



NECROLOG

One half of the extraordinary partnership behind the coming of the crop circles heads for the field of dreams; plus the doctor who studied bereavement illusions

DOUG BOWER

Doug Bower was a reluctant cultural hero. It was a measure of his charm that he refused to acknowledge the artistic implications of his idea in 1976 to enter a wheat field and “make it look as if a flying saucer has landed”. Other artists recognised this as an heroic intervention. Some, myself included, have described Doug as the most influential artist of the 20th century. Sadly he’s no longer around to dispute this. On the morning of Saturday 21 July, a month into his 94th year, Doug slipped away as quietly as he ever did leaving a field, just a stone’s throw from his birthplace, to join Ilene, his loving wife of 70 years who passed away in November 2017.

Doug’s generous, easy-going manner disguised a self-disciplined formality. He came from more conventional artistic stock. He was the great-great-grandson of Maritime artist Charles Martin Powell (1775–1824), who specialised in epic seascapes, and Doug’s own paintings – in either oils or watercolours – were recognised to be of high enough quality for inclusion, several times, in the Royal Academy Summer Show, as well as other exhibitions, including an annual open showing of contemporary British watercolours at the Bankside Gallery in London. His work sold internationally. Running parallel to his career as an artist, Doug was a photographer, aware of the nuances that make a good photograph, and an accomplished birdwatcher and naturalist, his wildlife sound recordings residing in several archives. There were occasions when the latter made a handy excuse for his nocturnal excursions into the countryside to make crop circles.

Doug’s legacy of mischief had relatively mundane beginnings. He told the *Daily Mail* about a local Upham man who would go



to the pub every night and on his way home would take off garden gates and leave them further up the lane. Doug would witness the upheaval in the morning on his way to school. The man was a practical joker, he remembered, and this rubbed off on Doug. Just as he became a hero to us, the gate devil of Upham was his hero.

After an otherwise desperately deprived childhood in the early 1930s, the son of a drinking, gambling Bedroom Steward on *HMS Queen Mary*, at 15 years old Doug entered service as a Section Man on the four-funnelled ocean liner *RMS Aquitania*. In three years or so he made 53 crossings from Southampton to Halifax, Nova Scotia. He loved this period of his life, and mostly he loved the storms, when he would sneak up on deck – out-of-bounds and not tied down – armed with his box Brownie camera. And the rougher it was, the better Doug liked it, he recalled recently. We

could have lost him right there.

After this, he went on to work in a sawmill in Eastleigh, with occasional trips to fell trees on the Longwood Estate, near Winchester. With war raging in Europe, at 20 he grew discontented with his Reserved Occupation status and volunteered for the RAF, as a Warrant Radio Operator/top gunner. The year was 1944. Doug’s basic training was marked by a terrifying cocktail of sound, silence, and enormous explosions of V1 Doodlebug flying bombs devastating London neighbourhoods.

Doug flew more missions over Germany than he cared to remember, sometimes back-to-back. He cried on recalling Dresden: “All those lives!” I suggested that it must have been a relief to return, and maybe have a pint. “Drinks?” he exclaimed. “There was no time for that. Perhaps enough for a bit of bread and cheese

and off you go again, on the next raid.” He was 21 when the war ended. Soon, he was courting Ilene, whom he met at a church dance, and they were married in 1948 at that church, St Mary’s in Twyford, Hampshire. 70 years on, we joined Doug for her funeral there, which was very distressing for him. In truth, Doug probably died more from a broken heart than illness.

Some days, around 6am, Ilene would jump on the back of Doug’s motorbike and together they would ride A-roads to the Lake District. Hardknott Pass was a favourite destination. One morning, Doug was returning from a leg-stretching stroll from there to where Ilene was setting out a picnic, and he saw she was joined by a couple and another man. This man was also an artist, and he and Doug immediately hit it off. His name was LS Lowry. Generally, it did not take Doug long to invite someone to visit for a cup of tea. When Lowry visited Southampton in 1956, that’s just what he did. “For years the BBC hounded Lowry for an interview and there he was pouring his heart out about all his lost loves in our living room,” Doug told me. Lowry suggested that Doug repay the visit in London, where Lowry had an exhibition, as he had something for him, but Doug never did. He liked the man and went to see his work but he didn’t think much of it; it wasn’t his cup of tea.

In 1976, the year Lowry went to his own grave, Doug and his friend and fellow RAF veteran Dave Chorley snuck into a wheat field on the Longwood Estate and laid down a simple circle, 30ft (9m) across. They used to meet for a beer every Friday evening to exchange RAF stories, to talk about art, life, and whatever else was on their minds. Doug reminisced about how, 18 years earlier, he and Ilene, tired of the daily slog in England, had set sail on a £10 assisted passage to Victoria, south Australia, to start

ROB IRVING



a new life. The couple bought a plot of land and built a bungalow on it. Doug worked the land. It was out there in the heat, clearing tuffets, that he nurtured his interest in UFOs, an interest he enacted, and thus brought to life, in that field in England. It was classic ostension – defined in the context of folklore as legend telling by action. Doug told Dave about the mysterious ‘saucer nests’ he’d read about in a newspaper. How the so-called experts – and there were plenty of them in those days, just as there are now – said that it was definitely where UFOs had landed. Doug saw no reason to disbelieve them. “There was no such thing as hoaxing or anything like that in those days,” he remembered. “So I just took it that the report was correct, and that UFOs had landed. Well it had to be something, didn’t it?” Doug and Ilene returned to Hampshire in 1968, and opened a gallery and picture-framing studio. He continued painting. His frames would have been made well – made to last. He was conscientious like that.

