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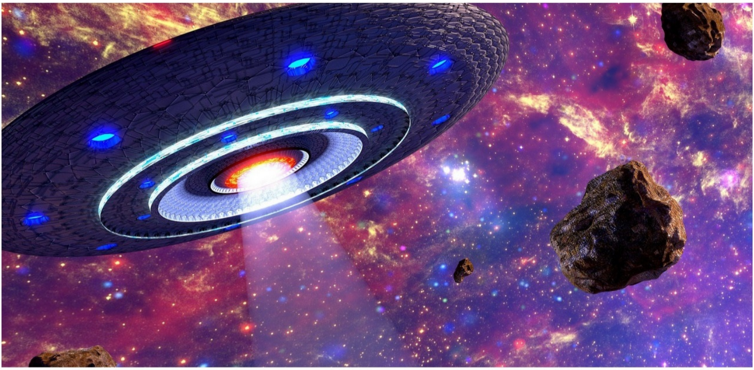
From the archive: The Rendlesham Incident – Some Lessons for UFOlogy

By *Jenny Randle* *7th April 2006*



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Any sighting of something strange in the sky or, better still, something that comes from the sky, lands on the ground and appears to leave unresolved physical evidence, is bound to generate human interest. It is no surprise that the events in Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk in December l980 have attracted the attention of everyone, from the media to the sceptics. That is, of course, because of those magic letters U.F.O. which characterise the nature of such a thing.

As it is presented to the public this case is a major challenge to those who disbelieve in UFO reality and a major *coup* for those who consider UFOs to be of global significance. It is not unreasonable to find it presented as Britain's best ever case – but only if one takes its nature at face value. And in UFOlogy that is the most dangerous thing that you can do.

UFO stories attract the media in levels that are quite disproportionate to their scientific value and those who report them rarely have much grasp of what constitutes useful evidence (otherwise they would be reporting the Hessdalen, Norway, lights where spectroscopic data have been obtained of what seem to be intriguing plasma-like phenomena). But in UFO-reporting terms plasmas are boring. To most folk, 'UFO' is synonymous (though wrongly) with 'alien spaceship'. It is in truth merely an acronym for 'unidentified' (not even 'unidentifiable') 'flying object', but such a fact is usually lost amidst the hype and screaming headline copy.

The media, of course, are there to tell a story and sell newspapers or attract viewers. They have a simple maxim that dogs virtually all UFO reporting. “Man sees aliens in spaceship” is news. “Man sees what he thinks are aliens in spaceship but it was really something explicable” is not – unless it has a good human interest angle that can be cobbled together around it. Perhaps the man was a defrocked vicar or a US military commander. Then any old sighting becomes news because of that factor alone.

Many UFOlogists, especially when chasing what they consider to be the ‘big cases’ fall prey to these same motives and subconsciously switch off from any desire for explanation. It is true that they want answers. But they want the answers that they have already fixated upon before even beginning an investigation. Most UFOlogists are enthusiasts, interested because they believe UFOs reflect something very important – nearly always extra-terrestrial visitors (even though in reality the evidence for this is remarkably scant). As such they rarely investigate a case to any objective degree or expect to find a different kind of answer. And when they do it becomes a non-case – not part of ‘real’ UFOlogy.

Yet, solved cases are the success stories for a UFOlogist (the unsolved ones are really their failures) and it is amazing how few seem appreciative of the processes involved in what turns a seemingly impressive close encounter into an IFO (Identified Flying Object) – or, indeed, the scientific value of examining such evidence.

A big case to most UFOlogists is a weapon in a war being fought with the powers that be, to get them to admit a truth – normally considered to be that the world’s key nations know that UFOs come from outer space, are engaged in some kind of surveillance operation but are afraid to admit to this stunning reality. Again, the evidence for this is very hard to detect and, in my view, considerably outweighed by that which demonstrates how the authorities have only ever practised a cover-up of ignorance as opposed to hiding guilty secrets. They do not know the truth behind UFOs, any more than we do, but suspect it not to be about extraterrestrials simply because the accumulated evidence comes nowhere close to demonstrating that.

