

Briefing document

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Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs)

1. What is a UFO?

The first reports of '**flying saucers**' being sighted were on 24 June 1947 from 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'. His sighting triggered a wave of similar reports from 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 flying saucer 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 '**Project Blue Book**', the USAF's official 'UFO project', to replace flying saucers, a term that was widely used by the media and public. 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'.

Although for the public and the media UFO has since become a synonym for 'alien spaceship,' for the military forces of the world it is simply refers to something in the sky the observer can see but does not 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 'extraterrestrial'. Some branches of the MoD, such as the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS), prefer the term **UAP** (unidentified aerial phenomena) to describe those UFOs that remain unidentified. UAP does not imply the existence of an 'object' of extraterrestrial origin.

2. UFOs in the early 20th century: 1909-1950

An understanding of the factors that lay behind the British government's interest in the UFO issue can be found by studying the range of documents available at The National Archives. The vast majority of the records are found in the post Second World War period. This reflects the growing post-war fascination with the idea of UFOs as extraterrestrial visitors, as portrayed in popular science fiction films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). In contrast, official policy was restricted to establishing whether UFO sightings could be considered to be a threat to national security. During the Cold War, for example, 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 British military.

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.

In October 1912, when sightings of an unidentified aircraft were made over the Royal Navy torpedo school at Sheerness, Essex, questions were asked in the House of Commons. This led the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, to order an investigation. Inquiries by naval intelligence failed to establish the identity of the aircraft but the Germans were widely believed to be responsible. The relevant papers are in [AIR 1/2455](#) and [AIR 1/2456](#).

Both the War Office and Admiralty investigated further sightings of unidentified airships, aircraft and mysterious moving lights. These were usually seen at night and were frequently reported to the military authorities from many parts of the British Isles during the First World War. In 1916 a War Office intelligence circular found that 89 percent of the reports could be explained by bright planets, searchlights and natural phenomena. It concluded: 'There is no evidence on which to base a suspicion that this class of enemy activity ever existed' ('Alleged Enemy Signalling 1916', [WO 158/989](#)).

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 dubbed these UFOs '**foo-fighters**', from a character in a comic strip whose catch phrase was 'where there's foo there's fire.' Although the foo-fighters did not appear to be hostile the sightings alarmed air intelligence branches of the Air Ministry and US Army Air Force as they prepared for the invasion of France. The RAF began to collect reports of 'night phenomena' from 1942 and later in the war, 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. At the end of the war no traces of advanced aircraft or weapons that could explain the 'foo fighters' were found by the Allied occupying forces. In addition, intelligence officers such as Dr RV Jones discovered that German pilots had observed similar unexplained aerial phenomena. (See bibliography)

Air Ministry reports on 'night phenomena' are at [AIR 2/5070](#) while reports from aircrew with Bomber Command's 115 Squadron in December 1943 can be found in [AIR 14/2800](#).

In 1946 and 1947 the War Office and Air Ministry became involved in an investigation of mysterious **ghost rockets** sighted over Scandinavia. Initially intelligence officers at the Air Ministry believed the 'flying bombs' (RV Jones memoirs, 'Most Secret War' chapter 52, pg 510-11, 1978) were modified V2 rockets fired by Soviets, from captured Nazi rocket plant at Peenemunde in the Baltic. Dr RV Jones, Director of Intelligence at the Air Ministry in 1946, was sceptical of this theory. Drawing upon his wartime experiences, he believed the scare was triggered by sightings of bright meteors in countries that feared

Soviet expansion. Reports and correspondence between the Foreign Office, Air Ministry and the British air attaché in Stockholm are contained in [FO 371/56988](#) and [FO 371/56951](#). An air intelligence report on the 'ghost rockets' of 1946 can be found in [AIR 40/2843](#).

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 **Sign** to investigate the growing mystery. USAF Lieutenant General Nathan F Twining's initial conclusion was 'the phenomenon reported is something real and not imaginary or fictitious.' (See further reading)

3. British Government interest, 1950-1951

The British Government did not begin any official inquiry into the UFO mystery until 1950. During the spring and summer of that year a large number of 'flying saucer' sightings were made in Britain for the first time and the media started to take an interest. Two Sunday newspapers serialised the first books on the topic that had been published in the USA. This led a number of senior figures, both in the establishment and the scientific community to treat the subject seriously for the first time. The *Sunday Dispatch* was encouraged to publish stories by Lord Louis Mountbatten, who was later to become Chief of Defence Staff. Mountbatten was one of a small group of influential military officials who believed UFOs were real and of interplanetary origin.

