The airship panic of 1913: the birth of aerial theatre and the British fear of Germany on the eve of the Great War

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Introduction

On the evening of 14 October 1912, several people in Sheerness, an important Royal Navy dockyard on the southern shore of the Thames estuary, saw and heard something passing overhead. An employee of a high street ironmonger’s told naval investigators that

She saw a light over Sheerness. Westward from the shore. The light seemed bright & was moving Eastwards fairly fast. She was unable to give any estimate of height. The night was dark but the light enabled her to have the impression of seeing a long dark object. She heard the sound of an engine.¹

At least three other people, including a naval lieutenant, also saw the object. A telephone call from Sheerness to the naval aerodrome at nearby Eastchurch led to flares being sent up, on the assumption that the unknown aviator would require assistance in landing. But the aircraft passed from view and was not seen again.² The commandant at Eastchurch ‘thought it might have been a German Zeppelin’, and accordingly notified the Admiralty in London.³ On 27 November the Liberal First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, confirmed, in response to a question from William Joynson-Hicks, a rising Conservative MP, that ‘an unknown aircraft’ had indeed been over Sheerness on the night in question, about which however he could only say

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¹ The National Archives [TNA], AIR 1/2456, letter, Commander C. R. Samson, 1 November 1912.
³ TNA, AIR 1/2456, letter, Captain Murray F. Sueter to Third Sea Lord [Rear-Admiral Gordon Moore], 14 November 1912.
that ‘it was not one of our own airships’.\textsuperscript{4} The quick succession of questions from MPs suggested nervousness to one parliamentary correspondent, and the \textit{Evening News} was dismayed by Churchill’s tacit admission that ‘it is possible for an unknown airship to circle without interruption or interference of any kind over a British dockyard, and over a harbour containing fifty British warships, both ships and dockyard being alike defenceless against aerial attack’\textsuperscript{5}. Things only got worse, for by early 1913 hundreds of mysterious airships were being reported from all over the British Isles. The reality of these ‘phantom airships’ or ‘scareships’ can be ruled out in all but a vanishingly small number of cases, but it was widely believed, despite German denials, that they could only be Zeppelins. In part, this was because it was thought that only Germany possessed the capability to undertake airship flights from the Continent to, and over, Britain. But it was also because it was assumed that only Germany would have the desire to carry out such missions in secret. The phantom airships seemed to be evidence of implacable German hostility towards Britain.

What they really are, however, is evidence for widespread British anxiety about Germany, from a period when relations between the two countries are supposed to have been cordial, even warm. Recent critiques of the concept of an Anglo-German antagonism notwithstanding, the years immediately preceding 1914 are usually described by historians as a period of détente between the two nations, a pause or even a reversal of the tensions which had been rising since the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{6} This détente is often extended to

\textsuperscript{4} HC Deb 27 November 1912 vol 44 col 1243. It seems likely that Joynson-Hicks got his information from C. G. Grey, the editor of the \textit{Aeroplane}, an influential aviation which was the first to publish news of the Sheerness incident; this kind of relationship certainly existed by January 1913, with Grey providing Joynson-Hicks with questions to ask in the House of Commons regarding the delayed acquisition of aeroplanes for the Royal Flying Corps: National Aerospace Library, C. G. Grey Papers, CGG 1, letter, William Joynson-Hicks to C. G. Grey, 8 January 1913; HC Deb 9 January 1913 vol 46 col 1397W. Grey is a well-known figure in the history of British aviation, but mainly for his influence, and his far right politics, in the interwar period: e.g. Richard Griffiths, \textit{Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-9} (London: Oxford Paperbacks, 1983), 138-140; Michele Haapamaki, \textit{The Coming of the Aerial War: Culture and the Fear of Airborne Attack in Inter-war Britain} (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 69-76.


public opinion. William Mulligan, for example, argues that after the Agadir crisis in 1911, ‘Anglo-German press wars, an important feature of international politics in the first decade of the twentieth century, virtually ceased’:

The ending of the naval race, the cooling of colonial rivalries, and diplomatic cooperation in the Balkans led to an improvement in Germany’s image in Britain on the eve of the First World War. In other words, the realities of international politics were the main determinant of public attitudes in Anglo-German relations.⁷

But if this is the case, then why did thousands of British people believe they saw German airships where there were none, precisely in the middle of this period of détente? Why did British newspapers obsess about the danger posed by German aerial supremacy when the press wars had supposedly ended more than a year earlier?

In fact public attitudes in Britain towards Germany did not simply mirror the diplomatic relationship. Mulligan himself notes the existence of ‘a reservoir of ideas, memories, and identities upon which the [British] population would draw in a defensive war’, but these were available in times of crisis short of war, too.⁸ In particular, earlier anxieties about German spies,

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⁷ Mulligan, The Origins of the First World War, 144. See also Catriona Pennell, A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20-21. This understanding draws heavily on recent German scholarship, which unfortunately has not yet been translated into English: e.g. Dominik Geppert, Pressekriege: Öffentlichkeit Und Diplomatie in Den Deutsch-britischen Beziehungen 1896-1912 (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftverlag, 2007); Martin Schramm, Das Deutschlandbild in Der Britischen Presse 1912-1919 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007).

German invasions and German dreadnoughts remained powerful after 1911. These scares and panics are by no means unknown to historians, but are rarely treated as serious topics in their own right. Even the naval rivalry, which retains its historiographical role as a key cause of the mistrust between the two nations, is usually understood in terms of relatively technical factors such as strategy, policy and technology. More recently, however, the study of the political and cultural aspects of the dreadnought race, such as fleet reviews and warship launchings, has been opened up by Jan Rüger. This emphasis on what might be termed subjective perception over objective reality allows for a very different understanding of the dynamics of the Anglo-German rivalry, as he notes:

The naval theatre reached its climax precisely at the time when the naval race had effectively been won by the British and a scaling-down of public posturing was required. Behind the scenes, the foreign offices in London and Berlin were keen to engage in détente and ease Anglo-German tensions. Yet the naval stage had the opposite effect, creating an image of two alliance blocs facing each other increasingly inflexibly. All this underlines the degree to which culture and politics were intertwined in the international relations of the decades before 1914.