In addition, many UFO enthusiasts see a big case as a powerful asset against other UFO enthusiasts. It sells copies of magazines, attracts people to conferences and lectures and gets them to join your group and not some rival society. These are important issues within the UFO movement, which is hardly ever geared up to pursue the scientific truth behind UFOs as you might expect. Rather it exists to perpetuate its own existence.

Think about it. If UFOs were ever properly understood, or revealed to be phenomena of interest to atmospheric physics, psychology or sociology (and all three are indeed intimately involved in the equation) then UFOlogy effectively commits suicide. It hands over the responsibility to people outside of the realms of the UFO Community.

Hence there is an inbuilt reason why UFOlogists actually do not want to solve its biggest mysteries. Many sincerely do not even realise how insidious is this factor at work.

Sceptics, on the other hand, are usually only attracted to UFO cases after they enter the public domain, maybe years after first investigation by UFOlogists (as with Rendlesham). By then these cases are already massively tainted by the way they have been ‘processed’ by the UFO community and ‘reported’ by the media. Inherently, sceptics desire to explain away what has taken place, on the assumption that UFOs are *per se* explicable phenomena and so this outcome is a certainty with any particular case.

This is biased, but less wrong than the approach adopted by a majority of UFOlogists (because the vast majority of UFOs are indeed actually IFOs and so amenable to explanation if well investigated). However, this perspective often fails to embrace even the possibility that some UFO cases might offer scientifically interesting data (as in my view they do).

Moreover, sceptics also often base conclusions on various false premises, which can result from not working with the raw data but from stories that have already been contaminated by the psycho-social factors that underpin every aspect of UFOlogy and are frequently hard to distil from a complex case years down the track. This is true, for example, with crop circles, where the massive cottage industry of circle faking is normally all that sceptics see, unaware that behind it lies a mildly interesting atmospheric effect that seems to have been at work for centuries.

Alien abductions are another good example, where in my view the widespread but disastrous tactic of hypnotically regressing witnesses wrecks the evidence before one can even start to examine it. Yet there is an intriguing root phenomenon that probably has nothing to do with aliens but offers scientific interest nonetheless; it is swamped by the noise generated by the hypnosis that tends to be all that sceptics see.

I regard it as my proudest moment in British UFOlogy when I got the national group BUFORA to ban the use of hypnosis on all its cases in a move for which sceptics have never given credit, even though when it happened 15 years ago it was hugely prescient even by sceptics' standards. The decision was based on the problems generated by the evidence. Any true scientist would have made the same decision.

Rules of Engagement

It is extremely difficult to remember the cardinal rules of UFO investigation when you get caught up in the excitement of a big case. But they are vital.

Firstly, 95% or so of all UFO sightings have prosaic explanations as 55 years of research has long established. These include cases that start off looking very interesting and run the gamut from mere lights in the night sky to allegedly landed UFOs with aliens nearby. Since the odds are stacked so greatly against any specific case being a 'real' UFO it is absolutely essential that a UFOlogist approach each case with the assumption that it will ultimately be solved. Unhappily most UFOlogists fail to understand this consequence of statistics and start with the expectation that it does not have a rational answer.

Secondly, you should always start off with the simplest possible explanation, then move on to look at other mundane, if somewhat more obscure options, and only at the end be dragged kicking and screaming into the belief that a case is unexplained – i.e., a 'real' UFO. It may turn out to be unsolved (in my view some cases are) and even of scientific interest (ditto in my estimation), but you have to fight to prove that by eliminating simpler options first. Although, as you must follow where the evidence trail leads, identification of the 'simplest explanation' can often be problematic in itself. Often, however, one answer may suggest itself as a possibility for initial exploration.

Also, you need to avoid the lure of the 'unimpeachable' witness. Simply because someone is a policeman, or a colonel or a government minister, does not make them any less likely to mistake an IFO. But UFOlogy offers frequent statements such as "This case is strong because the witness was a trained observer". Sadly, no UFO case is strong merely for that reason – not unless its intrinsic evidence is even stronger. Human perception (*via* a prince or a pauper) is always fallible.

Finally, never say never, with regards to an explanation. It can take months, years or decades to solve a case when the pieces of the jigsaw slot into place. No case is forever immune to explanation however strong it seems. There is always the prospect that something will emerge to make its nature obvious years down the track.

