

# Scareships over Britain - The Airship Wave of 1909

**Dr. David Clarke**

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*"It was realised...that as soon as an efficient flying machine made its appearance England lay open to an invasion from the air, that her traditional reliance upon the Navy and seapower was no longer so valid as it had been in what was looked upon as the dawn of a new age, the air age. As one contemporary expressed it....'England is no longer an island.'"*

Alfred Gollin, *No Longer an Island: Britain and the Wright Brothers, 1902-1909* (London: Heinemann, 1984) [1].

*"The Zeppelins have come at last, for three of them visited the Norfolk coast on Tuesday night and dropped bombs in the darkness. "The Graphic" anticipated an air-raid so long ago as May 22, 1909, though the present raid was made more fearsome by explosive bombs which killed four peaceful people, two of whom were women."*

Caption to pictures of air-raid damage published in the *London Graphic*, January 1915 [2].

## **Abstract**

On 25 July 1909, the pioneer aeronaut Louis Bleriot made history by becoming the first pilot to cross the English Channel in a rickety monoplane. The 37-minute flight won a £1,000 prize offered by Lord Northcliffe, the owner of the *London Daily Mail*, to the first man to cross the Channel in powered flight. The huge significance of Bleriot's achievement was recognised by Northcliffe who proclaimed on the front page of his newspaper the words "England is no longer an island." The Channel crossing marked the culmination of six years of rapid technological advances which had begun with the first flight by the Wright Brothers, and triggered a race to perfect a practical flying machine from which there was no turning back. Bleriot's flight marked the high point of a feverish summer in which the public had been gripped with aerial hysteria and fear of invasion from foreign hordes. The year 1909 saw the realisation that the British Navy's world-wide supremacy was directly under threat, and for the first time in its history the island was vulnerable to invasion from the air. Bleriot may well have been the first to cross the Channel, but just two months before his flight newspapers had suggested that the Channel had been crossed secretly, and at night, by a far more sinister aircraft - the German Zeppelin airship. In the spring of 1909 Germany's prototype airships were incapable of night reconnaissance operations over the British Coast. And yet, during four months that spring, several hundred eyewitnesses claimed to have seen "phantom Zeppelins" moving across the night sky, performing manoeuvres which were impossible for any contemporary airship or aeroplane of the day. In addition, a number of people claimed to have seen this mysterious airship at close range, hearing its whirring engines and observing its cigar-shaped gasbag and dazzling searchlight. A few even claimed to have seen and conversed with its crew. Although few of these claims were taken seriously, just six years later the first air raids, led by Zeppelins, would be launched against East Anglia, bringing the hitherto fictional horror of bombing to the very heart of England.

The phantom airship sightings, dubbed by some commentators as "scareships", were largely ridiculed by the Press. But they contributed to the growing demand by British patriots for more resources to be spent upon a military aircraft for defence against the Zeppelin threat. These demands reached fresh heights during the winter of 1912-1913, which coincided with a second airship scare. These outbreaks of hysteria have been largely ignored by historians who have studied the period immediately before the outbreak of the First World War. As a result, these fascinating scares have been researched by writers of UFO literature, who have compared the observations with modern 'flying saucer' phenomena. This article is an attempt to reconcile these two differing approaches to the subject, and set the scare in its correct sociological context with the use of original source material.

## **Introduction**

The wave of sightings of phantom Zeppelins over the British Isles during the spring of 1909 might have remained a peculiar footnote in English social history but for the works of Charles Fort. In *Lo!* (1931) the great collector described how he was "doing one my relatively minor jobs, which was going through the London Daily Mail, for a period of about twenty five years" [3] when he came across a brief description of a sighting by a Peterborough police constable. Fort went on to describe other sightings which appeared in the newspapers of the day, and the attempts which were made to dismiss the airships as the products of delusions, and hysteria. Crucially, his account included a report by a Punch and Judy showman who claimed to have seen a landed airship and its foreign crew on a Welsh hillside, a incident which has since become a "classic" Close Encounter of the Third Kind in the literature of modern UFOlogy. "If anybody...wants to think that these foreigners were explorers from Mars or the moon," Fort concluded. "here is a story that of course can be reasoned out quite, or almost, satisfactorily." [4]

Since Fort's account first appeared the 1909 sightings have been discussed almost exclusively within the confines of the contemporary UFO literature. UFO writers have tended to ignore the original cultural context of the airship craze and concentrate instead upon comparing the descriptions of aerial objects reported by 1909 witnesses with those from the post-war 'flying saucer' era. Carl Grove's two-part article on the scare, published in *Flying Saucer Review*, was the first attempt to present an overview of the sightings made that year based upon a small sample of newspaper sources [5]. Grove presented a summary of 43 of the more important observations and suggested that further work could possibly bring to light many more. Since that time, apart from the work of researchers such as Nigel Watson and Granville Oldroyd, little work has been done to take up Grove's challenge and UFOlogical literature has tended to categorise the 1909 sightings as "an early UFO wave." Watson's socio-psychological approach, which discussed the sightings in terms of latent fears of the German threat at a time of great social and economic stress, has been one of the few attempts to discuss the causes of this important scare in modern literature [6]. Bartholemew and Howard have extended this approach with a sociological analysis of a number of early airship and "UFO" waves, but did not include the British 1909 material in their overview [7].

This paper will attempt to demonstrate how the 1909 Zeppelin sightings were a product of the climate of tension which characterised Anglo-German relations in the decade before the outbreak of World War One. This was marked not just by the development of hostility and distrust between the two countries both in economics and diplomacy, but also by the appearance of a unique and completely new factor - the possibility of aerial bombardment in any potential future conflict. The probability of aerial warfare in the forthcoming confrontation between the European powers had been a popular theme of fiction writers since the turn of the century. In 1908, just before the airship scare, London newspapers had

serialised H.G. Well's novel *The War in the Air*, which depicted airships laying waste to New York with bombs dropped from the sky. In 1915, when the *London Graphic* published photos of the damage caused by an air-raid which killed civilians on the Norfolk coast, it chose to note that the arrival of the dreaded Zeppelins had been prophesied as far back as May 1909 [8]. While bombing raids by airships had been visualised in works of science fiction as far back as 1880, the rapid technological progress achieved by Germany in its development of the rigid Zeppelin airship had turned pipe-dreams into reality in less than one decade. The heavy investment by Germans in the production of the Zeppelins symbolised to many a direct challenge to the supremacy of the British Navy and for the first time allowed the sea barrier between this country and Europe to be bridged. Throughout 1909, scaremongers exaggerated the capability of the newly-developed airships to spy upon and even bomb Britain with impunity from the air. This emphasis on the power of Germany's Zeppelin fleet encouraged a climate of fear and loathing among the British public which persisted until the Royal Flying Corps shot down the first raiding airship over London in 1916.

These crucial psychological factors were recognised by Carl Grove in his survey of the 1909 airship scare when he wrote:

"...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.Well's new book, *The War in the Air*, was about to be published. Newspapers were asking if 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*." [9]

This belief, frame of reference, or context, provided the background against which the Zeppelin sightings were able to manifest. And rather than being an isolated, or unusual series of events, they were reported side by side in the same newspaper columns in which appeared scare stories about German spies, and of German armouries hidden in central London

The early years of the 20th century had seen the gradual build up of tension between the two great European powers of Great Britain and Germany, and by 1909 the deployment of dreadnought battleships was the primary manifestation of this tension. Early in 1909 the Dreadnought Scare reached such a level in Britain that a writer on *The Times* declared that "the people will be quite sane in a fortnight - they always went like this in March." [10] Grimsby, Hull and the East Coast of England were the focus of much of the spy and invasion activity, lying as they did at a strategic position from the point of view of any potential invasion army. Indeed, a military correspondent for the *London Morning Post* suggested the Germans would want to land half a million soldiers in the Humber estuary as part of any invasion plan. It is no small wonder residents of the Eastern Counties were the first to report phantom Zeppelins and German spies lurking under every hedge as a result of the stories published during this period of national hysteria.

On 12 May 1909, Sir George Doughty MP for Grimsby claimed in Parliament that the German War Department had already carried out a secret naval exercise in the North Sea designed to test the capabilities of the British coastal defences. The Unionist claimed two steamers had been commandeered at Hamburg and loaded with soldier was sailed into the mouth of the River Humber and back without the manoeuvres coming to the notice of the British Admiralty. Doughty claimed his source was a "German military officer" and said the operation demonstrated how "the whole east coast and its rivers are exposed to any surprise visit of this nature." [11] In reply, Mr McKenna for the Liberal Government said he had no knowledge of these alleged manoeuvres.

Other opposition MPs and sympathetic newspapers were quick to join the invasion bandwagon, and the stories became more and more sensational and lurid as the spring progressed. One rumour alleged the phantom Zeppelin seen in South Wales had been

launched from a German steamer lurking unseen in the Bristol Channel, while a Nottingham newspaper discovered another kind of "scare-ship", a motor-launch containing four German tourists which had cruised unnoticed along the River Trent as far as Newark [12]. Beside the naval panic the years 1908 and 1909 saw a gradual raising of tension among patriots and conservatives who expressed concern about the motives behind the German military and naval build-up and the activities of Germany's secret services. It was precisely this paranoia, which reached the highest levels of British society, which led the Government to set up country's first Secret Service department in 1909, the same year the Zeppelin and spy scares reached fever-pitch [13].

Military Observation Five or M05 was established by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's Liberal Government who appointed Captain Vernon Kell as its head on a salary of £500 per year. Kell, later knighted and promoted to Major-General, became known by the code-name "K" and in 1914 had an office in central London with a staff of just ten, including a clerk, a secretary and a housekeeper. By 1918 the number of employees of what had become known as MI5 had risen to 844 [14]. Despite the seriousness with which the claims about German spying were clearly being treated by the Government, MI5's recently declassified early files demonstrate how greatly exaggerated the concerns really were. One recently released memo, written by a War Office official in 1909, reads: "Espionage is carried out wholesale in East Anglia as is well known by everyone who rides a bicycle about those counties in the summer." [15] Other documents examine wild claims that German agents could be posing as horse-dealers, pedlars, waiters, chauffeurs, steamship employees and canal boatmen.

The widespread fear of German espionage and the possibility of a foreign invasion permeated all levels of society, and was whipped up by the Press and professional scaremongers such as Erskine Childers and William Le Queux [16]. Their works of popular fiction, such as *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) and *The Invasion of England* (1905) helped to intensify the nervous energy of those who were predicting a future war with Germany. Their efforts were amplified by a Press eager to sensationalise stories concerning German spies. In July 1908, the *London Times* reported how the Secretary of State for War was asked in Parliament whether he could say anything concerning "a staff ride through England organised by a foreign power" and whether he had "received any official information or reports from chief constables in the Eastern Counties as to espionage in England by foreign nations." [17] At the same time, the *Observer* said German officers were active on the southeast coast of England, and the *Illustrated London News* even published a map showing the 54 invasions of England which it said had taken place since 1066 [18].