Another senior official who took reports of UFOs seriously was Sir Henry Tizard. He is best known for his work on the development of radar before the Second World War. Post-war Tizard became 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](#)). It was as a direct result of his influence that 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. However, a reference to a study of flying saucers emerged in 1988 when a file of correspondence between Winston Churchill and the Air Ministry was opened under the 30-year rule, [PREM 11/855](#). On 28 July 1952 the Prime Minister asked the Air Minister: 'What 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.' The response, dated 9 August 1952, began 'The various reports about unidentified flying objects, described by the Press as "flying saucers", were the subject of a full intelligence study in 1951'.

Several unsuccessful attempts were made to trace this study but in 1998 the minutes of the DSI/JTIC were released in [DEFE 41/74](#) and [DEFE 41/75](#). These revealed how the working party was established in August 1950 under 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 ([DEFE 41/74.](#))

The working party included intelligence officers from each of the three armed services and was chaired by G. L. Turney, head of scientific intelligence at the Admiralty. This team reviewed what was known about the subject and investigated a number of sightings reported to it by RAF Fighter Command. During their inquiries they questioned a group of test pilots from the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough who had reported sightings of aerial phenomena. In June 1951 the working party produced a brief final report that debunked the sightings and concluded that flying saucers did not exist. A surviving copy of DSI/JTIC Report No 7 was found in MoD archives in 2001. It was released in the following year in [DEFE 44/119](#). A copy of the original report and covering letter to Sir Henry Tizard are in [DEFE 19/9](#), released in July 2008 at The National Archives. A copy of this report 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.' (See [DEFE 44/119](#))

The members of the working party relied heavily upon information supplied by the US Air Force UFO project (now renamed **Grudge**) and the CIA. US policy was to debunk the subject and restrict the release of information to the public about UFO sightings made by the armed services. The Assistant Director of the CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence, Dr Harris Marshall Chadwell, was present at the meeting of DSI/JTIC in 1951 when the report was delivered to MoD. American influence upon the team's methodology can be seen both in the adoption of the USAF term UFO in its title and the conclusions. Circulation was restricted within MoD with just one copy sent to Sir Henry Tizard.

4. Air Ministry investigations 1952-64

The sceptical conclusions of the Flying Saucer Working Party set the template for all future British 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 detected by radars in 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 this policy was revised 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 Capt Edward Ruppelt, of **Project Blue Book**, 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 was delegated 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 all RAF stations that in future reports of 'aerial phenomena' should be reported directly to DDI (Tech), 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 Air Ministry letter 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](#)).

From 1953 reports from all sources were sent to DDI (Tech) for 'examination, analysis and classification'. Advice on likely explanations was obtained from Fighter Command, the Meteorological Office and the Royal Greenwich Observatory. Each year a special report 'summarising all UFO sightings by types' was submitted to the Air Staff ([DEFE 31/118](#)). None of these summaries have survived before 1956. However, an analysis of 80 reports up to 1954 formed the basis of an article published in Vol 10, No 3 of the Air Ministry Secret Intelligence Summary (AMESIS) during March 1955 ([DEFE 31/118](#) and [AIR 40/2769](#)). This summary, based upon a longer report now lost, was classified 'Secret - UK Eyes Only.'

The existence of this summary study came to light in May 1955 when 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 outstanding 10 percent of 'unexplained' sightings remained UFOs (or, as the Air Ministry preferred, 'insufficient information'). This explains the policy decision to continue collecting reports. The reasons given in the AMESIS 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' ([AIR 40/2769](#)).

The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) initiated inquiries into 'aerial phenomena' on two occasions during the late 1950s. Following press reports of UFOs tracked by radars at **RAF West Freugh**, Scotland, in April 1957 the Air Ministry informed the JIC it was unable to explain four recent incidents ([CAB 157/27](#)). Aerial phenomena were again the subject of JIC discussion in March 1959 following a sighting made at London airport ([CAB 159/31](#)). Additional copies of these minutes and a background briefing prepared by the Air Ministry and published in the Red Book, can be seen in DEFE 24/2013/1.

