

SAUCERS OR GHOSTS?

A new look at old legends

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The author of this article offers a solution to one of the most divisive controversies in the field of flying saucer studies. The occultist has maintained that behind the apparent solidity of the UFO lies a deeper and, at the moment, impenetrable mystery. Our contributor approaches the problem from a new angle and suggests that in the days before flying machines were considered possible, the 'rationalisation' employed to accommodate the inexplicable took an occult form. In other words, anything that was considered possible was preferred to something that was not. This attitude of mind has persisted to the present day even though believer and sceptic seem to have changed places as a result of the flying machine having become a commonplace.

AS every reader of the FLYING SAUCER REVIEW must already know it was in the year 1947 and in the month of June of that year that the newspaper reading population of the world was first startled and then either disturbed or else amused to read that a number of strange shining disc-shaped objects, unlike any known form of aircraft, had been seen flying in formation in the skies over the United States of America. The apparent speed and manoeuvrability of these queer craft was utterly beyond the performance capable of being achieved by human aviators, and as time passed and similar reports began to appear with increasing frequency there soon arose a wave of speculation concerning the origin and purpose of the mysterious craft, which subsequently turned in some quarters into a proper investigation.

It was fairly soon discovered by some of the more thorough investigators that there had been similar objects reported on previous occasions months, years and even decades before. Deeper research has yielded a number of reports of even greater antiquity, some dating back centuries or even millenia, as far back as ancient Egyptian times.

The written records have thus received some attention, but can hardly have been thoroughly explored and it is to be hoped and even expected that many more interesting examples of ancient sightings will present themselves to the patient enquirer. But a substantial part of the record of human experience upon this Earth has been preserved for lengthy periods of time in oral form

only, and where such oral traditions have at last been committed to writing it has been only when removed to a considerable distance both in time and in factual accuracy from the original events that gave rise to the story. In entering upon such a field of study it is usual to find that historical truth and legendary fantasy have become intertwined and confused and it is often a matter of some difficulty to distinguish the one from the other. When strange and unaccountable things have happened (and it is of course well known that in the pre-scientific period of human history there was no lack of such occurrences) any original account of such an event would inevitably become distorted in the process of repetition and it is therefore scarcely to be wondered that if a UFO sighting report dates from a historical or prehistorical period it may possibly come to us in the form of folk-lore, pseudo-history or fanciful legend.

It is accordingly a matter of some interest to examine a number of likely-looking legends in order to determine whether the form in which they now appear is really the result of such a fanciful embroidery of an actual UFO sighting in the remote past. After carrying out such an examination of some old legends I have formed the conclusion that sightings have in fact occurred and have been subsequently modified in the customary manner when retold. I give here the details of the old legends, of the form of examination which I have made and of the manner in which I was led to take this course, which is rewarding enough to merit further effort.

On reading a recently published article on ghostly horsemen in a journal devoted to the more popular aspects of the occult, I was struck by the close similarity between some of the features of these apparitions and some of those noticed in many UFO sightings.

The galloping horseman, with or without a head, might claim with some justice to be one of the staples of Ghost-lore, and the variations on this theme must be extremely numerous. Two such tales, both of them German, are given in some detail in the article ("Behold a Pale Horse" by Nicholas Heron in *Prediction*, April, 1962).

The first of these is the legend of the Wodejäger (Hell-hunter) leading the Wütenden Heere (Wotan's Chase), and the second is that of the Schimmelreiter, the Headless rider. The article mentions two other legends having a similar character; the German Erbkönig (the Erl-king) and our own English Herne the Hunter.

The appearance of the Wild Hunt is described as follows:

"The Wild Hunter wears a curious hat with a broad brim and is followed by a conventionally infernal pack of dogs and wolves, fiery in appearance, and generally misshapen.

The Hunt rushes through the air with a terrifying sound; any unfortunate who has ventured out of his house is at once caught up into the air, and his neck is broken.

The poacher has particular cause to fear the Wild Huntsman, since he is a favourite victim."

The description of the Schimmelreiter runs thus:

". . . headless and mounted upon a white horse, he too wears a curious broad-brimmed hat, is a denizen of forests and has also a long beard of moss and lichen."

The points of similarity between these descriptions of ghostly night-riders and UFO phenomena are fairly obvious.

1. The hat-shape.
2. The central object is followed by a train or trailing appendage.
3. Nocturnal visibility.
4. Rapid movement through the air.

There are two main points of dissimilarity:

1. The immense volume of sound.
2. The destructively violent force.

In dealing with these points individually the following remarks seem to have some relevance.

1. The hat-shape.

In view of the well-known tendency to explain unfamiliar sights by reference to familiar ones it is not difficult to see how an observer's state-

ment that the thing he had seen was "in the shape of a curious broad-brimmed hat" became modified so as to gain a little more credence into "a figure wearing a curious broad-brimmed hat." Curious indeed. Such explanations are not unknown in connection with more recent sightings.

2. The attendant train.

Fiery or infernal shapes; a long green or moss-like beard. The terminology is fanciful, but it has a familiar ring. There has always been a substantial proportion of UFO sightings in which an account of some kind of fiery trail has been given. If some of the rather rare "Angels' Hair" was observed, it might alternatively have been described as "Devils' Whiskers" since the circumstances were so terrifying.