Perhaps the single most amazing claim made during the invasion scare, was that by Sir John Barlow, the Liberal MP for Frome, in Parliament on 19 May 1909. He asked the Secretary of War if he had any information showing that there were 66,000 trained German soldiers living in England "or that there were in a cellar within a quarter of a mile of Charing-cross 50,000 strands of Mauser rifles and 7.5 millions of Mauser cartridges, that is 150 rounds per rifle." [19] In the Commons, Mr Haldane replied that the statement was an "exceptionally foolish one" and declined to say more. However, the *Daily Telegraph* later revealed the arms were probably those stored by a Miniature Rifle Club in a sub-basement of Lloyds in the Strand [20].

These kind of exaggerated rumours went hand in glove with the tension and war nerves which helped to produce the airship scare of May 1909, and did nothing to halt the aggressive military competition between the British and German Empires which lay behind the fateful events of August 1914.. According to historian Caroline Playne, it was "the continual dropping of such hints of terror into the public ear (which) had the intended effect of representing Germany as an enemy state with which sooner or later we were bound to be at war." [21]

## The Zeppelin Menace

The early years of the 20th century not only saw German advances in shipbuilding, but also dramatic developments in the field of aviation, especially in the form of the huge dirigible airships which were designed and tested by Count Zeppelin. From the maiden flight of LZ1 in July 1900 when the 420 ft long gasbag cruised over Lake Constance at a top speed of 17 mph, the Zeppelin was planned as revolutionary new weapon which could be used in a future war. Despite these high hopes, Government cash was not forthcoming as quickly as the Count had initially hoped. In 1908, when the Imperial Government decided to order four airships of between 12 and 14,000 cubic metre gas capacity, the Zeppelin Company had produced just three functional rigid airships, the LZ3, LZ5 and LZ6. All these airships lacked the speed necessary to take part in regular passenger transport, and their twin engines were underpowered. A fourth, LZ4, exploded and was destroyed without loss of life during a sudden storm in August 1908, but LZ5 was completed by May 1909 and in the same year made an impressive cruise between Lake Constance and Bitterfeld in Saxony, covering 746 miles in just 40 minutes [22]. Its sister ship LZ6 was operational by August and was made even faster with the addition of a third 145 hp engine. Both of these aerial monsters were still in their experimental stages when the phantom airship sightings began, and were incapable of making long and hazardous night voyages such as a reconnaissance mission to England would entail. The German military did possess a number of smaller non-rigid airships including the Parseval and Gross dirigibles which took part in army manoeuvres in November 1909.

Several English newspapers suggested these more portable machines may have been responsible for the airship sightings over Britain. However, these airships had a much shorter range than the prototype Zeppelins, leaving promoters of the scare to suggest the craft could have been launched from the deck of a steamer off the English Coast or the Bristol Channel! British experts - including Winston Churchill who was to become First Lord of the Admiralty - remained sceptical that the huge hydrogen-filled Zeppelins, which were so dependent upon their sheds and the vagaries of the weather, would ever be of offensive use to the Germans [23]. During the scare, several experts pointed out that no airship could have crossed the Channel because of the strong southwesterly winds which had prevailed during the month of May. However, these arguments did not placate the scaremongers who exaggerated the airship's capabilities in the newspaper stories. Even when the possibility that the sightings were caused by Zeppelins were shown to be erroneous, they argued that it was the perception of the danger they posed that was more important than the facts!

In comparison with Germany's aeronautical advances, the single airship in service with the British armed forces during this period was the small and limited-range dirigible Beta, which did not even make its maiden flight until 1910. Two others, the Nulli Secundus I and II had been dismantled by 1909, although several small prototype craft were under construction by private aeronauts. Several newspapers speculated that the mysterious airship seen over East Anglia in 1909 was in fact a British War Office invention which was being tested in secret at night. One commentator summed up the frustration caused by Britain's failure to keep pace with Germany when he wrote:

"This theory [that the War Office had succeeded in constructing a really efficient airship] has, at any rate, the advantage of explaining the really fatuous 'trials' now proceeding at Aldershot with 'Dirigible No.2'. It is possible the War Office encourages these farcical flights as a blind to more important experiments going on elsewhere. It would also explain the mysterious transportation about two months ago of about twenty Royal Engineers, who were suddenly moved from Aldershot to an unknown destination." [24].

The 1909 airship scare coincided with a critical period in the history of British military aviation. For while Germany forged ahead with its rigid airship programme under Count Zeppelin's newly formed companies, in Britain experts were meeting to discuss which sectors

of the armed forces should be responsible for the construction of airships and aeroplanes. A specially-appointed advisory committee eventually decided the Royal Navy should have responsibility for rigid airships, while the army was left to produce smaller airships and aeroplanes. This was an arbitrary ruling which would continue into the First World War and has been blamed for creating internal divisions at a time when a united air defence force was required to combat the Zeppelin menace. In 1909, however, the future of all military air activities in Britain still hung in the balance and the perceived lack of direction became a standing target for the scaremongers in Parliament, and their friends in the Press, who were partly responsible for working up the airship scare by playing on latent fears and paranoia. For it was the claimed lack of an effective aerial force to counteract that which was perceived to be daily growing ever larger across the North Sea which contributed to the scare, and was cleverly manipulated by those who wanted to see the production of a British aerial fleet to defend the islands from the threat of future invasion or aerial bombardment. During the latter part of the 1909 scare, an Observer journalist asked Count Zeppelin himself for his opinion on England's phantom airship. His response, in a telegraph from Friedrichshafen, said simply: "I don't believe in ghosts." [25]

### **The Airship Scare begins**

It is clear that no German Zeppelin airship crossed, or was capable of crossing, the North Sea to perform reconnaissance of the English coast in the spring of 1909. The prototype craft which did exist were untested and fatally vulnerable to adverse weather conditions, problems which were never entirely solved. Even if such a mission had been possible, the potential for an international incident in the event of a malfunction or crash was an inconceivable risk. Despite these facts, the idea that German airships could be spying on the British coast had taken firm root in England by the winter of 1908. Early in the following year, reports began to filter through to the press from various places in the Eastern Counties, describing the night appearance of phantom Zeppelins.

In May 1909, the skipper of the Suffolk-based fishing smack *Superb*, J.H. Stockman, reported how in October the previous year, when fishing in the North Sea 35 miles out of Lowestoft he had seen what at first appeared to be "a large star rising out of the water" and approaching his ship. After calling one of his crew, Stockman decided to signal to the "airship" with a red flare, and to his surprise he was immediately answered by a red flare from above his ship. He then showed a white flare, and received a blue flare in response! The "airship" appeared to be sausage shaped, and carried a single light; it eventually disappeared out to sea in the direction of the Continent [26]. A similar report came from Coventry in the West Midlands, where a week before Christmas 1908, four tramwaymen at the Foleshill depot described how they had seen, a 4am one morning, a brilliant searchlight flashing through the night sky. The beam was apparently attached to a large dark object which moved quickly away to the east. They also distinctly heard "the noise of a motor or small engine." [27]

From the point of view of the London newspapers, however, the scare can safely be said to have begun with the sighting made by Police Constable Kettle in the Cathedral city of Peterborough, early on the morning of 23 March 1909. It was this sighting which was the first to appear in a London evening newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, and was subsequently noted by Charles Fort in his account of the airship scare [28].

In his original statement, published in the *Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser*, Kettle said: "I was on duty in Cromwell-road at 5.15 am when I heard what I took to be a motorcar some 400 yards distant. It was quite dark at the time, and I looked along Cromwell-road expecting to see the lights of an approaching car. Nothing appeared, but I could still hear the steady buzz of a high-powered engine. Suddenly it struck me that the sound was coming from above,

and I looked up. My eye was at once attracted by a powerful light, which I should judge to have been some 1,200 feet above the ground. I also saw a dark body, oblong and narrow in shape, outlined against the stars. When I first sighted the machine it was not straight overhead but appeared to be over the railway in the direction of Taverners-road. It was travelling at a tremendous pace, and as I watched, the rattle of the engines gradually grew fainter and fainter, until it disappeared in the northwest." [29]

The Daily Mail's account mentions that a second policeman in another part of Peterborough had corroborated Kettle's account, but no further reference has been located referring to this fact in the local Press. Newspaper reporters, however, were quick to locate other witnesses in the town who claimed to have seen a similar object in the sky over Peterborough at around the same time. One of these was a Miss Gill, daughter of the city electrical engineer, who upon returning from the theatre with friends that same night saw "a brilliant flashing light in the sky...apparently attached to some dark object moving slowly in the direction of Cromwell Road." [30]

Following a short burst of publicity, the Peterborough sightings faded from attention after, as the London Star sarcastically put it "...[they] had received about as much attention as a big gooseberry or a shower of frogs." [31] Kettle's observation was never officially contradicted, but by May 1909 it was revived when a new crop of sightings suddenly appeared in the Press. Now the policeman was given the undoubted honour of being "the first person to observe the airship." By this time, however, the Peterborough constabulary, clearly alarmed that one of their constables may have triggered a national panic, sought to offer a simple solution for his sighting via the columns of a rival newspaper. A reporter had been dispatched to interview another policeman provided by the Peterborough force who claimed that "for some days and nights before PC Kettle's vision there was a very fine kite flying over the neighbourhood of Cobden Street...the kite would have been moored at night, and have a Chinese lantern attached to it."

"But how do you get over the whirring and beating of engines?" asked the reporter.

"Oh, that was the motor which goes all night in the Co-operative Bakery in Cobden Street." [32]

Attempts to belittle PC Kettle's sincerity failed to shake newspapers such as the London Evening News and the Daily Express which became the chief promoters of the airship scare in May 1909. They both sent reporters to East Anglia and quickly collected a number of statements from eyewitnesses which appeared to suggest there was something behind the rumour of a mysterious midnight airship. One of these stories came from engine drivers at March Station, about ten miles east of Peterborough, who claimed to have seen a dirigible airship in the night sky two days after PC Kettle. One of them, Arthur Banyard, wrote: "On going into my yard shortly after 11 o'clock at night 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. Despite a heavy wind blowing against it, it gradually came nearer until I could plainly make out the object, to which powerful lights were attached. I could see it turn round several times, as though being severely tested by the gale. After a few minutes it struck out westwards, and I watched it gradually disappear from sight, travelling at a good pace." [33]

Another clear statement came from a farm-labourer, Fred Harrison, who lived near the hamlet of Terrington Marsh, overlooking The Wash at King's Lynn in Norfolk. He signed the following account, published in the Daily Express, describing what he saw in the sky on 21 April 1909:

"I was outside New Common Marsh Farm about a quarter to ten at night when I saw the airship. I heard a whirring noise overhead, and when I looked up I saw the fields round were lit up by a bright light. I was startled and wondered whatever it could be. Then I saw that the light came from a long, dark airship which was travelling swiftly overhead. It was low down -

only a little way above the trees - so I could see it plainly. It seemed to be eighty or a hundred feet long, and I could distinguish two men on a kind of hanging platform below. The searchlight lit up the road, the farm buildings, the trees and everything it touched, so that it was like day. I could even read the printing on some bills on the wall. The airship passed right over New Common Marsh Farm, and went in the direction of Hunstanton, on the other side of the Wash. It was travelling very fast against the wind, and it was out of sighting in a few minutes." [34]

Three nights later, at 8pm, a large crowd of people gathered in the town of Ipswich, Suffolk, to watch a bright light hovering in the sky to the southeast. One of the observers, Police Constable Arthur Hudson, said:

"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 north-westerly direction." [35]

This sighting led the Evening News to suggest someone in the Eastern Counties was sending aloft balloons with lights attached to work up a scare. They cited the testimony of an Ipswich postman, J.R. Jackaman, who had first drawn PC Hudson's attention to what he thought was "a very large and red star."