UFOlogy is littered with cases like that and the book that Dr David Clarke, Andy Roberts and I wrote together (Randles, Roberts & Clarke, 2000) is full of them. Any UFOlogist who assumes that a case is a genuine UFO because it has not yet been solved is failing to do their job. A UFO remains a UFO only so long as it continues to be unexplained. That status is constantly on borrowed time. No case is ever unexplainable.

Rendlesham

When the events in Rendlesham Forest happened I was still in my 20s and relatively inexperienced. Although I had been a member of BUFORA (the British UFO Research Association) for a few years I was not to take on the role of their Director of Investigations until some way into the Rendlesham story.

I first heard about the case in late January l981, less than a month after it happened. My source was a writer of a book about mystery disappearances (Paul Begg) who had by chance befriended a British civilian air traffic controller in a Norfolk pub. Knowing of my interest in UFOs Paul put the story onto me. The man was concerned for his job and required strict anonymity, but clearly took what he had heard seriously.

He reported that fellow officers at his base (Eastern Radar, Watton) had tracked an anomalous target over East Anglia the previous month, a story he knew about only second hand, not being on duty that night. But he was present when USAF intelligence agents some weeks later came to take radar tapes for analysis and in doing so gave a quite extraordinary justification for having such permission.

The intelligence officers said that a UFO had been reported coming down into Rendlesham Forest (approximate location of last sighting of the radar image just after Christmas) and that airmen from the twin NATO bases of Woodbridge and Bentwaters had gone out and confronted it. A senior officer had even left a base party and had a close encounter. Many aspects of the Rendlesham story as we now know it to be (including the alleged physical traces, the live tape recording of events and electrical interference on radios and arc lights) all featured in the story as told to this radar officer by the USAF intelligence staff.

Faced with such an extraordinary report from a witness who would not go on record and whose story was partly second hand anyhow I was at a loss. I did not have the resources to travel hundreds of miles from my home in Cheshire to investigate (having just left college and not being a car driver). Moreover, I could hardly implicate my witness by being too explicit and discrete calls brought no confirmation of this story from any of the bases involved.

I did ask two trusted colleagues from my circle to make other enquiries. One was Peter Warrington, with whom I had just published a book (Randles & Warrington, 1979) and with whom I later wrote a UFO article for *New Scientist* that led to a further book (Randles & Warrington, 1985). Peter had many contacts in the radar industry (indeed because of these we had just solved a major radar case, widely reported in the media, during which a British Airways crew allegedly saw and tracked a UFO on a flight to Portugal). But he got nowhere chasing the alleged radar tracking around Rendlesham and considered it likely to be a dead end.

The other person that I involved was Kevin McClure, a UFOlogist noted for his skills at investigating rumour propagation (his booklet on the UFO sightings during the Welsh religious revival is a classic example; McClure, 1979). I suspected that rumours were going to be a factor in a case involving thousands of airmen at a tight-knit base. But again Kevin never got very far and soon wrote this case off, much as I was then starting to do. It looked like an unproven collection of anecdotes.

What I did do was attempt to get some sense out of the MoD. At the time I was engaged in a campaign to persuade them to release their UFO data to the public, suggesting a scientific agency or university (something for which UFOlogists have accused me of treason since recently the MoD released a few of my letters that got into the Rendlesham file, although there were others that were presumably filed elsewhere and remain unreleased). However, I got no help from the MoD between early l981 and early l983, leaving me to choose between natural bureaucratic lethargy or the suspicion that they were not answering any of my straight questions about this alleged event because they had something to hide.

It is often not appreciated by the sceptics (and it rarely comes out in any media documentaries about this case) but the early days of UFOlogy's involvement were not characterised by wide-eyed acceptance that Rendlesham was a massive case proving that the aliens had landed. Quite the contrary, three of us tried and failed to verify things and only I retained any belief that there might be something to it beyond the very early days.

That only happened with me because by chance I discovered that two local women (a ghost hunter named Brenda Butler, who lived near the forest, and her newly joined BUFORA friend from 50 miles north, Dot Street) had picked up independent stories about the case from residents of Suffolk.