Doug wouldn’t have called his first circle an artwork, but that’s what it was. Or would have been had it been noticed. But his and Dave’s Friday night meetings were such fun that they persevered each summer, until in 1980, in a field near Westbury, someone noticed and their circle made the newspapers. The headline linked the event to the Warminster UFO flap that had fizzled out some years earlier (see FT331:40-47): “The Return of the Thing”, ran the headline. Doug and Dave were unaware of the tendency, endemic in paranormal research, of theories to attract their own proof. Explanations were many and various; the field of cereology, as it came to be called, was a veritable nirvana for explanationists of every stripe. But very few reckoned on just a couple of blokes. One scientist even saw in the circles an explanation for UFOs; and they didn’t come from outer space!

What! Doug & Dave hadn’t worked so hard for their efforts to be so easily explained,

had they? In response, their single circles morphed into couplets, triplets, groups, then, in 1990, pictograms, inspired by a particular painting, ‘Young Woman’, by French artist Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, featuring bars and lines and circles, from a book on Constructivism that Doug had in his studio. By summer 1991, others had joined in, and the shapes were becoming increasingly impressive – way beyond Doug and Dave’s capabilities – and centred on north Wiltshire, in the Pewsey Vale and nearby Avebury. The *Sunday Telegraph* arts critic, John McEwen, compared the circles to the work of artists such as Richard Long, while expressing disappointment that the circles had met with so much scepticism in the art world rather than rejoicing. He argued that the idea that they are ‘hoaxes’ is irrelevant; “Whoever or whatever made them is an artist of genius,” he proclaimed.

A big word, genius; it would have made Doug laugh, then spit (figuratively of course). But, he accepted that the patterns they swirled bore similarity to prehistoric rock art, and were related to symbols from mystical alchemy, rune languages, mandalas, and sacred geometry, which perhaps came from somewhere deep within – inner space – and that their work could therefore be considered devotional art, and of the highest quality. Moreover, their activities revealed an important distinction with regard to art: that religious awe directed at individual genius is rendered irrelevant in light of the spiritual sensibility the work itself succeeds in evoking. The art lies in human response, in the circus that surrounds the work – less in what is made than in what is made of it. This only occurs in certain conditions. The key to a good mystery is to not find answers, only more questions. Secrecy makes mystery. Mystery breeds imagination. Imagination begets art; then the formula folds into itself to create all manner of interesting possibilities. Taking something in your head and

putting it out there in the real world can be a powerful thing.

“I couldn’t wait for a visit from another planet,” Doug told John Lundberg in 2005. “That was what I was waiting for. I figured that I wouldn’t live long enough to see an alien visitation so it was up to us to get something down and make it happen for ourselves.” Doug regretted admitting having made crop circles. Not making them, but telling people about it. This was not his choice but Dave’s, and Doug recognised the power of mystery – of keeping schtum – against the temptation to shout “we made that”: ecce homo.

That genie hasn’t been recaptured. Today, no matter how clever and intricate the circles have become – let’s face it, they’ve been circling the drain for the past decade or two – they rarely evoke the wonder of Doug’s simple imprint. That the circles should die with him: what better tribute to a man who invented an art form yet refused to see it in those terms, true to the last.

One day, when those who insist that crop circles are all about them, not us, have gone, the true phenomenon might return. Quietly, again, the spirit of Doug reasserting itself. Perhaps it will revert to relatively small, localised outbreaks, echoing a time when a man saw magic in communion with a mystical landscape and acted upon it.

Douglas Bower, pioneering circlemaker and an extraordinary fellow, much loved by those who knew him, born Horton Heath, Hampshire, 25 June 1924; died West End, Hampshire, 21 July 2018, aged 94.

Rob Irving

DR WILLIAM DEWI REES

This family doctor made several classic studies of death and bereavement and was a pioneer of the hospice movement.

In 1971 he published a paper on “The Hallucinations of Widowhood” in the *British Medical Journal*, based on interviews with the residents of the mid-Wales market town of Llanidloes where he had his medical practice. He found that

illusions of the dead spouse – feeling their presence, seeing, hearing, even touching them – occurred in almost half the subjects. They were about as common in men as in women and often persisted for many years – suggesting that the experiences were more than a psychological response to the immediate pain of loss.

A widow of four years told Rees that she had seen her husband “only once. He was walking through the gate. He looked very happy.” Another, widowed eight years, reported: “I often hear him singing.” A widower of 16 years said: “I think she got me my present house... I like the feeling she is in the house.” The incidence was higher among those who had been happily married for many years and had children, and among professional and managerial classes. In most cases, the phenomena were described as helpful.

Four people decided not to remarry because they “felt” their dead spouse’s disapproval. A 71-year-old woman who had been widowed twice felt the presence of both her late husbands. Even so, hardly anyone in the study had breathed a word of their experiences to friends or family. (“They’d say I was silly,” said one subject, adding: “I don’t want to upset them.”) In Japan, by contrast, a culture in which ancestor worship is normal, 90 per cent of widows reported feeling their dead husbands’ presence.

A study by a team at the University of Milan, published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* in 2016, stated: “Overall, evidence suggests a striking high prevalence of PBHEs [Post-bereavement hallucinatory experiences] – ranging from 30 per cent to 60 per cent – among widowed subjects, giving consistence and legitimacy to these phenomena.” The researchers came to this conclusion after combining the results of all previous peer-reviewed English language research that had been conducted on PBHEs. (*D.Mail*, 12 Mar 2016).