

SCIENCE

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Information for Contributors appears on pages 600-602 of the 31 July 1992 issue. Editorial correspondence, including requests for permission to reprint and reprint orders, should be sent to 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. **Science Telephone:** 202-326-6500, TDD 202-408-7770. London office: 071-435-4291. **Subscription/Member Benefits Questions:** 202-326-6417. **Other AAAS Programs:** 202-326-6400.

LETTERS



Stonehenge in winter. [Photo courtesy of English Heritage]

The Pre-Druid Super Collider?

It has just hit me—Stonehenge is the pre-druid super collider. It was completed (on budget and on schedule) in 2000 B.C. and represents great skill, imagination, and faith—like the 2000 A.D. version. It cost \$8 billion, correcting for inflation.

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Crop Circles: Normal Hoaxing?

I read with pleasure and approval the fair account of our recent Crop Circle-Making Competition (Random Samples, 24 July, p. 481). Its purpose, as stated, was to see the extent to which people could reproduce the features observed in the formations of laid-down wheat, barley, and other crops which have mysteriously appeared during recent summers, particularly in areas of southern England.

The skill shown by the leading competitors surprised even the close students of this phenomenon and persuaded many that the whole crop circle affair could be explained as a human artifact. The only respectable belief would then be that for many years groups of practical jokers have been dedicating their summer nights to creating artistic effects in crop fields, working silently, eluding watchers, and telling no one about it. This is in itself remarkable.

Scientific tests, carried out last year on grain and soil samples from crop circle sites, gave evidence of anomalies which are incompatible with normal hoaxing. This justified a more complete program, carried out this summer by a team of American and British scientists. The results, due to be

published in the New Year, may help to establish whether or not human artists can be held responsible for the entire crop circle phenomenon.

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Arctic Mystery: Plumes or Clouds?

The Research News article "U.S.-Russian team solves Arctic mystery" by Richard A. Kerr (3 July, p. 35) implies that atmospheric samples were collected from a Bennett Island plume event. Over the last two decades plumes of an enigmatic origin have been episodically observed in satellite data that appear to be emanating from the surface around Bennett Island in the East Siberian Sea. Some workers have inferred that Bennett Island plumes are related to methane released to the atmosphere by decomposing permafrost and gas hydrates within the continental shelf. This process would result in plumes with elevated methane concentrations. Because elevated methane concentrations were not found during atmospheric overflights of Bennett Island this past April, the conclusion was drawn that the plumes are an exclusively meteorological phenomena. However, the plume pictured in the article occurred in May 1992 rather than during the U.S.-Russian overflights. We have been tabulating the characteristics of the Bennett Island plumes from the available satellite images archived at the Satellite Data Services Division of the National Weather Service in Camp Springs, Maryland. Before the publication of Kerr's article, we had independently concluded that no plumes occurred during the month of April 1992, although some clouds were seen over the island. Admittedly the distinction between clouds and plumes is vague. However, because an unambiguous plume event and the April overflights were not coincident, the conclusion as to the origin of the Bennett Island plumes on the basis of these overflight observations is premature.

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