

## The National Archives

### Research Guide - Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs)

#### 1 Background

The first UFO-related records were transferred by the Ministry of Defence to the former Public Records Office (PRO) in 1986 under the 30 year rule. These included a personal minute from Prime Minister Winston Churchill dated 28 July 1952 addressed to the Secretary of State for Air: *'What's does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth? Let me have a report at your convenience'* ([PREM 11/855](#)).

Further Air Ministry records dating from the mid-1950s were opened in 1987 and 1988. A study of these by Roger Morgan revealed they formed a fragmentary part of a much larger series of records created by a variety of government ministries, departments and military units from 1946 onwards (Morgan 1988: 12).

Until relatively recently British government records on UFOs and related topics were not regarded as being worthy of permanent preservation. In 1967 MoD policy was to destroy UFO files at first review due to a perceived lack of public interest in the subject. This policy was rescinded following a series of Parliamentary questions from Sir John Langford-Holt MP in 1968-1970 ([AIR 2/19086](#) and DEFE 13/1183). In response to further questions in the House of Lords during in April 1982 Viscount Lord said: 'The earliest UFO reports retained by the MoD date back to 1962. Prior to 1967 such reports, like other routine papers, were destroyed after five years. The decision to retain the reports instead of destroying them was taken in response to increasing public interest in the subject' ([DEFE 31/172/1](#)).

As a result, the earliest UFO records held by The National Archives, from the first 20 years after WW2, are fragmentary but the papers that have survived provide a fascinating, if incomplete, record of British government interest in this issue. Since 1962 most (but not all) MoD UFO files have been preserved and reviewed for eventual transfer to The National Archives. This recommendation was formalised by the MoD in guidance issued to its record reviewers in 2011 (Clarke 2012).

UFO records transferred for opening at The National Archives under the 30 year rule, established by the Public Records Act of 1967, include approximately 220 files covering the period 1950-1984. These include UFO related records created by the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, the Meteorological Office and Cabinet Office. The most recent records from this series date from 1984 and were opened at The National Archives in 2006-7.

Later in 2007 the MoD announced their intention to transfer 160 of their remaining records on UFOs to The National Archives. In 2005, in the first year following the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act the MoD received 199 requests for information on UFOs. 140 requests were received in 2006 and 158 in 2008 ([DEFE 24/2087/1](#)). The release of the files was in response to growing public interest in the topic and to 'counter the maze of rumour and frequently ill-informed speculation that surrounds the role of the MoD in the UFO phenomena' (Clarke 2012: x). A report

compiled for the Secretary of State for Defence in 2007 noted that 'since the end of WW2, MOD has been tasked with recording and, from time to time, investigating UFO sightings. Contrary to what many members of the public may believe, MOD has no interest in the subject of extraterrestrial life forms visiting the UK, only in ensuring the integrity and security of UK airspace'. A press release drafted in support of the project added: 'We believe that down to earth explanations can be found for these reports, such as aircraft lights or natural phenomena' ([DEFE 24/2087/1](#)).

In 2008 the Under Secretary of State for Defence, Bob Ainsworth, approved the transfer of the archived records, noting that '...in more than fifty years no UFO sighting reported to the Department has indicated the existence of any military threat to the UK ...there is no Defence benefit in Air Command Secretariat recording, collating, analysing or investigating UFO sightings' ([DEFE 24/2458/1](#)). The files were scanned before transfer and the digital copies were redacted to remove personal information and other material covered by exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act.

This release programme began in May 2008 when 27 UFO files, dating from 1979 to 1991, were opened to the public via The National Archives UFO page: (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufo>). In December 2009 the MoD announced the closure of their 'UFO desk' and subsequently, arrangements were made to transfer the remaining files – covering 2008-2009 - to The National Archives for release as part of the on-going programme. This continued until June 2013 when the 10<sup>th</sup> and final tranche of files was opened.

A further 18 miscellaneous UFO files, not included in the original transfer programme for administrative reasons, were identified and opened in 2017. In total 227 digital files containing approximately 52,000 pages of information, have been opened to the public via The National Archives UFO website: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufo>.

In addition, a number of the earlier files have been digitised and are available as downloads from The National Archives website. Digitised records can be accessed via hyperlinks from this guide. This research guide has been created to assist visitors to The National Archives who wish to examine its records on UFOs. It should not be considered comprehensive and it is likely that further information can be found by searching The National Archives' Discovery Catalogue (<http://www.catalogue.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>).

## 2. What is a UFO?

The first modern report of unidentified flying objects in the sky that attracted mass publicity occurred on 24 June 1947 in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state, USA. A private pilot, Kenneth Arnold, reported seeing nine strange objects that moved at tremendous speed across the sky 'like a saucer skipping on water'. The press coined the phrase **flying saucer** to describe the strange crescent-shaped objects that Arnold described. His sighting triggered a wave of similar reports from other observers in North America and across the world. On 8 July 1947 a report came from Roswell, New Mexico, that a disc-shaped object had landed on a remote ranch and had been removed for examination by officers from the US Eighth Army Headquarters. The age of the UFO had arrived.

The acronym **UFO** is an abbreviation for the US Air Force term 'Unidentified Flying Object'. It was coined in 1950 by Captain Edward Ruppelt of the US Air Force to replace flying saucers (Ruppelt 1956). A **flying saucer** is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a disc or saucer-shaped object reported as appearing in the sky and alleged to come from outer space'.