Indeed Brenda had been befriended (again in a pub) by a USAF intelligence officer who alleged direct involvement in seeing a landed UFO and even referred to aliens, plus a one-to-one contact between them and a local commander (Brigadier General Gordon Williams). There is little evidential support for this story (nearly all the military witnesses claim it never occurred) and I have never trusted this story. However, the tale fed to Brenda contained sufficient links with that coming from Watton to suggest they were at least referring to the same set of events (Brenda and Dot were unaware of the radar story when they heard from this USAF officer).

Brenda and Dot now did an extraordinary job of trawling the local area for other prospective witnesses and offered me several anecdotes about a man met in a bar who had said this, or a local farmer who had reported something else. Whilst the evidential value of these stories was not high, together they painted a picture of odd lights seen over the woods just after Christmas l980 that puzzled even the locals and activity inside the forest in the days afterwards, including men wandering around involved in what looked like some kind of 'scene of crime' or 'data recovery' operation wearing protective clothing.

All of this was enough to cause me to pause in being totally dismissive about the case and to do three things when invited to become Director of Investigations for BUFORA later that year.

Step one involved my holding a meeting in London, in late l981, bringing together all involved parties in this case in order to collate what we knew. I have to report that, apart from Brenda and Dot (who were convinced that something amazing must have gone on) and myself (persuaded only that this case could not simply be written off), most of our colleagues thought it a waste of time and a story that would never go anywhere or get verified. The level of scepticism within UFOlogy may surprise you.

Armed with the data I then compiled an account of the stories, claims, rumours and hard facts (few as there were) – as an attempt to document evidence before it was lost amidst the confusion. I printed this at my expense, circulated it to about 100 people in British UFOlogy and gave permission for it to be carried by *Flying Saucer Review* (then a respectable journal edited by Charles Bowen and frequently carrying articles by scientists). This piece appeared in spring l982 and was the first detailed record of the case.

The third thing that I did (once again note the tenor) was to encourage a group of sceptical UFOlogists, from a group in Southern England allied to BUFORA, to visit the forest, spend some time with Brenda and Dot and offer an independent assessment of the case. I trusted their judgement.

That report, published in summer 1982, concluded that it could not be said one way or another whether any sighting had occurred, but expressed caution about some of Brenda and Dot's anecdotal stories and argued (as with most other UFOlogists) that this case was likely to remain a dead duck in so far as gaining any meaningful evidence was concerned.

What did I think?

What was my opinion about this case during these early years? I was open-minded, but far from persuaded that we should treat these events at face value. There seemed scant reason to conclude that an alien contact had occurred at a NATO base.

However, I was deeply suspicious about the way this case had entered the public domain. That two separate people with military connections (both also linked to USAF intelligence sources and one actually a base intelligence public affairs officer) should leak this extraordinary story to the UFO community made no sense. Not if this story was true.

These days I might be more inclined to consider that this was all meant as a joke (even though the radar officer at Watton clearly never treated it as such) and what happened was that the tall tales on base were spread out with less than serious intent. But at the time the manner with which these stories seemed force fed (within four weeks of the events) and complete with extraordinary details, the like of which British UFOlogy had never seen before, made me suspect that the story was a mask for something else – especially as the MoD continued to say nothing at all about the case in replies to me. They just ignored every question that I asked about the matter and tried to deflect me onto other things.

Indeed at one stage they even released case files only weeks old about sightings from elsewhere in Britain in what seemed designed to set me off chasing these new stories and away from thinking about Rendlesham.

My dilemma was that I was increasingly convinced that an event had occurred in December 1980, but increasingly unconvinced it involved base commanders chatting with aliens beside a landed UFO. So why were stories saying this leaked out so casually? Clearly if these events had happened the radar tapes would have been taken from Watton without convoluted explanations to junior staff. Moreover, Brenda's source had bolstered his credibility by offering to us a sketch map of the route to the forest landing site written on the back of what he said was a top secret memo he had taken from base. This memo was a communiqué during the time when President Carter tried to get NASA to take over UFO investigation work – and suggestive that there were forces trying to prevent this from happening.

Although of modest import in and of itself, this memo had never been released before under the thenactive US Freedom of Information laws that had already generated thousands of government UFO records. The manner of its release suggested that Brenda's source did have access to high-level data. Far from convincing me about his story, however, this actually made me more suspicious about the alien UFO story. I suspected that disinformation was at work and we UFOlogists were being set up to spread a tale so tall that it would never be believed by any sensible commentator and would stifle any serious investigation into what else might have occurred.

