

THE ANNAPURNA-POKHARA UFO "BALLET"

Charles Bowen

TWO young Britons, Stephen Gill and Roderick Baird, both aged 20 and both of them "victims" of an adventurous wanderlust and a healthy desire to escape from claustrophobic Western life, met, by strange chance, in Kathmandu in March 1972. They elected to go trekking among the mountains, and this trip led them directly to one of the most interesting UFO experiences of recent years. Furthermore, they obtained a photograph to support their claim.

Why should it have been by *strange chance* that they met in Kathmandu? Solely because they had known one another in England—where together they had been pupils at a well-known public school—yet, having left school and gone their separate ways, neither one of them had any prior knowledge that the other would be visiting remote and entrancing Nepal.

I learned of their experience in the autumn of 1972 when, after he had traced my telephone number, Stephen Gill arranged to meet me at 21 Cecil Court. He told me very briefly about the unusual UFO incident, and gave me an en-print colour photograph which showed little more than a striking mountain and lakeside scene. It was arranged that when Roderick Baird, who lives in Oxfordshire, could pay a visit, we would meet at Stephen Gill's home in Surrey. Enlargements of the photograph would have been obtained by that time, and I would be able to interview them at length.

It must have been a frustrating experience for Stephen Gill to try to arrange that second meeting: on at least two occasions I was unable to meet them, and it was not until Whit Sunday this year that we finally succeeded in getting together.

I asked Stephen why he had decided in the first place to seek me out. His answer was, simply, that he had taken *Flying Saucer Review* for a couple of years while still at school: so it was established that he had some prior knowledge of the subject, as also had Roddy Baird—although to a lesser degree—through having borrowed a few of the magazines.

The witnesses

Stephen Gill, a student of agriculture and horticulture and, at the time of writing due, to leave for a visit to East Africa, had been to the Kingdom of Nepal in 1971, largely for the purpose of assisting in work to help Tibetan refugees. He returned to England, and went up to Oxford University to study Chinese. While he enjoyed the course, he found that after leading a spartan life in Nepal he was unable to come to terms with the "comparatively lush" life at Oxford. He left the University after one term and, on February 21, 1972, began the return journey to Nepal by a combination of hitch-hiking and public transport. He arrived in Kathmandu on March 17, 1972, and started to search for a job teaching English.

Shortly after his arrival he met his former school friend in the Nepalese capital.

Roderick Baird, now working in forestry, had left school in 1971. He flew out to India in February 1972 and quickly made his way to Kathmandu. The purpose of his visit? To see the Himalaya Mountains, and to visit the places where his grandparents—and his father—had once lived during their service with the Indian Army.

Soon after they met, Stephen and Roderick decided to go trekking, and they walked until quite close to the Chinese (Tibetan) border at Jomosom, a long way up the course of the Kali Gandaki, said to flow in the deepest gorge in the world.*

After trekking back from Jomosom, Stephen and Roderick rested up for two or three days in the little town of Pokhara.

