

The Crop Circle Making Competition

Rupert Sheldrake

In 1992, John Michell and I helped organize the first and last International Crop Circle Making Competition.

In the late 1970s, circular areas of flattened crops mysteriously appeared in fields in southern England, especially in Wiltshire, and throughout the 1980s they were found in increasing numbers. By 1991 the annual count was about 800. A few appeared in other countries, but the great majority were, and still are, in England.

By the late 1980s some of the formations had evolved a long way from the basic circle, with concentric rings, satellite circles and rectangular, triangular and wavy shapes. By 1990 the most complex formations were pictograms and 'insectograms'. The forms evolved further in 1991, and the season ended with an astonishing fractal pattern, the Mandelbrot Set, in a field near Cambridge.

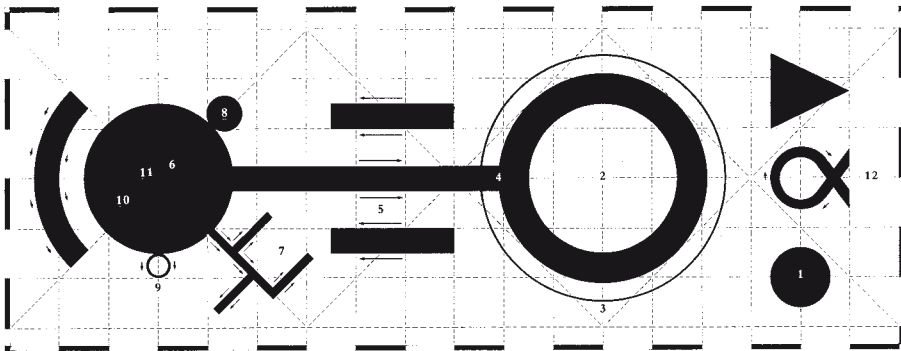
In 1991, two artists in their 60s, Doug Bower and Dave Chorley, claimed that they had been making crop circles for years. They gave a demonstration of their rather modest skills to journalists. Those of a sceptical cast of mind tend to be credulous when it comes to the claims of hoaxers, and jumped to the conclusion that hoaxing by Doug and Dave explained the whole phenomenon. But even if their claims were to be believed, they were making a maximum of 30 formations a year, leaving the great majority unaccounted for. Doug and Dave were mystified themselves.

Thinking through the hoax hypothesis to its logical conclusion led into the treacherous territory of conspiracy theories. Who were all the hoaxers, apart from Doug and Dave? Were they in the military or intelligence services? Were they members of occult groups, or secret societies? Performance or landscape artists? Japanese? There were also several naturalistic hypotheses: the crop formations were caused by complex whirlwinds, or even by migrating hedgehogs. Other proposals included a psychokinetic downloading from the collective unconscious, or the activity of 'higher intelligences' or extraterrestrials. Some people even claimed to have tape-recorded spaceships in fields where formations were appearing at night, but ornithologists identified the high, unearthly sounds as the song of the grasshopper warbler, a small bird with a ventriloquist-like ability to conceal its location.

Crop formations generally appear at night and are fully formed by sunrise. Despite many attempts to observe formations being made, the vast majority appeared mysteriously. In 1991 the debate was dominated by the question of what people could and could not do. Defenders of mystery theories claimed that various features of the more complex formations, including the way the



Resembling some vast extra-terrestrial printed circuit board, competition entries viewed from a helicopter. Some idea of the immense scale involved may be had by spotting the man on the ground, midway up the left of frame. The feeble effort by circle sceptic, arch-rationalist and future chairman of Northern Rock Matt Ridley is just about visible in the top left-hand corner



The 'standard design' for competition entries, which were judged in accordance with astonishingly rigorous criteria by a team of five. Rules and detailed instructions ran to four pages. Competitors were given up to five hours to complete the pictogram, having received it only 24 hours in advance. Permitted to enter the field at 10pm, they had to finish the job by 3am in darkness with only the light of the moon to assist. Additional points were awarded for not being seen. Invigilators were equipped with night-vision binoculars. The huge competition-cum-experiment was sponsored by the German science magazine PM and the Koestler Foundation in association with The Guardian

crops were flattened, could not have been produced by any human agency.

It was in this context that a group of people, including myself, John and Richard Adams decided to organise a crop circle making competition to find out exactly what people could and could not do. The competition was co-sponsored by *The Guardian* and *The Cerealologist*, the leading crop circle journal in Britain, edited by John. A German magazine, *PM*, funded the contest, enabling us to offer a first prize of £3,000. I was the chairman of the organizing committee.

The competition was announced in May 1992 and teams interested in taking part had to submit an application in advance. A panel of crop circle experts advised us on the design (*see diagram*) of a standard formation that all the teams were required to make. This contained supposedly difficult-to-hoax features like rings, and the instructions also specified the directions in which the crops were to be flattened. This design and general guidance notes for competitors were sent to all of the participants three weeks before the actual contest, so they had time to plan their strategy. They were also sent a copy of the marking scheme by which the judges would allocate points to the various formations. The location of the contest was kept secret, and the participating teams were informed of it only 48 hours in advance.

