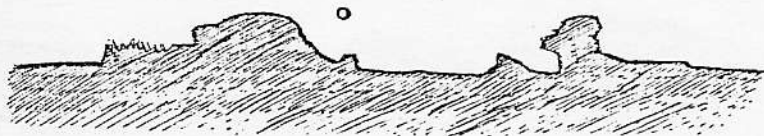
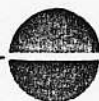


FIRE IN THE SKY

CASE HISTORY TWO
THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE UFO MOVIE FILM



bufoan



COMPILED BY JENNY RANGLES

SECTION ONE: THE CASE(1): INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you have just seen a UFO and now face the unenviable task of convincing other people.

Your main problem may well be that you were there and the rest of humanity was not. The very idea of a UFO seems ridiculous and when it comes to a choice between your testimony being suspect and accepting that you have been privileged to view something 'out of this world', then more than a few folk will decide that your credibility should be called into question.

What you really need is proof - preferably *visual proof*.

Genuinely interesting photographs that depict a UFO are not common. Movie film of a UFO is rarer still. Of all the cases to have taken place in Britain, the one debated in this booklet is probably the most significant. It is hardly stretching matters to term it one of the most important cases of this type to have come to our attention *anywhere* in the world.

What makes this incident so special? There are a number of reasons. Of course, the very fact that we are not solely reliant on the testimony of a witness is vital. With this case we can all see what the witnesses saw, captured for posterity on colour film. Unlike still photography, which offers limited data for analysis, moving images can provide a great deal of useful information about the dynamics of the phenomenon.

Also, here we are not restricted to a single eye-witness. Aside from the photographer there were several dozen other observers at two separate locations. This can allow very interesting opportunities to carry out trigonometry on the angles and directions and produce reliable estimates of the height, size and motion of the object in question.

The investigation of this case spanned a long period of time and included some very unusual sidelines. Ultimately you will have to decide for yourself whether or not there is an acceptable explanation for this particular UFO, or whether it should be handed down to posterity as a dramatic and *unidentified* close encounter.

You may well have seen this piece of movie film on a TV programme about UFOs. It has featured quite frequently. The cameraman has always complained that this is often without any reference in the voice-over as to why the case is of such importance.

We intend this booklet to be the first in a series of 'Case Histories' from BUFORA's *National Investigations Committee*. Our plan is to publish the cream of our high quality evidence in this fashion at the rate of about two per year. We hope that you will give this endeavour your support.

BUFORA is grateful to Peter Day, who is now retired, for his tireless cooperation. For sixteen years he has been a great help and shown constant interest in our efforts to resolve this enquiry. We are pleased to have the opportunity to do his story full justice in this '*Case History*'.

(2): THE EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT

It was Thursday 11 January 1973; an overcast morning with the sun barely filtering through the chilled skies and grey cloud cover. Peter Day, a building surveyor, left his home in the village of Moreton, one mile south west of Thame in Oxfordshire. His destination was Lower Winchendon, just across the border into Buckinghamshire. He was due to meet a client at the site of an old water mill, which was being converted into a country house. Day had been contracted to do the architectural planning work.

The businessman left his wife at home around 09.00 GMT, passing through the small market town of Thame and then heading north east along the A 418 in the direction of Aylesbury. This is quite a busy road at that time of the morning, but is only a single carriageway surrounded mostly by rich farmland and very low bordering hedgerows.

Shortly after leaving Thame and entering the A 418 (OS Map Reference SP 707070) Peter Day was distracted by something to his left (ie north west). At first his view was obscured by some trees, but as the road opened up into fields and low hedges he could make out an orange ball of light very low on the northerly horizon. The time would now be about 09.05 GMT; to within a minute or two either side.

The orange ball of light maintained a steady appearance to the naked eye and no sound was heard; although, of course, Mr Day was inside a car and there was other traffic on the road. Given the elevation (never exceeding five degrees) - and with the object hugging the ground as it moved from his left to right (north west to north east) across low gently undulating terrain - then it seems that it was also several miles north of the A 418. No other vehicle appeared to take any notice of this strange sight.

Peter Day could not stop due to the traffic and narrowness of the road, but after approximately two to three minutes he reached the tiny sideroad leading north to the village of Cuddington and, as this was part of his intended route in any case, he turned and as soon as practicable drew to a halt (at OS Map Reference SP 740103). (See Fig 1)

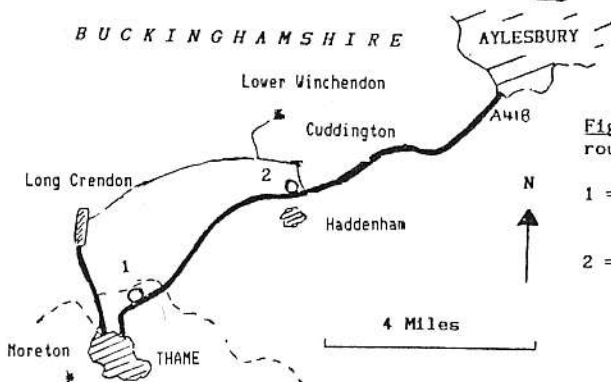


Fig 1 Map showing Peter Day's route on 11 January 1973

- 1 = Position where UFO was first seen
- 2 = Position where witness stopped to film UFO

The witness was nothing more than an amateur photographer. He professes no real knowledge of the subject, simply 'pointing and shooting', as he puts it. His movie camera was an inexpensive model and resided in the glove compartment or on the front seat beside him. He always kept it handy as he enjoyed filming things that might seem interesting. He had regularly tracked aircraft, including air force jets, an interest he had picked up during World War II, when he had personally flown in the new Oxford design of aeroplane.

By this point the orange light was still visible, but had moved sufficiently on the same track as to have crossed the road ahead of him and now appear to his right hand side. He quickly pulled the camera out of its protective plastic covering, remembered to remove the lens cap and propped it against the wound-down drivers' window to steady his aim. Then he pointed it at the object, which was moving away still towards the north east, and proceeded to film as best he could.

It had, in fact, been several months since he last used the camera and he had no idea whether it was on the 2 x zoom or standard setting. He tried to flick the switch to zoom, then found it was already at that setting. He next began to worry that the film might run out, as he was unaware how much was left unexposed on the super 8 mm reel.

The orange ball continued to move low across the skyline, passing on a couple of occasions behind trees at various distances between himself and the far horizon. At all times it emerged out the other side of the tree and proceeded unabated. Even with the window open and no traffic immediately beside him the witness heard no sound whatsoever.

Peter Day estimated that he filmed for just 12 seconds before the object vanished. In fact he had obtained 23 seconds of film. When we say the object 'vanished', this is how the witness phrased it in interview seven weeks later; *"one minute it was there, the next minute it was gone."* He elaborated in a written account penned about the same time; *"This word 'disappeared' is meant in the true sense... The object moved neither up, down nor sideways - it was just not there any more."*

This is amply justified by the film itself. Between one frame and the next the orange ball vanishes. Given the speed of the camera shutter this means it took just a small fraction of a second to disappear. Unfortunately, Peter Day stopped filming *instantly*. Again this word is meant literally, because only ONE frame exists with the object not on it. Peter Day justifies this by explaining that he was an economical person and had trained himself over many years of movie camera operation to stop shooting as soon as his subject (eg a jet aircraft) was gone from the viewfinder.

However, this is very peculiar. According to photographic experts it would be remarkable to be able to react fast enough to stop shooting within one single frame of film. Indeed, some have commented to BUFORA that it is physically impossible given the response times of the mechanism of the camera and the human body. Nevertheless, the object *does* vanish on the film and Peter Day insists that this matches precisely what the orange ball of light appeared to do to his eyes. Some investigators speculate the object was still visible, but the photographer jerked the camera away from it as he switched off. We cannot know, but this would contradict his verbal testimony.