What else might that be? I knew that there were strong grounds to suspect nuclear weapons were on base. The stories about the case suggested that anomalous radiation levels had been recorded (although as yet we had no details of this). Witnesses told us about seeing men in protective suits on site after the events. The Cold War was at its height and there were mounting protests about moving American cruise missiles into British bases (such as Greenham Common).

So I began to ask myself what incident at an air base might be such a hot potato that it would be preferable to spin out a UFO-related cover story that was sufficiently absurd to kill any sober investigation into the base.

I concluded that if there had been a mishap involving a nuclear weapon, perhaps lost from a plane (not unheard of in 1980), then the subsequent clean up involving helicopters and security teams would be impossible to hide in a civilian forest. Yet it would be a political catastrophe for the UK and US at the time when they were committed to siting cruise missiles and promising how well they were protected from anything going wrong.

It would not have been difficult to allow reports of such covert activities to fester in the minds of those who inevitably stumbled across them as a UFO encounter, especially if given a helping hand by feeding out stories to hopefully gullible UFOlogists. Indeed there was even a movie doing the rounds at the time (*Hangar 18*) in which a military base, a crashed UFO, little aliens and a cover up feature. This might have given the idea to someone creative at the base public affairs office.

To me at the time this made more sense than senior USAF officers chatting to little aliens whilst the USAF helped them to fix their broken UFO (which was one version we had been offered). I suggested the nuclear mishap theory in the first public articles on the case (for the Orbis magazine *The Unexplained* in summer 1982) and soon after in an interview with popular science journal *OMNI*, that was published in early 1983.

Dr David Clarke has achieved what I failed to achieve all those years ago and obtained release of the file on Rendlesham. This shows how my decision to suggest a nuclear mishap theory struck fear into the MoD. Whilst nothing they say suggests that it was true, they were clearly more phased by the idea than by any of the wild tales placing Rendlesham into a UFO context.

In fact, one memo between the British commander at Bentwaters and the MoD actually says with relief that most other UFOlogists will not pursue an interest in this case if it is suspected of being anything but an alien UFO. The MoD were certainly adept at reading most UFOlogists.

The turning point

Although, of course, it has to remain a possibility that there is some hidden reason like the nuclear mishap theory behind the Rendlesham incident, I increasingly came to doubt this possibility.

After the *OMNI* article, the MoD suddenly made a major about-face. Within days of its release, my umpteenth request for an official statement about Rendlesham bore fruit. Presumably now that their own base officer (Squadron Leader Donald Moreland) had verified the case in his interview with *OMNI,* it was futile to try to say nothing any longer.

So, in a letter dated 11 April 1983, Pam Titchmarsh of the MoD told me that there had been unusual lights seen over the forest in December 1980 and that the MoD had come up with no explanation for them. It is hard to realise now to what extent that letter, minor as its admissions were, galvanised this case. For it was the proof in writing that there had been an incident and a public admission by the MoD that it was still unexplained. That was unheard of in 1983.

Very quickly American UFOlogists could now use their Freedom of Information Act to obtain the infamous Halt memo (the one-page statement of the case sent by him, as a deputy commander and

USAF Lieutenant Colonel, to the MoD in London on 13 January 1981). Its release came in June 1983.

I had, of course, asked for this file the minute the MoD had affirmed the existence of the case to me. I never got it. But it was released to Americans, allegedly through the MoD. In August 1983 I was able (alongside Brenda and Dot) to take this file unannounced to the MoD main building in London. There had been no publicity for its existence anywhere and so our arrival was a total shock. A fascinating exchange took place. Although we half-suspected that we were breaking the Official Secrets Act by possessing this file, no action followed. Two months later it was plastered across the front page of the *News of the World* newspaper (although not at our initiative, I should add).

The world now knew about Rendlesham and the sceptical movement began to try to find answers – although, as I hope the above demonstrates, the UFO community was not entirely without caution in its two years prior involvement.