The contest itself took place on the night of Saturday July 11, 1992, in a wheat field on the estate of Sir Francis Dashwood in West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, thanks to John's friendship with Sir Francis. His son Edward (now Sir Edward, the twelfth baronet) kindly supervised the arrangements, which included the erection of a tent beside the field for our organizational headquarters. On Saturday afternoon, we marked out equal-sized plots that were allocated at random to the 12 competing teams. The competitors had to arrive at the tent by 9pm, when they were given the final rules and instructions. They were free to work in their plots in the hours of darkness, between 10pm and 3am, when they had to leave the field. During this period, members of the organising group were patrolling the area to make sure there was no sabotage of other people's plots by contestants or by anyone else, and after all the teams had left the field, the area was guarded by Sir Francis Dashwood's gamekeepers.

We arranged for a helicopter to fly over the field soon after dawn to take aerial photographs of the site. The five judges, led by Jürgen Kroenig, were in the field soon afterwards. When we were assembling the team of judges, we invited the Wessex Skeptics, who claimed that all crop circles were hoaxes, to nominate a judge, but they refused. They thought that our set design was too difficult to execute in the dark and claimed we were deliberately setting up an unfair contest. We also invited Doug and Dave to take part, pointing out that with all their practice, they should have found it easy to win the £3,000 prize. They also declined. However, one sceptic entered the contest himself: Matt

Ridley, along with his sister. Like the Wessex Skeptics, he complained that the design was too complex and that we were loading the dice to favour mysterious explanations. At the time, Ridley worked as a part-time journalist for the *Daily Telegraph* and also wrote books on evolutionary theory. (He later became chairman of the ill-fated Northern Rock Bank, whose spectacular difficulties in 2007 triggered the first run a British bank for more than a century, and involved the Government in a £25 billion rescue operation.)

The contestants were very varied. One team consisted of Cambridge undergraduates; another was a group of schoolboys from Hampshire who had been practising all week on the playing fields. A young American graduate student from Oxford, Jim Schnabel, worked alone. One team came in camouflaged outfits with lamps strapped to their foreheads. The rules had specified in advance that lights could be used, but would result in a loss of points. All the other teams worked in darkness, including two women accompanied by a Pyrenean Mountain Dog that had been trained to pull planks through standing crops. Unfortunately he was not much help because he went to sleep soon after the contest began.

The night was cloudy, with intermittent rain and only occasional moonlight. The next morning, after the aerial photographs had been taken, the judges were the only people allowed to enter the field. By midday they had completed their judging process, taking into account both their observations on the ground and the aerial photographs. The winning team consisted of three young engineers from the Westland Helicopter Company. However, before being presented with a cheque for £3,000 by the Earl of Haddington, they had to make the formation again in broad daylight so that everyone could see how it was done. Programmes about the competition on BBC radio had revealed the location that morning, and the circle-making demonstration was open to the public for a modest entry fee of £1. Several hundred people came to watch, along with TV crews, journalists and photographers.

The demonstration by the winning team was fascinating. The young engineers employed very simple apparatus. For flattening the crop, they used a roller consisting of a piece of PVC piping with a rope through it, pushing it with their feet. In order to get into the crop without leaving footprints, they used two lightweight aluminium stepladders with a plank between them, acting as a bridge. For marking out a ring, they did not put a post in the centre, but rather used a telescopic device made out of plastic pipes of different diameter projecting from the top of an aluminium step ladder. A string was attached to the end of it in such a way that by holding the string and walking in a circle around this central position a perfect ring of flattened plants could be marked out without leaving any trace on the ground in the middle.

The experiment was conclusive. Humans could indeed make all the features of state-of-the-art crop formations at that time. Eleven of the twelve teams made more or less impressive formations that followed the set design. The contest was reported in most of the British newspapers and on radio and TV. Some people jumped to the conclusion that all crop circles must be hoaxes. The sceptics were pleased with the outcome, although they had been so sceptical about the competition itself and had refused to cooperate in its organization. Ridley's team was the only one that did not attempt to follow the set design, producing a question mark instead.

After the competition I took part in many interviews, in which I pointed out that although the results showed that it was possible to hoax crop circles, it did not prove that all were hoaxes. The fact that it is possible to forge a £50 note does not prove that all £50 notes are forgeries.

The same night that the contest took place, three other crop formations appeared in fields in southern England. One of them was five miles from West Wycombe.

Since the competition, formations have continued to appear. Although the numbers have decreased, the designs have become ever more sophisticated, many of them embodying remarkable geometric constructions. Every year the Wiltshire Crop Circle Study Group produces a magnificent calendar showing the best crop circles from the previous year, and I have one on my study wall, reminding me daily of these extraordinary formations, with their spectacular designs and dazzling displays of creativity.

Almost everyone now agrees that most crop circles are human made. But some enthusiasts still believe that a minority are created by non-human agencies. Surprisingly, there was an article about them in the scientific journal *Nature* on June 10, 2010, called 'The Crop Circles Evolves.' The summary reads: "A growing underground art movement combines mathematics, technology, stalks and whimsy." But even this scientifically acceptable account has not managed to expel all mystery. The details of the bent stems suggest to the author of the *Nature* article that "some patterns may have been sculpted using microwave generators, such as masers or magnetrons from microwave ovens."

John enjoyed the continuing evolution of crop circles, their increasing geometrical sophistication, and the way they continue to defy simplistic explanations.

Dr Rupert Sheldrake is a biologist and author of more than 80 technical papers and ten books, including *A New Science of Life*. He was a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and a Research Fellow of the Royal Society. His website is www.sheldrake.org