

Nick Pope

MoD UFO Files

[MoD UFO Files – Nick Pope](#)

The British Government has declassified and released most of its UFO files. Nick Pope worked on these files, wrote many of the documents in them and – through his hundreds of media interviews – has been the public face of the release program. The following Q&A with Nick Pope gives an overview of the release of the files and is also designed as a quotable resource for journalists and academics (see especially the quotes at the end).

How much material has been released?

228 files and around 60,000 pages of documentation have been released. This is in addition to a number of UFO files that had already been released under the old Public Record Act, the best-known provision of which was the so-called 30-year rule, which said files could be considered for public release 30 years after the date of the most recent document contained in them.

Why were these files released?

There were three reasons. Firstly, the French Government released their UFO files in 2007, setting a precedent that would have been difficult for us to ignore. Secondly, the MoD hoped this would generate good PR about the Department's commitment to open government and freedom of information, while helping to dispel rumours of a cover-up. But the third and biggest reason was that the MoD devised this as a means of dealing with the huge number of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests the Department was getting on UFOs. In 2005, 2006 and 2007, there were many months when the MoD got more FOIA requests on UFOs than on any other subject. The workload involved in responding to them on a case-by-case basis was huge. But once the decision had been made (in 2007) to release the files proactively, all future FOIA requests could be dealt with simply by saying that the Department was in the process of releasing the material. In this way, new FOIA requests would not require a substantive answer, because "information intended for future release" is one of a number of FOIA exemptions. Similarly, once all the files have been released, pretty much all FOIA requests on UFOs can be dealt with by a statement saying that all information held on the subject is available at the National Archives.

How exactly did the release take place?

Firstly, all of the material had to be scanned-in, so it was available electronically. The MoD then had to redact the files. That is, they went through them word by word and blacked out anything still classified, or anything covered by any of the other exemptions to the Freedom of Information Act. Then, the unclassified/declassified files were transferred to the National Archives. This was a slow and time-consuming process, so the files were released in separate batches. The first batch was made public in May 2008 and the final files were released in 2019.

https://youtu.be/eTDn_GtdEzq

The National Archives video in which Nick Pope makes the official announcement about the release of the first batch of the British Government's UFO files

I've seen one or two ufologists claim they were responsible for the file release. Is there any truth in such boasts?

No. Such claims are either dishonest or incredibly naïve. Hundreds of people made UFO-related FOIA requests. Writing in 2006, on the MoD's website, the Under Secretary of State for Defence, Tom Watson said this: "*There is a real and enduring interest in Unidentified Flying Objects. By far the most popular topic of FOI requests has been UFOs, followed by recruitment enquiries, enquiries from staff, and historical events such as World War Two, the Falklands conflict and the Balkans. Recent freedom of information releases on UFOs have attracted media interest from as far away as Japan*". This was the main factor that led the MoD to decide to transfer its UFO files to the National Archives, so it's insulting to the hundreds of other members of the public, journalists and ufologists who lobbied MoD on this issue and made FOI requests, if any individual ufologists dishonestly try to take credit for this.

So what's actually in the files that have been released?

Let me start by saying what's *not* in the files: there's no 'spaceship in a hangar' smoking gun that's going to prove we're being visited by extraterrestrials. If we have such a thing, I'm afraid they didn't tell me! Now, as to what's in the files, it's a mixture. Firstly, there are policy documents, setting out how those of us charged with researching and investigating UFOs viewed the phenomenon. These papers set out the MoD's strategy on the issue, so to speak. Secondly, there are the sighting reports themselves. This category is a mixed bag, because obviously the vast majority of sightings turn out to be misidentifications, so people have to wade through a lot of bland one or two-page reports of what are obviously aircraft lights or Chinese lanterns, before they get to the better material – it's a classic example of the old saying that "the best place to hide a book is in a library"! To add to the frustration, the MoD's investigations didn't often generate the paper trail researchers would like. Thirdly, there are the public correspondence files. Fourthly, there are files showing how the subject was handled when raised in Parliament.

If there's no 'smoking gun', what do the files show, taken collectively?

What's readily apparent from a detailed study of all this is that the MoD was telling Parliament, the media and the public that the UFO phenomenon was of "no defence significance" and of limited interest to the MoD. However, the files show that behind the scenes, the subject was obviously taken more seriously than we let on, with many of the cases self-evidently being of great defence significance – e.g. when UFOs were seen in close proximity to military bases, were encountered by RAF pilots, or were tracked on radar by fighter controllers or air traffic controllers. Those of us working on this subject often found ourselves having to employ an Orwellian 'doublethink' in our handling of this issue.

Do the files cover other mysteries too?

