

THE AIRSHIP WAVE OF 1909

A Preliminary Survey

Carl Grove

DURING March, April, and May of 1909, a "mysterious airship", somewhat similar to the 1896-7 "airship", was seen by at least one hundred witnesses in Great Britain, and gave rise to considerable concern. Preliminary investigations suggest that a minimum of 50 separate sightings were made, and there is no doubt that further research would bring many more to light. The aim of this article is to place on record summaries of the 43 cases so far extracted from the files, thereby stimulating interest in this phase of UFO activity.

The 1909 airship was a dark, cigar-shaped object carrying a rather bright "searchlight" about 100ft. in length, which manoeuvred with ease. Like its 1897 predecessor, it is the behaviour and not the appearance of the airship that connects it with the modern UFO phenomenon. However, the 1909 airship differed from that seen in 1897 in two important respects; first, as is the case today, the British data lack many reports of Type I events. There was only one "touchdown", that on Caerphilly Mountain (Case 30). Secondly, the reports do not possess the dramatic impact and wealth of detail that characterised the American observations; this is at least partly due to the fact that most sightings took place at night. Despite this, some of the events described below could, by implication, be just as important—if not more so—as those documented for 1897.

It is necessary to point out that the socio-psychological background for the 1909 reports was very different from that in rural America in 1897. Aerial navigation was a fact, and anything connected with flight made the headlines. At the start of May, the Wright brothers were visiting the War Office, London; H. G. Wells' new book, *The War in the Air*, was about to be published; newspapers were asking whether the days of the Navy were numbered. There was, therefore, a very real possibility that a foreign power—Germany—was engaged in an aerial survey of the country in preparation for The Invasion. It is not surprising that the airship legend took its place beside stories of German spies, and of German armouries hidden in central London.

The airship scare* contributed nothing to Anglo-German relations; the Germans, Lord Northcliffe said, were starting to believe that England was "the home of mere nervous degenerates" (*Daily Mail*, May 21). There were thus social pressures against seeing airships, and towards the end of the wave reports were being "explained" in ways familiar to the ufologist.

The wave began in East Anglia, and extended to South Wales and Ireland, but it is useful to begin the summary

by reviewing a case that took place in the North Sea. On a clear night in October, 1908, the skipper of the smack *Superb*, 35 miles off Lowestoft, saw what appeared to be a "large star" approaching the ship. Calling a crewman, he decided to light a flare in an attempt to discover what the thing might be. He showed a red flare, and, to his surprise, was answered with a red flare which threw into relief a "sausage-shaped" airship. When the skipper showed a white flare, the airship responded with a blue one. After 20 to 30 minutes, the airship flew away seawards; the case was not reported until May (*East Anglian Daily Times*, May 20).

The cases

1. March 4. **Lambourne, Berkshire.** Charles Maberly, an organist at St. Michael's Church, was returning home from choir practice at Woodlands St. Mary. At about 8.25 p.m. his attention was attracted by a bright searchlight, and he looked up to see a large torpedo-shaped dirigible heading west at about 200ft. He estimated that it travelled three-quarters of a mile as he walked 50 yards. As it passed out of sight he heard three explosions, sounding at regular intervals, reminding him of the noise of "shell mortars at firework displays". (*Evening News*, London, May 18.)

2. March 23. **Peterborough, Northants.** Police-constable Kettle reported that: "I was on duty in Cromwell Road, and was coming out of Cobden Street into that thoroughfare when I heard what I took to be a motor-car, which I judged was some 400 yards distant. It was 5.15 (a.m.), and still quite dark. I walked along Cromwell Road, expecting to see the lights of an approaching car, but none appeared. Still I could hear the steady buzz of a high-power engine, and suddenly it struck me that the sound was coming, not along the surface of the road, but from above! I looked up, and my eye was at once attracted by a powerful light, which I should judge to be some twelve hundred feet above the earth. Outlined against the stars was a dark body."

The object was "somewhat oblong and narrow in shape, and looked about a couple of yards long", and Kettle could see no gas-bag attached. "When I first sighted the machine it was not straight overhead, but appeared to be over the railway . . . It was going a tremendous pace, and as I watched, the rattle of the engines grew gradually fainter and fainter, and it disappeared into the northwest. Altogether I should say I saw it for about three minutes." (*Peterborough Advertiser*, March 27.)

3. March 23. **Peterborough.** That night, Miss Gill, the daughter of the city electrical engineer, was returning from the theatre with two friends. They saw a bright flashing light, apparently attached to some dark object,

* Some newspapers began to make use of the term "scareship".

moving slowly in the direction of Cromwell Road. "The whole thing happened very quickly, and I lost sight of it almost at once." (*Evening News*, May 19.)

4. March 25. **March, Cambridge.** A. J. Banyard, a railway engine driver: "On going into my yard shortly after 11 o'clock . . . I saw a light in the sky in the direction of Peterborough. My curiosity was aroused, and a few minutes' careful watching revealed, beyond all doubt, that it was an airship I was looking (ergo sic)." (*Weekly Dispatch*, London, May 16.)

