British government inquiry into a UFO sighting over Sheerness naval base in Essex. This UFO was suspected to be the German Zeppelin, the L-1. (COPY 1/543)

Although the 1909 airship scare came to an end after a couple of months, more sightings would follow. In 1912 Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, presided over what could be called the first government inquiry into a UFO sighting over a sensitive military base. The future Prime Minister's interest in this subject would resurface again when UFOs made headlines during the 1950s (see p. 43).

On 13 October 1912 a new naval Zeppelin, the L-1, set out on a 30-hour endurance flight from its base at Friedrichshafen in Germany. The 900-mile flight took the airship out over the North Sea; it then turned towards Berlin, where it landed at 3.45 pm on the following day. Just after sunset that afternoon, something was seen and heard flying above the port of Sheerness in Kent. The dockyards here were an important part of Britain's defences and home to a Royal Navy torpedo school and naval flying station at nearby Eastchurch.

As the days passed, news of the Zeppelin flight over the North Sea reached the British government and the incident assumed a more sinister aspect for officials. On 25 October the director of the Admiralty Air Department, Murray F. Sueter, asked the Captain of the Royal Navy torpedo school to 'make private enquiries' to discover whether a Zeppelin really had visited Sheerness. Questioned in the House of Commons on 21 November, Churchill wrote: 'I caused enquiries to be made and have ascertained that an unknown aircraft was heard over Sheerness about 7 pm... Flares were lighted at Eastchurch, but the aircraft did not make a landing.' Questioned further as to whether he knew 'where our own airships were on that night', Churchill replied: 'I know it was not one of our airships.'⁵

The outcry that followed publication of this story led Count Zeppelin to telegram the editor of the *Daily Mail*: 'None of my airships approached the English coast on the night of October 14th.' This was also the conclusion reached by airship historians. The Eastchurch sighting was followed by many others. During February 1913, for example, hundreds of people on England's East Coast saw what they believed was the headlight of a 'phantom Zeppelin' cruising through the clear night sky. On the night of 25 February there were 37 separate sightings, including one by coastguards at Hornsea who reported their observations to the British Admiralty. Sceptics pointed out the scare coincided with a period when the planet Venus was prominent in the night sky after sunset and no evidence has been found that any of the German airship fleet actually visited the English coast during the winter of 1912-13. We are therefore left to wonder what was seen and heard above the torpedo school at Eastchurch and elsewhere as Britain found itself gripped by 'airship mania'. Were people seeing bright celestial objects or simply imagining things?

2.

Pte. Prince. Cpl. heard a rumbling sound above us and ordered us to be quiet. We looked up and saw a big light, which we thought was the light of an aeroplane. We watched this light for a second or two and an object seemed to pass it and we were sure it was a machine of some sort, and we fired at it.

(Sgd.) John T. Prince, Pte.

Pte. Munroe. I saw an aeroplane and it was travelling towards Barrow. It seemed to go to the West and drop down. I never opened fire. When it got to the star I lost sight of it.

(Sgd.) George Munroe, Pte.

About 11.0 p.m. I was in the Billet and two Patrols from Sowerby Lodge gave me the alarm and pointed out a small cloud in the sky, and said it was an aeroplane. I satisfied them that it was nothing and went back to billet. Again at 12.0 p.m. I was alarmed by the noise of firing and the whistle, which were both on together. I doubled to the Post and the Group were firing, so I took command, and enquired what the firing meant. The Cpl. in charge of the Group said there was an aeroplane, and all were gazing at a bright star; small clouds were flitting over this star and darkened it to some extent. I thought myself, that the men had been deceived; as I could see nothing in the shape of an aircraft. Soon after this a cycle messenger arrived from Barrow to say that we had to be on the watch for Air machines.

(Sgd.) J. Moffat, CR. SGT.

5th BORDER REGT. N.C.O. IN
CHARGE OF DETACHED POST AT
SANDECALES.