It would now be approximately 09.10 GMT when the object had disappeared. His appointment at Lower Winchendon was set for 09.30 GMT, but that is only a matter of a five or ten minute drive from where he was now parked. Peter Day says that he waited a further ten minutes or so in anticipation that the UFO (which he now assumed the orange ball of light to be) might return. It did not do so, and he eventually decided to drive on.

He arrived at the old water mill five minutes late and had to explain his tardiness to the slightly miffed client. As the timing when the object was filmed seems certain to within a very small margin of error this does imply that he waited at the parking spot a little longer than he has estimated, possibly for fifteen or twenty minutes. In support of this contention is the note that most of Peter Day's time estimates were *under* estimates (by a factor of about a half); as found in those instances where hard evidence exists or where they were subsequently reconstructed on site.

Peter Day placated his customer - who was a stickler for timekeeping and not especially interested in this excuse about a close encounter. He made a promise to let the man view the movie film, should it turn out that the UFO appeared. This offer of an 'exclusive' screening seemed to do the trick.

(3): AFTERMATH

Peter Day spent a couple of hours at Lower Winchendon doing preparatory work on the water mill. Then he set off for home. At 11.30 GMT he stopped off in Thame at the offices of the *Thame Gazette*. His intention was to report that he had not only seen a UFO, but succeeded in filming it. He was reasonably certain that the local press would be excited by his revelation. However, he was to receive quite a surprise.

The woman reporter knew all about the UFO. A teacher and some children from a primary school in Chilton, near Long Crendon, about four miles north of the town, had already called to describe what they had seen. The journalist had phoned the local police who had no hesitation in explaining to her that they knew what it was. A military jet had been in trouble and had 'dumped fuel'. This must have been what the children saw.

Peter Day could not accept this solution and pointed out that he had seen the object as a round ball moving at speed across an arc of sky over several minutes. The newspaper pointed out that they were writing up the UFO story in any case, and did so on the following Tuesday, 16 January.

When he arrived home, Peter's wife Connie greeted him with the news that soon after he left the local BBC radio news had carried a report that an F-111 jet plane from the USAF base at Upper Heyford (about 20 miles north west of Thame) had crashed in flames. Details were still sketchy. Connie Day thought this had been on the news at 09.00 GMT, but it is now certain that this was impossible. It *must* have been the 10.00 GMT news bulletin, because the aircraft did not crash until approximately 09.46 GMT.

Given this early confusion, Peter Day was positive he had not filmed the crashing aircraft. He thought, given his wife's claim about the bulletin timing, that the jet *must* have gone down prior to 09.00 GMT, thus making it impossible to have filmed it several minutes after that. Yet to make certain he did immediately put a call through to USAF Upper Heyford.

He spoke with an American Air Force Major, who confirmed that an F-111 had indeed crashed that morning. Requesting information, if this was not confidential, Peter Day was told that it had lost control and had come down near Newport Pagnell (just over 20 miles from the position where he had parked to film the UFO *and* in line of sight with it). The two crew men had escaped. Asking whether the jet had been on fire when it crashed the photographer was informed by the USAF that it was not, but had burst into flames on impact. This statement seems to have been incorrect. According to eyewitnesses, the aircraft *was* on fire before it came down.

After receiving this information Peter Day told the major about what he had seen and the movie film he had taken. The airman asked whether any sign of an aircraft was detectable behind the glow and the witness had to state honestly that this was not the case. Day offered the film to the USAF for their possible use in the accident enquiry, but the Major expressed neither interest in it nor desire to view the processed results.

Following this conversation, Peter Day called both the ITV and BBC television news to say that he had film of an orange ball of fire that may or may not tie in with the crashing F-111. Because the film was 8 mm, both professed not to have facilities to screen it and were not interested.

Undaunted, the witness next tried the Ministry of Defence (MoD). He was shunted from department to department and ultimately spoke with someone who interrogated him about his experience. The man requested that Peter Day post them the original reel of film, a suggestion that was not surprisingly declined. The witness did offer to take it personally to Whitehall in London and let them see it, but the MoD man said he would have to 'get back to you on that'. This was the end of the conversation and the matter. The MoD never contacted Peter Day again.

Surprised by all this disinterest, the witness switched his attention to the film itself. Unwilling to submit such a precious cargo to the postal service he took the Friday off work and drove the 50 mile round trip to the main KODAK processing laboratories at Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire. They agreed to expedite matters and later that day he was able to return home with the safely processed reel. Knowing only that something had been recorded, he could not wait to see precisely what it looked like when enlarged upon the screen.

Did he now have a historical scientific coup on his hands? Could it be that he had captured near exclusive footage of a UFO close encounter? Such were the questions that were buzzing through his head as he sat down to watch the results of his camera work.

(4): THE MOVIE FILM

As soon as Peter Day viewed his film it was clear that he had succeeded in spectacular fashion. Of course, the results could not reproduce what he had seen with his own eyes, but there on the screen was the small orange ball moving from left to right at a steady rate and passing partially behind a couple of trees during its flight. The foreground looked darker than he remembered, but this was a consequence of the less than perfect optics of the camera on a grey winters morning.

However, there were two very big surprises that confronted him when he examined what was on the film.

Firstly, the object clearly pulsed; seeming to throb in and out from dim to bright as it travelled. He had not observed this effect at all to the best of his recollection.

Secondly, the last frame of the film provided an astonishing shock. Whilst the hedge in the foreground remained in sharp focus all the trees below where the now vanished object had been were 'smeared' out of focus. Day himself likened it in his written account (penned *after* seeing the film, of course) to a painting that has been smudged.

He began to speculate about the meaning of this latter event. Someone suggested he had just moved the camera creating the blur, but he prided himself on his ability to hold it steady and he pointed to the evidence that the foreground was unaffected. From this information Peter Day developed a theory which emerged through discussions with other people who were interested in the film. This speculated about a force field emerging from the UFO as it vanished 'at the speed of light' and creating a 'warping' of light rays that would be too brief for the human eye to notice but was captured by the camera lens. Certainly the effect does look very strange when first viewed and has been commented upon by several of the TV airings of the film as if it represents a supernatural event.

(5): THE OTHER WITNESSES

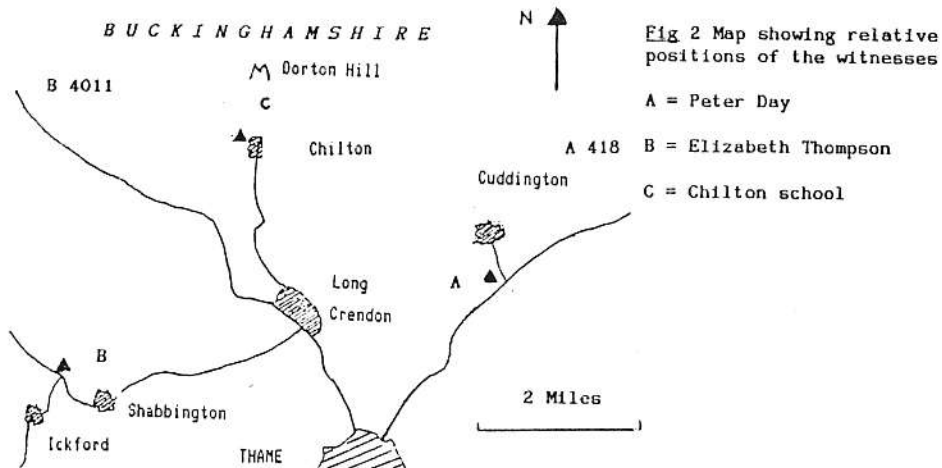
From the *Thame Gazette* Peter Day had known since two hours after his sighting that there were other witnesses; namely schoolchildren at Chilton village, near Long Crendon and at least one teacher. Several of these were cited in the local press story the week after the incident.

One of the first moves that Peter Day made after ensuring that his camera had recorded the UFO was to arrange to take the film and show it to the entire school, since (it transpired) many children were actual witnesses to the event. He also took one of his films of the Red Arrows aerobatics team so as to give a full half hour 'show' for the pupils.