3. Nocturnal visibility.

The luminosity of the majority of nocturnally observed UFOs is sufficient to account for the use of the adjective "white" though not for the equine character of the apparitions. The high mortality rate amongst poachers would certainly be consonant with a high incidence of reportage from such night workers, and it is possible that the former is a fiction created to discourage the latter.

4. Rapid airborne movement.

Unlike their mortal counterparts, the ghostly riders are not restricted to travelling on the surface of the earth, and, as is well known, the very idea of flying machines was held to be utterly fantastic until it became an established fact. With regard to the two points of dissimilarity, I would suggest that although the passage of a UFO is usually described as both silent and tranquil, both the contrary states have been reported and should not be disregarded in this question; but I think it probable that since the noise and violence are more frequently to be found in association with some of the more severe manifestations of terrestrial meteorology, by which I mean violent storms or hurricanes, there has been some confusing of reports, and the results of one natural phenomenon have been erroneously ascribed to the appearance of the other "supernatural" one.

Nevertheless it is interesting to note that even the most bizarre and fanciful of old legends may be worth taking a second look at, in view of modern reports of some "curious" things, and it is also worth noting that notwithstanding the mistaken attempts to rationalise the inconvenient appearance of the objects seen, so as to make them more acceptable, the hard kernel of truth remains.

World round-up

of news
and comment
about recent
sightings

ENGLAND:

Whitehaven:

"I've seen a flying saucer"

The following account, taken from the *Cumberland Evening Star* of July admirably illustrates the fact that the phrase "flying saucer" is deeply embedded in the public consciousness and that it would probably now be impossible to substitute any other: "Eleven-year-old Alan Taylorson, a pupil at Monkwearay School, Whitehaven, had a story to tell his mother when he got home on Saturday. 'I've seen a flying saucer,' he told her. Alan, of 140 High Road, Kells, also told a *Star* reporter about it. He had been with his seven-year-old sister, Doreen, and their grandmother, Mrs. R. Cross, of North Row, Kells, in Duke Street, Whitehaven, about 11 a.m. on Saturday when the little girl pointed to something in the sky.

"Mrs. Cross asked Doreen what it was but the girl could not say. Alan claimed it was a flying saucer, and a woman nearby commented: 'I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it.'

"It was like a big ring in the sky,' said Alan. 'There was another smaller ring inside and four markings between the two rings. At first I thought it was some sort of smoke signal, but it was not a plane or a cloud. I looked up again but it had disappeared in the clouds. I had only seen it for a matter of seconds. Another little girl looked up but it had gone.'

"Asked by our reporter if he was sure it was not a plane of modern wing style, Alan emphasised it had not been a plane but a shape he had never seen before."

Bournemouth mystery

The Bournemouth *Evening Echo* in July reported: "What was happening in the sky in the early hours of today? Mr. R. J. Cable, a greengrocer, of Commercial Road, Bournemouth, would like to know, for shortly after 1 a.m. when fishing with a friend at Sandbanks, he noticed a light in the sky behaving most peculiarly.

"It was moving to the east in short, sharp bursts. It would then stop and move back and forth. But it left no trail and there was no noise. It was certainly not a falling star or a Sputnik.

"Mr. Cable and his friend watched in amazement for 20 minutes. Later today he was having to convince friends he had not been drinking or was suffering from hallucinations."

London sighting

Mr. C. L. Davis of 16 Ravenshaw Street, London, N.W.6, has sent us the following report: "At precisely 6.8 p.m. on June 19, I began to take an interest in a UFO that I had noticed five minutes previously. I was on my way home from my office in the City of London and walking down a footpath running adjacent to the railway from West End Lane to Ravenshaw Street and Bloomsbury Street. The direction of the path is about due West. The object was seen passing from my right to left. It had, I would imagine, have come from the direction of Edgware and disappeared from my sight at about over Hammersmith, this being at precisely 6.9 p.m. It was travelling very slowly at about 400 to 600 feet and about two miles away, or maybe only one mile. It

travelled from side to side in flight very slowly in a shallow loop, hesitating sometimes and practically stopping in mid air. It was in the shape of an inverted shallow, very shallow, cup without a handle and had a wide lip running round its base. Dull grey (metallic grey) is the only colour which would describe it with accuracy and when it caught the sun at the base of its shallow loop it shone as though it were burning magnesium, a brilliant blue and white colour. No one was near enough for me to call and corroborate this sighting. I have the very best of eyesight and believe my own eyes implicitly. I would appreciate any further information as to whether or not any other person or persons saw it."

Buxton cigar

The *Buxton Advertiser* on June 8 reported that: "A 'flying saucer' in the shape of a silent, cigar-like spacecraft was reported over Buxton on Tuesday morning (June 6). One man who saw it—for a matter of seconds—was Mr. K. J. Whitehead, who was outside his home, Wenonah, Town End, Fairfield, at about twenty to eight. He telephoned the *Advertiser and Herald* with the following eye-witness account.

"This small, cigar-shaped silvery object, very bright at the front and at the back and apparently without any windows, was only about 1,000 feet up, flying from south to north. It was travelling slowly, perhaps at about 150 miles an hour, making no noise and leaving no vapour trail. I watched it for about seven seconds, then dashed inside the house for my field glasses so I could get a better