The UFO files inevitably include some alien contact/alien abduction accounts, as well as some material on other mysteries that some people believe are linked to the UFO phenomenon, such as crop circles and animal mutilations. And occasionally – mainly because there was nowhere else in government to send such material – the UFO project received reports of ghosts seen at military bases, and approaches from psychics, offering to undertake 'remote viewing' for the MoD. The last batch of files that was released even contained some papers relating to interest in anti-gravity and gravity modification research expressed by MoD scientists. I wasn't joking when I referred to MoD's UFO project as being "the real-life X-Files".

What has your personal involvement been with the release of these files?

Having worked on MoD's UFO project, staff at the National Archives asked me to select some cases that could be highlighted to the media in the run-up to the release. The media could run whatever stories they liked, of course, but inevitably, most times they would pick the ones I suggested. I was asked to ensure that there were cases from all parts of the UK, so as to appeal to the regional press, and to ensure that the material selected catered to a wide cross-section of viewpoints, i.e. picking out some cases that were easy to explain, some that were genuine mysteries, some disturbing cases

(e.g. near-misses between UFOs and commercial aircraft) and some of the more amusing cases in the files, such as the man who claimed that his car, tent and pet dog had been abducted by aliens. I was also asked to record a promotional video for the National Archives, drawing attention to the release and talking about it in positive terms. But my biggest involvement in all this was to do literally hundreds of TV, radio, newspaper and magazine interviews on the story (and write some of the features myself) and thus become the public face of the file release project. It was certainly a success and I appeared on a huge range of news programmes, chat shows and radio programmes, including Newsnight, BBC News, ITV News, CNN News, Larry King Live, Good Morning America, Sky News, This Morning, GMTV and Radio 4's Today programme, to name but a few.

<https://youtu.be/b1UrGQ8QOJI>

Nick Pope announces the release of another batch of government UFO files, in an interview that was syndicated to the world's media

What was it like for you on the actual days the files were released?

It was manic! As regard to the practicalities of a "file release day", two days beforehand, an embargoed press release would be sent out to the world's media. On a couple of occasions the embargo was broken, but we managed (just) to get the genie back into the bottle. On many occasions, I would be asked to write a feature article for a newspaper. I wrote several for The Sun, but also wrote for The Times, The Guardian and the Daily Mirror. Once the embargoed press release was sent out, I would receive requests for short, punchy comments that could be used in newspaper articles (that often ran in parallel to the features I wrote myself), as well as numerous TV and radio interview bids. I'd try to accept as many of these bids as possible, but inevitably, if I was at the BBC studios in White City for a live TV interview at 7am, I wasn't going to be able to get to the Sky News studios in West London by 7.15am. I partly got around this by trying to stagger things, so that I would do, say, a BBC news interview at 6am, an ITV chat show at 7am and a Sky News feature at 8am. But inevitably, things got hectic and stressful, especially as the BBC, ITV and Sky studios are in different parts of London, and the traffic can be a nightmare. I'm pleased to say that I never once missed an interview, but there were certainly some very close calls. Things got even more hectic as new requests came in all the time, and there were some surreal moments, such as doing a down-the-line interview with a BBC radio station on my mobile phone, while sitting in the back of a courtesy car taking me to my next TV interview. Another way we got around these difficulties was by pre-recording things where possible. Before most file release days I would record a string of 'to camera' remarks about the files at the studios of ITN Productions, in Holborn. They would then produce 2 or 3 different news packages, which any media outlets could use. This was particularly useful for US networks such as ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox. If people Google "Nick Pope" & "ITN" they can watch a few of these. It became a tradition that after my final interview, usually in the late evening, the courtesy car would drop me off at my local sports bar for a well-earned cold beer.

<https://youtu.be/MgnOe-yD6PQ>

Nick Pope being interviewed by CNN's Campbell Brown about his work on the British Government's UFO project

What was your favourite interview or news feature?

I have several. Newsround and Blue Peter were great fun to do, as was The Alan Titchmarsh Show. One of the most unusual stunts involved my writing a science fiction story based on the files, for the BBC World Service show The World Today. I then had to judge the entries from listeners, who were invited to email in suggestions for continuing the story. I also enjoyed giving a talk about the file release at the Royal Albert Hall, in October 2010.

What's your favourite story from the files?

It was good to see more papers released on 'classic cases' such as the Rendlesham Forest incident and the Cosford incident, though it was unfortunate that some Defence Intelligence Staff files containing documents on Rendlesham had been destroyed. There were also some interesting (and highly disturbing) reports of near-misses between UFOs and commercial aircraft. However, if readers will forgive me for highlighting a somewhat light-hearted story, I rather like the case of the man who placed a 100-1 bet that alien life would be officially confirmed by the Millennium, and then tried to enlist the help of the MoD to support his case against the bookmakers. Sadly, the man lost his bet.

How did you feel, seeing all this material again after so many years?