89A

Alarmed by reports of an airship, soldiers opened fire on the night sky on 10 August 1914. The first real Zeppelin air-raid on Britain took place five months later, in January 1915. AIR 1/561/16/15/62

DANGEROUS RUMOURS

In some cases it certainly seems that people might have been imagining things. One dramatic and slightly comic example, which can be found among the old Air Historical Branch files at The National Archives, happened near the Vickers shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness just days after the outbreak of the First World War. Although the first real German air raid against England by Zeppelins did not occur until January 1915, the War Office was inundated with reports before then; with widespread fear of imminent attack from the air, every light in the sky was transformed into an enemy airship.

The Vickers shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, like Sheerness, was of great military importance and was guarded by the only anti-aircraft gun on the west coast. Sentries were posted around the dockyard with orders to open fire on anyone who did not answer their challenge. Late on the night of 10–11 August, Major Becke, Commander of the Barrow Defences, stated that two, or possibly three, airships had been seen during the night flying over the Vickers yards and had been fired upon by the anti-aircraft gun without effect.

In a detailed description of events, Lieutenant W. Adair of the 5th Border Regiment based at nearby Sowerby Lodge tells how his men had seen two cigar-shaped craft travelling at great height in a northerly direction, their shapes lit up by the glare from the ironworks. At midnight, sentries at Sandscale spotted another light and opened fire with their machine guns. Alongside the excitable statements from those who saw something or fired into the night sky was one from the men's commanding officer who, having heard shots found them: '...gazing at a bright star; small clouds were flitting over this star and darkened it to some extent. I thought myself that the men had been deceived, as I could see nothing in the shape of an aircraft.'⁶

Elsewhere in the same Air Historical Branch file is a more troublesome account from the end of 1914, which was recorded by the crew of a Hull trawler – the SS Ape – the night before the German High Seas fleet bombarded the east coast ports of Scarborough and Whitby. In a statement to an intelligence officer, the ship's master described how his ship was steaming towards Yarmouth at 4.10 pm on 15 December when the crew sighted 'a black object astern which gradually drew nearer'. They saw the airship turn and head towards the Lincolnshire coast, where it vanished in the haze and fog.

Alone among the many reports of airships from the first year of the war this was recorded in the official history as 'proved to be founded on fact'. However, we now know that a German airship could not have been responsible for this sighting. Airship war diaries examined by historian Douglas Robinson show that weather conditions were so atrocious on 15 December 1914 that none of the German naval airships were able to leave their sheds on the Continent.⁷ And as with earlier sightings, any German airship making its way to these shores would surely have been seen somewhere by someone as it crossed mainland Europe.

re SUSPECTED AIRCRAFT seen or heard in CUMBERLAND.				25th August, 1914.
When seen or heard. Date & hour.	By whom.	Where.	Remarks.	
5th Aug. 1914 2.45 a.m.	John Murray, & Geo. Faulkner. Wager Bailiffs.	River Eden, Cargo Beck Foot, near Carlisle.	Aeroplane heard (not seen). Appeared to follow course of river. East to West.	
10th Aug. 1914 4 a.m.	Wilson Southward, Farmer.	Croasdale, Emmerdale.	Heard buzzing noise and saw bright light from his bed- room window; looked out and saw what he took to be an aeroplane travelling North.	
11th Aug. 1914 10.40 p.m.	Police Sergt Horn.	Egremont.	Aircraft heard (not seen except white speck) outline of craft not observed. Appeared to be moving rapidly towards Solway.	
night of 13th Aug. 1914.	Farmer.	Hesket-new-Market.	Reported by Major Salkeld that the farmer saw 3 or 4 distinct flashes such as would be seen from a search- light.	
14th Aug. 1914 12.10 a.m.	Police Sergt Horn and P.C. Nelson.	Egremont.	Moving light seen (occasional flare lights); lights rose and fell above horizon over Solway.	
14th Aug. 1914 2.50 a.m.	P.C. Kirkbride.	Egremont.	Red, green, and white lights seen moving south, but too far distant to observe outline of aeroplane.	
14th Aug. 1914 between 10 & 11 p.m.	Chief Constable Carlisle City.	Stanwix, Carlisle.	Saw strange light. Thought it might be from a balloon as it was for most part stationary, and light went out and in.	