The UFO incident

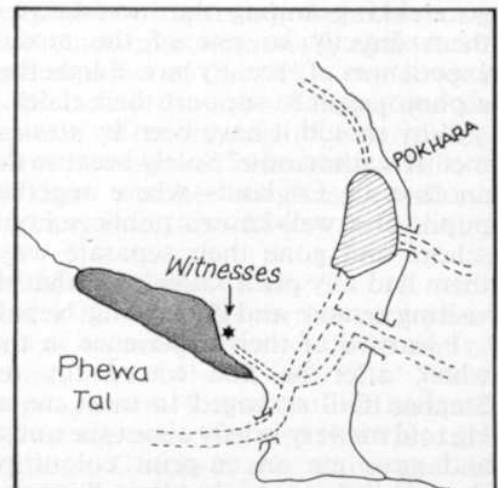
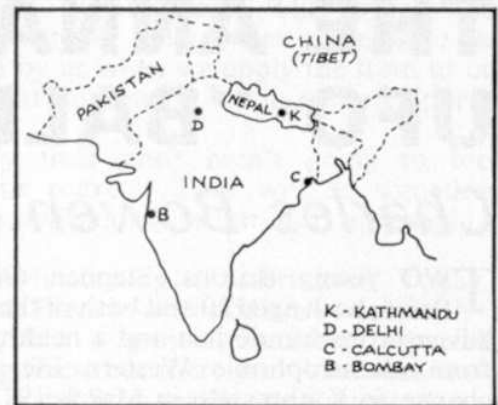
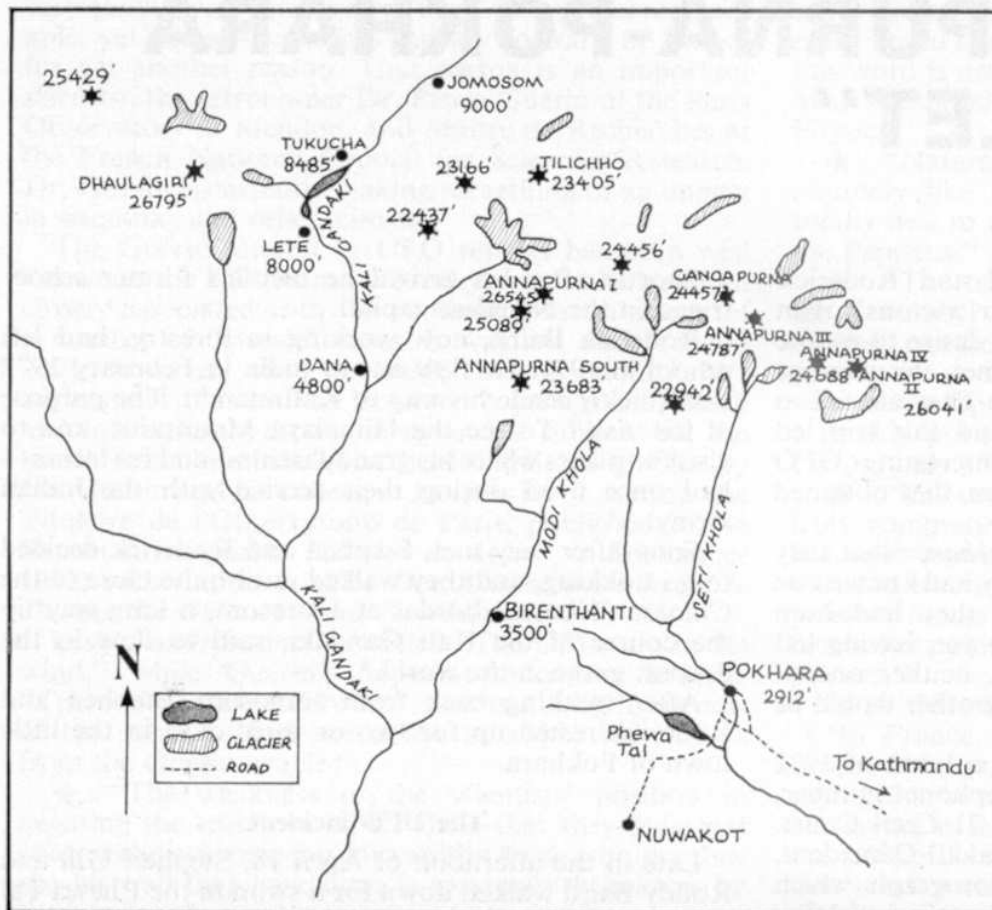
Late in the afternoon of April 18, Stephen Gill and Roddy Baird walked down for a swim in the Phewa Tal—beside the far end of which stands the king's summer palace. They had no watches, but Roddy did have his Kodak Instamatic camera with him (all he could tell me of this was that it was an "early model"). At a time which they jointly estimated as about 40-45 minutes before sunset, they had finished swimming and, fit and very fresh, were standing by the lakeside drying off, when Stephen was suddenly aware of something happening that was unusual. He turned to Roddy:

"D'you see that bird migration?"

Phase 1 of observation

A swarm of dots, massed in a fluidly moving "blodge", was seen by Stephen as he looked across the lake. It was travelling from left to right (approximately South to North), and was in view for no more than 5 seconds. Roddy Baird saw nothing. The swarm appeared fairly low over the mountain-dominated horizon, above the ridge of hills which they estimated to be near Birethanti.

* At Lete, for example, the river is about 8,000 feet above sea level, and the "wall" to the West rises to the great peak of Dhaulagiri at 26,796 feet, while on the other side are the flanks of the mighty Annapurna Himal (heights are quoted from the Nepalese trekking map lent to me by Stephen Gill). It was along the Kali Gandaki route that Maurice Herzog led his 1950 French expedition in their approach march prior to the assault on Annapurna I, and it was back down the same route that they made their nightmare return journey after Herzog and Lachenal, having conquered the peak—the first ever climbed at over 8,000 metres—fell victims of frostbite.



Left: the region trekked by S. Gill and R. Baird from Pokhara, via Birethanti and the Kali Gandaki to Jomosom, and return, showing the Phewa Tal and its position relative to the Annapurna Himal and the Dhaulagiri Himal (heights of main peaks shown in feet) and the larger rivers and torrents. Right: the position of Nepal relative to India and China, and (below) detail of the sighting location. Maps and cover drawing by Pauline Bowen

Phase 2 of observation

Suddenly, about one minute later, Roderick who had been looking idly across the lake, asked:

"Do you mean that thing up there?"