5. Mid-April. **New England, Peterborough.** F. Baxter reported: "I was returning from the theatre, where I play in the orchestra, about 10.50 . . . when I saw a bright light in the sky. I said to my mate, 'What's that up there?' and he replied 'It's the moon.' No further notice was taken until we had gone about half a mile further, when we saw the light travelling very rapidly in a north-westerly direction.

"Several other people also noticed it. We ran to a large field, where we got a good view. We could make out a long black body, in the front of which was a very bright light, the shape of a fantail pigeon. I could not say at what speed it was going, but it was not many minutes before it passed out of sight." (*Evening News*, May 17.)

6. April 24. **Ipswich, Suffolk.** About 8 p.m., P-c Hudson stated, he was on duty in the vicinity of Gippeswyk Park when his attention was drawn to a light in the sky. "It appeared to be at a great height, and I lost sight of it at intervals. Whilst I was watching the light I suddenly observed a dark object which appeared to be about a hundred yards from the lighted one. I examined it through a pair of opera glasses, and the dark object appeared to be like an ordinary balloon. After hovering about for a time it passed out of sight in a south-westerly direction."

Quite a crowd gathered to watch the object; another witness, J. A. Smith, said: "It did not appear to be an aeroplane, but rather a large elongated gas-bag, with a car carrying lights at a considerable distance below . . . Powerful lights were used at times, but I heard no sound." The object moved off against the wind. (*East Anglian Daily Times*, Ipswich, May 7; *Evening News*, May 13; *Weekly Dispatch*, May 16.)

7. May 2. **Lowestoft, Suffolk.** At 7.30 p.m., a "well-known builder" and his family saw an egg-shaped object, the larger end pointing skywards, passing between two banks of clouds in a westerly direction. "It was going at a rapid rate, and passed quickly out of sight." (*East Anglian Daily Times*, May 18.)

8. May 3. **Woolpit, Suffolk.** Mrs. Amy Rush and her son, driving from Woolpit, saw an "aeroplane" heading south. (*East Anglian Daily Times*, May 10.)

9. May 7. **Clacton-on-Sea, Essex.** About 10.30 p.m., Egerton S. Free, out locking up his house, sighted a long, sausage-shaped dirigible, hovering 200 yards inland above the cliffs and quite near by. It seemed to be 60 to 80ft. above the ground, carried no lights, and after a few minutes flew off to the northeast. The next day Free's wife found in the area where the airship had hovered a mysterious steel and indiarubber bag, 5ft. long, weighing 35 lb. Stamped on the side were the words—"Muller Fabrik Bremen"—and Free considered that it had fallen from the (German) airship.

Several weeks later, it was identified as part of a target used by the Navy for gunnery practice, but, by then, a more curious incident had taken place. The day after Free's sighting first received national publicity, May 16, two strangers appeared near his home. They examined his private stairs leading to the beach and the area where the airship had hovered, then walked round the back of his house to the stables, where he had for a time kept the peculiar object: "The men hovered about my house persistently for five hours, that is until 7 o'clock in the evening. When the servant girl set out to church she heard them conversing in a foreign tongue. Finally they came up to her, one on each side, and one of the men spoke to her in a strange language. The girl . . . was so frightened that she ran back to my house, and would not again leave for church." (*Evening News*, May 15; *East Anglian Daily Times*, May 18.)

10. May 9. **Wisbech, Cambridge.** "While cycling near Wisbech, Mr. Deacon, of Market Harborough, saw a dark shape drive by overhead." (*Weekly Dispatch*, May 23.)

11. May 9. **Northampton, Northants.** At 9 p.m., Mr. Kelf and his wife saw a torpedo-shaped airship with lights passing over the town. (*Weekly Dispatch*, May 23.)

12. May 9. **Stamford, Lincoln.** W. Cole: "I was taking a walk . . . about 11 o'clock when my attention was drawn by a searchlight over Burleigh Park. It flashed eight or nine times in different directions. The object which the searchlight came from was large and of oval shape. I watched it for about ten minutes, and then it disappeared towards Peterborough." (*Evening News*, May 15.)

13. May 9. **Southend-on-Sea, Essex.** Miss H. M. Boville: "I was closing the window of my bedroom, which faces N.E., about 11.20, when I noticed a very large dark object looming out of the sky, and travelling slowly from the direction of Shoeburyness. At first I thought it was the gunpowder cloud that one sees after an explosion, it was so opaque and black, and the night was too dark to enable me to see it clearly. After a few seconds, however, it crossed the sky and remained nearly stationary in front of my window. I could see the outline of a torpedo-shaped airship, very long and large. It was not more than about a quarter of a mile above the houses and trees, and remained immovable for a few minutes, then rose higher, and travelled very swiftly in a westerly direction towards the coast and London, showing, as it did so, two very powerful searchlights at either end for a second or two. I did not hear any sound from the engines, as it was too far off, nor could I discern the aeronauts; but the vessel seemed to travel very steadily and smoothly." (*Evening News*, May 15.)