The school in question is the Chilton Church of England Primary (OS Map Reference SP 687115). This lies approximately three miles west north west of the location where Peter Day filmed the UFO. As the object was seen to his north-west, heading on a north easterly course, this clearly shows that these children must have been rather closer to the UFO than he was.

In addition to these children (all aged between six and eleven, mostly at the upper end of that bracket) there was a teacher, Elizabeth Thompson, who was travelling to the school from home. She was on a small country lane out of the village of Ickford, heading north east and about to turn right at a T-junction leading into the village of Shabbington. Her OS Map Reference was SP 655077 and here (about three miles south west of the school and five miles west south west of the location where Peter Day was parked) she was also probably slightly nearer to the UFO than the cameraman.

The existence of these three separate groups of witnesses (see Fig 2) is an invaluable asset to the case.



Essentially this is what these witnesses described at the time. Mrs Thompson told the following story to Peter Day when he visited the school about ten days after the sighting: The object was hanging above the road ahead of her as she approached the T-junction (ie it was in the north east or more or less directly over the school). It was like an 'orange ball' that was slightly flattened underneath and was floating and spinning. She turned right towards Shabbington, got out but could see nothing due to hedges. Moving to a new vantage point where she could see better nothing was now visible.

Of the children interviewed by the paper at the time, most spoke of very similar things; ie orange balls or spheres. Several referenced the spinning or rotating (possibly the source of the pulsation on the film but too far away for Peter Day to have seen for himself). The children also reported that the object first appeared from the west, seemingly hovered above a council estate due north of their school yard, and then moved away eastwards in the direction of Aylesbury.

All these sightings were timed very accurately as at 09.00 GMT or within a very few minutes of that, due to the fact that the school assembly bell was just about due to ring as the UFO appeared.

(6): THE INVESTIGATIONS

Shortly after the story appeared in the local paper Peter Day was called by a UFO group based in Oxford, named CONTACT UK. This was formed by the Earl of Clancarty, otherwise known as Brinsley le Poer Trench, and under which title he has written several fairly sensational books about the UFO subject. CONTACT had been created as a team of 'sky scouts'; ie UFO observers, but outgrew that rather limited brief to adopt an outlook based more on data compilation and sober research.

Peter Day showed them the film and they were duly impressed. However, he denied their request for a copy of the film at that time. A copy was made available to BUFORA and CONTACT soon afterwards, when Peter Day took the original back to Hemel Hempstead and had several duplicates made. This duplication process effected the quality quite substantially and most versions shown on television in the years to come seem to depict a very dark background and sky which belies the time of day the incident occurred. This is purely an artefact of the copying method.

A preliminary analysis of the film occurred during March 1973; essentially a frame by frame breakdown of the appearance of the object as it changed during its flight. This added little of substance. Some calculations were also made after experimenting with filming a button of known dimensions at a given distance. From this work estimates of size and speed of the object were made, based on guesses as to how far away the orange ball on the film might actually be.

CONTACT UK agreed to work with BUFORA from the very start, which was a positive and encouraging step. Their investigation team had been Derek Mansell (who is still involved in the group; although now living in Cornwall) and Rick Roebuck (whose present whereabouts are unknown). Apart from visiting Peter Day and viewing the film they did speak to a number of the children and the teacher who witnessed the object. Meanwhile, BUFORAs Roger Stanway (a young lawyer, from Staffordshire and then chairman of the group) sent Peter Day a standard questionnaire, which he filled out on 2 March 1973. He also requested that Peter Day tape record a more detailed statement of the events. The photographer again very kindly obliged and recorded that account on 4 March, which was elaborated upon during several telephone conversations with Roger Stanway and a visit to him when the solicitor went to collect BUFORAs copy of the film.

During the summer of 1973 Roger Stanway conducted an on-site investigation, meeting Peter Day and going with him to the location where the UFO had appeared. One of the things which Stanway did during this reconstruction was to use a plumb line with a ball attached and move away from the witness along the line of sight of the object. When the ball on the plumb line attained the same angular size as the UFO had done at the time of the incident, Stanway asked Peter Day to report. From this fairly simple measurement a more accurate estimate of the apparent visual size of the UFO was obtained which, coupled with distance measurements, could give an approximate figure for the size of the orange ball. That turned out to be around 75 feet diameter (probably a slight over-estimate).

On 1 September 1973 Roger Stanway gave a lecture to BUFORA in London, presenting the fruits of this investigation. Peter Day was invited and answered questions to a highly informed (sometimes critical) audience of 250 UFOlogists! He emerged unscathed with a general consensus opinion that he WAS telling the truth.

The only event of any real note for some time after this work was the arrival of Dr J. Allen Hynek in Britain. This UFOlogist is widely considered the founder of scientific UFOlogy and was for many years USAF consultant on UFO matters and served as originator, advisor (and even a guest star within!) the Steven Spielberg movie epic "*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*". Indeed, the odd title of that feature comes from the classification scheme developed by Dr Hynek for UFO cases; where a 'third kind' encounter involves a meeting with aliens. The astronomer, who sadly died in 1986, founded the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), now one of the leading UFO research groups in the world. He seems to have been the first person to comment upon the possibility that the background image on the film might have been bent by a UFO departing beyond the speed of light. This came during a meeting with Roger Stanway when Dr Hynek saw the film.

Meanwhile, the CONTACT UK enquiries added much detail to the sightings by the other witnesses.

Rick Roebuck recorded interviews with the children and notes that he spoke to them both individually and as a group to clarify details. This was AFTER they had all seen the movie film, a point worth bearing in mind. Typical of the descriptions are as follows: -

Louise Driver ... saw ball with yellowy-orange centre with orange-brown edges which appeared at first to the west, then hovered due north and descended, rotating as it did so. It also appeared to be shaking from side to side. When not spinning it had a very flat appearance.

Paula Fox ... saw it descend into a clump of trees and then climb up again and move away.

Tracy Perrett ... when above the trees saw it "crack open into a V shape and slow down". Then the 'V' filled in and it moved away. This 'V' section was darker than the remainder of the UFO but you could see through it.

Nina Sparks ... saw a distinct silvery shape inside the orange and says that when it descended it did so for about ten seconds before moving away.

There were several other similar accounts, but these give the flavour of the incident. As you can see they offer some interesting differences with what Peter Day recorded. That may well be entirely due to these girls being at closer proximity to the object. The more detailed colouration, the silver shape (recorded by at least two people), the 'V' effect (also seen by some) and the hovering and descending (witnessed by all of them) are clearly significant factors. The object was also recorded as being less bright when it was moving slowly and increasing in brilliance as it accelerated. From reconstruction at the school the spinning was agreed to be anti-clockwise if viewed from above. The UFO was in view about two minutes and was lost to sight behind Dorton Hill (north to north east of the school).

In her interview with Rick Roebuck, teacher Elizabeth Thompson also gave more details as follows:

A bright orange dome or semi-circle was visible above hedges directly in front as she approached the T-junction. She estimated it was some way distant. She had it in view for no more than a few seconds but it seemed to be stationary and rotating. Upon arrival at the school five minutes later she was confronted by many children who spontaneously described what they had seen. They were so excited that lessons had been temporarily forgotten.

Although the children were all satisfied that the object they saw was what Peter Day had managed to film, Elizabeth Thompson was less positive when she first viewed the results. Her object looked much bigger and was not the rounded shape visible on film, but much more hemispherical. It was rotating very fast and seemed to vary in brightness or intensity, but she saw no pulsating as evident on screen. She was absolutely certain it was a solid object and not just a light reflection. Indeed, at first she presumed it was an orange domed roof on a new grain silo in one of the fields. Later, after she heard of the air crash that morning, her next impression was that she must have seen a novel type of orange parachute being used by the pilots in order to eject. We know this is impossible, partly because of the actual method of ejection used and mostly because the pilots were still in their plane long after the UFO was seen.

After noting the certainty of the children when viewing the film and weighing logic and the facts together Mrs Thompson ultimately concluded that she must have seen the same thing as Peter Day recorded. The differences were presumably caused by the variations in distance from the UFO and the changing angles of observation.