Of course, all that was lost amidst the maelstrom that followed (the case was a *cause célèbre* in the UK media for several days). I was hardly ever interviewed in that time, by the way, and do not feature at all in the *News of the World* reports (although I spent several hours with their reporter). My less than committed belief that this case had anything to do with aliens and spaceships was no doubt a factor.

Even so, the day before the *News of the World* story broke I was blitzed by calls from a rival tabloid. They offered me a fortune to talk to them exclusively and try to get one up on what they thought was a massive story about to break in a competitor. Of course, I was not going to get embroiled in this. The paper tried to blackmail me, literally claiming that if I did not talk they would make it up and ascribe it to me! They only went away (after several attempts) when I threatened to call in the police.

I spent much time in Rendlesham Forest over the next few months, now that the case was unavoidably big news. The radiation trace details were in the Halt memo and one of the first things that I did was get them analysed by an expert (Dr Michele Clare, a plant biologist). It is often reported that UFOlogists were over-excited by these radiation readings until sceptics proved them to be dubious. The later work by people such as Ian Ridpath and James Easton was invaluable but I had learned not to take these data too seriously right at the start, when Michele indicated that the figures were not way above background level. She also pointed out that in pine forests levels can build up due to the accumulation of fallen pine needles – especially if, as here, a nuclear power station is close by.

This was one reason why I had begun to doubt the nuclear mishap theory. Another came from my talks in the forest with forestry commission workers. They all doubted that any kind of dropped weapon was feasible or that helicopter recovery could have occurred in a dense forest or that they would be unaware of these things taking place. That said, one forester did intriguingly refer to a large hole in the tree canopy found in January 1981 close to what we believe was the alleged landing site. He considered it unusual, as if something heavy had passed through. Whilst UFOlogists might argue that it was a UFO ‘taking off ’, something falling from a plane is a more likely culprit, especially as there was a trace of a shallow crater in the ground beneath. Unhappily, the forester says that he reported it and within 24 hours that area of forest was felled, as part of a planned operation ordered by the regional headquarters in Cambridge.

The lighthouse

When the *News of the World* story was causing ripples I was actually busy on another case. A UFO had been reported by radio presenter, David Jacobs, who happened to be in a car with MP Shirley Williams. Although the ball of fire that they had briefly seen was of no importance, the witness factor came into play here again and made this case seem bigger than it deserved. There was never any question that what these witnesses had seen was a bolide, a bright meteor. But I had to fight a hard battle with NATO defence committee member, Major Sir Patrick Wall, to prevent him from connecting the incident with Rendlesham in questions that he was planning to ask in parliament to push the government to come clean on what it knew about the incident in December 1980. Predictably they told him little and that was that.

Although I prevented Patrick Wall from getting carried away by this new sighting, ironically, years later I met David Jacobs when we both did a TV chat show in Ireland. I went out of my way to try to explain to him what he had seen and how it could be explained. He seemed interested, asked me how to spell bolide and I thought I had scotched further coverage, at least. But a year or two later David appeared on the quiz show *Countdown* and he described the story of his UFO sighting to the enthralled audience. There was no mention of any explanation.

When Ian Ridpath, along with forester Vince Thurkettle, proposed their solution to the Rendlesham case in the wake of the press frenzy it was startling. They argued that a meteor known to have been seen from parts of the UK had attracted the military personnel into the forest where they were then fooled by the lights of the Orford Ness lighthouse. The first thing that I did was go to the forest at night and check it out. I had never been to these woods in the dark before, as such conditions were hardly conducive to doing meaningful research. Now, of course, it was essential. This is an example of factors that can transform a case years later when something arises that has simply never been considered before.

There was no doubt that from the site you could see the pulsing light of Orford Ness out across the field where the UFO supposedly came down. Alignments were broadly correct as well. Moreover, there was a second light (the Shipwash lightship) off to the right, although less obvious. The most noticeable lights were really those from a research building on Orford Ness where in the 1970s experiments involving atmospheric ionisation were conducted and whose role in this case has been a source of much interest on my part ever since.