He indicated a group of loosely-moving dots which appeared "higher up" in the sky.

Phase 3 of observation, now continuous

There was now an urgent debate. Could it have been a swarm of bees? Hardly... far too far away for bees to be seen. Were they birds?

Easily identifiable birds were observed as they flew in the distance and they looked completely different to the "components" of the swarms.

Newly arrived swarms were now performing a bizarre aerial "ballet," but the choreography was complicated, so many movements being involved that it was difficult to follow them. The stages of development were:

Stage I: matter collecting†

(a) "Bee" swarms, or "Bird migrations," which appeared black to the eye, were seen making some 9 or 10 appearances.

(b) Definite horizontal "vic" formations seen moving in both directions, left to right, and *vice versa*. Two or three manifestations of this kind.

Stage II: matter condensing

The dots in the swarms next began to close in on one another, and the overall shapes of the swarms were changing all the time, gradually "solidifying" into

conventional upturned "saucer shapes" seen sideways-on, and thereafter at every possible angle—i.e. elliptical, near circular and so on—but never as overhead disc shapes.

The "solidified" objects were incredibly versatile in their movements in the air, hovering, slowly moving, and accelerating alarmingly. Stephen Gill recalled one of these objects: from the act of "solidification" of the dots at what seemed to be a distance of some 20 miles, the object approached in an undulating, zooming—and then level—flight, until it reached a position over the far end of the lake in some 2 to 3 seconds.

No detail was seen on any of these "solidified" shapes—no "portholes," for example—and there was no noise.

There was some light about the objects: the sun was still shining on the snow peaks, so perhaps the light could have been reflected sunlight, but neither witness would commit himself to saying that the objects were not self-luminous. Most of them were seen, however, as lead-grey in colour.

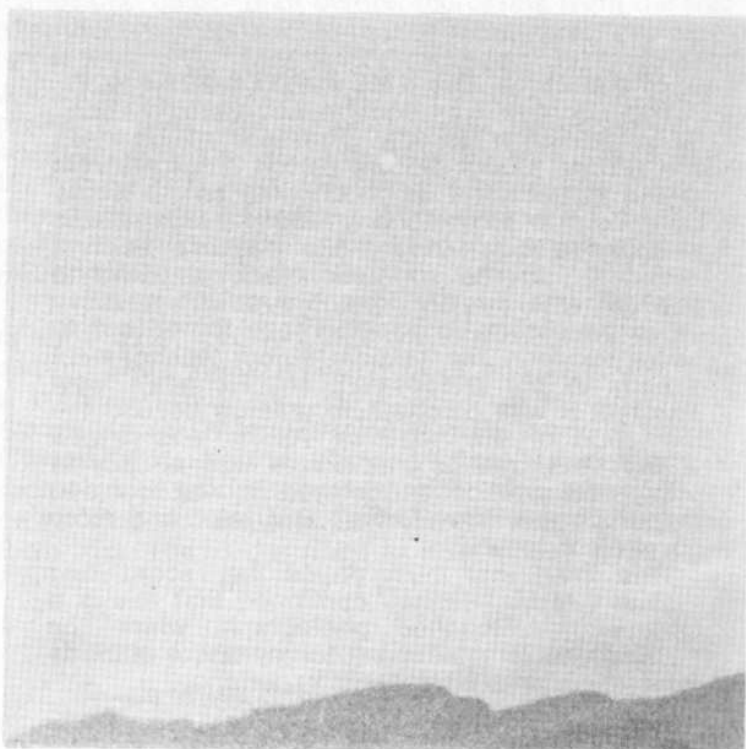
Roddy Baird alone saw two small disc shapes converging with, and merging into, a larger one: it happened swiftly, but he remembers surprise that the size of the larger object did not seem to alter.

Stage III: dispersion of solid objects

The large objects of "upturned saucer" shape were each in view for an estimated 15 to 20 seconds, and



Above: the photograph, as printed by Percy Hennell in black and white from the colour negative. The cloud-covered wall of Annapurna South rises in the right background.
 Below: detail, showing the 'object', taken from the original colour enlargement.



then, at the same rate as they had "solidified" so they effected "dispersion." This dispersion was effected *without* any return to the "bee swarm" or "bird migration" configurations. The saucer shapes appeared just to fade, each leaving behind it a pronounced smoke ring.

Stephen watched this process closely in two or three instances: the "smoke" began to appear around the edge of the object which then disappeared as the smoke ring was forming. Each smoke ring, said Roddy, remained in view for an estimated 20 seconds; for 5 to 10 seconds in perfect elliptical, or even a round shape, then fading while definitely changing shape. Then another repeat of the "aerial ballet" would start up in another part of the sky to distract attention.

