

Controlled UFO Hoax: Some Lessons

David I. Simpson

For many years it has been fashionable to argue a high probability that intelligent life has developed elsewhere in the universe (Shklovskii and Sagan 1966; Cameron 1963). The logic involved, however, suggests an extremely small likelihood that any such life would journey to Earth even once, with the probability of daily visits being negligible. According to the majority of those interested in unidentified flying object phenomena, this conclusion is at variance with the wealth of evidence indicating that our skies are often frequented by extraterrestrial visitors: the pilots of UFOs.

To resolve this apparent paradox, it is important to appreciate the abilities and motives of an enthusiastic group of people who make themselves responsible for investigating and reporting UFO sightings: the UFOlogists. Since Kenneth Arnold's sighting in 1947 (Arnold and Palmer 1952), when UFOs were first described as "flying saucers," the world has witnessed an ever growing number of UFOlogists, UFO "research" groups, and related magazines; there are at present approximately 250 such organizations throughout the world.

Starting in 1967 and examining in excess of 200 UFO reports from Britain, my investigations failed to discover a single case that could reasonably be argued to indicate anything more exotic than misidentified natural

David I. Simpson is a physicist at the National Physical Laboratory in England and is currently engaged in research into accurate pressure-measuring devices using laser interferometry. He became actively involved in UFO investigations about 13 years ago, initially accepting UFO reports at face value. However, his experiences soon led him to the conclusion that the subject's history is traceable to inaccurate data, compiled by highly biased investigators.

or man-made phenomena. A number of these reports contained insufficient data to reach a conclusion, a few were thought to be hoaxes, and a few more the result of mental illusions. The cases chosen ranged from simple lights in the sky, through UFOs that stopped cars, to photographic evidence and claims of alien contact. On examining the same cases, however, other UFO commentators usually published alarmingly different conclusions, often disregarding plausible but mundane explanations. Confronting these authors with alternative solutions provoked many accusations that I was a "nonbelieving skeptic with a closed mind."

It is sometimes difficult to convey to uninformed third parties the highly partisan nature of investigations undertaken by most UFO enthusiasts. I was therefore prompted to illustrate my opinions by perpetrating a series of controlled hoaxes. They were designed to attract the attention of UFOlogists directly, not the general public, with the aim of comparing known details of fabricated "UFO" stimuli with the issued statements of investigators. Since the experiments yielded broadly similar data, just one is detailed here.

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Throughout the world there are certain locations famous for attracting the attention of UFOlogists; they have been called UFOcals. Cradle Hill near the Wiltshire town of Warminster is one such place; UFOlogists make pilgrimages there most weekends, and it was the setting for the opening scene of this experiment on Saturday, March 28, 1970.

At 11 P.M. a 12-volt high-intensity purple spotlight was directed from a neighboring hill toward a group of about 30 sky-watchers on Cradle Hill, three-quarters of a mile away. The lamp was switched on for 5, and then 25, seconds, with a 5-second pause between. During the second "on" period, a bogus magnetic-field sensor, operated among the sky-watchers by a colleague, sounded its alarm buzzer, apparently indicating the presence of a strong magnetic field. (UFO folklore states that strong magnetic fields are a characteristic of UFOs, so this sensor was not an unusual sight.) In practice, the alarm was simply synchronized to sound while the distant spotlight was on. The "strangeness" of the purple light was thereby enhanced.

Norman Foxwell (another colleague stationed among the sky-watchers) pretended to photograph the purple light with a camera mounted on a tripod. Part of his film had already been exposed, however, and bore two latent images, each showing part of the distinctive night view of the streetlamps observable from Cradle Hill with a spurious UFO superimposed. (See figure.) Neither photograph included the site of the spotlight.