Beyond obtaining this information relatively little else seems to have been done by the first investigators. For instance, nobody appears to have pursued the vital clue that the police claimed to know what the children had seen (ie fuel dumping by the malfunctioning F-111). Some enquiries were made in the villages of Cuddington and Haddenham and, given the number of witnesses we do have, it is very strange that nobody there saw anything. But with the story in the *Thame Gazette*, all the publicity for the air crash and many subsequent promotions for the film, all attempts to come up with additional witnesses have proved unsuccessful. It is true that the immediate area north of Chilton, where the UFO seems to have flown, is almost devoid of any habitation. But Long Crendon is a fair sized town just one mile south of Chilton and the major town of Aylesbury is only eight miles east and the densely populated city of Oxford the same distance west. Why do we not have many more witnesses to this unusual phenomenon?

In 1976 the BBC contacted Peter Day. They seem to have discovered the existence of the film via BUFORA. Hugh Burnett, a TV producer, visited Peter and loaned a copy of the film to transfer it onto 16 mm for transmission. This was as part of a documentary entitled "*Out of this world*" which Mr Burnett was making as a review of the entire UFO field. I worked with Hugh Burnett on that show and sympathise with Peter Day, since I gained the same impression as he; that the programme would be of benefit to UFOlogy. In the end it was a major disappointment; although it has been repeated at least twice by BBC television in the 13 years since shooting.

Peter Day's film was shown on the programme with just a few seconds commentary to explain where it was taken, but no other details. Viewers were not even informed of the crucial fact that there were other witnesses. Peter Day himself was not considered 'important' enough to be included on screen.

My colleague Peter Warrington and myself were then working on our book "UFOs: A British Viewpoint" (Hale, 1979) and through our meetings with Hugh Burnett during production of the documentary we heard about the Peter Day film for the first time. I had been a member of BUFORA since 1969 but was not aware of the case, because Roger Stanway's investigation from 1973 had, for some reason, not been published and I lived too far from London to attend the lectures.

Warrington and I decided to ask Peter Day if we could do some work on the sighting and prepare an account for our book. He very generously agreed to this and let us loan his film for analysis. In return for his cooperation we provided him with still frame enlargements and a copy of our book when it duly appeared. The still frames are reproduced in black & white inside and depict two successive images from the film. These demonstrate the pulsation effect. In my later book "UFO Reality" (Hale, 1983) I reproduce a still frame on the cover so that the orange ball can be shown much more graphically in colour.

The investigation work described in these reports remained, as of 1983, the only published accounts in the UFO literature. We were chiefly involved in checks on the status of the film. The first step, in March 1978, was to arrange with the kind assistance of KODAK, to have the film studied at their Hemel Hempstead laboratories. As Peter Day had used KODAK stock their public relations officer, Peter Southerst, was able to justify the time and expense of analysis. We are very grateful to him for this.

Peter Warrington and I then met up with Peter Day at the Hertfordshire processing plant and the film was extensively scrutinised. This work by the photographic experts proved to their complete satisfaction that a real object was on the film at some distance from the camera. Not a major revelation. But it was very important to have this fact officially verified.

The KODAK evaluation also centred on that bizarre last frame. The analysts completely explained, at least so far as Peter Warrington and myself were concerned, that this was merely camera shake. The act of switching off the shutter causes involuntary movement which 'jars' the system. The reason why the foreground was *apparently* less blurred than the trees in the background was a product of the terrain. Indeed, *apparently* is the operative word here and there was clear evidence of foreground blurring when you looked carefully at the darkened vegetation (itself mostly a product of the copying process). It should be said that Peter Day was less happy with this explanation, but reluctantly acknowledged that we must bow to the verdict of photographic experts.

With the film now verified as genuine, efforts turned toward finding a possible solution for the UFO that it depicts. KODAK were once again extremely generous in offering their North London offices for a private symposium on the case in autumn 1978. This was arranged with the assistance of science journalist Ian Ridpath and was deliberately kept very low key.

KODAK had proposed that the object on the film might be ball lightning, a rare atmospheric phenomenon. As this had only ever been filmed through a few still photographs, it would represent a major scientific coup if movie film was procured. So about half a dozen of the nations leading specialists in plasma physics were invited to the seminar from their respective universities and institutes (including Harwell). Most accepted the invitation on the understanding it was to be a private affair. The results of this extraordinary and unprecedented 'evaluation symposium' on a British UFO case are discussed later in this report.

Peter Day could not attend, as he was on holiday. But Peter Warrington and myself showed the film repeatedly and discussed the case in depth. Also in attendance was an expert from the Ministry of Defence, who had agreed to come along and pass judgement on possible conventional explanations and to ascertain if there was any likely connection with the F-111 crash that same morning. Again we will review his comments later.

Unfortunately, to preserve the confidentiality of that day the names of most of these individuals are not being published.

Enquiries by Peter Warrington and myself into the case were more or less exhausted by these moves. We had not seen the BUFORA case file at that time. Had we done so it might have offered us further leads and we were aware that investigation into such a potentially significant case was still not as thorough as it should have been.

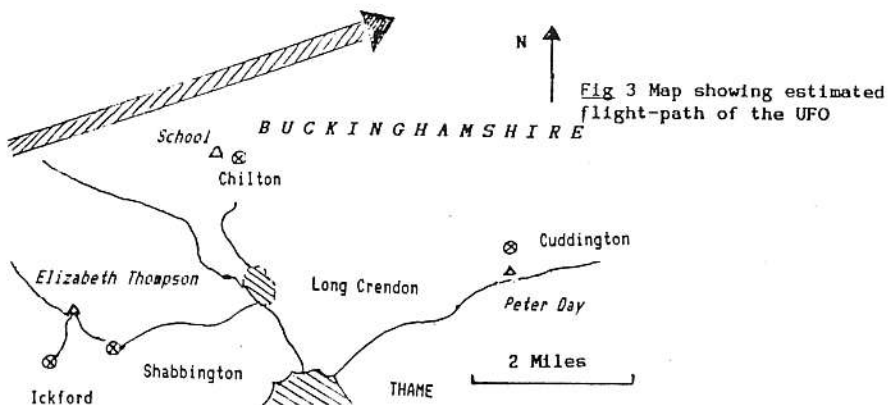
After the Hugh Burnett BBC presentation and publication of the case in "*UFOs: A British Viewpoint*", the film acquired a degree of notoriety in the UFO field and began to appear in other books and magazines. Peter Day became very frustrated by this, because it often happened without his knowledge or consent and with few (if any) details about the case accompanying the photographs. He also began to feel that UFO investigators were letting him down in not making more effort to explore this evidence.

When I took on the role of Director of Investigations for BUFORA in late 1981 I was very mindful of our need to redress the balance on this case. I proposed a seminar as part of an international UFO congress BUFORA was to organise in August 1983 at a venue near High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. However, administrative problems ensued and it took some time for the scattered case notes to be recovered. At that time BUFORA had a rather less sophisticated data base than the computerised version that we now possess. The seminar ultimately went ahead without further work on the case and served less as a presentation of the facts and more a post mortem on what data we still required to obtain.

Dr J Allen Hynek and John Timmerman from the Center for UFO Studies were present and visited the site with Peter Day on 28 August 1983. Here they obtained more accurate bearings and distance figures. Further work was split in several directions. Peter Warrington offered to explore the possibility of computer enhancement of the images on the film, BUFORA investigator Ken Phillips took on study of the F-111 crash relationship, Stuart Campbell wanted to examine the ball lightning option further and a new field investigation team was put onto studying the case itself.

(7): THE RAW DATA

At this stage it is useful to offer some basic information about the case that was secured by these different investigations. This is of value in our efforts to discover what took place. Fig 3 depicts the suggested flight path of the UFO as compiled from the bearings and elevations offered by the various witnesses.



Geologically the area is one which comprises mostly clays with some chalk beds nearby. This provides rich farmland, such as dominates the region.