For the public and the media UFO has since become a synonym for 'alien spaceship' but for the military forces of the world it simply refers to something in the sky the observer can see but cannot recognise. In the vast majority of cases, investigations have discovered ordinary explanations for UFO reports such as bright stars and planets, meteors, artificial satellites, balloons, aircraft seen from unusual angles and space junk burning up in the atmosphere. However, there are some cases on record where no common explanation can be found. For the Ministry of Defence, these types of report remain 'unidentified' rather than 'extra-terrestrial'. Indeed, some branches of the MoD have used the term **UAP** (unidentified aerial phenomena) to describe those UFOs that remain unidentified. UAP does not imply the existence of an 'object' of extra-terrestrial origin (Clarke 2012:151).

### **3. UFOs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: 1909-1950**

An understanding of the factors that lay behind the British government's early interest in the UFO issue can be found by studying the range of documents available at The National Archives. The records demonstrate that official interest in aerial phenomena/UFOs was restricted to establishing whether reported occurrences could be considered to be a threat to national security (Twigge et al, 2006). During the Cold War the major threat came from behind the Iron Curtain. Once Soviet aircraft were discounted, the identity of a UFO was of no further interest to the air defence organisation.

To understand the origins of the British government's interest in UFOs it is necessary to look back to an earlier period of 20th century history. In 1909 and 1913 phantom airships - dark cigar-shaped flying objects carrying searchlights - were sighted at night moving over many British towns and cities. As tension grew in the build up to the First World War, newspapers and some politicians accused the Germans of sending Zeppelin airships to spy on dockyards and other strategic areas around the British coastline (Watson 2015).

In October 1912 reports that an unidentified aircraft had overflown the naval torpedo school at Sheerness, Essex, led the Admiralty to order an investigation. In response to questions in the House of Commons, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, said inquiries had failed to establish the identity of the 'unidentified aircraft'. The press concluded that a German Zeppelin had visited the British coastline on a secret reconnaissance mission but flight logs show the airship never left the Continent (Watson 2015). The relevant Admiralty papers are in AIR 1/2455 and AIR 1/2456.

More sightings of aerial phenomena were made during the Second World War by RAF aircrew. These included balls of fire and mysterious moving lights that appeared to pursue Allied aircraft operating over occupied Europe. American pilots referred to these UFOs as **foo-fighters**, from a character called Smoky Stover, who appears in a popular comic strip of the time. His catchphrase was 'where there's foo there's fire'. Although the

foo-fighters did not appear to be hostile the sightings caused some concern in the air intelligence branches of the Air Ministry and US Army Air Force as they prepared for the invasion of France (Jones, 1968).

The RAF began to collect reports of 'night phenomena' from 1942. Later in WW2 the Air Ministry shared intelligence on the subject with the US authorities. They assumed the phenomena were German secret weapons, such as the Me262 jet fighter. However, Dr RV Jones, director of Air Intelligence at the Air Ministry, found that interrogation of captured Luftwaffe pilots revealed they had observed similar unexplained aerial phenomena. (Jones 1979) Air Ministry records of 'night phenomena' collated by Bomber Command are at AIR 2/5070, AIR 14/2076 and [AIR 14/2800](#).

In 1946 and 1947 the military intelligence services became aware of mysterious **ghost rockets** sighted over Scandinavia and parts of Western Europe, including parts of occupied Germany. Initially intelligence officers at the Air Ministry believed the 'flying bombs' were modified V2 rockets launched by the Soviet Union to intimidate the Scandinavian powers (Jones 1979, p. 510-11). Correspondence between the Foreign Office, Air Ministry and the British air attaché in Stockholm are contained in FO 371/569988 and FO 371/56951. Intelligence reports on the 'ghost rockets' can be found in ADM 223/700 and AIR 40/2843 (with map).

Reports of ghost rockets preceded by six months the first sightings of flying saucers over the mainland of the United States. In December 1947 the newly created US Air Force set up a project, code-named **Project Sign** to investigate the phenomenon. Lieutenant General Nathan F Twining's initial conclusion was 'the phenomenon reported is something real and not imaginary or fictitious'. His 'Opinion on Flying Discs', addressed to Brigadier General Schulgen, Commanding General of the US Army Air Force on 23 September 1947, was declassified in 1969, and is now at the US National Archives, College Park, Maryland. A facsimile can be seen here: <http://www.project1947.com/fig/twinng47.htm>

#### **4. British Government investigations, 1950-1951**

Documentary evidence of British government interest in UFO phenomena begins in 1950. During the spring and summer of that year a large number of sightings were reported in the British media. Sunday newspapers published serialisations of books that included *The Flying Saucers Are Real* by a retired US marine corps major, Donald Keyhoe (copy in DEFE 41/117). The publicity that resulted led a number of senior figures in the British establishment and the scientific community to treat the subject seriously for the first time. The *Sunday Dispatch* was encouraged to publish flying saucer stories by Admiral of the Fleet Louis Mountbatten who served as Chief of Defence Staff in 1959-65. Mountbatten was one of a small group of influential military officials who believed UFOs were real and of interplanetary origin.

