

The National Archives UFO Files (August 2011)

Welcome to the 8th collection of Ministry of Defence UFO files released by The National Archives.

I'm Dr David Clarke, author of The UFO Files and consultant to The National Archives UFO Project.

34 files / 8,600 pages - covering UFO policy, Press stories, Parliamentary questions, sighting reports and Freedom of Information requests.

"UFO" photos

One snowy night in 27 January 2004 a Nottinghamshire man took a series of colour slides showing Retford Town Hall for submission to a photography competition. He saw nothing unusual at the time. But on examining the transparencies he was amazed to find an image showing what appears to be a classic "flying saucer". Having ruled out lens flares and aircraft he contacted the Ministry of Defence who said "defence experts" would like to take a look at his image.

He delivered the slide to the MoD in March that year was sent to the Defence Geographic and Imagery Intelligence Agency in July 2004. After subjecting the image to detailed scrutiny DGIA said they were unable to reach any "definitive conclusion" about the mysterious image. But they did say "it may be coincidental that the illuminated plane of the object passes through the centre of the frame, indicating a possible lens anomaly e.g. a droplet of moisture."

There are some other examples of MoD calling upon image analysis experts to help them evaluate UFO photos. In 1994 VHS footage of a strange object in the sky near Bonnybridge in Scotland in January 1994 was sent to experts at RAF Brampton. They concluded: "It cannot be determined whether this object is real or a hoax – it is possible it is a hoax using a kite or video studio effects."

This type of work triggered a sharp exchange of views within the Ministry. In public MoD policy was they did not spend public money on UFO research. But in private desk officers at Defence Intelligence staff were keen to take a look at photos and films of UFOs obtained by members of the public. In order to do so, MoD would need to approach members of the public to gain access to footage. This was seen as a risky strategy as the Press and

UFOlogists would interpret any visits from “the men from the Ministry” as proof that a cover-up was underway.

Similar problems bedevilled attempts to use public money to put details of the sightings received by the Ministry onto a computer database for scrutiny. One early attempt to use a MoD computer to study UFOs in 1987 was halted after senior officials “decreed that all work should cease as it was in contravention of Ministerial statements to the effect that UFOs did not pose a threat to the UK”. But the idea was revived in 1993 when a limited study was proposed by DI55, despite the “potential for political embarrassment” if news leaked out. Ironically, one official described the potential for “disbelief and embarrassment since few people will believe the truth that lack of funds and higher priorities have prevented any study of the thousands of reports [they had] received [over 30 years].”

Threat from ‘Near Earth Objects’ (NEOs)

The files show that MoD was also drawn into the controversy over the potential threat to the Earth posed by Near Earth Objects, such as comets and asteroids. In 2000 Minister of Science Lord Sainsbury set up a Task Force to assess the hazard posed by and during a visit to the Pentagon in March three scientists from the group discussed future plans with officials from the Department of Defence, NASA and the USAF Space Command. On return to the UK they asked for a meeting to obtain “an overview of MoD’s current and possible UK contribution to international collaborative efforts”. But comments on the file suggest MoD officials felt they had “no remit to defend the earth against asteroids (or little green men for that matter)” and one added: “it may be that our answer...is that we are doing nothing about it, have no money to spare and are content to leave such matters to the [British National Space Centre].”

The night RAF scrambled to intercept UFO

One of the best known stories in the UFO literature concerns unexplained phenomena that were recorded on British and American radars in the vicinity of RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk, during August 1956. These files contain a first hand account from a retired RAF Fighter Controller, Freddie Wimbledon. He was on duty at RAF Neatishead in Norfolk when the USAF reported a fast-moving blip on their airfield radars at Lakenheath. To his amazement, he said “this [UFO] was clearly seen on RAF radar”. Fighter Command ordered a Venom interceptor, controlled by Wimbledon’s radars, to intercept this UFO: Wimbledon says: “It

was vectored towards the object and the Venom pilot called 'Contact' followed in a short while by 'Judy' (which meant that the Radar/Navigator had the target on his airborne radar)...but then he called, 'Lost contact, More help'...he was then told that his target was now behind him, and it remained glued in that position, following the Venom's every move. A second Venom was scrambled but it never got within 20 miles before the target sped off...climbing at terrific speed."