5. MoD investigations 1964-present

From 1958 a civilian Air Staff secretariat branch known as S6 (Air) took over responsibility for dealing with public relations on the topic of UFOs. During that year an S6 desk officer decided their policy would be 'politely unhelpful' in response to any public or press inquiry on the subject ([DEFE 31/118](#)). From this point onwards two separate branches of the Air Ministry were involved in dealing with the UFO problem. DDI (Tech), was responsible for investigating reports and assessing their defence significance, whilst S6 (Air) fielded questions from members of the public, the press and MPs.

In 1964 the Air Ministry became part of the new Ministry of Defence and the three separate service intelligence sections of the Army, Navy and RAF were merged under a new unified structure. S6's UFO remit passed to a new MoD secretariat, S4 (Air) and in 1967 responsibility for inquiries into UFO incidents deemed to have possible defence significance were inherited by a Defence Intelligence branch, DI55.

Although more than 11,000 UFO reports have been logged by DI55, S4 (Air) and a number of other MoD branches between 1959 and 2007, no detailed studies have been carried out on the accumulated data until relatively recently. 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 added 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](#)).

Following the conclusions reached by the Flying Saucer Working Party the MoD continued to rely upon studies 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 **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 (S4 briefing to MoD, 24 March 1970, copy in [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. 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. This policy rethink, the first of many, took place between 1970 and 1975 and the papers can be found in [AIR 2/19086](#).

The last time the Government made a full public statement on its policy was in January 1979 when UFOs were the subject of a lengthy debate in the House of Lords. This was initiated by Lord Clancarty (Brinsley le Poer Trench), the author of several books on UFOs and related subjects. Clancarty believed the MoD had evidence that UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin and was convinced they were concealing ‘the truth’ from the public. 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 further copy of these papers was opened in March 2011 under the piece number DEFE 24/2032/1.

6. Key Documents held at The National Archives

Keyword searches on the Catalogue using ‘UFO’ or ‘U.F.O’ or ‘(unidentified NEAR flying)’ and ‘flying saucers’ will produce a list of most of the relevant files held at The National Archives. This search can be carried out by clicking here: [catalogue search for UFO files](#).

Various documents held at The National Archives give a history of the British Government’s involvement in the UFO issue and an insight into the politics and personalities responsible for shaping official policy. The official reporting, analysis and recording of UFO sightings commenced in the early 1950s, but substantial records at the National Archives begin in 1962. Until 1967 MoD policy was to destroy UFO files at five yearly intervals because they were deemed to be of ‘transitory interest’; as a result a large number of records dating from the period before 1962 have been lost. This policy was rescinded as a direct result of pressure from the MP Sir John Langford-Holt in 1970 ([AIR 2/19086](#) and [DEFE 13/1183](#)). Since then most surviving MoD UFO files have been reviewed for eventual release at The National Archives. A note attached to a file dated 1988 reads: “in accordance with ministerial instructions, all UFO files are to be permanently preserved, in view of the public interest in this subject” ([DEFE 24/1928/1](#)).

The surviving records generally consist of four categories of material:

- 1) UFO policy;
- 2) Parliamentary business including responses to Parliamentary Questions (PQs) and Parliamentary Enquiries (PEs);

- 3) Public correspondence;
- 4) UFO sighting reports

There are several files documenting the UK Government's policy on UFOs, including references to how and by whom it was drawn up and how it evolved. These papers illustrate how a number of different branches and divisions within MoD were involved at different times handling policy and investigations. **Policy files** created by the former Air Ministry DDI (Tech) and their successor, the Defence Intelligence Staff, can be found at references [DEFE 31/118](#) (1953-1963) and [DEFE 31/119](#) (1967).