The scientist Sir Henry Tizard, best known for his work on the development of radar before the Second World War, also became interested in UFOs. Post WW2 Tizard served as Chief Scientific Advisor to the Ministry of Defence and came to believe that 'reports of flying saucers should not be dismissed without some investigation' (DEFE 41/74). As a direct result of his influence the MoD was asked to set up a small team of

experts to investigate reports of flying saucers under the Directorate of Scientific Intelligence/Joint Technical Intelligence Committee (DSI/JTIC).

The Flying Saucer Working Party operated under such secrecy that its existence was known to very few. On 9 August 1952, the Secretary of State for Air, in response to the question from the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, wrote: 'The various reports about unidentified flying objects, described by the Press as "flying saucers", were the subject of a full intelligence study in 1951' ([PREM 11/855](#)).

The minutes of the DSI/JTIC committee on flying saucers (DEFE 41/74-75) reveal how the working party was established in August 1950. It had the following Terms of Reference:

- 1. To review the available evidence in reports of 'Flying Saucers'.
- 2. To examine from now on the evidence on which reports of British origin of phenomena attributed to 'Flying Saucers' are based.
- 3. To report to DSI/JTIC as necessary.
- 4. To keep in touch with American occurrences and evaluation of such

The working party included intelligence officers from the three armed services and was chaired by G. L. Turney, head of scientific intelligence at the Admiralty (Twigge, et al 2008). In June 1951 the working party produced a final report that debunked the sightings and concluded that flying saucers did not exist ([DEFE 44/119](#)). A copy is also available in [DEFE 24/2050/1](#). Classified as Secret/Discreet the six-page report concluded that all UFO sightings could be explained as misidentifications of ordinary objects or phenomena, optical illusions, psychological delusions or hoaxes. They concluded with the following statement:

*'...we accordingly recommend very strongly that no further investigation of reported mysterious aerial phenomena be undertaken, unless and until some material evidence becomes available.'* ([DEFE 44/119](#))

## **5. Air Ministry investigations 1952-64**

The conclusions of the Flying Saucer Working Party set the template for future British government policy on UFOs. After the report was delivered the team was dissolved and investigations ended. However, during the summer of the following year a new wave of sightings were made across the world. In July 1952, as Cold War tension increased, UFOs were observed above the US capital Washington DC, prompting the USAF to scramble jet interceptors. The scare made headlines across the world and led Winston Churchill to send his famous memo to the Air Ministry on 'flying saucers'. The Prime Minister was told on 9 August 1952 that 'nothing has happened since 1951 to make the Air Staff change their opinion, and, to judge from recent Press statements, the same is true in America' ([PREM 11/855](#)).

In September 1952 this policy changed as a direct result of further UFO sightings that occurred during a major NATO exercise in Europe. The most dramatic were those reported by a group of Shackleton aircrew who saw a circular silver object appear above the airfield at RAF Topcliffe in North Yorkshire. In a report made to the base Commanding Officer one of the men, Flt Lt John Kilburn of 269 Squadron, RAF, said he

watched as the object appeared to descend to follow a Meteor jet, rotated on its own axis and then accelerated away at a speed 'in excess of a shooting star' (AIR 16/1199).

According to Captain Ruppelt it was the Topcliffe sighting that 'caused the RAF to officially recognise the UFO'. Soon afterwards the Air Ministry decided to monitor UFO reports on a permanent basis. Responsibility for UFO investigations was passed by the Chief of Air Staff to a branch within the Deputy Directorate of Intelligence (DDI (Tech) known as AI3 (DEFE 31/118).

In December 1953 HQ Fighter Command issued orders to RAF stations that reports of 'aerial phenomena' should be reported directly to Air Ministry for further investigation. The order said it was important that details of sightings made by RAF personnel and from radar stations should be carefully examined and its release 'controlled officially'. The orders stated that 'all reports are to be classified 'Restricted' and personnel are warned not to communicate to anyone other than official persons any information about phenomena they have observed, unless officially authorised to do so' (AIR 20/9994).

An analysis of 80 UFO reports investigated by Air Ministry between 1952 and 1954 formed the basis of an article published in vol 10/33 of the Air Ministry Secret Intelligence Summary (AMSIS) in March 1955 ([AIR 22/93](#) and AIR 40/2769). In May 1955 the Conservative MP Major Patrick Wall asked the Secretary of State for Air, in a Parliamentary Question, if he would publish the 'report on flying saucers recently completed by the Air Ministry.' In reply the Air Minister George Ward said: 'reports of "flying saucers" as well as any other abnormal objects in the sky, are investigated as they come in, but there has been no formal inquiry. About 90 percent of the reports have been found to relate to meteors, balloons, flares and many other objects. The fact that the other 10 percent are unexplained need be attributed to nothing more sinister than lack of data' ([AIR 2/16918](#)).

The AMSIS study explains the policy decision to continue collecting reports. The reasons given in the AMSIS article were that 'there is always the chance of observing foreign aircraft of revolutionary design'. This factor remained a concern for intelligence agencies until the end of the Cold War. The Air Ministry was careful to qualify this interest with this caveat: '...as for controlled manifestations from outer space, there is no tangible evidence of their existence'.

