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Britain's secret x files

Jackie Brown

The bizarre and intriguing history of Britain's UFO phenomenon opens a new series of Timewatch.

Britain's X Files examines the amazing true stories of Britain's most famous UFO sightings and opens up the Government's secret files on UFO investigations.

Charting this extraordinary cultural phenomenon from the Fifties onwards, the programme takes in royal believers Prince Philip (who used his equerry, Peter Horsley, as his unofficial UFO investigator) and Lord Mountbatten, sceptical Prime Ministers and senior RAF officers.

Timewatch explores how flying saucers exploded into the national consciousness more than 50 years ago and finds out why the Government took so long to admit that something remarkable was going on.

In Britain's X Files, the Timewatch team also track down the eyewitnesses to Britain's most famous UFO cases and reveals the incredible true story of an encounter in 1955 between Prince Philip's equerry and a mysterious "alien" called Mr Janus. Charting the investigation and cover-up by the British Government, Timewatch explores whether rational explanations stand up to scrutiny.

Flying saucers made their debut in 1947 when American Kenneth Arnold was flying over the Cascade Mountains near Washington. He saw nine disc-like objects, which he said were skimming "like a plate on water". A local newspaper pounced on the phrase and the "flying saucer" was born and as the fears of the Second World War faded, a new menace appeared on the horizon.

With the Iron Curtain drawn across Europe, the era of the flying saucer arrived. In Britain it marked the beginning of decades of paranoia and hysteria.

The first flying saucer to be seen by a member of the public in the UK was also in 1947. Mrs Marjorie Hyde - the wife of the Vicar of Deal in Kent - reported the sighting on June 30 that year.

The X Files were opened in 1950 - when Clement Attlee's Government established the bizarre Flying Saucer Working Party - and closed in 2000 when the Government disbanded its UFO intelligence unit.

The first Parliamentary Question about flying saucers was actually raised in the House of Commons in 1953 and Winston Churchill himself was so alarmed by the whole question of UFOs that he sent a memo asking for an enquiry.

It read: "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."

A year later, in 1954, Lord Dowding, Commander in Chief of the RAF during the Battle of Britain and a UFO buff, wrote an article in The Sunday Dispatch entitled "I Believe In Flying Saucers".

In between, flying saucers played on society's deepest fears of the communist threat during the Cold War and opened up the public's imagination to the possibility of other worlds. In the Sixties, UFOs took a hold on popular culture, inspiring rock

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stars, artists and space-age religions. Over the years, thousands of UFO sightings were investigated but officially dismissed.

In 1957, the year the Russians launched Sputnik, Cynthia Appleton from Aston in Birmingham reported that she was visited by aliens. They had told her that although she was pregnant by natural means, her baby would be born a "space baby" and go on to be a world leader. Matthew Appleton, her son, so far remains anonymous.

Still the general fear of little green men remains. Guitarist Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones was so paranoid about UFOs that he had a UFO detector installed at his house - the box would sound an alarm in the unlikely event of a UFO passing over his property.

And in 1978, after the release of the blockbuster film Close Encounters Of The Third Kind, 750 UFO sightings were reported to the Ministry of Defence.

They were not the only ones. From 1959 to the present day, the Ministry of Defence estimates that it has recorded an incredible 10,556 UFO sightings.

The truth, as they say, is out there . . . or is it?

- Timewatch - Britain's X Files, BBC2, Friday, 9pm