Frame one showed a cigar-profile UFO with a semicircular blob above and below center. With respect to the sky-watchers, it was approximately 22 degrees horizontally removed from the spotlight site. Frame two showed the same UFO but farther removed by 8 degrees, slightly lower, fainter, and blurred. Shortly after the "sighting," Foxwell took two genuine time-exposure photographs so that the developed film would show a total of four relevant negatives, two with UFOs and two without, on successive frames. They were designed to present substantial inconsistencies that would allow any moderately critical investigator to cast strong suspicion on their authenticity. Not only did the first pair of negatives show a UFO image quite unlike the observed UFO and on a different part of the horizon, but their magnification was 10 percent greater than the genuine negatives on subsequent frames. Also, the faked negatives were prepared from originals taken the previous year, when two lamps from the distinctive streetlamp pattern were not working. Therefore, two streetlamps that appeared on the genuine pictures were missing from the adjacent faked ones.

Foxwell was briefed to give the film from his camera to any UFOlogist on the hill who would be prepared to have it developed privately. Surprisingly, he managed to do this without raising suspicion. The recipient was John E. Ben, who had connections with *Flying Saucer Review (FSR)*, a glossy international UFO magazine.

For two and a half years, the hoax nature of this "sighting" was kept secret, during which time UFOlogists' letters, published articles, and general comments were collected. To quote the entire file would require more space than is available here. I therefore refer to just a few items that may provide insight into the way UFO enthusiasts investigate and record UFO reports.

Ben was employed by the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, and the film was developed in their photographic department. In early communications he sought permission from Foxwell to take the photographs to a meeting of the *FSR* consultative committee, adding that the top six men in Europe were fortuitously due to attend. After this meeting *FSR* wanted to examine the negatives in their laboratory. On May 26, Ben wrote to Foxwell: "Mr. Charles Bowen of *FSR* [the editor] has contacted me this morning to tell me about your Warminster photographs. I am pleased to inform you that they have now proven the negatives to be genuine beyond all doubt."

The Warminster photographs were first publicized by *FSR* in their July-August 1970 issue, with an artist's impression of the purple light on the front cover. Drawn by Terence Collins, who had been with the sky-watchers on Cradle Hill, the general details were correct, although with

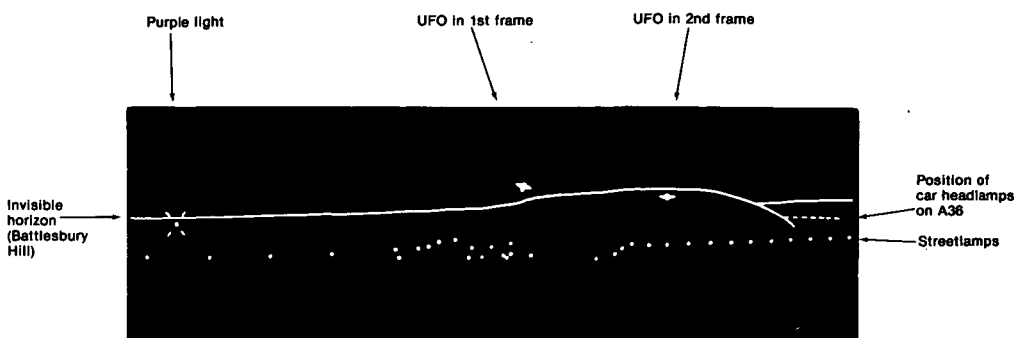


Diagram of view from Cradle Hill

respect to his streetlamps his purple light subtended an angular diameter roughly ten times too large. Inside the magazine, Ben's report, entitled "Photographs from Cradle Hill" (Ben 1970), described the stationary grounded light, which was visible for 30 seconds at an elevation of approximately zero degrees, in the following terms:

At 11:02 P.M. an object was seen at an elevation of approximately 20 degrees in the eastern sky. The object appeared very suddenly as if it came through the clouds, and appeared to the eye as a very bright ovoid light—purple in colour with a periphery of white. Two members of my group who observed the object through binoculars both remarked they could see a crimson light in the centre; this was also attested to by witnesses with good vision.