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That is, the cultural aspects of the naval race were out of step with the diplomatic ones, and still created anxiety and mistrust after Britain had already won.

Though less attention has been paid to it, what might be termed an ‘aerial theatre’ paralleled Rüger’s naval theatre. The neglect is understandable: aviation was still very new, with the first powered, controlled, heavier-than-air flight in Britain not taking place until 1908; unlike seapower, airpower was as yet of little objective importance in national affairs. Yet, even more than is the case with seapower, to focus on objective factors alone belies the increasing political, cultural and symbolic importance of the conquest of the air. Aerial displays and aviation meets were hugely popular, and the combination of high technology and high adventure gave flying and flyers an exciting cachet that had few rivals. Aviation’s very novelty meant that its ultimate potential was unknown, perhaps even limitless, and popular imagery in fiction, film and the press encouraged people to believe in an ‘airminded’ future in which flying was so pervasive that it transformed the world for the better, enabling unlimited personal mobility and collapsing international differences. The importance of aviation before 1914 lay in its subjective and imaginative appeal rather than in any objective military or commercial applications.

But right from the start such positive forms of airmindedness were mixed with and even dominated by negative forms, characterised by fears about

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14 See, however, Peter Adey, Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 54-67.
18 Joseph J. Corn, The Winged Gospel: America’s Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 29-50; Wohl, A Passion for Wings; Rieger, Technology and the Culture of Modernity, 20-50. The term ‘airminded’ (or ‘air-minded’) was in use in Britain by the mid-1920s, but the attitudes embodied in it can be traced to the late Edwardian period. Alternative approaches to aerial culture include aeromobility and aerofuturism: see Adey, Aerial Life; Alan Richard Lovegreen, "Aerofuturism: Vectors of Modernity in Nineteenth-and Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture" (PhD, University of California Riverside, 2014).
what the coming of flight meant for the defence of Britain and its people. An aeroplane — French, not British — crossed the English Channel for the first time in July 1909, demonstrating the nation’s potential vulnerability to a new threat against which neither the Army nor the Navy could offer protection. Britain’s own military airpower was still only nascent. This meant that, unlike its naval theatre, its aerial theatre was forward-looking rather than tradition-bound, and dominated by civilian aircraft and pilots rather than by military ones. This civilian character did not mean that it was pacific, however. Quite the opposite: precisely because of the lack of British airpower, the need to prepare for war in the air was always implicit in aerial theatre, and very often explicit. Unlike the naval theatre, then, the aerial theatre rehearsed Britain’s weakness, not its strength; unlike at sea, in the air it was Britain that was outnumbered and outgunned. The sea may have surrounded the British Isles, but the very sky itself was now a frontier, and an undefended one: ‘England’, it was increasingly asserted, ‘is no longer an island’.

If anxiety and fear can drive history, then scares and panics can shed light on ‘the dim recesses of the public mind’. But the latter terms are rarely defined with any precision. A scare is a momentary state of alarm, whereas a

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20 This is not to say that the traditions of the naval theatre were not invented — they clearly were: Rüger, The Great Naval Game, 12-49. However, in the Edwardian period there was practically no history of British aviation to draw upon before 1914, and so aerial tradition could only be self-consciously created or borrowed; it could not plausibly be claimed as having existing since time immemorial as was the case with naval tradition.

21 The phrase is attributed to Lord Northcliffe, owner of the Daily Mail and other newspapers, in 1906 after witnessing the first aeroplane flight in Europe: Gollin, No Longer An Island, 193; J. Lee Thompson, Northcliffe: Press Baron in Politics, 1865-1922 (London: John Murray, 2000), 136. On the rhetorical and symbolic value of Britain’s island status, see Rüger, The Great Naval Game, 173-175.


panic is a more extreme form of scare leading to some form of irrational behaviour. That is to say, a scare is a passive emotional response, whereas a panic is an active one. In 1913, Britain’s aerial theatre led to both a scare and a panic. The 1913 phantom airship scare, one of a number of early 20th-century mystery aircraft scares, has not been well-served by historians, despite playing a supporting role in George Dangerfield’s famous 1935 polemic *The Strange Death of Liberal England.*[^24] The best account is in Alfred Gollin’s study of late Edwardian airpower politics, but he does not realise the true scale of the scare, devoting more space to the much smaller and less consequential phantom airship scare in May 1909.[^25] On that occasion, these phantom airships — as in 1913, generally assumed to be German in origin — served only as a brief distraction from the dramas of the dreadnought race and the People’s Budget. Moreover, Gollin’s analysis downplays the collective, popular aspect of phantom airships, treating them as merely secondary to the political and press aspects of the airship panic which followed. But the 1913 scare provides striking evidence of a widespread public and collective British fear of Germany, precisely in the middle of the period from the Agadir crisis in 1911 to the July crisis in 1914, when the official relationship was at its most cordial and even friendly. The phantom airships suggest that despite the Anglo-German détente, negative images of Germany persisted in the public mind until just before, and into, the Great War. They were a consequence of the constant message imparted by Britain’s aerial theatre of Britain’s aerial weakness. They were also, in effect, a projection of Germany’s own aerial theatre into the skies — or rather, into the minds — on the other side of the


North Sea, displaying Germany’s strength in the air even where no German aircraft were to be found.\textsuperscript{26}