Extract from a military intelligence file listing reports of 'suspected aircraft' reported to the Chief Constable of Cumberland in August 1914, on the outbreak of the First World War. AIR 1/565/16/15/18.

Whatever visited England in darkness during the first months of the war, it could not have been a Zeppelin. So what was being seen? During the 1909 wave it emerged that jokers had successfully fooled at least some witnesses with lighted box-kites and fire-balloons. Indeed, as recently as 2009, fleets of Chinese lanterns – lit by tiny candles – have tricked people into thinking they were seeing UFOs. Could the same be said in 1912 and 1914? Were these strange sightings just balloons and bright stars transformed by fear and anxiety into something more threatening? Whether or not this was the explanation, these early sightings are undoubtedly direct precursors of the UFO scares that would follow in the modern era.

ENCOUNTERS OVER LONDON

The most important 'phantom airship' sighting recorded in the official history of German air raids stands apart from others made at this time and also counts as the first encounter with a UFO reported by a British military pilot. On the night of 31 January 1916, the crews of nine German Navy Zeppelins left their sheds on the Continent with orders to attack Liverpool, with London as a secondary target. In the event, the plan was thrown into chaos by poor weather conditions of freezing rain, snow and thick ground mist. This hid much of the countryside from the air and made accurate navigation impossible. In the confusion that followed, several towns in the Midlands were bombed leaving 71 people dead and 113 injured.

During the raid, the War Office was able to plot the course of all nine raiding airships. From the maps they produced it appears that none of the raiders reached London or the Southeast of England, but at least one of the raiders initially turned south after crossing the East Anglian coastline at 7.00 pm. The War Office calculated that if that course were held, the Zeppelin would be over London within one hour and aircraft defending the capital were ordered to intercept them.

Shortly before 8.30 pm two Royal Flying Corps pilots flying B.E.2c biplanes reported pursuing moving lights at 10,000 ft above Central London. Both lost their targets in cloud, and it seems possible they had actually spotted lights on each other's planes. But another sighting by a Royal Navy pilot is much more difficult to explain.

At 8.45 pm Flight Sub-Lieutenant Eric Morgan took off from the Royal Naval Air Service station at Rochford in Essex and began to patrol at 6,400 ft when his engine started

PHANTOM AIRSHIP VISITS SCARBORO'.

IS THE "WIRELESS" STATION THE OBJECTIVE?

SEARCHLIGHT SPYING OVER THE RACECOURSE.

MYSTERIOUS LIGHTS IN THE SKY.

TWO VISITS OF AERIAL INVESTIGATORS.

Like many others, this article from the Scarborough Daily Post, published 20 February 1913, explained the airship sightings by suggesting Britain was under 'systematic surveillance from the skies by the aerial spies of a foreign Power.'

in fact that Morgan believed his own aircraft had gone into a dive. He battled to bring his plane under control and was forced to make an emergency landing on the Thameshaven Marshes.

An account of Morgan's sighting, described as 'an encounter with a phantom airship', appears in Captain Joseph Morris's official history *The German Air Raids on Great Britain 1914-18*, published in 1925 and based upon then classified records. Morris refers directly to the airman's report filed with the Admiralty, but this report is not mentioned in the official account of the 31 January 1916 raid published by the War Office which charts the flight paths of the Zeppelins and the attempts by British fighters to intercept them. As a result, historians have been left with the impression that the authorities gave no credence to it.

There was in fact a story from a fourth pilot, Flight Sub-Lieutenant H. McClelland, who reported seeing what he described as 'a Zeppelin' caught briefly in the glare of searchlights above London at 9.00 pm, 15 minutes after Morgan's encounter. It disappeared as he closed the distance. His report was forwarded to the Admiralty where the Third Sea Lord, Rear-Admiral F.C.T. Tudor, dismissed it with the comment: 'night flying must be difficult and dangerous, and require considerable nerve and pluck, but this airman seems to have been gifted with a more than usually vivid imagination.'⁸