CONTACT UK obtained a weather report from Abingdon (approximately 12 miles south west of the location where the film was taken). This was for 09.00 GMT on the date of the event. This records the following:-

Heavy cloud cover at 1800 feet Visibility 6 miles
 wind was easterly at just 7 knots and temperature (cold) at 3.7 degrees C
 relative humidity was 78% and there was a tendency towards mist. No
 electrical storms were recorded as being in the area.

The camera used was a Japanese model, the Pacemaker 200 Super 8. From various on-site measurements, the 'line of trees' as they appear on the film are in fact several different stands at varying distances from the camera. The nearest is about 0.2 miles and the furthest slightly over 1 mile. It appears that the object must have been behind these furthest trees. Therefore, a minimum set of figures for size, height and speed are calculable. We also know a maximum height (given the cloud ceiling) and can estimate from certain factors (eg its sudden disappearance) that the objects height was close to this maximum. From a combination of these factors the following reasonable estimates are possible:

Height of object 1800 feet Distance from Peter Day 3.8 miles
 Diameter of object 64 feet Speed about 140 MPH

It cannot be substantially less than this, given the estimates made possible by the bearings and elevations from the other witnesses.

(8): THE NEW ENQUIRY

The team who took over the case after August 1983 were SCUFORI (Swindon Centre for UFO Research and Investigation), an erstwhile small group of people working closely with BUFORA in the Oxfordshire/Wiltshire area. Their research team comprised Charles Affleck, Marty Moffatt, Martin Shipp and Mike Williams.

SCUFORI did a fine job in collating the notes and data from the earlier case file and tidying up many loose ends. They finally produced a definitive 108 page case report in the summer of 1984.

Most of their work involved Peter Day. They noted; "(He) is a highly respectable and intelligent person... and appeared to SCUFORI to be very sincere. He was very helpful throughout the investigation, and seemed more than eager for his sighting to be investigated, possibly hoping that this would give the sighting the sort of recognition he obviously felt that it deserved.... (but) Mr Day was absolutely convinced that what he saw was indeed a UFO (and) ... did mention to SCUFORI that he had always wanted to see (one)..." They wonder whether this is relevant; although it is naturally far less significant than if we had no proof beyond the belief of a percipient, supporting their contention of a UFO encounter.

The main service that SCUFORI performed was to carefully reconstruct the event on site with the witness and film this reconstruction every step of the way, thus providing much more accurate measurements. However, despite writing to the school in Chilton they received no reply and did not make any other attempts to trace these other witnesses. Meanwhile they reached pretty firm conclusions which probably contributed to their decision to cease work on the case. We will examine these in a later section of this report.

Peter Warrington was having less success in his attempts to have the film computer enhanced. Contacts through KODAK and the RAF at Farnborough came to nothing when the spectre of horrific costs for the task were dangled in front of us. BUFORA, being a small organisation funded totally by the subscriptions of its membership simply could not justify the expenditure of a hefty percentage of its annual budget on one experiment with limited value. We already knew with virtual certainty that the film was bona fide. In some cases computer enhancement can bring out subtleties that prove a hoax. But this was not a hoax and so it was less probable it would add anything of substance to our knowledge of the matter.

We were faring better with our research into the mysterious F-111 crash that occurred on the same day as the UFO sighting. On 20 October 1983 Captain Paula Hoffmann, chief of public relations at USAF Upper Heyford, wrote to Marty Moffatt explaining; "The only information I can provide is we had an F-111 aircraft accident on 11 January 1973..." The Captain suggested that the records could only be obtained via Norton Air Force Base in California. She added that specific questions only would be answered and fees would be charged for such a procedure.

Nevertheless, Marty Moffatt posed specific questions; including the precise time and location of the crash, the F-111's speed and direction between encountering a problem and crashing and whether it was on fire at any point. In reply, Captain Hoffmann advised (17 January 1984) that; "You are looking for information over 10 years old... the research costs may be quite expensive... (and) you will only be given information consistent with Air Force and Department of Defense policies governing releasability." Despite this threat of 'secrecy' she appended the correct address in the USA.

The response, when it eventually arrived (3 April 1984), was not very detailed. Vincent Murone, chief of the reports branch at the Directorate of Aerospace Safety, Norton Air Force Base, wrote; "The F-111E aircraft you referred to crashed at 0946 local time on 11 January 1973, three-fourths of a statute mile south of North Crawley, 25 nautical miles east northeast of RAF Upper Heyford, United Kingdom. The aircraft's heading was 240 degrees when the crew ejected. The aircraft was burning in the mid fuselage area when it emerged from an overcast at approximately 2000 feet in a steep nose down attitude. The ejection capsule landed upright in the backyard of a home in the village of North Crawley. The crew was not injured and returned by helicopter to RAF Upper Heyford."

In fact this response tells us almost nothing we had not already been able to discover through Ken Phillips (who obtained local press reports from their archives) and myself (scouring microfilm records of the national press in January 1973).

No less a source than the *Times* carried a good account, for example. The incident was newsworthy, largely because F-111s were crashing a good deal at the time and were some cause for concern. Also the pilots used a new rocket propelled ejection system developed out of the space programme and this was the first time (certainly in Britain) that such a hi-tech and dramatic evacuation procedure had been put into operation. The story added a very important piece of news. The F-111 had been in trouble *long* before it crashed and had flown around and around in circles (some sources suggested that there was a problem with the rudder system on the jet). This circling was allegedly 'to use up fuel' and began '40 minutes' prior to the crash. That means the problem (whatever it was) actually appeared around 09.06 GMT - MORE OR LESS EXACTLY THE SAME TIME AS THE UFO SIGHTING !

The crash occurred in the vicinity of what is now Milton Keynes new town; although in 1973 this was little more than small villages and largely underdeveloped. The local paper, the *Bletchley Gazette*, understandably devoted several front page stories in its weekly editions and these are the source of valuable information.

On 19 January 1973, the heading reads: "Plane crash: Board of enquiry ask for our help" with a sub-heading "The aftermath of the USAF F111 drama - now people want to know what went wrong". They were not destined to get much of an answer, because in Britain the results of military accident enquiries are rarely published in the same way as civilian plane crashes are.

However, we learn that the F-111 came down "only yards from a farm house in Folly Lane" and was almost totally burnt out. This supports the report from Norton Air Force Base about it being on fire when it plunged out of cloud and flatly disputes what Peter Day was told on the morning of the crash by the major at Upper Heyford who declined his offer of the film.

The accident board were said to be trying to discover; "why (the F-111) developed a fault - and what happened in the 50 minutes before it finally crashed in flames." A very high level enquiry was being set up to study the events, headed by Brigadier General Darrall S Cramer vice-commander of the 17th Air Force" (most impressive indeed for what might on the surface look like a relatively routine accident). The paper also notes that; "unconfirmed reports say that the plane circled above Newport Pagnell using up fuel to reduce the landing weight while the two-man crew tried to sort out rudder trouble". However, this fairly innocuous allegation is contradicted by eye-witness testimony from Bletchley, where; "hundreds of people saw the plane, accompanied by another F111, soar low over the town with flames spurting from one engine." One of these was Paul Hunt, who described how at 'just after 9 am' he saw the two F-111s streaking over the town with one of them flying below the other and evidently looking up and inspecting it. The other jet had an engine which Mr Hunt describes as "white hot".

Clearly something fairly dramatic effected the F-111 causing it to come down in flames. Such a sudden impact clearly endangered civilians on the ground. A local farmer, Gordon Adderson said; "I heard an explosion in the sky and then there was a sudden roar. Out through the low cloud came the plane, all on fire. It dropped in a mass of flames."

Yet despite all of these problems the official line continued to be just a 'rudder defect'. Indeed, such was the worry that the F-111 had been flying at low altitude over the Milton Keynes area that the local MP challenged the Ministry of Defence and received an eventual assurance this did NOT happen, either normally or with this particular jet.

Fig 4 below illustrates the relationship of the various places involved with the F-111 crash and the site of the UFO incident.