In a letter to the Evening News Jackaman said: "I thought no more of it until Tuesday night last (11 May) when at 8.40 I saw a light ascending from the direction of Bramford, a village to the west of Ipswich. It went up very straight and steady until it appeared like a big star exactly as I saw it a fortnight ago. There was no sign of an airship about it." And he added: "My opinion is that someone is sending up a bright light attached to a kite or a toy captive balloon, and is having a rare old laugh at the excitement he is causing." [36]

The Northcliffe-owned Evening News and the Express built up the airship mystery to a crescendo during May 1909. By 13 May both papers were running daily headline stories describing the latest sightings of the craft, mixing rumour with conjecture to cleverly link the sightings with the activities of German spies. While at first it favoured the theory that the mysterious airship was the work of a British secret inventor, on 14 May a correspondent of the Express made the following bold statement in a telegram from Berlin:

"...it is admitted by German experts that the mysterious airship which has been seen hovering over the eastern coast of England may be a German airship. England possesses no such airship, and no French airship has hitherto sailed so far as the distance from Calais to Peterborough. On the other hand, the performance of several German airships, including the Gross airship, which has made one voyage of thirteen hours, would render it possible for them to reach the English coast. At the same time it is improbable that the German airship seen above England ascended from German soil. An aerial voyage to the English coast would still be a dangerous and formidable undertaking even for the newest airships..."

It was then that the correspondent introduced an ingenious explanation which could account for this problem of range. "German expert opinion," he claimed, "is unanimous in believing that the mysterious airship ascended from some German warship in the North Sea, on which it lands after each of its flights...Without actually asserting it as a fact, I am able to make the following statements on authority which has generally proved to be reliable: 1. It is believed that the German Navy possesses one or more small airships of four or five thousand cubic metres capacity; 2. That experiments have already been carried out at sea with these vessels; 3. These experiments have revealed the possibility of using ships as airship stations, which means that airships can ascend from them and land upon them after an aerial voyage." [37]

The paper also printed daily lists of the places where the airship had been observed, which by now included Ely, St. Neots, Wisbech, Peakirk, Orton, Wingland, Woolpit, Southend-on-Sea, Saxmundham and even Sandringham, where it was said Royal servants had spotted the



mysterious night visitor. As a result of this growing cloud of evidence, a leader writer felt able to express the view:

"...the fact that trials of a mysterious airship are being made at night over the Eastern Counties now appears to be established beyond doubt. It is probable that the inventor has chosen to make his experiments in the dark to keep his secret. As the airship has been seen at places a hundred miles apart it must be of considerable power. Observers agree that it is cigar-shaped, that it is at least 100 feet in length, and that it manoeuvres with ease." [38]

The growing cloud of rumour became so widespread early in May that a special correspondent from the Express was dispatched to track down the base from which it was assumed the airship must be flying. The reporter hired a car from a company in Northampton and toured the countryside between that city, Market Harborough and Peterborough watching for any strange light in the sky or whirring noise from above. Other motorists were taking night trips for the same reasons, and the reporter wired back to his paper:

"...In every little Fen village along the endless hedgeless roads they are looking out for the night-flier. The fact that it manoeuvres with ease so close to the North Sea has aroused apprehension, and I met many villagers who eagerly asked me for news." [39]

The reporter failed to find the airship's base, but he found a good supply of fresh witnesses who were prepared to say they had seen it in the air. One of these was a Mr C.W. Allen, described as "the pedestrian holder of the 2,000 miles road record" who claimed he distinctly saw the craft whilst driving with two friends near the Northamptonshire town of Market Harborough on 5 May 1909:

"...we had been for a night run, and when we were 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 a hundred feet long, although owing to its altitude it looked smaller. The lights were not very bright, but we could distinctly see the torpedo-shape and what appeared to be men on the platform below. We slowed up our motorcar and stopped to watch it. The steady buzz of the engines could be heard through the still air, and we watched it under it passed out of sight in a northeasterly direction towards Peterborough." [40]

Mr Allen and his friends were inclined towards the opinion that the airship was the product of an English inventor, who kept his machine concealed by day in a shed somewhere in the vicinity of Peterborough, from where at night it was launched for nocturnal trips across East Anglia. Another motorist, Amy Rush from Bradfield St George, Suffolk, also claimed to have seen a mystery aircraft while driving at night. She told the London Evening Star she was driving home on the night of 3 May with her son when they saw, away in the southeast, what at first appeared to be a fire.

"But intent inspection revealed a definite object of oblong shape," she said. "From this proceeded occasional searchlight flashes, such as I have seen come from warships. The object swayed about like a balloon, and with its light within somewhat resembled a glass conservatory. For a short time it was lost to sight, and then beyond the trees of Drinkstone Park, it was seen sailing away in the direction of Lavenham." [41]

Added to this testimony was a statement made by Patrick Alexander, "the well known expert on aeronautics," who said he had heard whilst in the vicinity of Windsor "sounds apparently of an airship in motion." He thought nothing of it at the time, he told the newspapers, as he thought the noise could have been made by a British Army airship on a night trip [42].

Another influential sighting was made by a solicitor from London, Mr Strange, whom the Express claimed had made a report direct to the War Office. "My house is near the loop-line of the Great Northern Railway and I thought I heard a light engine coming," he was reported

as saying, "Then I heard a swishing sound overhead, and the throbbing of a motor. When I looked up I saw a peculiar light coming from the direction of the sea. It was too dark to discern the shape of the airship." [43]

On Sunday 9 May the mystery airship was seen again, this time in the sky over historic Burghley House, the home of the Marquis of Exeter, at Stamford in Lincolnshire. Mr W. Cole told the Express: "...I was in the park just before 11 o'clock when suddenly I saw a light in the sky over the edge of the woods. It rose and fell seven or eight times quickly, and I saw that the light came from some dark cigar shape in the sky. The airship, or whatever it was, must have been moving quickly, for first I saw the light on one side of the park, a few minutes later it was on the other side, and then it came back again. I watched it for about ten minutes before it disappeared in the clouds in the direction of Peterborough." [44]

Twenty minutes later this, or a second airship, was spotted by Miss H.M. Boville, of Southend-on-Sea, Essex. She said: "...I was closing the window of my bedroom, which faces northeast, 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, but it was so opaque and black, and the night was too dark to enable me to see it very clearly. After a few seconds, however, it crossed the sky and remained nearly stationary in front of my window. I could then 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 swiftly." [45]

These two sightings were seized upon by the sceptical London Weekly Dispatch as proof that the airship witnesses must be deluded, or mistaken. The paper noted that if it could be seen at Stamford and then twenty minutes later was over the coast at Southend "this would give the airship a speed of 210 miles per hour seeing as the two places are seventy miles apart." In contrast, the top speed of Germany's newest Zeppelin airship, the LZ7 Deutschland, launched on 19 June 1910, was a sluggish 37.3 miles per hour!

The Dispatch maintained that "time and calm observation" were dealing ruthlessly with the airship mystery, and declared that the idea that a foreign airship was spying upon the country as a prelude to invasion was shattered by a few cold facts. It asked: "...The airship has always been sighted by night; no one claims to have seen it by daylight. How can a country be effectively reconnoitred in the dark, even with the aid of the fitful illumination supplied by searchlights?" and it added: "No airship has yet attained that perfection which would enable it to execute any sort of manoeuvre in any weather. Supposing the alleged 'scareship' really exists, it must have some base where it reposes during the daylight. Such a base could not possibly escape observation, especially during the tedious preliminaries to an ascent." [46]

### **The Airship "Fender"**

One of the most curious episodes to occur during the airship scare was the discovery of what was described as "an airship fender" on the cliffs at Clacton-upon-Sea, Essex, following a sighting of a strange aerial object. The saga began at 9.45 on the evening on Friday 7 May when a London businessman, Egerton Free, was locking up his house which stood on the cliff-edge two miles outside the resort town. He told a reporter how: "...I looked up, and in the sky I saw a long, torpedo-shaped balloon, high up in the air overhead. It was a clear, fairly light night, and I could see everything most distinctly. The airship was travelling swiftly in the direction of Frinton and showing two bright lights. I stood and watched it for some time

until it disappeared." [47]

Mr Free then told an Express reporter what occurred the following morning: "I was out early and crossed from the house to go down our private steps opposite to the beach. When I got to the cliff-edge at the top of the steps I saw a most curious shape sticking up in the sandy grass. It looked like a large, slightly flattened football, with a steel bar pushed right through it. I picked it up - it was not very heavy - and brought it into the house. The contrivance is about five feet long from end to end. The central bar is of hollow steel, with an end round and flat like the buffer of a railway engine. The ball part is about three feet long, oval-shaped, made of hard grey rubber, and corded net-fashion with twine, while the words "Muller Fabrik Bremen" are painted on the ball in black letters. The steel ends project about a foot on either side of the ball, and when I found it the sharp end was sticking in the grass and the ball was on its side." [48]

Police and coastguards arrived at Mr Free's house to examine the strange object, but being unable to identify it they asked him to keep it locked away, pending examination by the military. By this time Mr Free had declined to speak any further with the press, but Mrs Free was quoted as saying: "We have been told that the article, which is unlike anything my husband or I have ever seen before is a fender or buffer which aeronauts use to lessen the shock of concussion when they land from a balloon." [49] On 19 May with the mystery still unsolved, the War Office impounded the "airship fender" for closer examination, and shortly afterwards it was claimed by an officer from the destroyer HMS Blake who identified it as a "reindeer buoy" used by warships for target practice. Furthermore, the sinister Germanic lettering on the buoy, which was initially said to have read Muller Fabrik Bremen, were now officially stated to be "Moller Fabrick Drammen", Drammen placing its manufacture in Norway, quickly defusing its association with a Zeppelin [50]. This explanation failed to account for how the buoy happened to turn up on the cliffs the very morning after an unknown airship had hovered thereabouts - unless, of course the "airship" was in fact an experimental balloon or dirigible sent aloft by the British Navy?

However, by the time the Navy had claimed the buoy, a much more curious incident had been reported by Mr Free. He claimed that about 2pm on Sunday 16 May two "men of foreign appearance" had appeared near his High Cliff House home and wandered around for several hours as if "anxiously looking for something." He continued:

"They examined my private steps to the seashore and the vicinity where my wife found the steel and indiarubber object with the German name. Then the men went to the back of the house, where the stables are situated, and where for some time I kept the article. The men hovered about my house persistently for five hours, that is until seven o'clock in the evening. When the servant girl set out for 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, who is only eighteen years of age, was so frightened that she ran back to my house, and would not again leave for church." [51]

The clear implication was that the "foreigners" were German agents who had been dispatched to recover the "buffer" dropped by the Zeppelin and so remove evidence of its spying mission. Cold water was later poured on these claims by a reporter from the East Essex Advertiser, a Clacton paper, who noted how a respected local amateur photographer had innocently gone to the house to take a picture of the object on the beach. It added: "The next day it was reported that a foreign looking gentleman with a camera had asked permission to take a photograph of the 'find.'" [52]

The Clacton narrative is a classic of its kind in that it mirrors so much of the folklore found in current UFO mythology, namely the discovery of ambiguous artefacts following a "sighting", evidence being removed and 'explained' by the authorities, and the appearance of sinister Men In Black (MIB) whose sole purpose appears to be that of terrorising witnesses into silence by a combination of veiled threats and belligerent behaviour. Sinister foreigners were a staple

part of the spy mania of 1909 which ran concurrent with the airship reports, and even sceptical newspapermen took some of the tales seriously.