Whilst it was obvious that these lights were visible in 1983, though easily explained if you knew what they were in advance, it was far less apparent how they might seem if you were not expecting to see a lighthouse from a forest. Could they have been the cause of the reported sightings three years earlier? A problem was that the forest at this point had been heavily felled since the sightings and so at the time of the events there would be far denser tree coverage. The lights even now were merely distant points of no real prominence. TV images tend to exaggerate their impact. I doubted that these lights would be strange enough to trigger a major encounter, but we now know that to some extent they did because of the abortive chase of what turned out to be the lighthouse on the same night as the UFO sighting. This was made by the very same witnesses.

Although these witnesses seem not to consider that encounter to be with the same lights involved in the UFO episode one has to be mindful of the possibility. Unhappily the American UFOlogists who were aware of these statements years ago had for some reason never published any record of their existence. I did not discover this until 14 years after that first nocturnal visit to the forest – by which point it had changed again out of all recognition.

It remains debatable whether the lighthouse and/or Shipwash or perhaps the building lights on the Ness could have triggered a complex close encounter. Did the tree coverage and intermittent visibility this afforded make these lights appear more mysterious? I have my doubts that the lighthouse, on its own, could be strange enough to be the primary cause of the encounters in the forest, although we seem forced to accept that these lights must have had a part to play in this complicated set of encounters. It is too much of a coincidence otherwise.

My doubts about the lighthouse as a primary culprit grew when over the years more military witnesses came forward, often only after they had left the military and no longer feared retribution. Principal of these was John Burroughs, whom I met by surprise in Arizona in 1989. Our long conversations gave me a vital key to the case – a direct witness to the events in Rendlesham Forest who was objective and willing to listen to sensible possibilities. John never claimed to have seen a spaceship, or any kind of machine, or indeed to have met aliens. He denounced most of the fanciful tales associated with the case but was adamant (as one of the three men who had the initial close encounter) that he saw something weird that was like a fuzzy, opaque mass of light. When asked directly about the lighthouse he said this was not the answer – pointing out that he had picnicked in the woods, knew about it, had seen it before and, in any case, lighthouses did not fly and the lights that he saw that night clearly did move vertically upwards at one stage.

One should never be over-reliant on a witness and, of course, John never mentioned to me then, or in 1994 interviews he gave for a TV documentary that I set up, his aborted chase of what turned out to be the lighthouse. However, I consider John Burroughs a strong witness and I trust his basic version of events. I should add that he reports what appears to be a strong electrostatic field in close proximity to this fuzzy light, causing his skin to tingle and hair to stand on end. He was certain this was a genuine energy field of some sort but was perfectly willing to consider that it was generated by some kind of natural atmospheric energy rather than an alien craft.

After what John Burroughs told me in 1989 I was inclined to consider the lighthouse theory hard to justify. Hence my interest in the ionisation experiments that had been going on from Orford Ness, dead ahead in line of sight from where Burroughs reported this close encounter.

But there is little hard evidence that such research might have been occurring as late as 1980. The records show that the experiments ended five years earlier, but also that an enlarged project was being developed and that Orford Ness was a preferred site for this new setup. The government files relating to this research are still banned from release for many years to come owing to their alleged sensitivity. So we only have scattered clues, such as claims from a sailor aboard *HMS Norfolk* sailing past Orford Ness that men were ordered below decks because something was going to occur off shore they were not supposed to see.

Around Orford Ness is where radar was developed in secret in the run-up to World War Two, where experimental telecommunications sites were later created, and where the original home of radar (Bawdsey Manor) has become a cover British military base. It is also where there are many local stories, unconnected with Rendlesham, about humming noises, strange electrical effects and green glows (described by one witness as looking like a cathode ray tube – which is pretty suggestive of ionisation). There also exists an MoD warning to shipping about electrical interference when passing

Orford Ness which indicates that at some stage such research was considered likely to manifest the sort of physical effects that are connected with the claims from Rendlesham Forest in 1980.

What do I believe now?

I could write thousands of additional words about what is undoubtedly the most complex UFO encounter in British history. I have, since *Sky Crash* (Butler, Street, & Randles, 1984), written two other full books about it (Randles, 1992, 1998) and a lengthy chapter for *The UFOs that Never Were* (Randles, Roberts, & Clarke, 2000). On each occasion there has been significantly more additional evidence available to me and witness testimony in need of analysis, because this case has been characterised by its slow emergence from confusion into clarity.