14. May 11. **Ipswich, Suffolk.** One of the witnesses to the April 24 sighting, a postman named Jackaman, saw an object rising from the west at 8.40 p.m. He thought it may have been a kite or balloon. (*Evening News*, May 13.)

15. May 12. **Terrington March, Norfolk.** Fred Harrison, a farm worker, was walking home at about 9.45, "and was about a hundred yards from my house when I saw a bright light showing up all the road about two hundred yards from me. It was a very bright light—like a searchlight. The light was fastened in front of

what I thought must be an airship, because it was the shape of a cigar—oval shape. The thing passed over me, and I heard a rattling noise in the air—like a motor. It was ‘siding’ the wind, and that was how I knew it could not be a balloon.”

The object was heading north, and he saw it only two or three minutes. At 10.30, a Mrs. Warnes heard a whizzing noise, like a motor. She looked out, but did not see anything. (*Evening News*, May 17.)

16. May 13. **Sandringham, Norfolk.** According to several press reports, servants on the royal estate claimed to have seen an airship.

17. May 13. **Peakirk, Northants.** Mr. Strange, a solicitor, saw a black shape, heard a whirring of machinery, and saw searchlights. (*Weekly Dispatch*, May 23.)

18. May 13. **Kelmarsh, Northants.** C. W. Allen, “the pedestrian holder of the 2,000 mile record,” was motoring with two friends. “When passing through the village of Kelmarsh . . . we heard a loud report in the air, like the backfire of a motorcar. Then we heard

distinctly from above our heads the ‘tock-tock-tock’ of a swiftly-running motor engine, and we looked up. I was sitting on the front seat, next to the driver, and had a clear view of a dark shape looming up out of the night. It was an oblong airship, with lights in front and behind, flying swiftly through the air. It seemed some five or six hundred feet up, and must have been at least 100ft. long. The lights were not very bright, but we could distinctly see the torpedo shape and what appeared to be men on the platform below.

“The steady buzz of the engines could be heard through the still air, and we watched it until it passed out of sight in a north-easterly direction towards Peterborough. It was travelling at least twenty miles an hour, easily and steadily, and appeared to be answering the helm like a ship. I cannot doubt the evidence of my senses, and my two companions, both practical men, are convinced that the Peterborough district contains the home of the airship.” (*East Anglian Daily Times*, May 13.)

(To be continued)

MORE ABOUT UNIPEDS

Gordon Creighton

IN my article *On Unipeds and Asparagus* in FSR for May/June 1970 I included a summary of the account of the alleged 1949 Lomo de Ballena incident, which Coral and Jim Lorenzen told in their book *UFOs over the Americas*. The witness, or percipient, a Señor C.A.V., claimed that he saw a near-landed disc, from which emerged three extraordinary mummy-like creatures with human type profiles, arms and torsoes, but with legs joined together as one and with one large foot. Basing my account on the report given by the Lorenzens, I wrote that Mr. Richard Greenwell, formerly APRO representative in Peru, and now Assistant Director of that Organisation, had interviewed Sr. C.A.V., and was quite unable to believe that the man had invented the story.

A letter, dated June 30, 1970, with a further report enclosed, has been received from Mr. Greenwell, and *Flying Saucer Review* is happy to publish both documents, and to express our thanks to the writer.

As in all other cases, every reader must decide for himself whether he thinks that the story told by Sr. C.A.V. has or has not the ring of truth, *Flying Saucer Review's* function being simply to “keep the record” and serve, to the best of our ability, as a forum for discussion.

It should be borne in mind that, in his approach to UFO reports, Mr. Greenwell, in common with most folk, is probably inclined to seek either a straight “extra-terrestrial explanation”, a mental aberration in the percipient, or a hoax. For us at *Flying Saucer Review* it must be emphasised that such is not necessarily the case, and here, as in so many other occurrences which we have published, we desire to remind readers that

there may be yet another explanation. Indeed, more than one.

For example, it is possible that one of these explanations could be that Señor V's experience, while an “hallucination” (as Mr. Greenwell would no doubt prefer it to be) was nevertheless no subjective hallucination, that is to say, not self-induced, but was a *projection*, i.e. an hallucination induced within his mind and within his field of vision by some kind of alien intelligence—an intelligence regarding which the majority of mankind possesses at present no information, and which mankind as a whole has never seen or met. If such a form of intelligence be found to exist, it would at the present stage be merely a waste of time to debate the question of whether or not it is “extraterrestrial”.

Another possibility, to which I referred in my previous article, is that Señor V's experience was real and that the creatures he met could belong to the teeming kingdoms of the so-called Elementals of *this planet*.

Here, now, is Mr. Greenwell's letter:

APRO,
3910 E. Kleindale Rd.,
Tucson,
Arizona 85716.

Dear Mr. Creighton, June 30, 1970.

This refers to your article *On Unipeds and Asparagus, and not to mention Penguins*, in the May/June issue of *Flying Saucer Review*.

On the first and second pages of your article you discuss the case of “C.A.V.” in Lima, Peru, which is a case I investigated for APRO. Unfortunately, my