For example, a telegram from Colchester, Essex, dated 19 May, published in a number of newspapers, told how a correspondent had been stopped on the East Bridge by two foreigners who "speaking with a guttural accent" asked questions as to the layout of the garrison town. The report continued: "Our representative was about to reply to the writer with the inquiry whether he thought that the foreigner found near Colchester that morning with a fractured skull had dropped from a German airship, when he received official information that several foreigners had recently been noticed by the police in the act of taking notes as to various cross-roads and the configuration of the country around Colchester, several instances of this practice having been lately noted by the police." [53]

Similarly, before a series of phantom Zeppelin sightings spread to South Wales on May 18, a Cardiff stockbroker's clerk stated that he had seen on Sunday morning 16 May five "foreigners" surveying and photographing the area of Caerphilly. "The men were driven from spot to spot in a couple of traps, and the photographs were taken from cameras fixed above the seat of the traps and thus commanded extensive views of the surrounding country," he said. These sinister visitors visited Wenallt, near Caerphilly Mountain, which was later to become the scene of a dramatic airship landing, and separated at 12 noon - one party taking the road to Llanishen, and the other the road to Cardiff. [54]

The presence of German spies in England, and their role in signalling to Zeppelins were intimately connected and established in the British psyche, a belief which was demonstrated by the hysteria which accompanied the first Zeppelin air raids on this country during the Great War in 1915-16. These were accompanied by a wave of sightings describing "moving lights" which observers claimed had been launched from fields and motorcars by German agents guiding the Zeppelin raiders. Needless to say, in 1916 War Office investigators were able to rule out the majority of these claims as being baseless [55]. However, the connection between spies and Zeppelins had their origin in the scare of 1909. It was then, for example, that the Northern Daily Mail reported how workmen at Killingholme, near the strategic Immingham Dock works on the Humber, had been approached by motorists who asked if any airships had been seen nearby recently, and whether any mines had been laid in the Humber between Killingholme and Spurn [56]. Coincidentally, a report was made by a police constable Day, of the Lincolnshire force, to the effect that he had seen an airship hovering over Immingham Dock at night. PC Day claimed he was patrolling on the banks of the Humber at 2am when his attention was attracted to a bright light hanging over the river nearby.

"Having been in the navy for several years, the officer states emphatically that it was not a searchlight," maintained the Sheffield Telegraph. "He also states that he distinctly saw the outline of a car, which was swaying gently in mid-air. For an hour the mysterious body and light remained visible until, in fact, the officer went off duty." [57]

As usual there may well have been a less sensational explanation for this sighting, for the account went on to say: "It so happens that there was a remarkable display of the Northern Lights early [on the morning of 22 May] and it is quite possible that this may afford an explanation."

### **Scareship lands in central London**

If the phantom airship was indeed a reality, then it must have a crew and, reasoned the newspapers, they must have to touch down and return to a base for fuel and sustenance. This perception led to some people coming forward to claim they had seen the airship's pilots. Probably the strangest story to emerge from the 1909 airship scare was told to a reporter from

the London Evening Star by two city men who turned up at the newspaper's office on the evening of Friday 14 May 1909. "The story of Messrs Graham and Bond," remarked the paper, "is the most wonderful our man has heard since he read Jules Verne's 'Clipper of the Clouds' (and believed it) at school."

The two gentlemen stated "with every evidence of conviction" that they were returning from Teddington to Richmond, in southwest London, after 11pm on the previous night when they saw a landed aircraft on Ham Common. Mr Graham said: "We were near the middle of the common on a fairly open space 150 yards from the road and I said to my friend Mr Bond, 'sit down a minute, I find I have a stone in my shoe.' We sat down on the grass and I suddenly heard a soft buzzing noise behind me. I thought it was a motorcar in the distance, and I could not understand it. Then suddenly I saw it creeping along the surface of the grass. I said 'What is that an airship or what?' I could see the shape dimly. I am not an artist, but it looked like a collection of big cigar-boxes with the ends out. It must have been 200 or 250 ft long. There were two men on the aeroplane. The first man, who was near the forepart seemed to be in a sort of steelwire cage and had a row of handles in front of him, like the handles of a beer-engine, only thinner. The moment they saw us this first man, who was clean shaven and looked like a Yankee, turned the searchlight right round on us, and there he was doing this over and over again, blinding us with the glare, evidently so that we could not see too much of the shape of the airship. The second man, who stood in the middle of the airship, looked like a German, and was smoking a calabash pipe. They were on the ground quite close to us, and I went up to them. The German spoke first. He said: 'I am - sorry - have - you - any- tobacco?' "I just happened to have an ounce or so in my pouch, and I gave it to him, saying: 'Help yourself, here is the pouch.'"

"He said: 'Will you accept payment for it?' I said 'Certainly not'. He said: 'Will you accept a pipe for it?' and I said I would. He gave me the pipe and here it is." (A reporter from the Evening Star later discovered the pipe was manufactured in Austria but was available from any Fleet Street tobacconist).

At this point Mr Bond added an additional detail: "The German gentleman had a cap and a beard and a map in front of him. It was fastened on a board and there were red discs on it, as though they had been stuck in the map with pins. The airship was showing no light when it descended. They simply switched the searchlight right on and saw us. They came right down on us. He was quite surprised to see us as we were to see him. They never had dreamt we would be sitting there. The man at the searchlight was a tall, clean-shaven fellow in a blue serge-suit. The other man had a fur-lined overcoat and a soft hat they call at Trilby." [58] Mr Graham drew a sketch of the "airship" he saw for the newspaper. It showed three propellers at the stern and a big swinging searchlight at the bow... "parts of the airship appeared to be made of some light-coloured metal - aluminium, I think it must have been," added Mr Graham.. "It was nothing like a balloon, it was a pure aeroplane. There seemed to be some steel rods which stuck out and kept the airship upright and the propellers off the ground. The German leaned over the wire-railing to talk to me, and I had to reach up to give him the tobacco, We saw the tall man pull one of the lever down, and then he switched the light off. The aeroplane went without either of the men saying goodbye. It disappeared in ten seconds, and was gone before we could see where it had gone to. It was a very dark night and the common was empty. If they had known we were there they would not have come down." This account may appear preposterous, but almost four and a half hours later, at 3.30am on the morning of 14 May, two railway shunters independently reported seeing an airship flying over northeast London. The men, Joseph Cooper and George Waldan, were working in the sidings at West Green Station at Tottenham when they said they saw an object "shaped like a policeman's truncheon" travelling swiftly through the air towards Downhills Park [59]. The object was unlighted and made no sound. If this was same aircraft seen earlier at Ham Common, then it would have crossed the River Thames and central London during the early

hours of that morning. In fact, the night of May 13/14 produced a number of similar airship reports from all parts of the British Isles. In the Midlands town of Nuneaton, near Coventry, Mr Alfred Moreton declared that he saw "a large airship pass overhead...just before 11pm.. his attention was attracted by a faint light, which grew brighter and clearer [revealing] the familiar outline of an airship, nosed-shaped like a submarine, with a cage suspended below with two men in it." This aerial machine was travelling along silently at around 30 or 40 miles per hour "and glided along softly and beautifully." [60]

Meanwhile the Birmingham newspapers learned that residents had seen an object resembling an airship hovering above the Small Arms factory at Small Heath. "A number of people who have seen the object state that it appears to be a dirigible balloon, as it is constructed in the form of a cigar-shaped bag with a kind of framework underneath," said one report. "It has only been seen at night time and the only explanation suggested is that the airship has been built by some local person - probably an engineer engaged at the gun factory -who is carrying out his experiments in aviation with no desire for publicity until he has been absolutely successful." [61]

At Herne Bay in Kent, five independent witnesses in different parts of the town observed the passage of an airship shaped like "a big cigar" or a sausage, carrying a brilliant light, which travelled inland from the sea between 9 and 9.30 pm on 13 May [62]. On the same night hundreds of miles to the north in Hull, on the East Coast of Yorkshire, Mr A. Walker was walking home when he observed a flash of light in the sky above the Humber at 11pm. "It was working to the west and seemed to be tracking a little as if going against the wind which was forcing it back," he told the Hull Daily Mail. "It was a luminous body seen through a cloud, and appeared arc-shaped, and I also heard a peculiar whirring noise. The light was high up, about a mile up, I should think. It was dark and cloudy at the time and I had the light under observation for about two minutes. I immediately called my father and mother who were in the house, and they also both saw the light as it travelled westwards." [63]

Several other Hull residents also came forward and claimed they had seen an airship hovering over the Humber the following night, and that "for a brief space, a piercing searchlight was directed on the river."

Newspapers across Britain reported the events of the evening of 15 May 1909, when hundreds of people in the town of Northampton saw a peculiar object in the sky. "It came from the direction of Bedford, and it went at a rapid pace towards Daventry," read the telegrams.

"Headlights were clearly seen, whilst the dark, cigar-shaped body of the airship was faintly silhouetted against the dull sky." [64] This particular aerial mystery was soon put to rest as a result of enquiries made by the Northampton Chief Constable Mardlin. His investigations established the "airship" in this case was in reality "a fire balloon carrying Chinese lanterns...sent up by two young men with the object of hoaxing the people of this town." One of the culprits, Mr W.J. Bassett-Lowke, added: "We have been hearing so much about airships flying by night that I thought it was time to let Northampton see one...I made a gas balloon about 3ft in diameter, and attached a paraffin flare to it by means of a long wire. About 9.15, when there was plenty of people about, I sent it up from Kingswell Street. It rose gradually and sailed off westward over St James's End, then veered to the left towards Berry Wood Asylum." [65]

Another joker amused himself at the expense of residents in Ipswich who saw "a big box-kite with a bicycle lamp attached" while a similar kite was spotted at Southend-on-Sea, sparking further sightings in that area [66]. Even the Daily Express correspondent was forced to concede that a number of small balloons had been found in the East Anglian countryside where airships had been sighted, but he suggested these had been set adrift by the aeronauts themselves "to test the air currents before starting out on their night flights." [67]

## **Airship touch-down in Norfolk**

The airship scare of 1909 brought a number of accounts from witnesses who claimed to have seen landed flying objects and their occupants which have similarities with those reported during the 1897 wave in America. Early on the morning of Sunday 16 May people in the Norfolk Broads area reported seeing the lights of an airship, and one man produced an account of a "landing" which would not appear out of place in any UFO magazine of the modern era. The witness in this case was a solicitor's clerk from Lowestoft, Mr Edwards, who was walking home through lonely countryside near the village of North Walsham when his experience began. He said:

"When about a quarter of a mile out of that town something attracted my attention, and upon looking round and lifting my eyes over a fence I saw two or three lights, and they appeared to be a short distance from the ground. I paid very little heed to them, and walked on. However, I had walked a few hundreds yards when I again heard a peculiar noise, and this time upon looking round, I noticed a glaring light, and it seemed to be coming towards me. To make certain that there was something moving I got behind a large tree. I got into a position so that the light was entirely obliterated from my sight, and then I observed a dark object ascending. It passed over my head and proceeded in the direction of Yarmouth or Lowestoft." [68]

In Lowestoft, Suffolk, at 2am, a number of people reported seeing what they described as "a brilliant light" and heard "a throbbing noise" as an airship moved in from the direction of the North Sea. Mrs Wigg, a resident of North Lowestoft, told reporters she had been awakened by "a noise similar to that of a motorcar, and on looking through the window saw a dark object pass at a fairly quick speed and proceed in a south-westerly direction." Asked if she could describe the object, Mrs Wigg said that it was "bottle-shaped, in a horizontal position, and of considerable length." She also claimed she spotted what appeared to be a man steering at the front of the machine. Another resident of the same house, Mr Theo Plowman, said that at around the same time he had been "dazzled by a brilliant light" which appeared to be that of a searchlight [69].