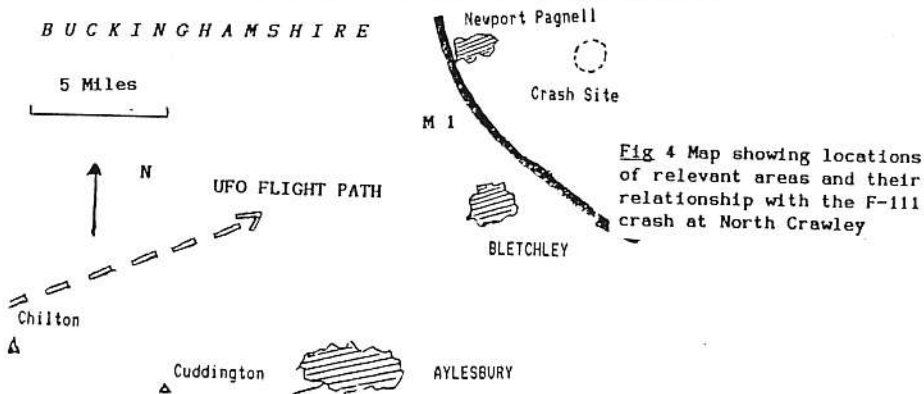


Fig 4 Map showing locations of relevant areas and their relationship with the F-111 crash at North Crawley

SCUFORI had not succeeded in tracing any of the witnesses at the school (now all adults, of course), even though they did write a letter to the head teacher. But in November 1987 a new possibility arose when the BBC television programme 'Kilroy' decided to devote its 45 minute programme to UFOs. I persuaded them to feature this case and with the resources of the BBC we were able to find some of the witnesses. I have since tracked down others and interviewed them for this publication; although the majority of the estimated two dozen female youngsters are now married, have changed their names and some have moved away.

The headmaster, Edwin Bennett, interviewed by the BBC said the following; "I came shortly after it happened and there was a great deal of consternation in the school. Everybody was talking about it. A teacher (Elizabeth Thompson - now retired and unavailable for interview) left her home about four miles from the school and (saw) this object... It hovered overhead for quite some time. All the children came out to see it - then it dropped into a valley behind the school and wasn't seen again..."

Paula Fox was quoted earlier from her comments given to CONTACT UK at the time. She is now married and told me when I interviewed her that on television she had been very nervous and said only the following; "All the children were waiting to go into school and we saw something that was very similar if not the same thing (as on the film). A very bright light in the sky, travelling and spinning at a very fast rate. All the children stopped and looked into the sky and saw this thing... What I think I saw was a dome-shaped very bright light - if not a ball of fire type object." She confirmed to interviewer and former MP, Robert Kilroy-Silk that her immediate reaction was that they had seen a UFO and she still believes that to be the case.

When I spoke to her she said that the pressure of 'live' television did not allow her to describe what she saw very well. She wanted to make clear that it was rather more dramatic than what was on Peter Day's film; although vaguely similar. She said; "It was not really orange at all. It was definitely silvery white and spinning. It was also a definite shape. In no way was it just a ball of fire. I would say it had a saucer shape with a dome on it."

This was certainly a surprising description, matched partly by the testimony of Elizabeth Thompson who had likened the object to a hemisphere or dome. Paula added that during the two or three minutes the UFO was in view; "the playground went dead quiet. We all just looked up at it. There was no sound at all. Most of us heard nothing; although one girl (Tracy) says she did. We must have been near to it, because it was much bigger than it appears on the film. It moved left (north west) to right (north east) and was slow and steady. Then it dipped as if about to land and after a few seconds rose up again. It just vanished instantly in a patch of blue sky where there were no clouds to hide behind."

I asked again if she was certain about the structured shape that she recalls seeing. "Yes - it was spinning round and round. Frankly, I expected it to land and martians to get out. I was scared."

Tracy, who also appeared on the TV programme, seems to be the only one who claims to have heard a noise. None of the other witnesses in any circumstances heard this. Tracy says of the incident; "There were thirty of us, or roughly thirty and we all saw the same thing. So we can't all be wrong. It was like a ball of fire and it had a very big roaring noise."

I picked up this point with a third witness, who did not appear on television but who is a friend of Tracy's. She is the Nina Sparks whose comments at the time are also quoted earlier. Despite Tracy's remarks she is adamant that there was no sound. "I couldn't hear anything. Of course, there was a lot of excitement, but I think I would have heard a loud noise. What we saw seemed to be visible for a very long time - about five minutes. But I doubt it was that long. You know how your perception of time is different as a child. But the object was just like a great big orange blob and it travelled across the fields in a curved path. It seemed to be descending as it moved. I don't have any explanation all these years later and I have never seen anything remotely like it since then."

In other words, the testimony of just three of the girls is now substantially different on a number of points. I am quite certain that all are being sincere and reporting the events as accurately as they can do, but was the object silent or not, was it just an orange blob or was it silver, did it have no structure or a dome shape behind it? Such questions remain shrouded in mystery and the further passage of time or the tracing of other witnesses is not likely to do more than add to the confusion.

Fig 5 Some of the shapes as seen by the children at the Chilton School.



SECTION TWO: EVALUATION(9): ASTRONOMICAL

For once in a UFO case we can be sure that some sort of genuine strange phenomenon was seen on the morning of 11 January 1973. One obvious possibility is that it was a meteor - a chunk of rock entering the earth's atmosphere and burning up with friction. A three minute duration would be exceptional (if not impossible) for one of these. But on BBC television, Adrian Berry, the *Telegraph* Science Correspondant, instantly leapt to that conclusion saying, "It was a meteorite. I think it crashed into the earth and that was the explosion you saw." Yet such awe-inspiring events in broad daylight are most rare and if such a spectacle had appeared east of Oxford there would certainly have been countless witnesses, not just one cameraman and a few school children. This would have been one of the astronomical events of the decade and I find it astonishing that an educated science writer should make such an unsupported statement about a case he has not investigated. In articles he has accused UFOlogists of being gullible. But this kind of hasty 'explain it all away' tactic is surely inadvisable. The film does not show a meteor, meteorite or any obvious astronomical object.

(10): AIRCRAFT OR HELICOPTER

Leaving aside for a moment the subject of the F-111 air crash what is the possibility that the film depicts a form of air traffic? This is one of the most common sources of UFO misidentification and must be considered in cases where a busy military air base is nearby.

Firstly, it should be stressed that Peter Day was used to filming aircraft. Furthermore, not a single witness was in any way satisfied - at the time or during my 1989 interviews with them - that any normal form of air traffic could explain what they saw. Nina Sparks, for example, said categorically; "I have seen and heard F-111 jets from Upper Heyford very often. They have passed over here for years. They are exceptionally noisy. There is no way that what we saw that morning could have been a plane."

The wind was blowing sound from the east. Elizabeth Thompson was apparently west of the UFO and ought to have heard something. Of course, like Peter Day she was inside a car. Would that be enough to mask all sound? The mist and low cloud need to be taken into account. I live directly under the flightpath into Manchester, one of the busiest airports in Europe. Aircraft pass over at around 950 feet on final approach. From personal experience I can verify that on misty or cloudy days the sound of jets echoes from the cloud base and is frequently deafening. It is very hard to imagine an F-111 (a particularly noisy type) not being heard by these witnesses.

Of course, we need to add two riders to that statement. Firstly one witness (seemingly just one) says she *did* hear a roaring noise that would be totally consistent with an F-111 accelerating away. Also there might have been another less noisy kind of aircraft involved, possibly a light plane. But if so, then what caused it to take on the dramatic appearance we see on the film? Certainly it was not reflecting sunlight, given the weather conditions. So how did it glow bright orange?

At this stage we should mention that soon after the incident Rick Roebuck of CONTACT UK wrote to the Ministry of Defence department that collates UFO reports (then known as Department S4f and now under the acronym Air Staff 2). They gave the following brief statement about the case: "Our investigations into the report reveal no unauthorised air activity. However, the description we received was consistent with that of an aircraft flying with the use of its afterburners which were switched off as the observer watched it..." The department do add that this is mere speculation and they do not have the resources to check with the many possible air bases who might have led to such a report.

