



What did P.C. Kettle see?

*—another
old mystery
revived*

The contemporary
artist's impression of
what P.C. Kettle saw
in the air above
Peterborough.

“ March 25, 1909—that upon the night of March 23, at 5.10 o'clock in the morning, two constables, in different parts of the city of Peterborough, had reported having seen an object, carrying a light, moving over the city, with sounds like the sound of a motor. In the Peterborough Advertiser, March 27, is published an interview with one of the constables, who described ‘an object, somewhat oblong and narrow in shape, carrying a powerful light.’ To suit whatever anybody should prefer, I could give data to show that only lights, and no object, were seen, and that no sound was heard; or that a vessel, carrying lights, was seen, and that sounds,

like sounds of a motor, were heard.”—The Works of Charles Fort, pages 630 and 631.

IN the March/April issue of this Review, there was published an article relating to the strange encounter with a mystery aircraft in 1909. A Mr. Lethbridge, of Cardiff, also claimed to have seen a tube-shaped object that year on the top of Caerphilly mountain: he also told of seeing its two occupants. A local paper had discovered further contemporary information which Charles Fort was obliged to omit from his necessarily condensed version. The article attracted considerable attention and also caused some misunderstanding, so before we tell the story of

“*terrible disconcerting apparition in mid-air . . .*”

P.C. Kettle we would like to remind the more dogmatic of our readers that the title of this article makes it quite clear that we regard the visitation as a complete mystery and we publish what follows as a matter of general interest.

Fifty years ago

The *Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser* has come across a reference in a saucer book to the fifty-year-old story and has referred back to its files. The main news item in its issue for March 24, 1909, began: “Citizens of Peterborough—and especially those who support Mr. Balfour and his co-conspirators in their demands for a larger Navy—will be alarmed to learn that the city was visited in the dark and early hours of yesterday morning by a mysterious airship.” (Charles Fort speaks of more than one policeman as witness, but the Peterborough newspaper states that there was only one. He was P.C. Kettle, “an undeniable and thoroughly trustworthy witness.”)

The report continues: “Interviewed last night, the constable said he was on duty in Cromwell Road and when near the corner of Cobden Avenue he heard what at first he thought was a motor car. Looking around, however, he saw nothing coming, and on listening again the noise appeared to come from the air almost directly above him. ‘I looked up,’ he continued, ‘and saw almost above me an airship. It had a powerful light, and was a considerable distance from the earth. In fact, it looked little more than a couple of yards long.’”

Ironic headlines

The rest of the interview between the newspaper reporter and the policeman went like this:

“What shape was it?”

“Oblong, and it was travelling as fast as an express train. I could not, of course, see anyone in it. It was too dark.”

“Couldn’t have been a balloon, I suppose?”

“Oh no [emphatically], I heard the motor distinctly, and besides, it was oblong in shape.”

“Which way was it travelling?”

“It seemed to me as if it had come from the direction of Castor.”

“Did it pass above you?”

“Yes, almost immediately above me. If it had been about half an hour later, I should have seen anyone inside it; it would have been light.”

P.C. Kettle was disbelieved: Gilbert has remarked that a policeman’s lot is not a happy one. The general incredulity of the citizens of Peterborough was reflected in the contemporary report. The headlines, for instance, were loaded with irony:

“A Terrible Machine Sails Over Peterborough!!!”

And Powerful Lights Search the City!!!”

The word “aeroplane” in the account also is used almost with incredulity, as will be seen from the following extract:

“An immense amount of interest and speculation has been aroused by the report by a Peterborough police constable on Wednesday morning to the effect that he had heard and seen an aeroplane flying over the city. Among the numerous theories advanced in explanation of the terrible disconcerting apparition in mid-air are two: One from pacifically-minded persons who believe it was Mr. Wilbur Wright paying a flying visit from Pau and the neurotic war-faring people who believe it to be a foreign spy surveying the Fens in order to discover their suitability as a base from which to attack King’s Cliffe and London. A well-known farmer in the Thorney district asseverates his belief that the strange machine contained a land speculator returning from a secret inspection of the Duke of Bedford’s estate.”

After another interview with P.C. Kettle, who by now must have wished that he had kept his big mouth shut, the newspaper commented: “We understand that the Intelligence Department at the War Office is taking no steps in the matter. Our artist has endeavoured to give picturesque plausibility to the gallant policeman’s vision.”

Scorned today?

The journalist who has performed the excellent work of resurrecting the account from the files remarks that today P.C. Kettle would be listened to more sympathetically. We wonder: if he thought his mystery object to be an aeroplane he would hardly think it worth his while to report the matter. If he considered that the stranger above his city was something more remarkable, we think his story would be met with similar scorn.

There is a moral here: Man has made rapid progress in the air, but his incredulity has kept at least one step ahead of him.