By the night of 16 May reports of mysterious objects in the sky began to appear in Ireland. The Belfast Telegraph reported how people in the Malone and Balmoral districts of the city had seen: "...at about ten o'clock, a brilliant light in the sky in the direction of Colin Mountain...the aerial visitant was thousands of feet light, and came steadily in the direction of the city, occasionally dipping towards the ground but always keeping at a great altitude. The night was fairly dark, and it was impossible to distinguish clearly what the light came from, but when it came over the Lisburn Road and across the various residential parks between the thoroughfare and the Malone-road it was just possible to distinguish in the gloom a long-shaped object, and no doubt was left in the minds of those who saw it that it was an airship. It was utterly impossible to distinguish the construction of the ship or the forms of the passengers owing to the great height, but that there were persons on board was evident from the fact that a red light was seen on several occasions flashing from it..." [70] This sighting was followed by others reported from the Dublin area, where residents of Donnybrook claimed to have seen a "football-shaped" object crossing the sky at speed on the night of 20 May [71].

The scare had now reached such heights that by the morning of 17 May the subject arose during a debate on airships in the House of Commons. Mr Fell, the MP for Great Yarmouth, had asked the Secretary of State for War if he could give the numbers of dirigibles constructed or in the course of construction by Germany. Mr Haldane replied that seven dirigible airships had been built, and another five were under construction, more than £100,000 being earmarked specifically for the craft in 1908.

Subsequently, Mr Myer asked Haldane: "Will the honourable gentleman, in any report he may circulate, tell us about a certain dirigible supposed to be hovering about our coast?" This

question was greeted with laughter, and no reply was received [72].

Even the more sceptical newspapers were forced to take one report seriously, as this came from a foreign ship captain who claimed he had seen an airship at close quarters whilst in British waters. Captain Egenes of the Norwegian steamer St Olaf, which traded between Blyth and Sarpsborg, described his experience to Norwegian journalists who telegraphed his story of "the phantom passage of an airship over the North Sea." According to the captain's story, when the St Olaf was a short way out from Blyth on the Northumberland coast on the evening of 14 May "a large airship carrying five searchlights suddenly appeared, and hovering directly above the vessel, directed all its lights onto the steamer's bridge." The account described how the airship then swung away in the direction of a second steamer a mile or so away, "on which also the searchlights were directed. The airship afterwards made off at a sharp rate towards the south." [73]

This sighting was given added weight by telegrams which reported how several fishermen from Ostend in Belgium, who had been returning from the Icelandic fishing grounds had seen "a dirigible balloon manoeuvring over the North Sea, about ten miles outside of Hull" on the night of 18 May. Furthermore, a telegram from Bremen added how "several ship's captains (none of the them German) think they have seen airships over the North Sea." [74]

### **The Caerphilly Mountain saga**

By 18 May the airship scare spread to South Wales, whose residents were soon apprehensively scanning the night sky for signs of the phantom menace. One of the earliest reports came from employees of a flour mill at Newport who said their attention had been drawn to a dark object hovering over Newport Bridge at 1 am on the morning of 15 May. The airship was cigar-shaped and searchlight beams flashed from each end onto the railway lines below as it hovered. After ten minutes one of the lights went out and the airship sailed away towards Stow Hill [75]. Wales was the setting for the most sensational of all the reports during 1909. This came from a Cardiff showman, C. Lethbridge, who told reporters from the Cardiff Evening Express how he saw a landed airship and its two pilots, evidently German officers, near the top of Caerphilly Mountain at 11pm on the night of 18 May 1909. His account, reprinted in several national newspapers, read:

"I work during the winter months at the Cardiff Docks, but in the summer-time I travel the district with my little Punch and Judy show, giving performances at the various schools. Yesterday I went to Senghenydd, and after covering a few pitches, proceeded to walk home over Caerphilly Mountain. You know that the top of that mountain is a very lonely spot. I reached it at about 11 pm and when turning the bend at the summit I was surprised to see a long, tube-shaped affair lying on the grass on the roadside, with two men busily engaged with something nearby. They attracted my close attention because of their peculiar get-up. They appeared to have big, heavy fur-coats, and fur-caps fitting tightly over their heads. I was rather frightened, but I continued to go on until I was within twenty yards of them, and then my idea as to their clothing was confirmed. The noise of my little spring cart seemed to attract them, and when they saw me they jumped up and jabbered furiously to each other in a strange lingo - Welsh or something else, it was certainly not English. They hurriedly collected something from the ground, and then I was really frightened. The long thing on the ground rose up slowly - I was standing still at the time, 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. When they 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 towards Cardiff. I was too frightened to move for a time, but I pulled myself together, and as soon as I came home told



my people about what I had seen."

When questioned concerning the two "aeronauts", Lethbridge added: "They were two tall, smart young men, and I am also certain that they did not speak English, for when they looked towards me they spoke very loudly to each other, as if quarrelling or excited, as I made up my mind at once that they were foreigners. When the thing went into the air I distinctly saw what looked like a couple of wheels on the bottom of a little carriage, and at the tail end of it was a fan whirring away as you hear a motorcar do sometimes." [76]

Lethbridge's story was supported by a number of independent witnesses at the Cardiff Docks who claimed they had spotted an airship pass overhead as they enjoyed a supper-break at 1.15 am on 19 May. This was just two hours after the airship left Caerphilly Mountain. Robert Westlake, signalman at the King's Junction, Queen Alexandra Dock, made the following official report on the matter to the Cardiff Docks Company:

"At 1.15 this morning, while attending to my duties signalling trains...I was startled by a weird object flying in the air. In appearance it represented a boat of cigar-shape, and was making a whizzing noise. It was lit up by two lights, which could be plainly seen. It was travelling at a great rate, and was elevated at a distance of half-a-mile, making for the eastward. A number of men working on the steamship Arndale also saw the airship. It came from the direction of Newport, and took a curve over the docks, and passed over the Channel towards Weston, being clearly in view for a minute or two before the lights on board were suddenly extinguished." [77]

Five or more coaltrimmers working on the deck of the Arndale all testified to having spotted the airship, and Frank Smith, the third mate of the ship, said he had heard a "distinct whirring noise" in the air at the time.

"Had the Dowlais Works blast been on," stated one of the workmen. "We should have had the airship clearly discovered, but we saw enough to put at rest all doubts about it. The night was clear though there was no moon, and the airship could be distinctly seen, and the whizzing of its motor was heard by us all." [78]

W. John said that he could see "two lights on the ship and the trellis work round" while Harwood, the traffic foreman, added: "There is no question about the reality of the mysterious airship. Too many of us have seen it to leave room for doubt. We could not all be mistaken. The airship took a wide curve from the direction of Newport, and though high up could be clearly seen against the clear sky even if it had not been lit up by the two lights which it carried, and we all heard distinctly the whirr of its driving gear. It seemed to hover over the docks for a few seconds, and then swept away across the Channel, and the lights were extinguished as it passed away to the eastwards. We could not see those on board. The airship was too far up for that at night, but it was plain that it was a big airship with the usual cigar-shaped balloon." [79]

Newspaper inquiries early that morning established that neither Superintendent Davis, of the Bute Dock Police, nor anyone at the Customs Look-out station or Pier Head of the Docks, had seen or heard anything unusual. Checks with police in neighbouring Cardiff, Newport and Weston also failed to discover any other sightings, although residents of Cathay Road in Cardiff did claim to have seen object in the sky after midnight.

After Lethbridge had been quizzed by a number of journalists, reporters from several Cardiff newspapers accompanied him on a return visit to the scene of the craft's touchdown. Although not far distant from the city, the top of the mountain was bleak and isolated with just a few houses and sheep dotting the open hill country. The party noted how the road was so high and steep that the taxicab carrying the Punch and Judy showman and the reporters was only able to reach a spot within a quarter of a mile of the landing site. Waiting for them was a 54-foot long gouge in the hard ground "as if a ploughshare or some such hard contrivance had been drawn across it", trampled grass and a whole collection of torn paper and other objects scattered around. Among these were newspaper cuttings containing references to airships and

the German Army, including one with a headline which read: "War in the Air. Government appoints a committee of experts. Bid for supremacy. Wright Brothers have a conference with Mr Haldane." Another cutting from the London Daily Telegraph contained references to the German Kaiser, underlining the connotation that the airship contained foreign spies. Strewn across the grass were small pieces of blue paper "bearing a mass of figures and letters of the alphabet formed in a style distinctly different to that of the average English calligraphy" along with a quantity of pulpy, papier-mâché paper and the lid of a tin of metal polish. Another piece of paper contained the letterhead from a firm of London stockbrokers, sliced in half, on which typewritten words read: "provincial centres...rest assured we shall not...the fullest confidence...this letter amply justified." Soon afterwards a spokesman for the firm, Arthur Shirley & Co., of Threadneedle Street, London, denied all knowledge of the airship mystery, and could not explain how their notepaper had turned up "in the lair of the scareship." The head of the firm said he recognised the words found on the letter, and added: "They are from a letter I have sent to several correspondents in Wales. I have several friends in Wales who have taken out airship patents, but I know nothing of this affair." [80]

Another potential "find" from Caerphilly Mountain which came to nothing was a red label attached to a chain and a small plug, which contained a number of instructions in French. This item was soon identified by the manager of the Michelin Tyre Company as a valve-cap which was attached to the end of their car tyre inflators. However he pointed out that French instructions were only sent out with Continental orders, and never accompanied goods sold in England. The inference was that the pin had travelled to South Wales on board an airship. It was later concluded that this label had been merely discarded by passing motorist, but it was not explained how a car could have reached the scene which a taxicab had failed to negotiate. For those who believed in the airship theory, the Michelin spokesman speculated that: "We know by Mr Lethbridge's statement that the airship in question is provided with a carriage, and we also know that earlier types of aerostats and aeroplanes were fitted with bicycle wheels to give them their first impetus. It would appear, therefore, that the mysterious airship was fitted with Michelin cycle tyres, all of which were provided with this type of valve." [81]

What happened to the strange hoard from Caerphilly Mountain remains unknown, and nothing more was heard from Mr Lethbridge following the initial flurry of publicity his claim received. Charles Fort, writing in 1931, erred on the side of caution by categorising the story as a publicity stunt. However, experienced reporters who interviewed Lethbridge at the Cardiff offices of the South Wales Daily News claimed that he was "an elderly man, of quiet demeanour, and did not strike one as given to romancing." Another said the Punch and Judy man's credibility had been "tested in various little ways known to an experienced journalist, and... he came unshaken out of this cross-examination of several of the office staff." [82]

Asked if he had been reading reports of the mysterious airship's movements in the daily papers, Lethbridge replied: "Not I. I don't read the papers."