Wimbledon said afterwards all those involved in the incident were quizzed by a senior officer from Fighter Command who stressed "absolute secrecy". When I quizzed MoD about this dramatic incident in 2001 they said an archive search had confirmed all records of this dramatic incident had been lost or destroyed.

This Lakenheath incident is also mentioned by retired MoD official Ralph Noyes who, in a letter to MoD in 1986, said he had been shown gun camera film of UFOs taken by RAF Venom aircrew at a secret screening in MoD Main Building in 1970.

Churchill and the Washington UFO flap

Noyes also said he was Private Secretary to Vice Chief of Air Staff in the summer of 1952 "when news reached the Air Ministry and the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, of a spate of UFO sightings over Washington DC. According to Noyes, the Ministry's Scientific Advisor, Robert Cockburn, was "instructed to make enquiries...but [his] report convinced them that it was 'all American hysteria' and Churchill was advised that there was nothing in the 'UFO nonsense'."

He adds that after the events of 1952 "no further official notice was taken of the subject within the Air Ministry...[but] other subsequent events suggested to some of us that a 'UFO phenomenon' of some kind or another certainly existed. But there were never solid grounds for regarding it as a Defence threat or as justifying official steps such as the establishment of a standing committee of enquiry." As a result the subject remained "something of a joke (albeit an uneasy one on occasion)".

Chinese Lanterns and Glastonbury Festival UFOs

The UFO report files in this tranche include details of a particular type of sighting that became common during the summer of 2006. These are descriptions of formations of orange lights in the sky drifting slowly across the night sky. These are almost certainly

observations of Chinese lanterns, or mini hot-air balloons, that are often released at wedding parties and music festivals.

One account from Herne Bay, Kent, filed in August 2006 describes eight yellow/orange spheres “that looked like they had flames coming out of the back of them”. Another from London describes hundreds of fireballs that were an “amazing” sight in the night sky. Chinese lanterns almost certainly explain a report of revolving lights spotted above the Pyramid Stage at the Glastonbury festival in the summer of 2003.

Other sightings are a little more difficult to account for.

Channel Islands aircraft sighting

One unexplained incident was a report submitted to the Civil Aviation Authority by the pilot of a Trislander aircraft during April 2007. He described seeing a long, cigar-shaped object – sparkling yellow in colour – hovering in the sky as the prop-driven plane approached Alderney in the Channel Islands in broad daylight. The captain said estimated the size of this UFO as about that of a Boeing 737. This strange object was also seen by a number of passengers on the small plane as it hovered above the sea just 15 miles from the small aircraft. As they prepared for landing the pilot reported the sighting to Air Traffic Control in Jersey, who asked other pilots to look out for anything unusual. As he was speaking to ground control, the Trislander pilot then saw a second UFO, identical in shape to the first, that appeared to be further away.

The MoD file also includes an account from the pilot of a Jetstream aircraft who, alerted by air traffic control, saw a similar unusual object in the sky above the English Channel at the same time.

But the RAF said nothing was seen on radar and no further investigation was required, as the sightings occurred in French airspace. Again this unexplained sighting remains one of the more intriguing puzzles in the MoD’s X-files.

Rendlesham Forest

The Rendlesham forest incident is possibly the UK’s best known cause celebre for the UK UFO community and is often called ‘Britain’s Roswell’. There are two files devoted almost entirely to the MoD’s increasingly exasperated attempts to answer a long series of Parliamentary Question tabled by a retired Chief of Defence Staff, the late Lord Hill-Norton,

between 1998 and 2001. One MoD official describes Hill-Norton as “pursuing this [campaign] with evangelical fervour” and notes that he was seen as “a champion of the case” by proponents of the extra-terrestrial hypothesis for UFOs.

Although the papers do not contain any “smoking gun” they do include a copy of a black and white photograph taken several days after the sightings in 1981 by USAF airmen at RAF Woodbridge, showing a British police officer inspecting the “landing” site within Rendlesham forest.

One file also includes a letter sent by a Suffolk police inspector to author Georgina Bruni, during the summer of 1999. He describes his officer’s role in the incident as “minimal” and says that as the years passed witness testimony had been “substantially embellished”. The officer said the area was swept by powerful beams from the Orfordness lighthouse and “I know from personal experience that at night, in certain weather and cloud conditions, these beams were very pronounced and caused strange visual effects.”

All 34 files can be downloaded from the National Archives website,

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufos>

Note on audio slideshow: Audio recorded by Clare Jenkins, Pennine Productions.

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