Air Staff policy can be followed at [AIR 20/11612](#) (1967-68), [AIR 2/18117](#) (1967) and [AIR 2/19086](#) (1970-75). UFO Policy, 1985-1995, was opened in August 2011 at DEFE/1958/1. A file containing details of a 1997 review of UFO Policy by Sec(AS) can be found in DEFE 24/1986/1. Two more files in this sequence, UFO Policy 1998-2000 and UFO Policy, 2000-2002 were opened in 2011, at DEFE 24/2006/1 and DEFE 24/2019/1. More UFO Policy files were opened in July 2012. These include UFO Policy 1995-97 at DEFE 24/1985/1, UFO Policy 1997-98 at DEFE 24/1987/1 and UFO Policy 2002-2008 at DEFE 24/2087/1. The final UFO Policy file, covering 2009, was opened in 2013 at DEFE 24/2458/1. A collection of 'selected papers' on MoD UFO policy from 1972-1995 was assembled for a policy review carried out in 1997. This file was released in July 2012 and can be found at DEFE 24/2080/1.

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. Another series of files contains responses to Parliamentary Enquiries on UFOs, at [DEFE 13/1183](#), [DEFE 13/1187](#), [DEFE 13/1188](#) 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. [DEFE 19/253](#) contains RAF Chief Scientist papers, [DEFE 31/172](#) contains DIS papers, while [AIR 20/12966](#) is the Head of S4 (Air)'s file on the debate and its aftermath.

[DEFE 24/1970/1](#) (Parliamentary Questions and Enquiries on UFOs 1985-1995) was opened in August 2009. A number of more recent files containing MoD responses to parliamentary questions and enquiries from MPs were released in 2010 and 2011 covering the years 1995 to 1998. This period represented a high-water mark for reported UFO sightings in the UK, see for example DEFE 24/1983/1 and DEFE 24/2004/1. Two files containing Parliamentary Correspondence on UFOs were opened in March 2011: DEFE 24/2018/1 covers 1998 and DEFE 20/2092/1 covers 2001-2006. DEFE 24/2033/1 and DEFE 24/2034/1, opened in August 2011, cover Parliamentary Questions 1998-2001.

A file containing responses to Parliamentary Questions on UFOs by Martin Redmond MP in 1996 was opened in July 2012 at DEFE 24/1984/1. A second file containing responses to PQs tabled by Lord Hill-Norton in 1996-97 can be found at DEFE 24/2005/1. Ministerial correspondence files covering 2008-9 can be found at DEFE 24/2453/1, DEFE 24/2457/1 and DEFE 24/2629/1.

UFO report files contain a mixture of letters from members of the public and reports from official sources such as the police, coastguard and Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). 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 proforma, originally based on a USAF questionnaire. An early draft of this report format can be found at [DEFE 31/118](#). A version of this questionnaire is still used today by the Ministry of Defence. The proforma contains 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 from 1973).

From 1966-67 UFO reports and correspondence between members of the public and MoD were preserved in two separate sequences of files. Five separate file series held at The National Archives contain papers relating to UFO sightings and UFO correspondence from 1962 in chronological order:

[AIR 2/16918](#) features numerous sighting reports and correspondence from members of the public to the Air Ministry secretariat S6, between 1961 and 1963. On the reorganization of MoD in 1964 a new Secretariat, S4 (Air), took over responsibility for UFO matters. 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](#). [AIR 2/18871](#) contains reports and newspaper cuttings from 1972, while [AIR 2/18872](#) consists of a collection of UFO reports and correspondence 1972-1973; [AIR 2/18873](#), 1973-1974; and [AIR 2/18874](#) likewise for 1974-1975. A series of files containing UFO reports runs from February 1974 until December 1976 and begins in [AIR 2/18950](#). [AIR 2/19126](#) contains a statistical analysis of UFO reports made to MoD between 1967 and 1973.

AIR 20 files include a number of Air Ministry UFO papers that escaped destruction before 1967. [AIR 20/7390](#) contains reports of unidentified objects/aircraft made to Air Ministry between 1950 and 1954. [AIR 20/9320](#), [AIR 20/9321](#) and [AIR 20/9322](#) contain Parliamentary Questions and briefings on UFOs reported in 1957, including reports of phenomena tracked by radar. AIR 20/9994 also contains papers from RAF radar stations concerning 'reports of aerial phenomena' during 1957. A further series containing UFO sighting reports made to S4 (Air), filed in monthly folders covering the period August 1967 through to December 1973, begins in [AIR 20/11887](#) and ends in [AIR 20/12555](#).