"Have you heard people talking about airships having been seen about the place lately?" asked another reporter.

"No I. Such a thing never occurred to me," he replied.

## **Airshipitis**

The story told by Lethbridge and the dockworkers at Cardiff were a mere prelude to the deluge of telegrams which arrived at newspaper offices on Wednesday 19 May 1909. This day brought the largest crop of "scareship" sightings of the entire craze, from all corners of the British Isles. Six or seven hours after the "airship" had departed from the Cardiff Docks in the direction of the Bristol Channel, just as dawn was breaking, several people in Newport

said they saw a craft move in from the sea at a great height. One observed the object through a telescope, and said the craft was just 12-15 yards long and carried three crewmen [83].

Two sightings made hundreds of miles apart appear to describe two airships flying together, both on the same evening. One witness told the Western Mail how he was on Mumbles Head at dusk watching the Bristol Channel when he saw "two elongated objects, apparently about 80 to 100 feet long, moving from northwest to southeast at a rapid rate. After watching them intently for a few minutes I saw four white flashes in quick succession from the most easterly object, which was immediately answered by three slower flashes from the other. I also distinctly heard three sharp signals, apparently from a bell, answered by two more. The objects appeared to approach each other, and then disappeared, travelling away from my observation at a considerable speed." [84]

A similar report came from Berwick-upon-Tweed, hundreds of miles to the north on the border with Scotland. This described how at 10.30pm that night railway signalmen Tait and Fogg had been startled by a loud buzzing noise, and then saw a cigar-shaped airship carrying two bright lights. Shortly afterwards they saw "a second and larger airship hovering over Berwick, off the bay where the 8th cruiser squadron anchored some time ago." Both airships then disappeared out to sea [85].

One hour before the Berwick sighting, several people in Pontypool, South Wales, including forge-workers and post office officials, reported seeing a "cigar-shaped" airship speeding gracefully through the sky and then "striking off in another direction practically at right-angles from that in which it was travelling." At Penygarn, nearby, architect Garth Fisher and his wife saw this or a similar object pass overhead and said that it carried a powerful light in the glare of which they could see something "like striped canvas." [86] It appears possible this group of witnesses saw at least one of a pair of 6ft diameter fire balloons released from Newport by Mr W. Watkins that night, although these were stated to have been liberated at 10pm. In addition, Victor Swanton, of Pontypool, made a statement to the effect that he had been experimenting with a model airship, fitted with a flare-light, in the sky on the same evening [87].

Less easy to account for were a spate of sightings reported from the East Anglian region late on 19 May. At dusk, an "airship" was observed manoeuvring at a great altitude over Shoeburyness in Essex by a Royal Artillery Sergeant [88]. At 11.30pm that night a "well-known resident" was riding a motorbike over Wroxham Bridge in Norfolk when the lamp on his machine suddenly went out. Dismounting to examine the lamp, the rider was suddenly hit by a "dazzling" flashlight beam which appeared to be directed upon him from the sky above. Shortly after this, Mrs Turner of New Catton, Norwich, had her attention attracted by "a flash of light which made the street look like day." She said she could then hear a noise like "the whirring of wheels" and:

"...I looked up and there I saw a big star of light in front and a big searchlight behind...It was coming from the NNE from the direction of the Angel Road School and flying very low, so low that it would have touched the pinnacle of the school had it passed directly over it." [89] Nearer midnight, an torpedo-shaped airship with a powerful searchlight was distinctly observed by a man riding a bicycle at Tharston, south of Norwich. Shortly afterwards a group of people in Framlingham, Suffolk, claimed they saw a similar aerial object [90]. And from across the Irish Sea, a report came from a Dublin man who was cycling home from Kingston when he saw a "cigar-shaped body, with two clear lights in front, travelling at a considerable pace across the sky." [91] "Airships" carrying brilliant lights were also reported from the north coast of Devon, and by a police constable near Bury in Lancashire. PC Woods told the Manchester Daily Dispatch how his attention was drawn to a strange object manoeuvring above Holcombe Hill. "I saw two big flashlights which I watched for about a quarter of an hour. The lights, which were very powerful, were shone over the hill, and I could see objects on the hill quite distinctly." The airship then disappeared in the direction of Ramsbottom

[92].

Some observers suggested the lights seen that night were those of a bright meteorite or a shooting star which those affected by the invasion scare could have imagined came from an enemy airship. Mr E.B.Nye of Norwich told the Norfolk News that while others saw an airship at 11.30 that night, he and several others saw "a bright light in the sky, which looked exactly like a falling star" and he added: "Had our brains been inoculated with the present airship scare, we might even have heard a whizzing noise, or had a searchlight directed upon us." [93] Similarly, at the same hour another observer at Thrapston, near Northampton, saw what he described as "a brilliant green light, similar to a rocket, rise and fall in a curved line high up in the heavens to the northeast. It had the appearance of a round ball, after the manner of the globes thrown off by certain fireworks...[he is of the opinion] that it was of meteoric origin." [94]

A similar prosaic explanation was offered by the South Wales Daily Post who made inquiries into a sighting reported to them by a young man called Daniel Blight. He claimed to have seen an airship hovering over Port Talbot docks in the early hours of 20 May. He wrote: "The airship was of quarter-circle shape, with two bright lights, one at each end of it; also the searchlight could be seen plainly. But I could not hear any noise whatsoever, as the distance was about five or six miles from where I was stood watching it. It seemed to be rising and hovering and swaying about rather sharply, and its searchlight would appear at intervals of about every 40 seconds. The night was very dark, but clear, and anyone would not wish a better view to prove its reality. It was working its way towards the southwest with its fading lights and disappeared. I drew the attention to it of Police Constable No. 440 C., who was passing at the time, and no doubt he will report it."

Blight enclosed a drawing of the craft which showed a dark cigar-shaped object with lights on either end of the balloon and searchlight beam projecting from the carriage below. He added: "There isn't anything false about this report, and you are at liberty to have it printed in any newspaper you desire, as there are other eyewitnesses besides myself."

When an Aberavon reporter tracked down the policeman whose number was quoted by Blight, and asked him what he saw, the reply was "Stars." "Blight, he said, pointed something out. It was a particularly bright star, and it was there again on Thursday night," noted the correspondent [95].

### **Airship or advertising scheme?**

These revelations coincided with a general mood of scepticism which overtook the newspapers which had promoted the scare earlier in May. By 21 May, the reports began to dwindle in number, and soon afterwards even the most pro-airship London newspapers began to dismiss the scare as the result of a clever advertising scheme organised by "a well known firm of motorcar dealers." Even the London Daily Express admitted that: "We may, in the next few days witness a rush of advertisers all crying out: 'We did it!'" [96] They did not have to wait that long. The Cardiff Evening Express found one witness who saw an airship hovering over the mountains between Pentyrch and Taff's Well which appeared to be 25 feet long and carried the words "Bovril" in big red letters on the side [97]. Meanwhile, reporter from the London Morning Leader went one step further, visiting the offices of the company under suspicion, the Continental Tyre Company of Clerkenwell Road. There he said he spoke with two officials, one of them, Paul Brodtkman, the managing director, being of German origin. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, the reporter noted how one of the men immediately left the room, taking with him "a heavy fur coat."

"We were among the first," he told the reporter, "to study the interesting art of aerial advertisement with big toy balloons, little toy balloons and airships - toy airships."

"Can you make them whiz?" he was asked.

"Certainly - and whirr," came the reply. "We have some very pretty models - cigar-shaped and several feet long, upstairs."

"Can they fly?" asked the reporter.

"Yes, if they are tied at the end of a line, with the other end fixed to a fast motorcar."

"And is there any difficulty in fixing lights to the end of them?"

"Not the slightest," came the reply.

And asked if the models could "...scare Punch and Judy proprietors on the way home across Welsh mountains, particularly if two fur-coated gents were talking at the same in time in guttural [sic] tones", Mr Brodtman replied: "That would depend upon the state of nerves of the Punch and Judy man." [98]

Unfortunately, it soon turned out that this amusing "explanation" for the scare was a hoax itself. For in a subsequent interview with the London Evening Standard, Brodtman emphatically denied that his company was responsible for the airship sightings:

"The interview with me published today [in the Morning Leader]," he said. "has been written up in a way which entirely distorts my statements. It is true that I had a little banter with this man, but in none of my replies to his many questions did I ever suggest that the company had been trying to get an advertisement by sending up either toy airships or balloons. I can assure you that we have had nothing whatever to do with this so-called mystery. Neither I nor anyone connected with the company has been going round the country, as suggested, with a balloon attached to a motorcar, or released any of the airships which are supposed to have been seen. In declaring that anything I said solved the mystery, my interviewer is entirely misrepresenting the meaning of the remarks I made to him." [99]

The suggestion that toy or model airships were responsible for the airship scare soon gained general acceptance, despite the lack of evidence. On 21 May the Daily Express, hitherto the chief promoter of the idea that a German airship was responsible for the scare, printed an interview with an aeronautical engineer which it concluded solved the mystery. Percival Spencer, of the firm Spencer Brothers, told the Express:

"These mysterious airships can only be accounted for in two ways. The first and most probable explanation is that they are model balloons, of which a large number are being sold, and which range in size from 25 to ten feet. Occasionally, petrol is used to supply the lifting power for these balloons, and this might give a luminous flame which would light up the country for miles around, and would have the appearance at all events to a searchlight. Reports of the throbbing of a motor in an airship can only be explained by the assumption that these model airships have been sent up by motoring parties who have been near at hand, and within hearing when the vessels were seen. The other theory might be that the aerial vessels which have been seen have been one or two of the man-carrying airships which have been supplied by this firm, and which the owners have been using. We have supplied no less than five during the past season, and of these two have found their way, one to the Eastern Counties and one to Cardiff. I entirely scout any idea that a foreign vessel has crossed the North Sea, knowing as I do the conditions which have prevailed during the past few days. No airship, moreover, is likely to carry a searchlight because of the enormous weight, not only of the lamp, but of the battery." [100]

In addition, Mr Spencer poured scorn on the idea that the phantom airship could be a German craft, a claim which he described as "ridiculous." He added that it would be impossible for any airship of which he had knowledge to cross over from Germany and return from whence it came in the same day. "I entirely scout any idea that a foreign vessel has crossed the North Sea, knowing as I do the conditions which have prevailed during the past few days," he said. Possibly one of the "airships" supplied by Mr Spencer found its way to a well-known firm of West-end motorcar manufacturers, who were next to jump on the bandwagon. "Great excitement," wired a Dunstable correspondent to the London newspapers on 25 May, "has

been caused in this district by the discovery this morning of a wrecked airship in a field about a mile north of the town. Two men were going to work at Sewell-lane works when they came upon a smashed-up airship, whose long cylindrical gasbag was lying across the hedge. The bamboo framework was completely smashed up, the two powerful lamps, radiator, and various pieces of machinery were scattered about." [101] Inside this broken mass was found a document which read: "NOTICE: In the event of accident. This airship is the property of Autocar, London, who will pay the sum of £5 to the finder, provided he first sends a telegram to Autocar, London, stating where the airship is to be found."