A modern jet fighter uses 'reheat' or 'afterburners' to accelerate by ejecting fuel at speed from the rear. This causes an orange glow which is only visible from the back or at extreme side angles. It generally is a short lived affair and putting a jet on 'reheat' for several minutes is an unlikely event and would cause notable increase in velocity. Additionally, the use of afterburners is a noisy business and makes it even more improbable that the offending aircraft would remain inaudible.

Researcher Stuart Campbell favoured the idea that the witnesses did see the F-111 afterburner through the misty conditions.

However, in May 1989 I lectured at RAF Shawbury to a group of senior air force officers showing stills from the Peter Day film. Subsequently I discussed the prospect that the image was a jet afterburner and received widespread disbelief. One military air traffic controller told me that he could not conceive an afterburner being visible across such an arc of sky and for such a period (especially without obvious auditory clues) - unless, as he wryly smiled, "the jet was flying sideways".

But another option came to light during that September 1978 seminar with the atmospheric physicists. The Ministry of Defence expert present was Staff Sergeant Ron Stafford, whose speciality was munitions. He pointed out that at some point in the mid seventies an experiment had been conducted fitting helicopters with rotating orange searchlights. He speculated that the film could depict precisely that effect. This idea was investigated by Peter Warrington, who found that such a trial had occurred, but was short lived. It had not operated during January 1973.

(11): METEOROLOGICAL

There is a rare atmospheric phenomenon which until relatively recent times was not accepted as fact by many scientists. Today it is believed that *ball lightning* is a form of plasma that occurs in unusual atmospheric conditions. It can be spherical or cylindrical in shape, often orange in colour and drifts about briefly before tending to vanish suddenly (sometimes with a dramatic explosion). One can imagine the consequences of ball lightning coming into close contact with a jet aircraft.

Stuart Campbell has corresponded at length with Dr Charman, a specialist represented at the seminar, but ultimately concluded that ball lightning was not a probability in this case.

The idea that this film depicts unique footage of this still mysterious atmospheric process was KODAK's justification for staging the symposium in the first place. On that day Peter Warrington and I replayed the film many times and talked at length about ball lightning with an esteemed assembly of scientists. A number of conclusions emerged.

Firstly, it was agreed that ball lightning may sometimes get reported as a UFO.

Secondly, it was believed that ball lightning is a very short lived phenomenon (generally stable for only seconds) and has a size of just a few feet, rather than the many tens of feet found with this case.

Thirdly, it was widely felt that ball lightning occurs during certain meteorological conditions (although not confined to thunderstorm activity). These criteria were not fulfilled by the weather on 11 January 1973.

On the other hand, the scientists did all comment that the parameters of ball lightning remain controversial. There is a possibility that extreme ball lightning may get reported out of the scientific field (as UFOs) and so bias the samples used to determine such parameters in the first place.

Nonetheless, after the scientists saw the film many times they were in total agreement as to its status. Not one of them believed that it depicted ball lightning and they made very plain that they were rather disappointed to have to say this. They had attended the symposium with high hopes of attaining significant new information about their subject.

I did offer these people the film to take back to their research laboratories. One of them actually said; "I am not sure why you seem so afraid of calling this a UFO. In my opinion the film fits that description better than anything else."

Quite possibly that is so, but the stigma attached to our subject (where a UFO is automatically interpreted as a 'spaceship') explains why BUFORA is careful with its wording and why Peter Warrington and I were using the less emotive term UAP (Unidentified Atmospheric Phenomenon) for the object on the film. Such caution is wise. You can see this by noting that all the scientists at the symposium declined to loan the film for further study, because such an action might jeopardise their credibility in front of peers and research grant committees!

However, Dr Terence Meaden, editor of the *Journal of Meteorology* and head of the Tornado and Storm Research Organisation (TORRO) has worked with BUFORA and developed an exciting (if controversial) theory. He believes that spinning vortices can occur, rather akin to short-lived tornadoes. They bring extensive effects like ionization. He has accumulated considerable evidence for their existence, even in Britain, and sees them as an answer to strange circular patterns appearing with regularity in Wessex cereal fields (see "*Controversy of the Circles*", BUFORA, 1989). Dr Meaden is convinced that such a vortex could be a danger to air traffic which might accidentally come into close proximity. It may be that the UFO event under consideration was the result of such a novel meteorological phenomenon.

(12): THE AIR CRASH THEORY

In the conclusion to their 1984 BUFORA report the Swindon team noted the following: "It is a fact that there was an aircraft crash some 24 miles north north east of Mr Day's position at around the same time or slightly after his sighting... The principal point to bear in mind is that the F-111 was in the air at the time of Mr Day's sighting, and indeed he was looking in the direction of the area in which the aircraft eventually crashed. The crash of an aircraft is a very unusual event, and it has to be considered what the chances are against two highly unusual but unrelated phenomena occurring in the same area at around the same time (ie a plane crash and a UFO)... The inevitable conclusion is that there was only one phenomenon, namely the troubled F-111, and that it was this which was observed and filmed by the witnesses."

On the face of things that logic is impeccable. However, let us look at the three possibilities that exist in this context and assess the likelihood of each one.

(a) The two events were completely unrelated...

This is the hypothesis favoured by Ken Phillips who did most of the ground work in the Milton Keynes area checking into the air crash. It should be remembered that military aircraft are very common and, sadly, do crash in Britain several times in any year. In 1973 F-111s were proving especially troublesome. Whilst the area where the UFO was observed lies more or less between the base of the doomed jet (Upper Heyford) and its ultimate crash location (North Crawley) it was over 20 miles from there and was seen at least forty minutes prior to the crash. Also the F-111 was flying in precisely the opposite direction to the object on the film at the time of the impact (according to the letter from Norton Air Force Base). Not that this tells us anything about its direction forty minutes earlier, at about 09.05 GMT, especially as sources indicate that the jet was flying in circles for some time prior to the crash. These facts do imply that the F-111 could have flown past the UFO witnesses heading towards its destiny at about the time when the film was taken.

A good deal of circumstantial evidence supports a link between the crash and the UFO incident. However, as Ken Phillips rightly points out we should never forget that the evidence remains circumstantial. Nor should we forget that the US Air Force and the MoD were remarkably disinterested in the film. Surely if it was in any way possible that Peter Day had photographed their stricken plane they might be expected to have wanted a screening of the results.

Or would they? If, as reported, the F-111 was flying for over forty minutes whilst in trouble and at one stage a second F-111 accompanied it in close proximity, does this mean that diagnostic film was taken by the second jet? If so it would probably be so superior to anything Peter Day might have obtained that his efforts would prove of little consequence to the investigating authorities.

Whilst coincidences do happen, even extraordinary ones, I think there are good grounds to accept that the UFO and jet crash are somehow linked.

(b) The UFO caused the jet to crash...

This is a very dramatic scenario. The Swindon team rejected it for the following reason. If an unidentified object was responsible for the problem with the F-111 then presumably at some point the two must have come into close proximity with one another. However, nobody has reported the F-111 and a UFO together. That suggests they are one and the same stimulus.

Of course, it is also true that the F-111 only seems to have been reported in and around Bletchley and Newport Pagnell. The national press stories indicate that the plane was circling in the vicinity of the M 1 motorway; some distance away from where the UFO sighting took place. If the jet was in the area between Oxford and Aylesbury about the time the UFO was seen, it is odd that nobody saw or heard it's passage. Surely, with the considerable publicity for the plane crash and also for the UFO somebody who saw or heard the F-111 would have come forward to offer that solution for the film? But they did not. Instead we have a very localised UFO encounter at some distance from a subsequent air crash.

A most important fact to recognise is that the F-111 crashed at 09.46 GMT and all sources suggest it was circling for between 40 and 50 minutes prior to that point, allegedly using up fuel. That implies that whatever problem the jet developed began at the start of that three quarter hour period- placing it remarkably close to 09.00 GMT or the moment when the UFO event occurred. This, above all else, seems to me to strongly infer that the air crash and UFO are in some way related.