A third series of files, in DEFE 24, contains the majority of the surviving reports and public correspondence from 1977 onwards. [DEFE 24/1206](#) covers 1977 and [DEFE 24/1207](#), 1977-78. These files contain papers from a number of MoD secretariats. S4 (Air) was replaced by DS8 (Defence Secretariat 8) in 1979. In turn DS8's UFO responsibility passed to Secretariat (Air Staff) 2 or Sec (AS) in 1985. DEFE 24 also contains a series of 'edited copies' of UFO reports received by MoD, covering the years 1975-1980. These are duplicates of the main reports series, prepared at a time when the MoD first considered the release of UFO material to the public. The identities and home addresses of observers have been deleted 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](#)).

A total of 17 DS8 and Sec (AS) files were opened under the Freedom of Information Act during 2008. [DEFE 24/1925/1](#) contains public correspondence 1985-86. DEFE 24/1929/1, DEFE 24/1930/1, DEFE 24/1931/1, DEFE 24/1941/1, DEFE 24/1941/1, DEFE 24/1942/1 DEFE 24/1949/1 DEFE 24/955/1 DEFE 24/1956/1 and DEFE 24/1957/1 contain correspondence 1986-1992 and can all be accessed through nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufos.

UFO reports files opened during 2008 include [DEFE 24/1922/1](#), [DEFE 24/1923/1](#), [DEFE 24/1924/1](#) (1984-85), [DEFE 24/1926/1-1928/1](#) (1986-88), (1988-89), [DEFE 24/1939/1 – 40/1](#) (1989-1990), [DEFE 24/1953/1 – 54/1](#) (1991-92). DEFE 24/1938/1, opened in March 2009, contains details of sightings reported between August and December 1989.

Files opened in August 2009 include [DEFE 24/2086/1](#) (UFO incidents 30/31 March 1993) and [DEFE 24/1972/1](#) (alleged UFO involvement in the crash of a Lightning F6 aircraft in September 1970)

UFO correspondence files opened in August 2009 include: [DEFE 24/1962/1-1965 /1](#) (covering 1992-1993). Sightings reports files include [DEFE 24/1959/1](#) (1993); [DEFE 24/1960/1](#) (1994), [DEFE 24/1961/1](#) (1995) and [DEFE 24/1974/1-1976/1](#) (1996).

Files opened in February 2010 include: DEFE 24/1971/1(Parliamentary Questions and Enquiries on UFOs); DEFE 24/1977/1, DEFE 24/1988/1, DEFE 24/1989/1, DEFE 24/1990/1, DEFE 24/2007/1, DEFE 24/2008/1, DEFE 24/2009/1, DEFE 24/2010/1 (UFO sighting reports).

UFO correspondence files opened in February 2010 include: DEFE 24/1966-1969/1, DEFE 24/1979-81/1 and DEFE 24/1994/1 and files containing persistent correspondence include, DEFE 24/2000/1, DEFE 24/2002-2003/1, DEFE 24/2016-2017/1, DEFE 24/2029/1, DEFE 24/2091/1 and DEFE 24/2030/1-2032/1 (opened in 2011).

16 files of public correspondence covering the period 1995 to 2003 were released in August 2010 including DEFE 24/1973/1, DEFE 24/1978/1, DEFE 24/1982/1, DEFE 24/1992-3/1, DEFE 24/1995-6/1, DEFE 24/1998/1, DEFE 24/2012-15/1 and three files of persistent correspondence: DEFE 24/2001/1, DEFE 24/2042/1 and DEFE 24/2045/1. Ten further files in this series were opened in March 2011 including DEFE 24/2028/1, DEFE 24/2040-41/1, DEFE 24/2044/1, DEFE 24/2062-63/1, DEFE 24/2085/1, DEFE 24/2046/1, DEFE 24/2030 and 2032/1.

Ten UFO correspondence files were opened in March 2011 including DEFE 24/1986/1 (1997) and DEFE 24/1997/1 and DEFE 24/1999/1 (1998). Files DEFE 24/2023-2027/1 and 2037-39/1 contain correspondence from 2001-2003. DEFE 24/2060/1, containing correspondence from 2004 was opened in August 2011. Two additional files containing correspondence from 2006 and 2007 were opened in July 2012 at DEFE 24/2084/1 and DEFE 24/2089/1.

