

The first contact of the century?

an old mystery revived

"*Daily Mail*, May 20 [1909]—that a man, named Lithbridge, of 4 Roland Street, Cardiff, Wales, had, in the office of the *Cardiff Evening Express*, told a marvellous story. This story was that, upon the 18th May, about 11 p.m., while walking along a road, near the Caerphilly Mountains, Wales, he had seen, on the grass, at the side of the road, a large tube-shaped construction. In it were two men, in heavy fur overcoats. When they saw Mr. Lithbridge, they spoke excitedly to each other, in a foreign language, and sailed away. Newspaper men visited the place, and found the grass trampled, and found a scattering of torn newspapers and other debris. If anybody else wants to think that these foreigners were explorers from Mars or the Moon, here is a story that, of course, can be reasoned out quite, or almost, satisfactorily." *The Works of Charles Fort*, page 632.

WHEN a contributor to a national magazine five years ago was reviewing the history of flying saucers he mentioned this incident. As it had happened so long ago, he did not stress the matter which might easily have gone to sleep again but for the industry of a reporter on the *Cardiff Weekly Mail* who took the trouble to look into the files of the evening paper on whose office the startled contactee—if such he was—had called with his unusual story. Many new facts in elaboration of Charles Fort's necessarily condensed version came to light. In the first place, the man involved was named Lethbridge, not Lithbridge. The name may not be important, but it has a certain significance, as will be seen later. (The error, by the way, may have been the *Daily Mail's* and not Charles Fort's, but editors of future impressions of his book, please note.) Now follows the fuller account of the story as recently re-told:

"The man who caused the sensation was a Mr. C. Lethbridge, of Roland Street, Cardiff, who during the winter months worked at Cardiff Docks, but in the summer travelled the district

with a Punch and Judy show. And on the night when he was to see something which, nearly half a century later, was destined to suggest he had made history, he was walking home from Senghenydd over the Caerphilly Mountain. 'I reached the top of the mountain at about 11 o'clock,' said Lethbridge, in an interview the following day, 'and when turning the bend at the summit, I was surprised to see a long tube-shaped affair lying on the grass with two men busily engaged with something nearby. They attracted my attention because of their peculiar get-up. They appeared to have big, heavy fur coats, and fur caps fitted tightly over their heads.

"I was rather frightened, but I continued to go on until I was within 20 yards of them. The noise of my little spring cart seemed to attract them, and when they saw me they jumped up and jabbered furiously in a strange lingo.' Then Mr. Lethbridge said he really became frightened, for at that moment 'the long thing on the ground rose up slowly—I was standing still quite amazed—and when it was hanging a few feet off the ground the men jumped into a kind of little carriage suspended from it and gradually the whole affair and the men rose into the air in a zig-zag fashion.

Wheels—and a whirling fan

"When they had cleared the telegraph wires that pass over the mountain, two lights, like electric lamps, shone out, and the thing went higher into the air and sailed away across Cardiff."

"In subsequent cross-examination by newspaper reporters, Mr. Lethbridge said that as the strange craft rose into the air, he distinctly saw what looked like a couple of wheels at the bottom of the little carriage, and at the tail a whirling fan."

"Next day," *The Cardiff Mail* reporter continued, "there were signs of recent trampling on

the grass and quite a collection of torn newspapers. Nearby was quite a quantity of pulpy paper, like papier mâché, thought to have been used to repair the machine, which it was suggested had grounded for this purpose. But perhaps the most significant discovery in the immediate vicinity was a red label, in French, attached to a chain and a small pin. This was described on the following day by a Norwegian residing in Cardiff and engaged on airship construction as being the instrument used to regulate the valve fixed on to the pump which injected air from the atmosphere into an airship. Forty-eight hours later more reports were received from Cardiff people of nocturnal visits by the mysterious cigar-shaped airship.

"A report from Pentyrch said that the object was very large, with two lights, one at each end. A report from Dublin about the same time stated that it appeared to have a cigar-shaped body 'with two clear lights in front and travelling at a considerable pace across the sky.'"

In the early hours of Friday, May 21, several people in the Newport area reported seeing an airship crossing the town and heading for Cardiff. A Newport photographer took a picture of it in flight over Stow Hill. It was reproduced in the Cardiff *Evening Express*.

Aeronauts experimenting?

The writer who has told us all this after a lapse of fifty years ends his account with an open mind as to what Mr. Lethbridge actually saw. However, we have purposely omitted from his story a number of interpolations which indicate that he is of a sceptical turn of mind. He prefaces his remarks by saying that in his opinion they were either experimenting aeronauts on an evening run in a home-made airship or balloon, or, at the worst, foreign spies on a reconnaissance. (Here, at least, we can recognise our old friend, the secret weapon theory.) When referring to Mr. Lethbridge's account of the strangers "jabbering in a strange lingo," he comments: "It is rather significant, I think, that Mr. Lethbridge admitted it might have been Welsh!" Now, Lethbridge is a Devon name and this would explain why he couldn't understand the language of his adopted country. It is surprising, however, that he could not, apparently, recognise the tongue by its unmistakable intonation: this he must have heard every day of his life.

Later on, the account mentions that there had been at the time considerable aeronautic experiment in England—"and in Germany, whose army airships were reputed to have a range of 800 miles."

Another interjection by our sceptical writer mentions that an object seen in the sky over Pontypool had been explained away by a Mr. Swanton, who said he had been experimenting with a model airship about seven feet long and had released it in that area complete with an electric flare light. On the same night a Newport man had sent up two fire balloons! This last item will call to mind the official French "explanation" of a whole series of bizarre incidents in 1954—they were caused by a mischievous but anonymous French miner who had followed the example set for him by the equally anonymous man from Newport fifty years before.

Advertising automobiles!

Another "plausible" explanation is then put forward that it was an advertising stunt, for on May 26 it was claimed that a wrecked airship was found on the Dunstable Downs. Charles Fort has something characteristically ironical to say about this.

"A large imitation-airship had 'come down' at Dunstable, and the lights had been upon that. It was an advertising scheme. An automobile manufacturer had been dragging the thing around in England and Wales. . . . I suppose that such a thing could be dragged slowly, and for a short time, perhaps only a few minutes, because it was of hot-air-inflation, along a road, and conceivably through a city or two, with a policeman, who reported seeing lights in the sky, not seeing a rope going up from an automobile: but, with whatever degree of advancement that of mine may be, I do not think of any such successful imposition in about forty large cities, some of them several hundred miles apart."

What did Mr. Lethbridge see? That we may never know, but the writer in the *Cardiff Weekly Mail*, intending to debunk the story, has in fact strengthened it. His conventionalisations have failed in their cumulative effect. If we are to give each of them their full weight, Mr. Lethbridge must have seen two German spies in a French airship talking Welsh playing a practical joke in order to advertise an automobile. It's simpler, we think, to suggest that he saw two men from Mars.