Again, the cloud ceiling must be taken into account. With reported total coverage at just 1800 feet and subsequent very strong reassurances offered by the MoD that the F-111 was not engaged in low flying during its mission (at least not prior to its problems) this means that it may well have been at some considerable height above the clouds when (and if) it passed near the UFO witnesses. That is a plausible explanation as to why no aircraft was seen or heard by them. Clearly, if the orange ball was nothing more than the aircraft using reheat it would by necessity have to be low down, ie just above the 1800 feet cloud ceiling. Otherwise it would not be visible. In my view it would have then been heard. That it was not heard indicates it had to be much higher (if overflying the area at all). So I do not see how the orange ball could be the aircraft or its afterburners.

It is not farfetched to put these facts together and envisage some atmospheric phenomenon (a Meaden vortex?) briefly manifesting in the area around Cuddington and Chilton, where it was then observed (and filmed) as it drifted past. Towards the end of the short lifetime of this 'UFO' it then apparently disappeared (possibly by climbing up into cloud cover). If by some happenstance the unlucky F-111 chanced to be flying through the area at that time, presumably several thousand feet above the cloud cover, then it might easily have suffered disastrous consequences from ionization effects or a direct contact with this phenomenon. The result could well have been electrical faults, rudder failure or engine overheating. The jet may even have been immobilised without the crew knowing what had 'hit' them. Certainly the disappearance of the UFO from ground level does seem to coincide with the onset of the F-111's malfunction disturbingly well.

Inevitably, if this did occur, it would account for the high level team that was put in charge of the accident enquiry, plus the immediate security cordon reported around the field in North Crawley. It might even explain the apparent lack of any specific information to emerge about the causes of the crash.

Presumably, the two crewmen in the F-111 would have tried to regain control of their stricken aircraft and thus circled the area around the M1 for some time using up fuel. Their plan would likely be to attempt an emergency landing back at Upper Heyford when drained of fuel, since the risks of an uncontrolled touchdown would be considerable if the aircraft was literally full of dangerous and flammable aviation fuel.

However, at around 09.46 GMT, with this fuel wasting process still underway, something else went wrong (presumably an escalation of one of the problems initiated earlier by the UFO). This led to an engine overheat and a fire and gave the crew no alternative but to eject, thus putting at risk the lives of civilians on the ground as their plane became a fireball.

Naturally, we cannot prove whether this imaginative reconstruction is fact or fantasy. But it seems to make a certain amount of sense. Of course, if it had taken place it is easy to understand why the authorities would not admit or show any interest in the UFO sighting. Nor would they wish to view the Peter Day film. The great probability is that IF a UFO caused the accident it was some form of novel atmospheric process. Yet to the media or the average person in the street, a UFO is a UFO, which effectively means an alien spacecraft. The publicity that would result from such a revelation is all too predictable - viz 'Jet shot down by aliens'... 'Little green men attack US Air Force'. Wildly exaggerated to be sure, but the stuff that is guaranteed to sell Sunday newspapers. Also the stuff to give public relations officers in Whitehall and the Pentagon many sleepless nights.

(c) The UFO was the crashing jet...

Eventually SCUFORI in their report settled for this conclusion. However, they did so from what I consider to be a faulty assumption.

Quite rightly they argued that the F-111 could not have been filmed on fire at 09.05 GMT and yet still remain in the air for another three quarters of an hour. So the investigators concluded that Peter Day had got his timing estimates wrong and must have filmed the object after 09.30 GMT - ie immediately prior to the air crash at North Crawley.

What this forgets is the testimony of the children. I have spoken with the headmaster and several of the witnesses and there is no question whatsoever that their encounter could not possibly have happened as late as 09.30 GMT - which is long after the school bell rang. Peter Day is equally certain that 09.05 GMT is accurate to within five minutes. Therefore, the UFO cannot be the F-111 in flames just about to crash - unless there was an earlier fire at the moment of the very first problem which lasted for about three minutes and was then successfully brought under control.

But is it possible for such an intense fire, which appears on the film as nothing but an orange ball of flame, to have blazed for such a long time? Especially when it neither provoked an immediate evacuation by the aircrew nor left the jet with sufficient damage to prevent it flying on for a substantial period of time. Surely such a catastrophe would have rapidly destroyed the plane beyond hope of salvation.

Of course, there is another possibility. That the UFO was a product of the aircraft's behaviour during the first moments after the malfunction.

(13): THE FUEL DUMP THEORY

Let us suppose that the F-111 did overfly the location where our witnesses were positioned just after 09.00 GMT. It would have been at some height on its routine mission and so out of view above the clouds and possibly too distant to be heard. Then, out of the blue, disaster struck and a serious malfunction afflicted the jet. There would have been a rapid realisation that in order to attempt an emergency landing much of the fuel in the near full tanks would have to be exhausted.

Literal dumping of fuel from the tanks is rarely used unless drastic measures are called for. It is illegal because it can be very dangerous. Aviation fuel burns furiously and one can well imagine the wrath of citizens who might be underneath such a potentially deadly rainfall, not to mention damage to farmers crops. However, if the decision was taken to eject fuel during those first moments of the disaster what might have occurred? According to RAF sources I consulted the most likely thing would be for the pilot to eject fuel, ignite it with his afterburner and do so at such a height as to hope it would burn up before reaching ground level.

Now let us picture this taking place. The fuel may have produced a mass of burning flame which might have become trapped by an air thermal in the misty and cloudy conditions. A cloud of burning vapour could then have been tugged along in the slipstream of the F-111 almost 'floating' on the stable air just above the low cloud ceiling and shining through cloud like a UFO.

Once the results were seen it is likely the crew would quickly dispense with the idea and the F-111 would turn to much safer, if slower methods of reducing the fuel level. That would mean circling for a long period of time until fuel was consumed and it was safe to make an emergency landing. But, in the meantime, at 09.46 GMT, the jet's problems escalated and the crew were forced to eject and the aircraft crashed out of control.

Could the UFO have somehow been the result of ignited aviation fuel descending towards the ground, bouyed up by air currents near the cloud ceiling? I posed this question to RAF officers at Shawbury after showing stills from the Peter Day film. The general view was that this was fanciful and improbable but not impossible. The main drawback to the theory is the apparent steady and relatively slow passage of the UFO in a horizontal path. The film gives no indication that if burning fuel is creating the glow this is in any sense falling downwards. Could it really 'fly' sideways?

I put the idea to the witnesses and there was a mixed reaction. Paula said; "I suppose it could have been burning fuel - if fuel can burn like this. But it did not seem like it to me. It seemed to be a solid object not a mass of flames." Nina Sparks concurred; "I can accept that it might have been fuel that had been dumped. But surely I would have heard the plane, even if it was some distance away."

(14): CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately you must make up your own mind as to what took place. A fire was seen in the sky above Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire just after 09.00 GMT on the morning of 11 January 1973. About the same time an F-111 got into trouble and crashed three quarters of an hour later. These are facts. By a strict definition of the term the thing was a UFO - namely an *unidentified flying object*. Whether it will remain *unidentifiable* is another matter.

It seems likely that the UFO and F-111 crash are somehow connected. But if one caused the other, was it a strange atmospheric phenomenon that damaged the jet and led to its downfall, or did the witnesses see burning fuel ejected by the F-111 crew as they fought to save their multi-million dollar machine?

By one of those twists of fate that so often beset the UFO subject the question may have been answered by a news story that broke as I was finalising this report. It featured as a tiny snippet in many British newspapers in early June 1989.

Under titles such as 'Heavens Above' these stories reported how on 2 June 1989 police throughout Oxfordshire were swamped by calls about a UFO in the sky. The UFO should sound familiar. It was a short-lived ball of orange fire. But after investigation the police soon had an explanation; "It was an American fighter pilot from RAF Upper Heyford who was igniting jettisoned fuel with his after-burners."

Jenny Randles Cheshire July 1989

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FIRE IN THE SKY

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