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The First Crop Circles—Mystery


CONCLUSION
Tory boys tracked their invertebrates. When local invertebrates were observed, they were noted down in their notebooks. Sometimes, they planned each notebook section—sometimes, informally on note cards. Invertebrates could be responsible.

Curiously, they planned their note cards. The process began by organizing their invertebrates. Sometimes, they also began to organize their note cards—particularly when they noted down and charted their invertebrates. They never told us why.

In the picture, the Boys of Invertebrates are seen in their notebooks. They have written down their invertebrates. Their invertebrates were noted down by the time of the party. They never told us why.

In 1968, a new party was started and Dave Croxton, a happy-go-lucky figure, was invited. In his party, he kept on talking about his invertebrates. He never told us why.

In the picture, the Boys of Invertebrates are seen in their notebooks. They have written down their invertebrates. Their invertebrates were noted down by the time of the party. They never told us why.
deduced a kind of whirlwind because all of the crops were deflected downward in a clockwise circle, they confounded him by making a new figure with an exterior ring flattened counterclockwise.

Soon other crop figures appeared in southern England and elsewhere. Copycat hoaxes had appeared. Bower and Chorley carved out a responsive message in wheat: “WEARENOTALONE.” Even this some took to be a genuine extraterrestrial message (although it would have been better had it read “YOUARENOTALONE”). Doug and Dave began signing their artworks with two Ds; even this was attributed to a mysterious alien purpose. Bower’s nocturnal disappearances aroused the suspicions of his wife Ilene. Only with great difficulty—Ilene accompanying Dave and Doug one night, and then joining the credulous in admiring their handiwork next day—was she convinced that his absences were, in this sense, innocent.

Eventually Bower and Chorley tired of the increasingly elaborate prank. While in excellent physical condition, they were both in their sixties now and a little old for nocturnal commando operations in the fields of unknown and often unsympathetic farmers. They may have been annoyed at the fame and fortune accrued by those who merely photographed their art and announced aliens to be the artists. And they became worried that if they delayed much longer, no statement of theirs would be believed.

So they confessed. They demonstrated to reporters how they made even the most elaborate insectoid patterns. You might think that never again would it be argued that a sustained hoax over many years is impossible, and never again would we hear that no one could possibly be motivated to deceive the gullible into thinking that aliens exist. But the media paid brief attention. Cerealists urged them to go easy; after all, they were depriving many of the pleasure of imagining wondrous happenings.

Since then, other crop circle hoaxes have kept at it, but mostly in a more desultory and less inspired manner. As always, the confession of the hoax is greatly overshadowed by the sustained initial excitement. Many have heard of the pictograms in cereal grains and their alleged UFO connection, but draw a blank when the names of Bower and Chorley or the very idea that the whole business may be a hoax are raised. An informative exposé by the journalist Jim Schnabel (Round in Circles; Penguin Books, 1994)—from which much of my account is taken—is in print. Schnabel joined the cerealists early and in the end made a few successful pictograms himself. (He prefers a garden roller to a wooden plank, and found that simply stomping grain with one’s feet does an acceptable job.) But Schnabel’s work, which one reviewer called “the funniest book I’ve read in ages,” had only modest success. Demons sell; hoaxers are boring and in bad taste.

The tenets of skepticism do not require an advanced degree to master, as most successful used car buyers demonstrate. The whole idea of a democratic application of skepticism is that everyone should have the essential tools to effectively and constructively evaluate claims to knowledge. All science asks is to employ the same levels of skepticism we use in buying a used car on in judging the quality of analgesics or beer from their television commercial.

But the tools of skepticism are generally unavailable to the citizens of our society. They’re hardly ever mentioned in the schools, even in the presentation of science, its most ardent practitioner, although skepticism repeatedly sprouts spontaneously out of the disappointments of everyday life. Our politics, economics, advertising, and religions (New Age and Old) are awash in credulity. Those who have something to sell, those who wish to influence public opinion, those in power, a skeptic might suggest, have a vested interest in discouraging skepticism.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What is meant by the general term "crop circle"? Describe some of the features of a crop circle.
2. What is Occam’s razor, and how might it apply to the phenomena of strange figures in fields of grain?
3. In their early days, crop circles were not always linked to aliens. Discuss the process by which such a link could take hold of the popular imagination. What other explanations have been offered for the origins of the phenomena? Who were some of the “explainers”?
4. Schnabel says that one of his scientist acquaintances claimed he found sophisticated mathematics encrypted in the cereal designs. Compare this “find” to Bible code “hits.” What do you see?
5. Two friends confessed to making the original circles, and then showed how they did it. Why, in your view, did the confession not dissuade further belief in the mysterious designs? Does debunking have no real effect on rational people?
6. What does Sagan mean by the term “the democratic application of skepticism”? He claims that our culture is “awash in credulity.” What evidence can you mention in support of this claim?