The object remained stationary for approximately 30 seconds, during which time Mr. Foxwell was able to take the first of his photographs. The object then moved slowly to the right—towards the town—and lost a little altitude in the process. At one stage in the movement it dimmed considerably as though obscured by low cloud. The object continued moving for approximately 20 to 30 seconds, and then stopped again. The light then increased considerably in intensity, though we could not be sure if the object was moving directly towards the observation point, or if it remained stationary. At this point the alarm of a detector sounded and a witness ran to switch it off. After 10 to 20 seconds the light dimmed and went out as though concealed by cloud. However, we were all certain that the object had not moved once more. The sighting had lasted for approximately one to one and a half minutes.

It would perhaps be unfair to criticize the duration estimate and even the "20 degrees in the eastern sky." Of more interest is the movement described, it being inconsistent with the observed stationary light but consistent with the implied movement of the UFO in the fake photographs. Neither Ben nor any subsequent investigator ever commented, to my knowledge, on the fact that the photographs did not include that part of the horizon on which the purple light was located.

In the same issue of *FSR* Percy Hennell, a photographic consultant to *FSR*, reported: "Let me say at the outset that there is nothing about these photographs which suggests to me that they have been faked in any way" (Hennell 1970). And later, because his enlargements showed the fake UFO to be slightly elongated at one end, he suggested that "some propulsive jet may have been operating to move the object to the right."

Both Ben and Hennell identified car headlamps on the pictures (see figure) but, seemingly unaware of the A36 main road, assumed that they were caused by a single vehicle on a track on Battlesbury Hill.

R. H. B. Winder, a consultant to *FSR*, was presented with the artist's impression of the purple light and observed: "These colours are reminiscent of the colours associated with ionisation in air" (Bowen 1970).

After examining the negatives, Pierre Guerin, director of research at the Astrophysical Institute of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, published a "tentative interpretation" of the Warminster photographs (Guerin 1970).

In my opinion there is no question of the object photographed being in any possible way the result of faking. The question that arises is why the appearance of this object on the photographs is so different from its appearance to the eye according to the descriptions given by the witnesses [Bowen 1970].

In this connection it should be noted that the eye is not sensitive to the ultra-violet radiations of wave-lengths of less than 0.36 microns, whereas all photographic films are, whether panchromatic or not. On the other hand, the sensitisation of the panchromatic films in commercial use (such as the Ilford HP4 emulsion) drops off very sharply in the red area for wave-lengths of more than 0.63 micron, while the eye remains sensitive to them up to around 0.70 micron and even a bit beyond that.

Consequently the interpretation of this divergence between what the witnesses "saw" could be quite simple: namely, that the object photographed was emitting ultra-violet light, which the eye does not see. Around the object, however, a ruby-red halo, probably of a monochromatic colour and doubtless due to some phenomenon of air ionisation, was visible only to the eye and in actual fact has made no impression on the film.

If this interpretation is correct, the consequences which we can draw from it are important. As will be known, in a recent issue of *Flying Saucer Review* (Vol. 15, No. 4), John Keel disputed the presence of any solid material object inside the variable luminous phenomena which he calls "soft sightings," claiming thereby that the solid phase of the UFO phenomenon is only one of the aspects—and no doubt the least frequent aspect—of the phenomenon in question. The Warminster sightings do indeed appear to furnish us with an example of "soft sighting" linked with the presence, at its centre, of a solid object not visible to the eye but emitting ultra-violet light.

That the UFOs can appear, or disappear, on the spot, when leaving or entering our usual four-dimensional space-time is probably true. But it would be rash to assert that they do not always possess a material, solid body

right from the moment that they have penetrated into this space-time. Despite the claims of John Keel, the "soft sighting" could in fact very well be merely secondary effects of the presence of solid objects, whether or not visible to the eye, in the gaseous medium of our atmosphere. This hypothesis had already been formulated long ago, and the Warminster sightings seem to confirm it.