The whole file release project has been something of a 'blast from the past' for me, seeing material that I worked on (or wrote), when I never thought I'd see it again. Bear in mind that when I was working on MoD's UFO project, the UK didn't have a Freedom of Information Act, so the assumption was that none of the files I was working on would even be considered for public release until 30 years after a file was closed. So, there were mixed emotions really. I had some feelings of nostalgia, obviously, but also some feelings of pride at a job well done, and some regrets for the inevitable mistakes and missed opportunities.



Have all the MoD's UFO files been released?

No. Firstly, many UFO files from the 1950s and 1960s were destroyed many years ago, before any decisions were made to retain files on this subject, or release them. Secondly, there are a number of exemptions to the Freedom of Information Act, which can exclude from public release material covering such areas as "defence", "national security" and "intelligence". Many exemptions in the UFO files are little more than deleting the names and addresses of witnesses, to protect their privacy, but there are cases where other exemptions have been used. The final report of an intelligence study into UFOs, codenamed Project Condign, is a good example of a publicly-released UFO document where a small (but significant) amount of information has been blacked out. Thirdly, and by the MoD's own admission, Defence Intelligence Staff files on the Rendlesham Forest incident were "inadvertently destroyed". Similarly, the MoD stated that a ship's log for HMS Manchester, that might have contained details of a UFO seen during a NATO exercise, was lost after having been blown

overboard by a “freak gust of wind”. Gun camera footage of UFOs taken by RAF jets in the Sixties has apparently “not survived”, while a spectacular UFO photograph that had been on my office wall for many years was “mislaidd” – along with the negatives. I make no accusations of foul play here, but I can certainly understand the anger and frustration that has been expressed by some people in the UFO community and the conspiracy theory community. And finally, some additional files (mainly public correspondence) have recently come to light and will be published on the UK’s GOV.UK website in 2020.

What has been the reaction of the UFO community to the release of these files?

To be honest, the reaction was a little disappointing. True believers tended to dismiss the release as disinformation: “All the good stuff’s been held back” was a frequent comment. The revelations concerning material that has been destroyed or lost didn’t help, while my central role in publicizing the release project further fueled the fire: “He’s still on the payroll” is a phrase that I often heard from true believers and conspiracy theorists, when they saw me in the media, discussing these files. The reaction from die-hard debunkers was equally disappointing. There was a sneering tendency to focus on the odd case which clearly involved a hoax or an eccentric, while ignoring or glossing over the sightings where the witnesses were police officers, pilots or military personnel, where UFOs were tracked on radar, or where a photo or video was analysed by MoD’s technical wizards, with no evidence of fakery being found. The reasons for these reactions, of course, had to do with belief. Just as fascist and communist regimes are actually very similar, despite the apparent distance implied by phrases like “left-wing” and “right-wing”, so true believers and die-hard debunkers are actually chiseled from the same block, united by their dogma and their conclusion-led approach to the subject. The MoD files played to this, because they told neither group what they wanted to hear. True believers wanted definitive proof of extraterrestrial visitation and a government cover-up, while die-hard debunkers wanted confirmation that all sightings could be explained in terms of misidentifications, hoaxes, delusions, or people who’d had too much drink or drugs. But the files didn’t tell them this – they reflected a more subtle and complex truth about UFOs, i.e. that MoD isn’t covering up proof of extraterrestrial visitation, but that some UFO sightings appeared to defy conventional explanation, with even those of us in government not being aware of the true nature of the phenomenon.

So what happens now? Where do we go from here?

There was massive media and public interest on each of the days that the files were released, and for maybe a day or two afterwards, but memories fade quickly. There’s an old saying in the UK media that today’s newspaper is tomorrow’s fish and chip paper. Once the dust has settled, the UFO community turns its attention elsewhere. More sightings take place, new stories surface and things move on. MoD’s UFO files are a valuable resource, but in time they will doubtless become little more relevant to the ufological debate as, say, the Project Blue Book archive. In the final analysis, little will change. True believers and die-hard debunkers will occasionally cherry-pick cases, information and quotes that fit their existing worldview – a classic case of what cognitive science calls “confirmation bias”. Ultimately though, true believers will naively continue to believe every tall tale they hear, while die-hard debunkers will dishonestly ignore good data, or alter the facts of a case so as to shoehorn it into their pre-conceived views. The irony is that UFO phenomenon itself will endure, as it always has done, oblivious to the views of either faction.

Do you have any final comments to make on the release of these files?

Perhaps I can finish by restating two points I made when the June 2013 file release took place, as they were quoted in most of the media articles about this story. I think they encapsulate things quite nicely:

“I hope people have as much fun reading these real-life X-Files as I had working on them. These documents don’t resolve the UFO mystery but they certainly show how the phenomenon was just as intriguing to the government as it is to the public.”

“These are the real-life X-Files. Most UFO sightings had conventional explanations, but a small percentage remained unexplained. These included cases where UFOs were seen by police officers, chased by pilots and tracked on radar. Whatever you think about UFOs, the release of these files shines a light on one of the most intriguing subjects ever studied by the British Government”.