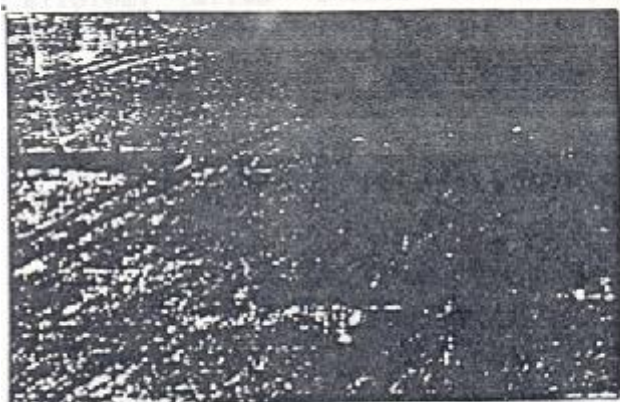


Curious corn circles are common in this area - but what makes them?



Several corn circles appeared last year at Silbury Hill.



Part of a set of circles that re-appeared near Marlborough. The picture was taken in early July

They came from outer space...or did they?

"Gosh, Professor, it's out of this world!" Real life imitates science fiction as a series of bizarre, perfectly-formed circles in fields baffle scientists and intrigue amateurs. MARK TUNGATE investigates.

Looking back into mysteries

1986: Colin Andrews removes a soil sample from one of the mysterious circles which have appeared in crops at Wantage, Oxfordshire.

He seals it in a plastic bag and locks it in his office at Andover.

At exactly 4.15 am the following day, one of the office's alarm systems activates.

All the clocks in the room, both battery and mains operated, stop. It happens at the same time every morning for two weeks, until the sample is removed.

1987: One crystal clear morning in September, a Harrier jet leaves an airfield in Surrey on a test flight.

The air traffic control tower at Boscombe Down, Wiltshire, receives a perfectly normal radio message. Moments later, all contact is lost.

An American transport plane spots the jet, heading out towards the Atlantic with an empty cockpit and its canopy ripped away. The ejector seat is still in place.

Later, the pilot's body is found lying near one of the strange circular formations. His jet passed over several of the rings during its flight.

1988: More than 200 of the circles have appeared in various locations around the world - a larger number than ever before.

Most of them are in Wiltshire. And they're getting bigger.

If you think this is a plot from a 1950s B-movie pastiche, think again. The events listed above are real and the strange circular indentations have been appearing in crops for years.

They are always perfectly round, with plants flattened neatly in one direction. In Hampshire and Canada 45 ft conifer trees have been squashed like grass under a roller.

Colin Andrews, of the Circles Phenomena Research Group, has been studying the mystery since 1981.

"Over the past four months there has been a major escalation in activity," he said. "And the very centre of it in the world is the area around Avebury, Silbury Hill and Beckhampton."

The latest find is an unprecedented 100 feet across. As journalists and scientists all over the world are gripped by circle fever, Mr Andrews and his team have their own theory about what causes them.

"We have considerable evidence to show that it is an airborne component, a rotating high energy field which is capable of being luminous at night."

But he dismisses the idea of space ships piloted by alien beings.

"We are not talking about a solid object. I'm convinced of that."

Mr Andrews became interested in the circles when he saw a set of five in a Hampshire field.

Intrigued, he joined forces with Pat DeLgado, a retired NASA radar expert who had



This 50ft wide ring, thought to be a hoax copying circles that appeared near Warminster in the previous week, appeared in a field near Wantage during the summer of 1983.



Mystery circles which appeared at a farm on the Devizes/Beckhampton road.

investigated three rings in the same field in 1981.

By now, the pair have published a book called Circular Evidence and surrounded themselves with the country's top scientific minds.

Farmers are more sceptical about the rings. One landowner, from Avebury, dismisses them as a practical joke.

"I've seen gates broken down and fences cut," he says. "But you not only have to put up with the pranksters, you get all these scientists traipsing over your land too."

But most people believe the circles are a genuine phenomenon. The Ministry of Defence is interested, and army helicopters regularly buzz the sites.

Dr Terence Meaden, a physician from Bradford-On-Avon, has a convincing explanation.

He says the circles are caused by high-speed gusts of wind, rather like aircraft slipstreams. They gather electrical charges and then, for reasons as yet unclear, drop to the earth.

"There are several eyewitness reports which back up this theory," he says. In the latest sighting, a man saw a line of wind rippling across a field. Suddenly it

stood on one end like a spinning top, flattening the corn into a perfect ring.

"All the other witnesses report similar occurrences," says Dr Meaden.

But there are many bizarre facts surrounding the circles which his theory cannot explain. For instance, they seem clustered around ancient monuments.

The Circles Phenomena Research Group has discovered many of them form a precise pattern, shaped like a dartboard, with seven concentric rings and 48 spokes leading out from the centre.

And then there is the business of the slime.

The jelly-like substance, about the size of a chocolate bar, was found inside one of the rings in 1985.

Those who came into contact with it suffered breathing difficulties shortly afterwards. Four years and three laboratories later, it has still not been identified.

"Next year I'm going to drop a Mars Bar in one of the rings and cause a similar uproar," Dr Meaden chuckles.

Meanwhile, weird things keep happening around the circles.

When the BBC interviewed Colin Andrews in the centre of one, sound recording equipment picked up a high pitched whine and £48,000 worth of camera equipment refused to function.

Mr Andrews is convinced his group is on the brink of a major breakthrough.

"We have detected a molecular change in some of the plants inside the circles, and we've asked the Ministry of Agriculture to do tests," he says.

"It ought to take a closer look at them before they enter the food chain."

But the man from the Ministry is unconcerned.

"Farmers do not have to notify us about these things. We have no reason to believe the cereals are affected or are unfit for human consumption."

He lists possible explanations as ancient earthworks or freak whirlwinds.

"That's nonsense," Mr Andrews snorts. "The circles are genuinely increasing in number and size."

"Things are now at the stage where the Government cannot afford to ignore what is happening."



Cuttings shown above, from the Evening Advertiser over the past few years, talk of circles that have appeared in many parts of this area.