UFO sighting report files opened in March 2011 include DEFE 24/2021/1 (covering 2001, with two annexes containing colour images), DEFE 24/2022/1, DEFE 24/2036/1. DEFE 24/2058/1-59/1 (2003-2005). Four files opened in August 2011 include UFO sightings 2001 at DEFE 24/2020/1, sightings reported in 2002-3 at DEFE 24/2035/1, sightings 2006 at DEFE 24/2082/1 and sightings in 2007 at DEFE 24/2081/1. Two files containing sighting reports from March 2006 and December 2007 were opened in July 2012 at DEFE 24/2083/1 and DEFE 24/2088/1.

The 10th and final tranche of UFO files opened in 2013 included files on sightings reported in 2008 (DEFE 24/2623-27/1) and 2009 (DEFE 24/2459-65/1).

A file of correspondence from 2007-8 can be found at DEFE 24/2628/1 and 2009 at DEFE 24/2451-52/1, opened in 2013.

One file containing **Press Cuttings on UFOs** from 1996-2002, collected and annotated by MoD UFO desk officers, was opened in August 2011 at DEFE 24/2047/1. A second file, covering press cuttings 2004-2008 was opened in July 2012 at DEFE 24/2093/1.

DEFE 31 contains a series of UFO records created by the **Defence Intelligence Staff** branch DI55 and their predecessors, Air Ministry DDI (Tech). Policy files are [DEFE 31/118](#) and [DEFE 31/119](#). UFO report files include [DEFE 31/171](#) (1975-76) and [DEFE 31/163](#) through to [DEFE 31/167](#) (1979). Four files in the DI55 UFO reports sequence were opened in May 2008. These are [DEFE 31/172/1](#) (UFO reports 1978-1983), [DEFE 31/173/1](#) (UFO reports June 1983-March 1985), [DEFE 24/174](#) (UFO reports April 1985-December 1986) and [DEFE 31/175/1](#) (UFO reports December 1986-November 1987). Six DI55 UFO files were opened in March 2009. DEFE 31/1976/1 - DEFE 31/181/1 contain details of reports received by DI55 between November 1987 and April 1993. Seven DI55 files were opened in August 2011, covering sighting reports received from April 1993-July 1996. These can be found at DEFE 31/182/1-DEFE 24/187/1. The remaining UFO incidents files containing reports copied to DI55 between August 1996 and February 1999 were released in July 2012 at DEFE 31/189/1-DEFE 31/194/1. DI55's report 'Unidentified Aerial Phenomena in the UK Air Defence Region' was completed in 2000. From that point onwards the branch were removed from the distribution list of UFO reports received by MoD.

Details of some well-documented UFO sightings investigated by the Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence can be found by searching the reports files. [AIR 2/18564](#) and [AIR 20/9320](#) contain reports from various RAF stations including RAF West Freugh in 1957. 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. It led to national interest when the story leaked to the press. Newspaper stories led to questions in Parliament and at the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). A report on the incident prepared by DDI (Tech) 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. The report 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 papers and reports on a 'flying cross' sighted by police officers and other witnesses in Devon, Sussex and elsewhere during October 1967. Papers from 1967-68 also contain details of field investigations of selected UFO reports carried out by S4 (Air) and DI55. [AIR 2/19083](#) contains brief details of the so-called **Berwyn Mountains** UFO incident, reported in North Wales in January 1974, and further details were made available to a member of the public in 2003 (DEFE 24/2045/1). [AIR 2/19125](#) is a collection of UFO sightings compiled by staff at RAF Patrington in North Yorkshire – referred to as 'reports of unusual occurrences (UFO).' This includes details of sightings made by civilians, police, and various flight personnel from the station between 1968 and 1973.

[DEFE 24/1943/1](#), transferred to The National Archives during 2008, contains a collection of letters sent to the MoD between 1985 and 1992 describing alleged 'close encounter reports, alien entities and [alien] abductions.'