The result of the phantom airship scare among the public was an airship panic in the press.\textsuperscript{27} Not only did the press play a critical role in propagating and amplifying the phantom airship scare, but Conservative newspapers used the claims that Zeppelins were flying over Britain to launch a fully-fledged press panic along the lines of the much more famous dreadnought panic in 1909, when it was demanded that battleship construction be accelerated in order to maintain the Navy’s lead over its German counterpart. In 1913, however, the argument was that Germany, having now lost the naval arms race, was turning to airpower to overcome Britain’s superiority at sea. Critics alleged that, in stark contrast to Germany’s large fleet of airships and aeroplanes, British airpower was practically non-existent, and that the amount of money spent on military and naval aviation therefore needed to be drastically, and rapidly, increased. The danger was that Britain’s aerial inferiority would lead to the destruction of the Navy, the invasion of the British Isles, and the prostration of the British Empire. That this was not merely a hypothetical threat seemed proven by the foreign airships now flying over Britain’s ports and towns. So, as entertaining and exciting as the aerial theatre was, it was also unnerving. If the sea was Britain’s domain, then the sky, it appeared, would be Germany’s. Perhaps it was already.

\textbf{Aerial theatre and aerial warfare}

The foundation of the airship panic was the growing belief that aviation was certain to play an important part in the next war, perhaps even a decisive one.\textsuperscript{28} This belief owed much to the increasing popularity of aerial theatre in Edwardian Britain. By 1914 most people had still never seen a real aeroplane anywhere other than in photographs or at the cinema.\textsuperscript{29} However, this was

\textsuperscript{26} On the German aerial theatre, albeit not conceptualised as such, see Peter Fritzsche, \textit{A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination} (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11-22.

\textsuperscript{27} On Edwardian press panics, see Morris, \textit{The Scaremongers}; Mulligan, \textit{The Origins of the First World War}, 171-173. On defence panics, including air panics, see Brett Holman, \textit{The Next War in the Air: Britain’s Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941} (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 167-186.

\textsuperscript{28} Gollin, \textit{The Impact of Air Power}; Paris, \textit{Winged Warfare}.

changing rapidly. The number of people who could fly an aeroplane was increasing and accelerating: in the three years to March 1913, the Royal Aero Club issued 474 pilot’s certificates, 299 since the beginning of 1912 alone.\(^{30}\) Every week, tens of thousands of people flocked to pioneer aviator Claude Grahame-White’s Hendon aerodrome in north London to watch aerobatic displays; for the inaugural Aerial Derby in June 1912 some 40,000 spectators turned up, with perhaps another 3 million watching along the 81-mile circuit around London.\(^{31}\) Numerous aviation events were staged in London and elsewhere: the Aerial League of the British Empire, formed in February 1909, held an exhibition at the Crystal Palace from June through August 1910 featuring lectures on aeronautics and model aeroplane competitions, while the exhibitions of British and foreign aircraft held annually at Olympia from 1909 were also seen by many people, including the King.\(^{32}\) The Aerial League also organised ballooning events for the Boy Scouts, while the parallel Women’s Aerial League formed a Boys' and Girls' Aerial League (later the Young Aerial League) to promote aviation to the next generation directly.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{30}\) Minutes, Royal Aero Club annual general meeting, 19 March 1913; available at http://raec.sds.websds.net/PDF/AGM0022.PDF, accessed 29 January 2015.


Figure 1. The first ‘Illuminated Aerial Exhibition’ at Hendon, 26 September 1912. ‘Flying at Hendon’, *Flight*, 5 October 1912, 889.

But flying was not merely a civilian entertainment. Even during its infancy, the seemingly limitless potential of aviation made it obvious that it would revolutionise war, though exactly how remained unclear. At the very least aircraft could be used to locate and observe enemy troops or ships from
above. More troubling was the possibility that they might drop bombs, on battlefields, on battleships, on dockyards — or on cities. Whether the large and relatively costly airship, or the nimble but less powerful aeroplane should be favoured was hotly debated. In the absence of any practical examples of Tennyson’s ‘airy navies grappling in the central blue’, imagination held sway, and airships, with their unparalleled ability to fly long distances while carrying heavy loads, featured more prominently than aeroplanes in discussions of aerial bombardment. In January 1908, the Pall Mall Magazine began serialising H. G. Wells’s latest novel, The War in the Air, in which the coming of flight leads to a world war and the end of civilisation. The first blow is struck by a German aerial fleet which crosses the Atlantic to New York and, failing to pacify the city, destroys it in an orgy of bombing:

As the airships sailed along they smashed up the city as a child will shatter its cities of brick and card. Below, they left ruins and blazing conflagrations and heaped and scattered dead; men, women, and children mixed together as though they had been no more than Moors, or Zulus, or Chinese. Lower New York was soon a furnace of crimson flames, from which there was no escape.

Wells was then at the height of his fame and in both serial and book forms, The War in the Air was read widely. Others followed in his footsteps, bringing forth a stream of publications, fictional and non-fictional, sensible or not, about the use of aircraft in war. One particularly early and influential such book, journalist R. P. Hearne’s Aerial Warfare, warned that ‘before war were declared, an aerial fleet might be massed some forty or fifty miles away from our coasts, and on receiving a wireless message could strike within two hours of war being declared!’ However, he focused not so much on the possibility of cities being bombed as on the way in which command of the air could overturn command of the sea:

34 Paris, Winged Warfare, 123-151.
35 Alfred Tennyson, Poems (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1842), 104; Paris, Winged Warfare, 91.
36 H. G. Wells, The War in the Air and Particularly How Mr Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908), 154.
37 Paris, Winged Warfare, 38; Wohl, A Passion for Wings, 70.
38 On this literature generally, see Paris, Winged Warfare; Brett Holman, The Next War in the Air: Britain’s Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941 (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014).
The German aerial fleet, by crippling our naval forces at two such points as Sheerness and Portsmouth, would open the way for a German naval raid covering an expeditionary force. The landing of a German army on our shores would be possible in no other way — and it would be the last chapter of the war!40