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After watching a succession of these appearances and disappearances, Roddy Baird suddenly remembered he had his camera, loaded with colour film of which a few shots remained. They went back from the water's edge to the place where they had left their clothes: the one

† Stephen Gill's own headings for the three main stages of the display are given.

thing that mattered was to take photographs of the spectacle.

The method employed was for Roddy to aim the camera, by using the viewfinder, at one particular object, and for Stephen, who was watching the changing process, to give the signal to press the trigger: it seemed there might be some small delay involved, but it was the best they could do in the circumstances. Stephen shouted when the "solidified saucer" stage was clearly observed: by the time Roddy's eyes were taken from the camera the object had already transformed into a smoke ring. Both witnesses were convinced that there was at least one other object in view in the sky to the left (South) as they took their picture.

They only had the opportunity to take one photograph, for the continuing aerial gyrations were moving away to the West, and gradually being lost to view. As the two young men walked away from the lake, the sky was clear.

Later that night they scanned the sky from the roof of the hostel in Pokhara, but saw nothing. Next day they returned to the same place by the lake, but again saw nothing: soon after that they departed for Kathmandu.

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When the enlarged prints were made of their photograph, both Stephen and Roddy, who were expecting to see the image of a dark object, were surprised to see instead a glowing image. Perhaps the delay in pressing the trigger had been such that they had obtained for

POSTSCRIPT

When Stephen Gill returned from Africa South of the Sahara, where he had been to view the eclipse of the sun (not East Africa, as stated above), he was shown the proofs of this article. He considered the use of the word "wanderlust" to be incorrect: he said he had gone back to Nepal to take up a teaching job, and, after meeting Roderick Baird, the trek to Jomosom was undertaken to pass the time while waiting for a post to become vacant.

Again, both he and Roderick Baird considered I had devoted too much space to describing them, and how they had met in Katmandu.

On the first point I make no comment. On the second point I beg to differ: it is as essential to learn something of the backgrounds of the witnesses, and how they came to be where they were at the time of the experience, as it is to read their reports. If Mrs. Brown sees a luminous 'something' glide past her bedroom window, and wakes her husband to see the object that has landed in a field nearby, or if Dr. Doolittle is driving his car home after a late call to the local hospital when it is stopped, presumably by a glowing object hovering overhead, nobody is surprised that these witnesses should be where they were at the time of their experiences, their credibility is established, and it should be relatively easy to uncover any corroborative evidence that is going. When two young Britons claim that they saw such a strange spectacle after taking a swim in a remote lake in the shadow of

themselves a picture of the Stage III of the "ballet," in other words, the process of "dispersion." When we looked closely at the enlargement, using a magnifying glass, it appeared that Roddy had captured a picture of the moment when the smoke was beginning to form around the perimeter of "something." It was decided there and then to send the film to Mr. Percy Hennell for examination.

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I feel that I can make little comment about this detailed and objective report. As we sat in the lounge of a charming country house, looking out over picturesque Surrey countryside, I was impressed by the sincerity of the two quietly-spoken young men, by their steady avoidance of sensational exaggeration, and by the consistency of their story under repeated questioning. Again, they had waited with great patience for many months to describe to me what had happened before their eyes over the beautiful valley of Pokhara against a backdrop of the high mountain wall of the Himalaya. Their report, it seemed, was altogether too fantastic and unusual in its detail to have been "made up," and there was the photograph too.

As I drove home I could not help but wonder whether or not these young men, standing on the fringe of Yeti country, had witnessed the materialisation and dematerialisation of a something—call it the UFO Phenomenon—that is permitting itself to be seen, and perhaps comprehended, in gentle stages.

the Himalayas, and subsequently offer the story for publication, then investigators and researchers, and other readers of this journal, are bound to want to know why they were there, and what manner of people they are. It should be remembered that witnesses and their reports are the only material which we have.

COMMENT ON THE PHOTOGRAPH

The negative was sent to Mr. Percy Hennell for examination in July. Pressure of business and private affairs did not permit him to devote to the examination as much time as he would have liked to have done. In fact he was unable to make a black and white negative as first intended, so he printed black and white enlargements directly from the colour negative on to panchromatic paper. These turned out to be larger than the original colour enlargement already in our possession: Mr. Hennell's view was that it was pointless to enlarge beyond the resolution of the negative. As he was unwell at the time, and as this article was already in print, and publication delayed it was decided to pursue the study further at a later and more convenient time.

One thing that must go on the record, and that is that Mr. Hennell confirmed that this is a completely untouched photograph, which, he says, seems a small thing to say about such an interesting and fascinating experience.

C.B.