A telegram was duly sent, and the "airship" was removed by the firm. This was followed by an announcement from Autocar's Coventry office that the wrecked airship found on the Dunstable Downs was "the identical airship that has been causing so much comment by its mysterious passages over Peterborough, Cardiff and elsewhere. The craft belongs to the British agents of a Continental motorcar manufacturer, and was used for advertising purposes." [102]

What this firm was supposed to have been advertising was never made clear, although a reporter from the Manchester Daily Dispatch who travelled to Dunstable to see the remains of the airship came away satisfied that:

"...it is certain that such an airship, even when fitted together and the missing parts supplied, would not carry a man and it is questionable if this one ever flew at all. The conclusion one is bound to come to is that the various parts that go to make up the "airship" were taken to the spot where they were found and left there for some credulous and fearful person to discover." [103]

The Manchester newspaperman's conclusions dovetail with Charles Fort's account of the Dunstable "crashed airship" saga. In his typical laconic style Fort observed:

"We are told this object, roped to an automobile, had been dragged along the roads, amusingly exciting persons who were not very far advanced mentally. With whatever degree of advancement mine may be, I suppose that such a thing could be dragged slowly, and for a short time...along a road, and conceivably through a city or two...but...I do not think of any such successful imposition in about forty large cities, some of them several hundred miles apart. No one at Dunstable saw or heard the imitation airship come down from the sky. An object, to which was tied a card...was found in a field. The explanation, as I want to see it, is that probably the automobile manufacturer took advantage of the interest in lights in the sky, and at night dumped a contrivance into a field, having tied his card to it." [104]

Whatever the explanation, the report from Dunstable was accepted by the majority of the newspapers as having finally solved the "airship mystery." From 26 May onwards, as Fort noted, the publication of airship reports dwindled and by June came to a grinding halt. By this time many editorials had taken a hostile stance against the scare, and began to ridicule those who claimed to have seen the flying machine. It remains a mystery whether reports continued to reach newspaper offices, but were not published after 26 May, or whether the publication of an acceptable solution brought an sudden halt to the public interest in the subject. The research for this article found evidence to suggest that while the London newspapers dropped the airship story after 25 May, several provincial papers continued to print stories. One of these came from a police constable from the Hertfordshire force, who filed a report claiming he had seen an airship at 1.15am on 22 May while on patrol near Bishop's Stortford. PC Robinson, whose story was corroborated by a second man, claimed he was attracted by the flash of a searchlight which had been directed upon him from above [105].

On 25 May the Manchester Daily Dispatch reported how the scare had reached the northwest of England. "Early this morning rumours were current to the effect that mysterious lights had been seen over Manchester," an account stated. "One witness stated that about 2.30 am his attention was attracted by a flash of light over the Corn Exchange. A second observer corroborated this statement, and added that there visible a bulky body in the sky, which

moved in the direction of the Town Hall, showing the light once more in its progress. It was then lost to sight." [106]

The Hartlepool-based Northern Daily Mail also reported a crop of fresh airship sightings along the northeast coast later that month and early June, 1909. One of these concerned a group of three men who heard a "strange whizzing noise" above their heads as they returned to their homes in Southwick on Wearside. "At the same time they saw a light in the sky travelling at great speed in the direction of Fulwell and Roker. The radiance illuminated what appeared to be the car of an airship...the light, so the seers state, was turned down on the land as the airship travelled on above the new Catholic Church at Southwick, and manoeuvred about there for three or four minutes, then going off at a tremendous speed towards the west." [107] The same object was reported independently by Miss Thompson, the stewardess of the Southwick Club and her brother, on the same evening.

Several nights later a stevedore called Alexander Mitchell reported seeing another airship while working with a gang of men on board a steamer moored off Jarrow Slake on Tyneside. He described it as "an oblong object of great size" which carried a powerful searchlight. "The light was manipulated at intervals, the rays sometimes lighting up almost the full extent of Jarrow Slake," said a report. "At times the object would be motionless, and at others it would dart in different directions. Finally it made a complete circuit of the Slake, and then moved away over the coast of the Tyne, proceeding down the river to the harbour's mouth, where it was lost sight of." [108]

Although Mitchell's account of the airship's peculiar movements hardly square with the behaviour of a dirigible airship, nine days later the same source reported that the craft was the product of a local inventor. "Investigation shows that a firm on the Tyne who are the owners of the airship have been making experimental flights on several nights recently," claimed the Northern Daily Mail. "and the people of Tyneside district have had frequent glimpses of it." [109]

## **The Secret Inventor**

Airship sightings fizzled out by the first week of June, but this loss of interest on the part of the Press was followed by further revelations on 6 July 1909. On this date, a London paper, the Daily News, announced that the "scareship" which alarmed the country earlier that year was a reality after all. It read: "In a private park little more than an hour's motor-ride from London there is lying what we are now informed is the wonderful 'phantom' airship of the glaring eyes and whirring machinery that struck terror into the hearts of Peterborough policemen and electrified signalmen of South Wales less than a couple of months ago." [110] The secret inventor concerned was a Dr M.B. Boyd, whom the News said "had been perfecting airship inventions for eight years" and held degrees in science and philosophy. His airship was claimed to be 120 feet long, having 300 horse-power engines, a cabin slung between two gasbags and "enough petrol - roughly 600 gallons - to last for 1,400 miles." According to his story, Dr Boyd began experimenting with his airship in March, 1909, under great secrecy, and continued his trials by night throughout April and May, when he began to travel long distances. "It was our airship that was seen by the signalman at Cardiff Docks," claimed Dr Boyd. "and by the good people of Northampton on 15 May. We were also responsible for the astonishment created a week previously among Great Eastern Railway porters within ten miles of London." When questioned about the sighting over Belfast in Northern Ireland on 16 May, Dr Boyd replied: "That was the occasion when we completed our longest flight. On that night we flew across the Irish Channel, and I have plenty of proof of the fact. Where we crossed, the distance from shore to shore is about 90 miles. We accomplished the journey in one night, in one continuous flight, and we attained an average

speed of 32 miles per hour."

Dr Boyd claimed he had submitted his invention to the War Office, and his claims were enthusiastically endorsed in the magazine "The Aero" edited by the influential Charles Grey [111]. However, nothing more was ever heard of the ungainly flying machine described by this inventor. His incredible flight across the Irish Sea, which if he was to be believed, had taken place at night several months before Louis Bleriot completed the first solo crossing of the English Channel, was clearly a lie. As was his claim that his airship was responsible for the sightings over Northampton, which had been satisfactorily explained as being caused by a fire balloon at the time.

Dr Boyd's claims are curious in their similarity with those made by another "secret inventor", Wallace Tillinghast, who claimed credit for a great airship scare which gripped the northeast USA during Christmas week, 1909. Tillinghast, a businessman who dabbled in aeronautics, also claimed to have travelled vast distances in a home-made aeroplane. One of these involved a trip from Worcester, Massachusetts, to New York, a distance of around 300 miles, carrying three passengers at a speed of 120 miles per hour. This daring flight included a circle of the Statue of Liberty at 4,000 feet, with the machine cutting its engines while mechanics tinkered with the mechanism. Tillinghast's invention never materialised for public inspection, but many people claimed to have seen and heard the craft in the air above Massachusetts and Connecticut in December that year [112]. The sightings were encouraged by sensational newspaper accounts of Tillinghast's hoax, which gave credence to his claims and allowed people to re-interpret lights they had seen in the sky as evidence for his long-distance flights. Towards the end of the wave the newspapers grew more sceptical and pointed to fire balloons and the planet Venus, encouraged by mass delusion, as an explanation for the sightings. The claims of "secret inventors" were rife across the USA during the 1896-97 craze for seeing airships, and have to be interpreted in the context of an age when it was widely anticipated that mankind would soon conquer the sky. Aeronautical pioneers of the age worked under great secrecy, and their activities helped foster the idea that airships capable of marvellous flights did exist. Newspapers, magazines and popular science fiction works were full of depictions of Jules Verne-type flying machines which helped foster the expectations of the public. Newspapers were happy to encourage the exaggerated claims of back-street inventors who often claimed responsibility for sightings of mysterious airships. During the British 1909 scare many newspapers speculated that the airship reported over East Anglia and South Wales could have been produced by an English inventor, while others suggested it was a craft perfected by the War Office in response to the German Zeppelin menace, which was being tested in secrecy at night.

Towards the end of the scare, many newspapers were inclined to dismiss the accounts of airship sightings as hoaxes or the products of vivid imaginations. Furthermore, the initial enthusiasm of several London newspapers who had printed accounts of those who had claimed to have seen the craft encouraged an army of enterprising jokers. Among these we must place Messrs Graham and Bond with their account of the airship or aeroplane powered by handles which resembled those used on beer engines, which allegedly touched down on Ham Common in London. Charles Fort was equally dismissive of Mr Lethbridge's story of the two foreigners he saw beside a tube-shaped airship in Wales, noting that he was a Punch and Judy man and "perhaps his story was some profit to him." Perhaps the most obvious hoax was a letter carried by the Daily Express at the height of the scare, signed by a "Major Mayfield, The House, Pinchbeck Road, Spalding."

It read: "While motoring home from Crowland along the banks of Cowbit Wash I was surprised and somewhat alarmed to hear a peculiar whirring in the air - very low down. I thought it was a flock of wild ducks which frequent this part of the Fens. But this illusion was quickly disposed of as I then saw a strong powerful light and a big, black, oblong object just overhead, and distinctly heard men talking in a strong, guttural tone. It passed over Cowbit



Wash, and then across the shipping in the River Welland, in a line for Cowhirne towards the Wash. My object for writing is to ask if some enquiry could not be made by the Government." [113]

A telegram from a Spalding correspondent soon cleared up this "mystery." The House, Pinchbeck Road, Spalding, turned out to be Spalding Workhouse, in which resided "a well known local character, Samuel Mayfield" who was humorously known as "The General," The writer added: "Nobody who knows him [Mayfield] would suggest that he wrote the letter in question, and some local humorists have evidently used his name, and very neatly hoaxed the Express." [114] Clearly, the same wags responsible for this letter made another attempt just three days later when a note signed "Samuel Mayfield" appeared in another London paper, the Daily Chronicle. It read:

"Crossing from Hamburg on Saturday night, my interest and suspicions were aroused by hearing sounds of what I judged to be subterranean excavations while passing over the shallows to the northwest of the Netherlands coast. The sounds, possibly those of mining drills, were quite audible, and the sea was quiet and calm. This information I volunteer in order that the Government may make enquiries into the matter. Such an invasion would undoubtedly be more feared than any which may be attempted by either marine or aerial invasion." [115]

The general hilarity which these hoaxes encouraged, produced the following lampoon, published in the satirical magazine Punch.