Unsurprisingly, then, the nascent aerial theatre often had a militaristic element. As early as 1907, the Army airship Nulli Secundus, flew low over London, circling St Paul’s and then landing at the Crystal Palace. The flight of 40 miles was a record for the time, and as the Spectator noted, ‘From the spectacular point of view, the experiment was a splendid success’.41 The visibility of flying aircraft over long distances meant that military flights could be witnessed and appreciated by the public: in February 1913, the ‘spectacle’ of an airship and an aeroplane engaging in mock combat ‘attracted the attention of large crowds’ at Salisbury, while the cross-country flight in stages of eight RFC aeroplanes from Farnborough to their new aerodrome at Montrose was for many people along the route their first encounter with aviation.42 But the very paucity of British military aircraft meant that in contrast to the naval theatre, the aerial theatre was dominated by civilian activities like the Aerial Derby and the flying displays at Hendon.43 However, this somewhat perversely led to airminded civilians putting a great deal of energy into promoting the need for military aviation, rather than focusing on peaceful uses for aircraft. The Aerial League’s professed mission was to educate the British people in the need to ‘secure and maintain for the Empire the same supremacy in the Air as it now enjoys on the Sea’, while Grahame-White, especially, took it upon himself to use his celebrity to force the nation to prepare for war in the air.44 At Hendon, he and his pilots regularly performed such spectacular feats as bombing dummy battleships or carrying out mock airship attacks, sometimes at night when searchlights could be also

40 Ibid., 172.
41 Spectator, 12 October 1907, 3.
be used to striking effect (see Figure 1).  

Grahame-White’s most conspicuous venture was the ‘Wake Up, England!’ campaign in the summer of 1912, in which he put on flying displays over 121 of the nation’s towns and cities. The tour was organised in association with the Daily Mail, which lent it the full force of its publicity and explained that ‘The object is to educate the people of this country as to the qualities and potentialities of the “new arm” and to stimulate the Government and the War Office to make good the deficiency caused by past neglect’.  

The message that airships posed a menace to Britain was also propagated in cinemas and music halls: the 1909 film The Airship Destroyer featured a scene showing the aerial bombardment of a city, while in 1910 Raymond Phillips demonstrated a small airship drone in theatres in London and the provinces, which ‘would enable explosives to be dropped if the airship were used in warfare’.

The aerial theatre therefore helped to prime the British people to expect threats from the air, now presumed to be an arena for great power conflict. But there were also attempts to forestall the visions of Tennyson and Wells. Alfred Russel Wallace, the eminent evolutionist, wrote to the Daily News protesting the Aerial League’s belief that aerial warfare was inevitable, and that ‘that all we can do is to be sure and be in the front rank of the aerial assassins -- for surely no other term can so fitly describe the dropping of, say, ten thousand bombs at midnight into an enemy's capital from an invisible flight of airships’.

Three years later, the International Arbitration League called on the world’s governments to prevent the ‘sheer terror’ of aerial warfare:

> There has never yet been a moment when it was practically possible to ban the war machines of earth or water. There is a moment when it is practically possible to ban those of the air. That moment is now —

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47 ‘Electric control of airships’, The Times, 2 May 1910, 10; Tyne and Wear Archives, TH.EMP/1/3/12, daybill, Sunderland Empire, 19 September 1910. See generally Horrall, Popular Culture in London, 92-95.

before the use of these machines is proved; before great vested interests have formed.\textsuperscript{49}

Despite the support of over two hundred British intellectuals (including Wells himself), this appeal had no effect. It was anyway too late: aircraft had already been used in war, during Italy’s invasion of Ottoman Tripolitania (now Libya). At first employed for reconnaissance, on 1 November 1911 an Italian aeroplane bombed two Ottoman-held towns, an operation which quickly became routine. This was followed in March 1912 by the first operational use of airships; these, too, were soon used as bombers.\textsuperscript{50} Aircraft were also used in the First Balkan War, and Adrianople (now Edirne), a city containing more than 100,000 people, was bombed by Bulgarian aeroplanes in October and November 1912.\textsuperscript{51} While casualties were few, a precedent had been set: civilians were now targets for airpower.

These developments were noted in Britain and in Germany, which in their different ways developed their own aerial forces. Aircraft as yet played only a small role in British defence policy. The Army had occasionally used observation balloons in colonial warfare since 1885, but formed an Air Battalion only in 1911, which in turn was absorbed into the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) upon its foundation in April 1912.\textsuperscript{52} By the outbreak of war in August 1914, the RFC and the new Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) between them numbered no more than 2073 officers and men, 113 assorted aeroplanes and 7 small airships.\textsuperscript{53} Nor did aviation yet draw heavily on the nation’s finances: the amount allocated to the RFC in the 1912 Army Estimates amounted to just £322,000, less than a sixth of the cost of a single


contemporary dreadnought.\textsuperscript{54} The British aircraft industry, though by no means negligible, lagged behind its German and French counterparts.\textsuperscript{55} Germany had a considerably larger air force, although with its much smaller army Britain actually possessed more aeroplanes per soldier.\textsuperscript{56}