## **6. MoD investigations 1964-2009**

From 1958 a civilian Air Staff secretariat branch known as S6 (Air) agreed to take on responsibility for answering public and press inquiries about UFOs. S6 desk officers also responded to Parliamentary questions on this and RAF matters. During that year an S6 desk officer described their attitude to public inquiries would be 'politely unhelpful' (DEFE 31/118). From this point two separate branches of the Air Ministry were involved in dealing with the UFO problem. Air intelligence officers at DDI (Tech) investigated credible reports and provided 'technical assistance' to civilian desk officers in S6 (Air) who became the central focus for public information on UFOs. This administrative reorganisation marks the origin of the MoD's 'UFO desk'.

In 1964 the Air Ministry became integrated within the new unified Ministry of Defence. S6's UFO remit passed to another MoD secretariat, S4 (Air). This branch were

responsible for public relations issues and, three years later in 1967, responsibility for investigation of UFO incidents deemed to have possible defence significance were inherited by a Defence Intelligence branch, DI55 (DEFE 31/119).

More than 12,000 UFO reports were collected by MoD between 1959 and 2009 but no systematic study was carried out on the accumulated data. Following a new wave of sightings in 1967 the Government faced a series of Parliamentary questions on their UFO investigations and policy. In response, the head of S4 (Air), James Carruthers, produced a detailed briefing for the Secretary of State for Air, Merlyn Rees MP. In his report dated November 1967 Carruthers said the MoD had kept a statistical analysis of UFO reports received since 1959 'and has found no evidence to suggest [UFOs] have other than mundane explanations'. He adds that MoD 'does not consider that a separate study by [UK] Government departments or by a university or other independent organisation would produce results to justify the expenditure, time and money involved' (DEFE 31/119).

The surviving records show how the MoD relied upon work carried out by USAF for their policy lead on UFOs. There was never any British equivalent of the publicly funded study by the University of Colorado on behalf of the USAF that was completed in 1969. The 'Condon report' - named after the project head, the physicist Dr Edward Condon - was based on an analysis of 12,618 reports collected by the USAF's **Project Blue Book** between 1947 and 1969 (Blue Book followed Projects Sign and Grudge in 1952). Of this total 701 remained unexplained. The main findings of the US study were:

- About 90% of all UFO reports prove to be plausibly related to ordinary phenomena.
- Little, if anything, had come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years that added to scientific knowledge.
- Further extensive study of UFO sightings was not justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby.
- No evidence came to light in the study to indicate that UFO sightings may represent a defence hazard.
- The Department of Defence should continue to handle UFO reports in its normal surveillance operations without the need for special units such as Project Blue Book (BJ 5/311).

Project Blue Book was closed by USAF following publication of the Condon report in December 1969. In the UK the MoD used the findings to further reduce their workload on UFOs. From 1973 members of the public who reported sightings received only a polite acknowledgement. However, unlike the USAF, the MoD decided it should continue to maintain an interest in the subject so that it could answer questions from MPs and where necessary, reassure the public that UFOs posed no threat to national defence ([AIR 2/19086](#)).

In January 1979 UFOs were the subject of a debate in the House of Lords. This was initiated by Lord Clancarty (Brinsley le Poer Trench) who was the author of several books on UFOs and related subjects (Coates 2000; Clarke 2012:99-104). Clancarty believed the MoD had evidence that UFOs were of extra-terrestrial origin. In the summer of 1978 he tabled a motion that called on the Government to set up an inquiry and for the Defence Minister to make a televised statement on UFOs. In the Lords, the

Government's response was delivered by a retired Royal Navy officer and Labour peer, Lord Strabolgi (David Kenworthy). His closing remarks were: '*... as for telling the public the truth about UFOs, the truth is simple. There really are many strange phenomena in the sky, and these are invariably reported by rational people. But there is a wide range of natural explanations to account for such phenomena. There is nothing to suggest to Her Majesty's Government that such phenomena are alien spacecraft*' (AIR 20/12966). A digital copy of these papers can be found in [DEFE 24/2032/1](#).

## 7. Key Documents held at The National Archives

Keyword searches on the Catalogue using 'UFO' or 'UFOs' or '(unidentified NEAR flying)' and 'flying saucers' will produce a list of most of the relevant files held at The National Archives. The surviving records consist of five categories of material:

- a) UFO policy
- b) Parliamentary interest
- c) Public correspondence
- d) UFO sighting reports
- e) Miscellaneous topics

### **a) UFO Policy**

These papers illustrate how a number of different branches and divisions within the MoD were involved at different times handling policy and investigations. The Defence Intelligence Staff produced a separate series of UFO Policy files. The earliest and most heavily weeded of these is DEFE 31/118 (1953-1960); DEFE 31/119 covers 1967; part three of this series, covering 1968-1970, was destroyed in 1984. Five DIS UFO policy files covering the period 1971-2004 were opened in 2017. Chronologically these begin with a policy review of the US Air Force sponsored University of Colorado study of Project Blue Book's UFO files in 1970.

This sequence ends with DI55's report 'Unidentified Aerial Phenomena in the UK Air Defence Region', commissioned in 1996 and completed in 2000. The author of the study chose to use the acronym **UAP**. The Executive Summary stated that while UAPs certainly existed, they posed no threat to defence. Furthermore, there was no evidence that UAPs are 'incursions by air objects of any intelligent (extra-terrestrial or foreign) origin' and 'no artefacts of unknown or unexplained origin have been reported or handed to the UK authorities, despite thousands of UAP reports' (Clarke 2012: 154).