[AVIA 65/33](#) contains papers and photographs relating to Project Y (1953-55), a Canadian proposal to design a saucer-shaped vertical take off (VTOL) aircraft. This file shows that both the Air Ministry and Ministry of Supply wished to develop ideas for saucer-shaped aircraft but no progress was made due to cost and technical difficulties. Further papers on 'unorthodox aircraft' designs, including flying saucers, from 1949-52 can be found in [DEFE 41/117](#) and [DEFE 41/118](#).

[BJ 5/311](#) contains papers collected by the Meteorological Office relating to UFO reports and policy 1968-1970. The Met Office have provided technical advice to the Air Staff secretariat on UFO matters since 1950, but this is the only surviving file containing evidence of their input to official policy.

Sequences of RAF Air Defence/Operations UFO files that have survived destruction include [DEFE 71/3](#) (UFO reports 1975-77) and [DEFE 71/4](#) (UFO reports 1977). [DEFE 71/33](#), dated 1977-78, contains a brief discussion between RAF, Air Traffic Control and the Defence Intelligence Staff concerning UFOs as a potential hazard to civil aviation.

[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 screened 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 DEF 24/2031/1, released in 2011. [DEFE 24/1565](#) contains a transcript of the head of S4 (Air)'s contribution on a Yorkshire TV programme on UFOs shown in 1979.

7. The Ministry of Defence and the Freedom of Information Act

Since 2005 the Ministry of Defence have continued to release information to requests received under the Freedom of Information Act. In March 2011 seven files containing Freedom of Information Act requests relating to UFO matters were opened at The

National Archives. These files are DEFE 24/2048/1-2050/1 and DEFE 24/2052/1-2055/1. More UFO related FOI requests and responses can be found from DEFE 24/2056/1-DEFE 24/2076/1 and DEFE 24/2094/1, opened in August 2011. More UFO related FOI files can be found from DEFE 24/2073/1-DEFE 24/2074/1 and DEFE 24/2077/1-DEFE 24/2079/1, opened in July 2012. FOI requests and responses from 2008 were opened in 2013 at DEFE 24/2448-2450/1; requests from 2009 can be found in DEFE 24/2454-56/1.

In 2008 MoD announced their intention to transfer all their remaining records on UFOs to The National Archives. This transfer began with 27 UFO files dating from 1979 to 1991 opened to the public via The National Archives UFO website during 2008. The transfer process was completed in June 2013 when the 10th tranche of files were opened to the public. *A total of 209 files, containing approximately 52,000 pages of information, have been made available during the five year transfer programme.*

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**, often called 'Britain's Roswell'. Papers relating to the release of this file can be found in DEFE 24/2030/1 and DEFE 24/2031/1 (UFOs: Persistent Correspondence, Dr David Clarke, 2000-2001). 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 seen at reference [DEFE 24/1512](#).

A file dedicated to the Rendlesham incident was opened by the MoD several years after these events. This file was opened at The National Archives in August 2009 (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.

Another file transferred to The National Archives in August 2010 contains details of the 2002 judgement by the Parliamentary Ombudsman that led to the release of further MoD papers on the incident which were not part of the original 2001 release (DEFE 24/2042/1). The Ombudsman's judgement can be found in DEFE 24/2028/1, released in March 2011. Another file opened to the public in August 2010 (DEFE 24/1995/1) contains the transcripts of interviews with two of the key US Air Force witnesses, Jim Penniston and Charles Halt, while DEFE 24/1983 contains the MoD's position statement on the incident. Two files of parliamentary correspondence on UFOs, DEFE 24/2033/1

and DEFE 24/2034/1 contain responses to a series of questions on the Rendlesham incident tabled by Lord Hill-Norton in the House of Lords between 1998-2001.

Four files containing correspondence between Dr David Clarke and MoD on UFO issues and copies of papers released under the Code of Practice and Freedom of Information Act between 2003-2008 can be found at DEFE 24/2032/1, DEFE 24/2043/1, DEFE 24/2061/1 and DEFE 24/2090/1, opened in July 2012.

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

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

8. Suggestions for further reading

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- Letter 'Opinion on Flying Discs' sent by Twining to the Brigadier General Schulgen, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, 23 September 1947, originally classified 'Secret and declassified in 1969 now at US National Archives, College Park, Maryland, see: <http://www.project1947.com/fig/twinng47.htm>

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