The divergence was particularly stark in airships. Britain’s only attempt at building a large rigid airship before the war, the Navy’s HMA 1 (popularly and punningly known as the Mayfly), broke up in September 1911 while being taken out of its hangar for its first flight.\textsuperscript{57} An initiative by patriotic citizens and the \textit{Morning Post} to purchase a French Lebaudy airship for the nation likewise ended in failure.\textsuperscript{58} By late 1912 the RFC’s airship fleet consisted of just three small non-rigid models inherited from the Royal Engineers, useful only for experimental purposes, and a Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) subcommittee, chaired by the Secretary of State for War, Colonel J. E. B. Seely, had been given the task of drawing up a new airship policy.\textsuperscript{59} The subcommittee’s members were concerned by Germany’s clear lead in lighter-than-air flight, especially the possibility that it could prevent the Navy from imposing a close blockade of the German coastline in the event of war.\textsuperscript{60} This lead was largely the work of Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, whose eponymous airships far outstripped their foreign counterparts in every way. By 1908 he had succeeded in developing a large rigid airship capable of long-distance flights, \textit{LZ4}. Within a few years \textit{LZ4}'s successors were flying for the German army and navy as well as with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} ‘The service grant for aviation’, \textit{Flight}, 2 March 1912, 188; Lawrence Sondhaus, \textit{Naval Warfare, 1815-1914} (London: Routledge, 2001), 205.
\item \textsuperscript{55} John H. Morrow, \textit{The Great War in the Air: Military Aviation From 1909 to 1921} (Washington, D.C., and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 41-42, 44.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Edgerton, \textit{England and the Aeroplane}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Driver, \textit{The Birth of Military Aviation}, 123, 211. Rigid airships (such as Zeppelins) could be larger than semi-rigid or non-rigid ones, due to their use of an internal skeleton to maintain their shape.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Gollin, \textit{The Impact of Air Power}, 67-68; TNA, CAB 16/17, Report and Proceedings of the Technical Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on Aerial Navigation, Airships, 6 August 1912, 5-6.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Mowthorpe, \textit{Battlebags}, 8-12; TNA, CAB 16/17, Report and Proceedings of the Technical Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on Aerial Navigation, Airships, 6 August 1912, iv.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 2. The Admiralty was already in the midst of reassessing the close blockade strategy at this time, though this had more to do with German torpedo boat flotillas and coastal batteries than Zeppelins. See Lambert, \textit{Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution}, 261-273; but also David Gethin Morgan-Owen, "History is a Record of Exploded Ideas": Sir John Fisher and Home Defence, 1904-10’, \textit{The International History Review} 36 (2013): 550-572.
\end{itemize}
DELAG, the world’s first airline.\textsuperscript{61} Four new Zeppelins entered service in 1912 alone: the military $Z\, III$, the naval $L\, I$, and the civilian $\textit{Viktoria Luise}$ and $\textit{Hansa}, L\, I$, which first flew on 7 October, was the largest and most powerful aircraft yet constructed, with a length of 518 feet, a volume of 794,000 cubic feet, and a lifting capacity of 20,700 pounds. $\textit{Hansa}$, while somewhat smaller, was slightly faster, with a maximum trial speed of 50 miles per hour.\textsuperscript{62} In September $\textit{Hansa}$ demonstrated its capabilities in a flight from Hamburg to Copenhagen and back, carrying more than a dozen people for more 11 hours over a distance of roughly 370 miles.\textsuperscript{63} In Britain, the press reported that Count Zeppelin had been ‘keenly desirous of making a demonstration above the British ships’ present in Copenhagen harbour, which included the new battlecruiser HMS $\textit{Lion}$.\textsuperscript{64} German aerial theatre was therefore projecting power in a way Britain was unable to match.

The phantom airship scare

That the aerial theatre was successful in persuading the public that in the aerial age Britain was ‘no longer an island’ is demonstrated by the otherwise inexplicable belief that German airships could already be seen in British skies in peacetime. Rumours of a mysterious airship flight over Sheerness began to circulate in late October 1912, leading the Admiralty’s Air Department to order an investigation into whether ‘the Zeppelin airship “Hansa” came over’, especially since it had reportedly undertaken a 30 hour flight recently.\textsuperscript{65} But before the results were received, the $\textit{Aeroplane}$, under the editorship of C. G. Grey an influential aviation weekly, broke the story that ‘an aircraft of some sort was heard flying over the town’, noting that ‘the general opinion seems to be that the mysterious visitor was a German’.\textsuperscript{66} Another possibility was that it was a naval aviator from Eastchurch, attempting the still rare and dangerous