### **The Everywhere Ship - Latest Report**

Harpenden- A suspicious looking foreigner was seen here yesterday on the common. A watch was kept on him, and he was seen after dark in an unfrequented spot to be busy with a cigar-shaped looking object which had a brilliantly coloured band around the middle. Every now and then a light would appear at the end of the object and almost immediately to go out, to the accompaniment of gutteral [sic] expletives in a foreign tongue. The object is of a brownish colour, and seems to require constant attention from its owner. Three dozen wooden matches and a box with foreign words on it were found near the spot where the stranger was observed at work on the instrument described above, and it is as though that he was engaged in making strenuous efforts to get it going. Intense excitement prevails. Later - The coloured band referred to (which had foreign words on it) has just been found and forwarded to the Board of Trade." [116]

Other newspapers preferred to go to a different kind of "expert" for their opinions on the genesis of the airship scare. The Cowes, Isle of Wight, correspondent of the London Daily Chronicle wrote that: "I have interviewed today, a prominent official of the Isle of Wight County Asylum, who expressed the opinion that the alleged mysterious airship was a myth in the minds of supposed eye-witnesses who were bordering on aviation insanity. It is almost a nightly occurrence, he said, at the county asylum, for inmates to have wild delusions about airships, imagining they see them sailing round the tower of the asylum. So confident are they that these illusions are real that it is impossible to persuade them to the contrary. They insist that they see airships racing round the asylum, and will describe their appearance in graphic language. They are always accompanied by lights and a whirring sound." [117]

Similarly, a "lunacy expert" told the Morning Leader how: "In every thousand men there are always two every night who see strange matters, chromatic rats, luminous owls, moving lights and fiery comets, and things like those. So you can always get plenty of evidence of this sort, particularly when you suggest it to the patient first." [118]

The Daily Mirror added its two pennorth when it featured the views of a physician at Bedlam

(Bethlam Royal Hospital for the Insane). He said: "Hallucination by suggestion is indicated. So many stories of airships are going about that it is quite possible that people of unstable mentality might build in their minds from some suggestively similar but commonplace sight the vision of an airship." [119]

A more unusual explanation was put forward by a correspondent to a Cambridge daily paper. Drawing upon the works of H.G.Wells he noted how "in the excitement caused by the recent airship scare, one possibility seems to have been overlooked. Might not the nocturnal visitor which has so disturbed many of the inhabitants of this peaceful Isle be the invader from a neighbouring planet whose advent was prophesied some time ago by one of our greatest authorities on aerial warfare?" [120]

Another writer in the same city mused that "some skilled aviationist may have dashed down from Mars to explore our little Earth and so caused the scare" [121], but in general these suggestions were not taken seriously by anyone. Most editorials in 1909 and subsequent years saw the airship sightings as merely one symptom of a more general "Invasion Scare" directed at Germany.

### **Analysis and Conclusions**

The effective end of the 1909 airship panic came on 21 May, when Lord Northcliffe, the influential owner of the London Daily Mail wired an editorial to the paper from Berlin, attacking those who he blamed for whipping up the scare. His long sermon discussed the harm stories of phantom Zeppelins were doing to Anglo-German relations and warned of what he called "the real danger", namely the advanced Dreadnought-building programme of the German Navy, and her alliance with Italy and Austria-Hungary. "Germans who have so long been accustomed to regard Great Britain as a model of deportment, poise and cool-headedness," he opined, "are beginning to believe that England is becoming the home of mere nervous degenerates." [122]

Northcliffe's sentiments even received backing from a well-known scaremonger, Leo Maxse, who welcomed his comments in a letter to the newspaper proprietor: "People were making considerable asses of themselves over these imaginary airships and they required sitting upon as you have done. The real thing is so serious it is maddening to have people going off at tangents." [123]

The Imperial German Government's own thoughts on the scare were eloquently expressed by Herr Friedrich Dernberg, father of the German Colonial Secretary. He wrote in a telegram printed by many national and provincial newspapers that "while Germans may shrug their shoulders at the symptoms recently manifested of the state of the British mind towards Germany, namely the Invasion Scare, and the stories of 40,000 spies disguised as waiters, vessels cruising at the mouth of the Humber, and of a mysterious airship hovering over England at night; these are most serious factors in the situation, for when an external incident exciting popular imagination occurs, even a peace-loving Government may be driven to the most fateful decisions." [124]

Sociologists Bartholemew and Howard have interpreted the phantom Zeppelin sightings as a symbol of the xenophobic sentiments which typified the relationship between Britain and Germany in this period. From this point of view, the "sightings" were the product of a collective delusion, and grew out of the invasion rumours encouraged by sensational Press reports and were rendered plausible because of rapid technological progress [125]. These anti-German sentiments had been growing from 1907, but reached a peak two years later in the form of the spy mania and the phantom Zeppelin sightings.

As for the "sightings" themselves, little can be said because none of the witnesses quoted in the newspapers of 1909 can be questioned, and the lack of any subsequent independent and

objective account of the scare leaves us almost totally reliant upon the newspaper records from that year alone. As a result, the best that can be said is that several hundred people in all parts of the British Isles reported seeing unexplained lights and objects in the sky over a period covering four months during the spring of 1909. The prevailing folk theory of the time suggested that these were hostile German Zeppelins taking part in secret aerial reconnaissance missions in preparation for an invasion. Fort noted that lights in the sky had in fact been frequently reported, upon the same night, from places far apart. The range of reported observations stretched from Ipswich on the East Anglian coast to Belfast in Ireland, a distance of 350 miles, and from Hull to Swansea, a further 200 miles. Other reports have been uncovered from the Isle of Man, the West Country and Tyneside, and there is every possibility others could be found in the Irish and Scottish newspapers from the same period. Observers frequently described the 1909 airship as a dark, cigar or torpedo-shaped object at least 100 feet in length, which manoeuvred with ease, and whose speed and performance was far superior to any known airship in existence at that time, British or German. The majority of the stories describe flying objects carrying a dazzling searchlight and often apparently accompanied by a whirring or whizzing sound which witnesses associated with its engines. How many of these "sightings" were caused by lighted box-kites, fire balloons, bright stars and planets or work of cunning advertisers is open to question and interpretation, but it is certain that media hype, wish-fulfilment and "war nerves" played a frequent role in transforming mundane phenomena into phantom Zeppelins.

The scare is interesting because of the startling parallels which can be drawn with other "airship" and "phantom Zeppelin" scares of the same period, and with more recent UFO flaps in the modern era. For example, the sightings took place almost exclusively at night; many of the reports emphasise brilliant lights and there is a concentration of stories in certain "window" areas. In the later stages of the scare there is the proliferation of rumour and fantastic theories to account for the sightings, and claims of secret Government investigations, secret inventors, the discovery of strange artefacts and the appearance of mysterious "foreigners" who are close cousins to the sinister Men In Black or MIB of contemporary UFO folklore. Beginning in July 1909 another airship scare gripped the British colony of New Zealand, which was experiencing a similar wave of hysteria accompanied by a sudden perception of its vulnerability from invasion [126]. Just prior to these sightings, the New Zealand press had carried reports of the airship scare in Britain, and emphasised the German decision to switch military strategy away from warships towards producing a fleet of Zeppelins capable of travelling vast distances. During this scare, which lasted three months, there was speculation that the phantom Zeppelin had been launched from a German cruiser *Seestern* which had recently left Australia and was believed to be off the coast of South Island [127].

The airship scare of 1909 occurred at a pivotal point in British history, just weeks before Louis Bleriot's record-breaking flight across the English Channel demonstrated finally that England was no longer an island. With the security offered by Britain's Navy challenged, the British Empire was for the first time vulnerable to attack from the air. This was a concern felt not just in the British Isles themselves, but in colonies further afield where vulnerable citizens felt threatened by the growing might of the German military.

The ten years which preceded the outbreak of the First World War were marked by enormous social and economic change, accompanied by rapid technological progress which overturned the European balance of power and set empires on a collision course to war which ultimately proved unstoppable. According to Nigel Watson's analysis of the causes of the scare "it is clear that the social climate in Britain reflected an awareness and a fear of dramatic change" just prior to the sightings [128]. It was precisely those fears, tensions and expectations which gave birth to the idea that Zeppelins were capable of visiting England in secrecy. Even though many of the more rational citizens of the time found it difficult to accept the claims made by

airship witnesses, many did accept the possibility that visits by Zeppelins were possible, even probable in the near future. This frame of reference allowed a range of ambiguous phenomena to be interpreted in an exotic fashion. Today, the UFO belief system operates at a more extensive level as a result of dramatic progress in communications, and has helped to give rise to the idea that earth is being visited by Extraterrestrials. In 1909, television and Internet did not exist, and the primary method of communication remained the newspapers, telegraphs and word-of-mouth, allowing rumours to spread rapidly before facts could often be established. As Batholemew and Howard observed in their analysis of the subsequent British airship panic of 1913 "the phantom Zeppelin sightings reflected the prevailing socio-political climate in Britain just prior to World War I. The skies reflected the collective psyche, and a variety of ambiguous, prosaic, almost exclusively nocturnal aerial stimuli, circumstances, and events were widely redefined." [129]

### **A Note on Sources**

This paper is the product of original research into newspaper archives from 1909 located at the Newspaper Library at Colindale, London, during a five-year period from 1985 to 1990. In all the files belonging to 80 English newspapers and magazines were checked for the period March through June 1909, with a concentration upon London and the Eastern seaboard. The files of Welsh and Irish newspapers were sampled only during this research, and further intensive checks may well yield further material, as may searches of the Scottish press. In addition, a number of colleagues provided data including cuttings and offprints from their personal files which have supplemented the original material used in this survey. These include Nigel Watson, Granville Oldroyd, Carl Grove, Paul Screeton and Andy Roberts.

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London newspapers:

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London Magazines:

The Aero, The Automobile Owner and Steam & Electric Car Review, Punch.

Provincial Newspapers:

East Anglia:

Aldeburgh Times (Aldeburgh, Suffolk), Cambridge Chronicle, Cambridge Daily News, East Anglian Daily Times (Ipswich, Suffolk), East Coast Illustrated News (Clacton, Essex), East Essex Advertiser (Clacton, Essex), East Suffolk Gazette (Beccles, Suffolk), Eastern Evening News (Norwich), Ipswich Evening Star (Suffolk), Ipswich Observer, Lowestoft Journal and Suffolk County Record (Lowestoft, Suffolk), Norfolk News (Norwich, Norfolk), Northampton Daily Chronicle, Northampton Mercury, Northampton Independent, Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph (Northampton), Peterborough Advertiser (Northants), Peterborough Express, Suffolk Chronicle and Mercury (Ipswich, Suffolk), Wisbech Advertiser (Wisbech, Cambs), Wisbech Chronicle and County

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Ireland:

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Midlands:

Birmingham Daily Mail, Birmingham Evening Dispatch, Birmingham Gazette and Express, Coventry Standard, Grimsby News, Lincolnshire Free Press (Spalding, Lincolnshire), Lincoln Leader, Midland Counties Tribune (Nuneaton, Warwickshire), Nottingham Daily Express.

Northern England:

Doncaster Gazette, Hull Daily Mail, Manchester Daily Dispatch, Manchester Guardian, Northern Daily Mail (Hartlepool), Sheffield Independent, Sheffield Telegraph, Yorkshire Evening Press (York).

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