A copy of the four volume report (referred to under the code-name Condign) can be found in DEFE 24/3155. Following the delivery of this final report in 2000 DI55 were removed from the distribution list of UFO reports received by MoD.

DEFE 31/118 (UFO Policy 1953-1963)

DEFE 31/119 (UFO Policy 1967)

DEFE 24/3152 (UFO Policy 1971-1996)

DEFE 24/3153 (UFO Policy 1996-1999)

DEFE 24/3154 (UFO Policy 2000)

DEFE 24/3155 (UFO Policy 1992-2003)

DEFE 24/3156 (UFO Policy 2004)

MoD/Air Staff UFO policy files include

AIR 20/11612 (1967-68)

AIR 2/18117 (1967)

[AIR 2/19086](#) (1970-75)

[DEFE/1958/1](#) (1985-1995)

[DEFE 24/1985/1](#) (1995-97)

[DEFE 24/1987/1](#) (1997-98)

DEFE 24/3122/1 (Defence Policy issues 1997-2000)

[DEFE 24/2006/1](#) (1998-2000)

[DEFE 24/2019/1](#) (2000-2002)

[DEFE 24/2087/1](#) (2002-2008)

[DEFE 24/2458/1](#) (2009).

[DEFE 24/2080/1](#) (selected policy papers 1972-1995)

### ***b) Parliamentary Interest***

Background briefings for the Under Secretary of State for Air, George Ward, in 1957, can be followed in three files AIR 20/9320-9322.

Examples of parliamentary correspondence can be found at DEFE 24/1535. This file also contains papers relating to the British Government's response to the Prime Minister of Grenada's attempts to table a debate on UFOs at the United Nations in 1977-78. Other contents include references to the French Government's UFO policy and the study group established by the French Space Agency.

A separate series contains responses to Parliamentary Enquiries on UFOs. Examples can be found at DEFE 13/1183, DEFE 13/1187-1188 and DEFE 71/97-100. There is a substantial collection of papers relating to the UFO debate held in the House of Lords in January 1979. A number of MoD branches, along with the Foreign Office and the Department of Science & Energy, contributed to the Government's response in the Lords. AIR 20/12966 is the UFO desk file on the Lords debate and its aftermath.

[DEFE 24/1970/1](#) (Parliamentary Questions and enquiries, UFOs 1985-1995)

[DEFE 24/1971/1](#) (1995)

[DEFE 24/1983/1](#) (1995-96)

[DEFE 24/1984/1](#) (1996).

[DEFE 24/2004/1](#) (1996-97)

[DEFE 24/2005/1](#) (1996-97).

[DEFE 24/2018/1](#) (1998)

[DEFE 24/2092/1](#) (2001-2006)

[DEFE 24/2033/1](#) (1998-2001)

[DEFE 24/2034/1](#) (1998-2001)

[DEFE 24/2629/1](#) (2008)

[DEFE 24/2453/1](#) (2009)

[DEFE 24/2457/1](#) (2009)

***c) Public Correspondence.***

These files primarily combine letters, reports, drawings and news cuttings sent to RAF and MoD by members of the public and the responses prepared by the MoD's UFO desk staff, between 1962 and 2009. The name of the branch responsible for UFO matters changed frequently as a result of MoD's internal reorganisations from S6 to S4 in 1964, from S4 to DS8 in 1979 and to Secretariat (Air Staff) in 1984. From the mid-1990s emails and internet communications begin to enter the records sequence. The correspondence files also contain a variety of material from official sources including other government departments, RAF stations, the police, coastguard, Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and intelligence officials that were routinely consulted by UFO desk staff.

[AIR 2/16918](#) features both sighting reports and correspondence from members of the public to the Air Ministry secretariat S6 (Air), between 1961 and 1963.

[AIR 2/17318](#) (1963)

[AIR 2/17526](#) (1964)

Following the reorganisation of MoD in 1964 the air staff branch S4 (Air) assumed responsibility for UFO matters.

[AIR 2/17527](#) (1964-65)

[AIR 2/17982](#) (1965-66)

[AIR 2/17983](#) (1966)

[AIR 2/17984](#) (1966-67)

UFO reports and correspondence from 1967 can be found in AIR 2/18115 and AIR 2/18116, 1967-68 in AIR 2/18117, and 1968-69 in [AIR 2/18183](#).

From 1968 S4 (Air) UFO correspondence can be found in series of AIR 2 files. These also contain UFO reports received from members of the public and service sources.