\textsuperscript{61} Guillaume de Syon, $\textit{Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939}$ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 40-70; Fritzsche, $\textit{A Nation of Fliers}$, 9-58. Before 1914, the German navy was much more diffident about Zeppelins than the army; see Douglas H. Robinson, $\textit{Giants in the Sky: A History of the Rigid Airship}$ (Henley-on-Thames: G. T. Foulis & Co., 1973), 77-83.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 330-331.
\textsuperscript{63} ‘Incidents at Copenhagen’, $\textit{The Times}$, 20 September 1912, 4.
\textsuperscript{64} ‘Flight from Hamburg to Copenhagen’, $\textit{Aberdeen Daily Journal}$, 20 September 1912, 5; see also ‘Germany’s air cruisers’, $\textit{Manchester Courier}$, 27 September 1912, 18.
\textsuperscript{65} TNA, AIR 1/2455, letter, Captain Murray F. Sueter to Captain, HMS $\textit{Actaeon}$ [Samson], 25 October 1912.
feat of night-flying; however, none were airborne at the time.\footnote{Aeroplane, 31 October 1912, 440.} Two weeks later the \textit{Aeroplane} felt able to declare that ‘It now seems practically certain that the mysterious aircraft heard over Sheerness on the night of October 14th was actually one of the German Zeppelins’.\footnote{Aeroplane, 31 October 1912, 440; ‘The alleged visit of a foreign airship’, \textit{The Times}, 22 November 1912, 8; TNA AIR 1/2456, letter, Sueter to Third Sea Lord [Moore], 14 November 1912.} \textit{L1} had indeed left on a long proving flight over the North Sea the previous day, although German reports indicated that it had already landed at Johannisthal by the time of the Sheerness incident.\footnote{Aeroplane, 14 November 1912, 497.} In December, in the privacy of the CID, Churchill claimed that ‘there was very little doubt that the airship reported recently to have passed over Sheerness was a German vessel’.\footnote{‘Ships that pass in the night’, \textit{Manchester Courier}, 6 March 1913, 7.} At another CID meeting the following February, the Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, stated definitely that ‘A German airship of the Parseval type had flown over Sheerness and back to Germany’, adding that ‘The recent journeys were probably made with a view to pick up leading marks for future guidance’.\footnote{TNA, CAB 38/22/42, minutes, CID meeting, 6 December 1912, 12.} While these discussions were confidential, cryptic reports in the press hinted that the official conclusion was that the Sheerness airship, along with another mysterious airship seen at Dover on 4 January, was the civilian Zeppelin \textit{Hansa}.\footnote{TNA, CAB 38/23/9, minutes, CID meeting, 6 February 1913, 3. A Parseval was a much smaller airship than a Zeppelin with a much shorter range, and hence a most implausible candidate. Churchill supported his subordinate, hinting at ‘information from other sources which confirmed their belief’: Ibid., 4. On these ‘other sources’, which included a British pilot visiting Germany, see TNA, CAB 38/23/11, letter, Winston Churchill to Admiral of the Fleet Sir A. K. Wilson, 3 February 1913.} \footnote{E.g. ‘The airship mystery’, \textit{The Times}, 13 January 1913, 6. On the Dover incident, see, e.g., ‘Dover airship mystery’, \textit{Evening Telegraph and Post} (Dundee), 6 January 1913, 5; also TNA, CAB 38/23/2, minutes, CID meeting, 7 January 1913, 3. A later theory, supposedly based on confidential information, was that \textit{Hansa} was hired by Henry, Prince Pless, in order to visit friends in England, but was turned back by bad weather. If so, it is not clear why such an innocuous flight was never admitted publicly. ‘Airship mystery’, \textit{Globe}, 3 March 1913, 7; ‘Concerning £1,000,000’, \textit{Aeroplane}, 6 March 1913, 271.} The identity of Sheerness’s visitor has never been ascertained. It was widely believed both inside and outside the government that only Germany had both the means and the motivation to undertake such a flight.\footnote{Despite supposedly originating with the Admiralty, a claim that a French military airship was responsible for the Dover incident (only) found little support elsewhere:} A covert,
long-distance flight to Britain might well have been contemplated by the German government to test the limits of airship technology and aerial navigation, and the flight of *Hansa* to Copenhagen in September 1912 and, later, the forced landing of the military Zeppelin *Z IV* across the French border at Lunéville in April 1913 might fit this pattern. Regardless, no direct evidence has since been found to suggest that an airship flew over Sheerness in October 1912. The same is true is for the great numbers of mysterious airships which began to be reported from all over Britain in the following months. Again, there is little evidence for the reality of any of these airships. Douglas Robinson, who drew upon naval flight logs for his still-definitive history of the Marine-Luftschiff-Abteilung (Marine Airship Division), compared ‘the reports of “phantom airships” over England’ to ‘the “flying saucer” craze of our own day’. It is in fact impossible that any but a handful of the hundreds of phantom airship sightings were caused by real Zeppelins: Sheerness and Dover apart, there were simply too many of them seen too far from Germany to be accounted for in terms of the small numbers and primitive performance of the Zeppelin fleet in early 1913. The much more numerous and more capable Zeppelins brought into service during the First World War still found navigation over the British Isles an extremely inaccurate and hazardous undertaking, none ever venturing as far as Ireland, for example, the site of several phantom airship sightings in 1913; even they would not have been able to appear over so many places at the same time and return to Germany before daylight. The lack of any objective basis for the phantom airships only underscores their subjective importance as evidence

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*Observer*, 2 March 1913, 12. Cf. TNA, CAB 38/23/2, minutes, CID meeting, 7 January 1913, 3.

74 De Syon, *Zeppelin*, 74-75.


77 Note, for example, the so-called ‘Silent Raid’ of the night of 19 October 1917, when a raiding force of 11 Zeppelins encountered high winds and were scattered across western Europe; 4 were lost, only 1 due to enemy action. Ibid., 262-283.
for what the British people believed in late 1912 and early 1913 about the German threat from the air.

![Geographical distribution of phantom airship sightings, October 1912-April 1913. Credit: the author.](image)

Nearly all of what is known about the phantom airship scare comes from the press, which reported widely on the sightings at both the national and local levels.\(^78\) As at Sheerness, these phantom airships were nearly always seen at night, usually in the evening, and often took the form of an exceedingly bright light or searchlight seen from some distance away. Again as at Sheerness, sometimes the sound of an engine was heard as well, or alone. More than 300 distinct sightings were reported in the first four months of 1913, around three quarters in the last week of February and the first week of March.\(^79\) In geographical terms, many sightings were made along the eastern coast, exactly where an airship coming from Germany might be expected (Figure 2). However, more reports came from inland areas,

\(^78\) Only the sightings at Sheerness and Dover are mentioned in official sources.

Yorkshire especially, while south Wales, Somerset and eastern Scotland were also well-represented, and several reports were from Ireland. Most sightings were made from, or near, villages or market towns. Conversely, most witnesses lived in London and the provincial cities, where the phantom airships appeared before large crowds of excited onlookers. Judging from press accounts, the great majority of witnesses were working-class male adults: town corporation employees, police constables, postmen, colliers, trawlermen, a lift attendant, a nightwatchman, and so on. Some were at least middle class: a solicitor, a town councillor, Army officers. Observers considered respectable, whether by profession or birth, were often given prominence in press accounts: when an airship was reported at Scarborough, for example, it was noted that one of the witnesses held ‘a managerial position in connection with a firm of grocers’. Women saw phantom airships too, such as Mrs Schofield, wife of the manager of Singer's Machine Company at Selby, , but are noted less often in available newspaper accounts.