The March-April 1971 issue of *FSR* published five reports related to the Warminster photographs (Bowen 1971; Scammell 1971; Ben 1971; Collins 1971; Samuels 1971). Charles Bowen's "Progress at Cradle Hill" included a print of the negative strip showing all four photographs. The images are small but a ruler is the only apparatus required to measure the magnification discrepancy outlined earlier (by comparing the distance between ten streetlamps on negative one with the distance between the same ten streetlamps on negative four). Scammell (a land surveyor), Ben, and Collins each attempted to pinpoint the position of the photographic UFO with respect to Battlesbury Hill. Each generated gross errors, largely through assuming that the A36 main road car headlamps were on the side of Battlesbury Hill. Collins calculated that the UFO was 60 feet long and, including the "globes," 30 feet in diameter. Michael Samuels, an "independent consulting photographer," widened the debate with a three-page article discussing erroneously the effects of ultraviolet radiation on photographic emulsions.

Their investigations continued. The "Case of the Warminster Photographs" rapidly became a UFO classic, and it incorporated qualities rarely found together: multiple "independent" witnesses and good photographic data (the film was chaperoned from camera to developing tank), and the prime investigators were linked through *FSR*, a magazine regarded in the field as a forum for dispassionate UFO research.

It was therefore unfortunate that, when presented with a case of such potential importance, the investigators failed to learn the geographical layout of the sighting area and no effort was made to examine the basic data critically. The negatives contained glaring inconsistencies that were never discovered, and in more than two years no attempt was made to interview the prime witness, Foxwell. Yet without his photographs the sighting would have been insignificant.

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Regrettably, my experiences in the UFO field have shown that the investigator incompetence demonstrated by this particular experiment, far from being exceptional, is typical. Of course very few UFO reports stem from calculated hoaxes like this one; but when reading or hearing of any "sight-

ing,” it is important to be aware of the general caliber of UFO enthusiasts, even if they do not appear to have been directly involved in the case. Their irrational thinking is infectious and has frequently provided the media with entertaining headlines. As a result, certain members of the general public, on seeing something in the sky that is strange to them, describe not what they saw but what they think they ought to have seen.

That unidentified flying objects exist is undeniable, as hundreds of thousands have been reported globally since biblical times. Argument otherwise would suggest, absurdly, that every human being has always been fully conversant with the multifarious causes of visual phenomena. UFOlogists have, therefore, plenty of material to contemplate and often plead to the scientific community for assistance and recognition of their exotic theories. Assistance is sometimes forthcoming—for example, the University of Colorado’s *Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (Condon 1969)—but acceptance of the alien nature of UFOs is not. This is simply because the evidence, when subjected to detailed critical analysis, fails to provide the degree of integrity required. UFOlogists are reluctant to accept that scientific evaluation requires inconclusive, suspicious, or self-contradictory testimony to be classified as such and that a hypothesis based on disreputable evidence or myths remains weak, unconvincing, and adds nothing useful to the understanding of our world. Instead, they prefer suggesting that government and scientific authorities are party to a world-wide conspiracy to prevent the “truth” from being known, demonstrating remarkable faith in governmental unity and little knowledge of the scientific fraternity. More than once they have suggested that science should be “modified” in order to cope with UFO phenomena and have actively encouraged the growth of UFOlogical pseudoscience. Occasionally individuals with relevant technical backgrounds become involved; it is disturbing to witness the abandoning of their mental disciplines and common sense. Unfortunately, credibility is given to dubious evidence when it is endorsed by people of high professional status—such as Dr. Pierre Guerin in the controlled hoax.

In conclusion it is felt that the wealth of UFO reports available for study represents nothing more significant than the relatively simple events listed in paragraph three. There is no logical reason whatever to decide that a more exotic, perhaps extraterrestrial, solution is justified. If ever there is subtle evidence suggesting extraterrestrial visitation, it is unlikely to be discovered by a typical UFOlogist, and care must be taken to ensure that the signs are not swamped or destroyed by nonsense.

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