AIR 2/18565 (1970-71)

AIR 2/18871 (1972)

AIR 2/18872 (1972-73)

AIR 2/18873 (1973-1974)

AIR 2/18874 (1974-1975)

AIR 2/18920 (1975)

AIR 2/18921 (1976)

DEFE 24/2879/1 (1976-77)

DEFE 24/1206 (1977)

DEFE 24/1207 (1977-78)

DEFE 24/1552 (1978-79)

[DEFE 24/1913](#) (1979)

*1979-85: Defence Secretariat 8 (DS8).*

DEFE 24/1553 (1980)

DEFE 24/1512 (1980-81)

DEFE 24/1513 (1981)

DEFE 24/1514 (1982)

DEFE 24/1515 (1982)

DEFE 24/1516 (1982-83)

DEFE 24/1517 (1983)

DEFE 24/1518 (1984)

*1985-2000: Secretariat (Air Staff) 2.*

[DEFE 24/1922/1](#) (1984-85)

[DEFE 24/1925/1](#) (1985-86)

[DEFE 24/1929/1](#) (1986-87)

[DEFE 24/1930/1](#) (1987-88)

[DEFE 24/1931/1](#) (1988)

[DEFE 24/1941/1](#) (1989)

[DEFE 24/1942/1](#) (1989-90)

[DEFE 24/1949/1](#) (1989-90)

[DEFE 24/1955/1](#) (1990-91)

[DEFE 24/1956/1](#) (1991-92)

[DEFE 24/1957/1](#) (1992)

[DEFE 24/1962/1-1965/1](#) (1992-1993).

[DEFE 24/1966-1969/1](#) (1994-1995)

[DEFE 24/1979-1982/1](#) (1996)

[DEFE24/1991-1999/1](#) (1997-98)

[DEFE 24/2011-2015/1](#) (1998-2000)

From 2000-2009, when MoD announced the closure of its 'UFO desk', the Defence Air Secretariat (DAS) became the focal point for public correspondence on UFO issues.

[DEFE 24/2023-20127/1](#) (2000-2002)

[DEFE 24/2037-2039/1](#) (2002-2004)

[DEFE 24/2060/1](#) (2004-2005)

[DEFE 24/2084/1](#) (2006)

[DEFE 24/2089/1](#) (2006-7)

[DEFE 24/2628/1](#) (2007-8)

[DEFE 24/2451-2452/1](#) (2009)

#### **d) UFO reports**

Many reports take the form of military signals received by MoD via a variety of RAF and RN stations. The most frequent method of reporting a UFO sighting was via a standard form that was based on a questionnaire used by investigators for the USAF's Project Blue Book. An early draft of this report format can be found at DEFE 31/118. A version of this questionnaire was used by the Ministry of Defence until November 2009 when the UFO desk and telephone hotline closed. The form contained 16 questions, a-q:

- (a) Date, time and duration of sighting
- (b) Description of object
- (c) Exact position observer
- (d) How observed
- (e) Direction in which object was first seen
- (f) Angle of sight
- (g) Distance
- (h) Movements
- (j) Meteorological conditions during observations
- (k) Nearby objects
- (l) To whom reported (police, military organisations, the press etc)
- (m) Name and address of informant
- (n) Any background on the informant that may be volunteered
- (o) Other witnesses
- (p) Date and time of receipt of report
- (q) Is a reply requested? (Note item q was deleted in 1973).

Details of UFO incidents investigated by the Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence can be found by searching the files in the 'UFO reports' category.

F0 371/81093 contains papers on a 'flying saucer' sighting over Asmara airport in present day Eritrea that was reported to the Foreign Office in 1950.

AIR 2/18564 and AIR 20/9320-9322 includes accounts of radar and visual sightings of UFOs and aerial phenomena reported from various RAF stations in 1957. More information, including Air Ministry orders on the reporting of 'aerial phenomena' can be found in AIR 20/9994. The West Freugh incident involved the tracking of UFOs by a number of trailer-mounted radar units at a RAF bombing range in southern Scotland. An official report on the incident contains in its conclusions what is possibly the closest the Air Ministry ever got to recognition that some UFOs remained inexplicable and therefore of possible defence interest. It stated:

*'It is concluded that the incident was due to the presence of five reflecting objects of unidentified type and origin. It is considered unlikely that they were conventional aircraft, meteorological balloons or charged clouds'* (AIR 20/9321).

AIR 20/11889 and AIR 20/11890 contain accounts of a 'flying cross' sighted by police officers and other witnesses in Devon, Sussex and elsewhere in the British Isles during October 1967. These files and DEFE 31/119 also contain reports of in-depth investigations conducted by a MoD UFO field investigation team in 1967-68.

BJ 5/31: Meteorological Office papers relating to UFO reports and policy 1968-1970. For many years Met Office staff provided technical advice to the Air Staff secretariat on UFO matters but this is the only surviving file containing evidence of their input to policy on the subject.

AIR 2/19083: information relating to the so-called Berwyn Mountains UFO incident, reported in North Wales on 23 January 1974. Further information on this incident can be found in [DEFE 24/2045/1](#).

AIR 2/19125: a collection of sighting reports compiled by operations staff at RAF Patrington, North Yorkshire of reports submitted to the station by civilians, police, and various flight personnel between 1968 and 1973.

[DEFE 24/2086/1](#): reports and analysis of sightings reported in the West Midlands and southwest England on the evening of 31 March 1993. These sightings are popularly known as 'the Cosford incident' as one of the reports was made by a RAF police unit at RAF Cosford, near Wolverhampton.

[DEFE 24/1943/1](#): a collection of letters sent to the MoD between 1985 and 1992 describing alleged 'close encounter reports, alien entities and [alien] abductions'.

#### *Rendlesham Forest incident*

One of the first UFO files to be released by the Ministry of Defence under the Code of Practice for Access to Government Information, the precursor of the FOIA, in 2001 was that containing papers on the famous Rendlesham Forest incident. This is often described by the media as 'Britain's Roswell'. Papers relating to the release of this file can be found in [DEFE 24/2030/1](#) and [DEFE 24/2031/1](#).