At first the reports were few and largely concentrated in the west. After the airship seen at Dover on 4 January came rumours of aerial lights seen from both the Somerset and the Welsh sides of the Bristol Channel. A sighting at Newport on the northwest coast of Ireland is fairly typical:

On Wednesday [8 January], at 6.40 p.m., some excitement was caused in the little town of Newport, Co. Mayo, by what appeared at first to be a very large, bright star in the southwest. After a little while it was seen to move slightly to and fro, and at times was surrounded by a kind of luminous haze, such as is formed when strong light falls on smoke or vapour. It then occurred to those who were watching it that the light belonged to some airship, probably a dirigible, and that the haze was caused by vapour from the engine being blown across the path of the light. It seemed as if the airship was trying to approach the lights of the town, but was unable to do so owing to the strong easterly wind that was blowing [...] The light appeared to be about two miles distant, and

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80 E.g. ‘Unknown aircraft over Dover’, *The Times*, 6 January 1913, 6; ‘Mystery airship returns’, *Standard*, 24 February 1913, 9; ‘Airship mystery’, *Globe*, 26 February 1913, 2; ‘The mystery airship’, *Standard*, 27 February 1913, 9; ‘London is visited by mystery airship’, *Courier* (Dundee), 8 March 1913, 5; ‘Seen at Broughty Ferry’, ibid.
81 ‘Another airship seen’, *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 20 February 1913, 4.
83 ‘Mysterious lights’, *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 9 January 1913, 4; ‘Another airship mystery’, *Mercury* (Lichfield), 10 January 1913, 7.
at an elevation of between 500 and 1,000 feet. Some of the onlookers affirmed that they distinctly heard the whirr of propellers.

A widely-publicised sighting at Cardiff by, among others, the Chief Constable of Glamorganshire, Captain Lionel Lindsay, on 17 January, was quickly followed by reports of airships seen or heard in Staffordshire and Norfolk. A burst of sightings at the end of January and beginning of February spanned the nation from Chancery in Wales to Chatham on the Medway, from Liverpool and Manchester in the northwest to London in the southeast. The most impressive of these incidents, at least in terms of the number of witnesses, took place in the Cardiff area on 5 February, where according to one journalist ‘what is supposed to have been a dirigible airship travelling over the Bristol Channel [...] was seen by thousands of people’. The peak of the scare came, after a fortnight’s lull, in the last week of February and the first week of March, when around 180 phantom airship sightings were reported. Some of these were again from the Bristol Channel region, as well as from London, Manchester and Liverpool. However, more sightings came from new areas: the east coast of Scotland, from Kirkcaldy all the way up to the Orkneys; the coastline around and including Hull; the Norfolk coast; and especially a small area around the town of Selby in Yorkshire, where a dozen or more separate incidents took place on the nights of 21 and 22 February. Among the latter was the sighting of Mrs Schofield, who on being driven to Cawood on the night of 22 February 1913 ‘was astonished to see a very powerful light, something like the headlight of a motor car, approaching them, with a smaller light about 30 feet to 40 feet

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84 ‘Mysterious airship in the west’, Irish Times (Dublin), 11 January 1913, 9.
87 ‘Welsh mystery airship again’, Standard, 6 February 1913, 8.
88 E.g. ‘The reported lights’, The Times, 27 February 1913, 6; W. H. Webber, letter, Manchester Guardian, 1 March 1913, 6; ‘London is visited by mystery airship’, Courier (Dundee), 8 March 1913, 5; ‘Crossing the Bristol Channel’, ibid.
89 E.g. ‘Mysterious airship is seen hovering over Kirkcaldy exhibiting a focussed light’, Courier (Dundee), 1 March 1913, 5; ‘The phantom airship now pays a visit to Scotland’, Evening Telegraph and Post (Dundee), 28 February 1913, 2; ‘Whose is the airship?’, Daily Express, 26 February 1913, 1; ‘The mysterious airship’, Norfolk News (Norwich), 1 March 1913, 12; ‘Positive evidence of eye-witnesses’, Standard, 25 February 1913, 9; ‘Airship seen at Hull’, Standard, 26 February 1913, 7.
behind […] The lights, she said, bobbed up and down, and then turned parallel with their car, and within two or three minutes the airship, or whatever it was that was carrying the lights, had passed out of sight’.\textsuperscript{90} She felt able to judge the airship’s height at one to two thousand feet, by comparing it to ‘the Army airmen she had seen pass Selby on Friday’ on their way to Montrose.\textsuperscript{91} The last phantom airship sighting to receive widespread attention in the national press was also one of the most spectacular. At 8.15pm on 28 February, the trawler \textit{Othello} was in the North Sea, 170 miles off the Spurn, when the captain and first mate observed

a light in the distance. In five minutes the light was practically above the trawler, and the powerful searchlight was cast on the boat. The aircraft sailed so low that they thought the craft would touch the trawler’s masts. The skipper blew the syren [sic], and the airship swerved to the west, circled the trawler twice, and afterwards rose in the air and disappeared in a westerly direction.\textsuperscript{92}

As reports multiplied across the country, many sceptics were converted, since, as the \textit{Globe} put it, ‘to believe that crowds of people […] have been deluded by a phantom demands too great a stretch of the imagination to be satisfactory’.\textsuperscript{93}

However, liberal newspapers, especially, tended to doubt the very existence of the phantom airships. The \textit{Daily Chronicle} interviewed a psychologist who explained that ‘One man says he sees an airship, and by straining the eyes and auditory senses his friends can easily be persuaded that they also see it, and even hear the sound of the engines’.\textsuperscript{94} Some conservative newspapers also kept their distance, with the \textit{Daily Mirror} abruptly converting to a sceptical position literally overnight.\textsuperscript{95} The discovery of a wrecked fire balloon on a Yorkshire moor persuaded many newspapers that the numerous sightings around nearby Selby a few days earlier, and perhaps everywhere else, were the result of hoaxes.\textsuperscript{96} Other explanations put forward included