Many sensible heads have of late applied their reasoning powers and it is almost impossible for those seeing the wealth of data and the abundance of vociferous witnesses going public these days to think back to the first three years when all we had were second-hand stories, dubious witnesses, and a total lack of any written statements or official confirmation that anything had happened at all.

I believe that I tried to steer the case in a sensible direction, but once it became a mega-story thanks to the media intervention of 1983 there was always going to be a limited prospect of sorting truth from fantasy. As with any famous case, 'wannabees' and tall-tale-tellers have proliferated and from no evidence we now have a plethora of 'evidence' which is often next to impossible to make to fit together.

My view is that parts of this case have gradually become explained as time has progressed. I am now of the view that much of what happened on the night when Colonel Halt led a team into the forest and tape-recorded sightings is resolved. There were misperceptions of what are clearly stars (stationary lights, moving in box motion – a classic effect known as autokinesis) which then stayed in the sky as dawn broke, vanishing when the sun came up. Any UFOlogist with experience would recognise these for what they are almost immediately.

Similarly there is every chance that the lighthouse/lightship was involved in the equation somewhere – since this case is clearly not the product of a single IFO source but a combination of different things that are adding to its complexity.

The radiation is, I believe, not an issue. The score marks on the trees have simple answers connected with the practices of the forestry workers in marking trees and even Halt on his live tape expresses doubts saying these marks seemed not to be recent. There is no absolute certainty the landing site identified is exactly where the UFO was located. Therefore the contentious ground traces may be one giant red herring. After all, these were airmen from another country in a forest at night where it would be difficult to tell one clump of trees apart from another. They could have found the ground marks on retracing their steps (as we know they did) and assumed that because these were in the same general area to that in which they saw the strange lights, these were marks left by the lights. But that is very much an assumption, which few researchers into this case seem to appreciate. The link between ground traces and close encounter is often raised as a key reason to believe in its credibility.

What still stands out to me from Halt's encounter is the reference to beams of pencil-like light that came down from the sky and touched the ground nearby. Halt told me that it was these laser-like beams that convinced him that something inexplicable was going on. And there is partial independent witness support from a civilian in a house just across the forest who saw bands of light coming down from the sky.

It may be that these relate to the claimed prank by Kevin Conde, using the bright lights of his 1979 Plymouth Volare to create a hoax, but a good deal of work needs to be done to demonstrate a clear cause and effect link between these two events. As for the first night, when a three-man security patrol, including John Burroughs, encountered that smoky light and the allegedly associated electrostatic field, what happened then? Were they fooled by the lighthouse?

Importantly there are references in witness testimony to the lights seen hovering on a carpet of mist. Weather records suggest ground mist could have been present. I have investigated cases where ground lights seen through mist have generated very odd-looking UFOs, especially if there is also a temperature inversion layer in the atmosphere. These conditions can trigger a mirage effect, where a ground light is smeared into a fuzzy blob and appears to move as it passes through the inversion layer.

Indeed I once myself witnessed a star rising over a lake through ground mist and an inversion layer. Only several minutes later, when the star finally rose above the mist and inversion layer, did its true nature become obvious. Before then it had resembled a yellow light that had a fuzzy shape and that moved suddenly in a burst of speed at one point, presumably when its rays of light were distorted by the inversion layer. A similar effect causes light from the sky near ground-level to bend on hot days creating what looks like a pool of water on the road ahead.

Is it possible that the lighthouse shining through mist and an inversion layer produced a spectacular mirage that turned this otherwise innocent light into a much stranger looking blob that seemed to rocket skywards? However, on this assumption, the reported electrostatic effects remain more of a mystery. I discuss this mirage theory in more detail in *The UFOs that Never Were* (Randles, Roberts, & Clarke, 2000).

In conclusion I would say that this case is a fascinating one because it is a true test of UFO analysis. Even now it is far from obvious what caused these events, and there are multiple possibilities.

If you are willing to regard it as a detective mystery to be unravelled then it is possibly the best example in UFOlogy, because the clues are there – just so many of them, often rather contradictory in nature, that you will struggle to piece together a coherent whole. The task is made more difficult because Rendlesham Forest in December 1980 was such a fascinating place with many things going on that could have had a part to play. A number of them may have chanced to come together to create a mystery.

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