The sightings took place over two nights late in December 1980 at RAF Woodbridge, Suffolk, an airbase loaned to the USAF. Mysterious lights were seen to land in the forest beyond the perimeter of the base and a group of airmen went to investigate. They reported seeing lights they were unable to identify moving through the trees. The next day marks were allegedly found on the ground and on trees in the forest where the men claimed the UFO had landed. Two nights later UFOs were again sighted from the base and the deputy base commander, Lt Col Charles Halt, took a team of handpicked men into the woods to investigate. During the expedition Halt saw several unidentified lights and made a live tape recording of the incident.

Early in January 1981 Halt produced an official report on the incidents, titled 'Unexplained Lights' that was sent to Defence Secretariat 8 (DS8) at Whitehall. Halt's

original typewritten report and the follow-up inquiries made by MoD can be found in DEFE 24/1512.

A digital copy of the MoD file on the Rendlesham incident has been digitised as [DEFE 24/1948/1](#). This contains Halt's memo and briefings prepared for a Parliamentary question tabled by Major Patrick Wall MP in 1983 when *The News of the World* published the story. The remainder of the file covers internal discussion of the case and correspondence from the public between 1983 and 1995. Additional MoD material, extracted from DS8 files covering the period, was added to this file by UFO desk staff in 2001.

[DEFE 24/2042/1](#) contains details of the 2002 judgement by the Parliamentary Ombudsman that led to the release of retained papers on the Rendlesham incident. The Ombudsman's judgement can be found in [DEFE 24/2028/1](#).

[DEFE 24/1995/1](#) contains transcripts of interviews with two of the key US Air Force witnesses while [DEFE 24/1924/1](#) contains the MoD's position statement on the incident. In summary, this says:

*'...it is highly unlikely that any violation of UK airspace would be heralded by a display of lights. [We] think it equally unlikely that any reconnaissance or spying activity would be announced in this way. We believe that fact Col Halt did not report these occurrences to MoD for almost two weeks after the event, together with the low key manner in which he handled the matter are indicative of the degree of importance in defence terms which should be attached to the incident'*

[DEFE 24/2033/1](#) and [DEFE 24/2034/1](#) contain MoD responses to a series of Parliamentary questions on the Rendlesham incident that were tabled by the late Lord Hill-Norton in the House of Lords, 1998-2001.

#### *UFO reports file series*

A sequence of records in AIR 2 and AIR 20 contains UFO reports received by S4 (Air), filed in 81 separate monthly folders covering the period August 1967 through to December 1973. This begins in AIR 20/11887 (August 1967) and ends at AIR 2/18978 (December 1973). Reports from 1974 onwards begin with AIR 2/19083 (January) and end in AIR 2/18978 (December 1976). These records have not been digitised but are available for viewing at The National Archives reading rooms at Kew.

DEFE 24 also contains a series of 'edited copies' of UFO reports received by MoD, covering the years 1975-1980. AIR 2/18949 covers 1975-76, DEFE 24/977-979 cover 1977, DEFE 24/1288-1289 cover 1978 and DEFE 24/1554-1559 cover 1978-1980. These are duplicates of the main reports series and were prepared at a time when the MoD first considered the release of UFO reports to the public. The identities and home addresses of observers have been redacted from the edited reports. A MoD proposal to make selected reports available on request to members of the public was reversed in 1984 by defence minister John Stanley on the grounds of cost (DEFE 24/1517).

The file sequence within DEFE 24 contains the majority of the surviving reports from 1977 onwards.

DEFE 24/1206, DEFE 24/1205 and DEFE 71/34-35, cover 1977

DEFE 24/1207 (1977-78)

DEFE 24/1207-1212, DEFE 24/1290-91, cover reported received in 1978, the year in which the UFO movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was released in UK cinemas. The numbers of UFO reports made to MoD increased in 1978 to a record of 750, more than double the previous record of 362 recorded in 1967.

DEFE 24/1552-53, DEFE 24/1560-62, [DEFE 24/1913](#) (1979)

DEFE 24/1562-64, DEFE 24/1512 (1980)

DEFE 24/1513 (1981)

DEFE 24/1514-16 (1982)

DEFE 24/1517 (1983)

DEFE 24/1518-20 (1983-84)

Redacted versions of UFO report files from 1984-2009 have been digitised and are available to download from The National Archives website.

[DEFE 24/1922/1](#) (reports and correspondence, 1984-85)

[DEFE 24/1923/1](#) (1985)

[DEFE 24/1924/1](#) (1985-86)

[DEFE 24/1926/1](#) (1986-87)

[DEFE 24/1927/1](#) (1987-88)

[DEFE 24/1928/1](#) (1988)

[DEFE 24/1951-52/1](#) (1988-89)

[DEFE 24/1938/1](#) (1989)

[DEFE 24/1939-1940/1](#) (1990-91)

[DEFE 24/1953/1](#) (1991)

[DEFE 24/1954/1](#) (1992)

[DEFE 24/1959/1](#) (1993)

[DEFE 24/1960/1](#) (1994)  
[DEFE 24/1961/1](#) (1995)  
[DEFE 24/1974/1](#) (1995-96)  
[DEFE 24/1975-77/1](#) (1996-97)  
[DEFE 24/1988-1989/1](#) (1997)  
[DEFE 24/1990/1](#) (1997-98)  
[DEFE 24/2007/1](#) (1998-99)  
[DEFE 24/2008/1](#) (1999)  
[DEFE 24/2009-2010/1](#) (2000)  
[DEFE 24/2020-21/1](#) (2000-2001)  
[DEFE 24/2022/1](#) (2001-2)  
[DEFE 24/2035-36/1](#) (2002-2003)  
[DEFE 24/2058-59/1](#) (2005)  
[DEFE 24/2082-83/1](#) (2006)  
[DEFE 24/2081/1](#) (2007)  
[DEFE 24/2088/1](#) (2007)  
[DEFE 24/2623-27/1](#) (2008)  
[DEFE 24/2459-65](#) (2009)

Branches that formed part of other MoD departments, RAF Air Defence and the Defence Intelligence Staff, received duplicate copies of reports via the 'UFO desk' until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their role was to provide specialist advice, for example on air defence radar and intelligence matters. In some cases more detailed investigations were conducted but few records of these have survived.

RAF Air Defence/Operations UFO reports files include:

DEFE 71/3 (1975-77)

DEFE 71/4 (1977)

DEFE 24/3129/1 (1982-83)

DEFE 24/2821/1-2823/1 (1991-96)

DEFE 24/3124/1 (1995-96)

DEFE 24/3125/1 (1996-97)

DEFE 24/3126/1 (1997-99)

DEFE 24/3127/1 (1999-2001)

DEFE 24/3128/1 (2001-2002)

DEFE 24/2862/1 RAF HQ No 11 Group file covering UFO issues 1986-2001

A sequence of Defence Intelligence branch DI55's UFO reports files can be found in DEFE 31. From 1967 DI55 had a remit to investigate any reports that might contain any 'defence significance', for example as suspected intruder aircraft. This sequence ends in 2000 when DI55 informed the UFO desk they no longer wished to receive copies of UFO reports received by MoD. Few of the earlier records have survived destruction.

DEFE 31/171 (1975-76)

DEFE 31/163-67 (1979)

[DEFE 31/172/1](#) (1982-83)

[DEFE 31/173/1](#) (1983-85)

[DEFE 31/174/1](#) (1985-86)

[DEFE 31/175/1](#) (1986-87)

[DEFE 31/176/1](#) (1987-88)

[DEFE 31/177/1](#) (1988-89)

[DEFE 31/178/1](#) (1989)

[DEFE 31/179/1](#) (1990-91)

[DEFE 31/180/1](#) (1991-92)

[DEFE 31/181/1](#) (1992-93)

[DEFE 31/182/1](#) (1993)

[DEFE 31/183/1](#) (1993-94)

[DEFE 31/184-85/1](#) (1994)

[DEFE 31/186/1](#) (1994-95)

[DEFE 31/187/1](#) (1995-96)

[DEFE 31/188-89/1](#) (1996)

[DEFE 31/190/1](#) (1996-97)

[DEFE 31/191/1](#) (1997)

[DEFE 31/192/1](#) (1997-98)

[DEFE 31/193/1](#) (1998)

[DEFE 31/194/1](#) (1999)

A tabulated list of UFO sightings reported to MoD's Directorate of Air Staff (DAS), between 1997 and 2007, is available via the Freedom of Information Publication Scheme here:

<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FreedomOfInformation/PublicationScheme/SearchPublicationScheme/UfoReportsInTheUk.htm>

#### **e) miscellaneous topics**

AIR 2/19126: a statistical analysis of UFO reports made to MoD between 1967 and 1973.

DEFE 71/33: papers relating to a discussion between RAF, Air Traffic Control and the Defence Intelligence Staff concerning UFOs as a potential hazard to civil aviation in 1977-78.

#### *Media issues*

AIR 2/19119 and AIR 2/19117 contains papers relating to the MoD's involvement in two BBC TV productions on UFOs. In 1972 the head of S4 (Air), Anthony Davis, appeared on a UFO debate produced by BBC2's *Man Alive* series. Air Commodore Davis was also interviewed by BBC Radio Oxford for a programme broadcast later that year. A second copy of both files can be found in [DEFE 24/2031/1](#). DEF 24/1565 contains a transcript of the head of S4 (Air)'s contribution to a Yorkshire TV programme on UFOs shown in 1979.

Two files, [DEFE 24/2047/1](#) (1996-2004) and [DEFE 24/2094/1](#) (2004-2008) are collections of cuttings from regional and national newspapers and magazines, annotated

by UFO desk staff. These files also contain material prepared by the MoD press office in response to media inquiries for information.

#### *Freedom of Information requests*

Since 2005 the Ministry of Defence have continued to release information in response to requests received under the Freedom of Information Act. A sequence of files containing Freedom of Information Act material can be found at

[DEFE 24/2048/1-2050/1](#), [DEFE 24/2052/1-2057/1](#) (2005)

[DEFE 24/2064-73/1](#) (2006)

[DEFE 24/2074-79/1](#) (2007)

[DEFE 24/2448-2450/1](#) (2008)

[DEFE 24/2454-56/1](#) (2009)

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