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{90} ‘More mysterious airships’, \textit{Standard}, 26 February 1913, 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{92} ‘Mystery airship at sea twice circles around a Hull trawler’, \textit{Courier} (Dundee), 5 March 1913, 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{93} ‘Airship mystery’, \textit{Globe}, 3 March 1913, 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{94} Quoted in ‘Visions’, \textit{Liverpool Echo}, 27 February 1913, 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{96} ‘The airship rumours’, \textit{The Times}, 28 February 1913, 5.
\end{itemize}
Venus, lightning, searchlights, and even geese.\textsuperscript{97} Liberal newspapers were also more likely to espouse the notion that the airships were in fact British, whether developed by the government or by a private inventor: the radical \textit{Manchester Guardian}’s London correspondent noted the ‘the theory in Wales [...] that the vessel belongs to some experimenter living on the Devonshire moors’, but argued that ‘the direction in which the “mystery” vessel was moving and the places at which it was seen would point even more cogently to experiments conducted from Salisbury Plain’, and hence to tests carried out by ‘a Government department’.\textsuperscript{98}


Overall, however, speculation centred squarely on the possibility of a German origin. The apparently official claim that the Sheerness incident was caused by a Zeppelin was constantly invoked by the press in the months that followed as evidence that Germany was also responsible for the phantom
airships; and even in distant Ireland, many ‘recalled the airship that was said
to have flown over Sheerness some time ago, and the word “Germans” was
heard pretty often’.99 As the Standard explained:

There is not the smallest doubt but that this country at the present
moment is the object of a systematic aerial reconnaissance carried out
at night. Carried out by whom? it will be asked. There is only one
answer to that question -- by Germany, because Germany alone
possesses aircraft capable of doing what is being done by the airships
that have been seen over England.100

Conservative newspapers, particularly the more populist, Northcliffe-style
ones, were particularly prone to blame Germany: the Standard had already
pointed out that a nonstop return flight across the North Sea 'is easily within
the capacity of the present German Zeppelins', asking 'Does Germany hold
the secret'?101 At the peak of the scare, the whole press, left and right, was
almost unanimous in the conviction that the phantom airships were
Zeppelins. Maps were issued showing that Zeppelins based at Heligoland or
Cuxhaven could reach most of the British Isles; one, originally published in
the Review of Reviews, was captioned 'The black shadow of the airship' and was
republished in the Illustrated London News and elsewhere (Figure 3).102 A front-
page article in the Daily Express was printed under the headlines 'NIGHT
RAIDS BY AIR. GERMAN DIRIGIBLES' FLIGHTS OVER
ENGLAND'.103 That the German press roundly ridiculed this 'New English
Sickness', and the German Admiralty categorically stated that 'that not only
has no German airship been over England, but also that no vessel has been
near enough to make a casual visit even tempting' made little difference.104
Just what Germany might hope to gain by sending its airships over Britain in
peacetime was not immediately clear, but the evidently covert nature of the
flights led to the darkest of suspicions: The Times declared that, whoever was
responsible, their 'motives are not likely to be friendly'.105 According to the

99 'Mysterious airship in the west', Irish Times (Dublin), 11 January 1913, 9.
100 'Germany's Zeppelins', Standard, 25 February 1913, 9.
101 'Airships in the night', Standard, 22 January 1913, 9.
102 'Britain's peril in the air', Review of Reviews 47 (1913): 127-135; 'Is it "the sea to
us, the air to the foe"?', Illustrated London News, 22 February 1913, 239; "The black
shadow of the airship", Flight, 1 March 1913, 248.
103 'Night raids by air', Daily Express, 25 February 1913, 1.
104 'German airships', Manchester Courier, 1 March 1913, 8; 'German airships', Irish
Times (Dublin), 1 March 1913, 7.
105 'Aerial defence', The Times, 12 February 1913, 7.
Standard, the opinion at RFC headquarters was that the mysterious flights were 'made for the sole purpose of training navigators for future visits, and that these training voyages to England have been more frequent than is generally believed'. The conclusion was difficult to resist: even the syndicalist Daily Herald accepted the reality of 'frequent visits of foreign aircraft over our lands', calling them 'England’s Latest Invaders'.

The airship panic

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What turned the phantom airship scare into an airship panic was the belief that Germany was already so far ahead of Britain in aviation that it would have complete command of the air if war came, justifying and indeed demanding an immediate response by the British government. The *Daily Mail* called it ‘a bitter and extraordinary fact’ that Britain had no airships able to
respond to an aerial invasion, ‘nothing building to compare with the huge German Zeppelins. This is an ignominious position for a great nation, and it would mean grave danger in war’.  In a dynamic which would be repeated in later air panics, the numbers of aircraft possessed by Germany was constantly inflated, while British airpower was, if anything, understated. A cartoon in *John Bull*, run by the disgraced former Liberal MP Horatio Bottomley, put German ‘military aerial strength’ at ‘about ten times’ that of Britain’s, while according to a table published in the *Daily Mirror*, Germany had nine large airships, the aerial equivalent of dreadnoughts, but Britain had none. The addition of civilian Zeppelins, which were reportedly already being successfully used in bombing experiments, increased this number further: the *Manchester Courier* estimated that ‘the total number of serviceable airships, State-owned and private, at the disposal of Germany in case of mobilisation is 35’, of which at least 20 could cross the North Sea and return. Projection into the future also amplified the threat: citing German sources, the same paper later predicted ‘a fleet of fifty of the largest type by 1915 […] 60 Zeppelins three years hence, all of which, be it repeated, will be perfectly able to make dynamite raids on our dockyards, ammunition depôts, oil-fuel stations, and stores’. Even the radical *Manchester Guardian*, normally resistant to scaremongering, accepted a figure of forty Zeppelins by the end of 1915. Striking visualisations of these disparities were published and republished, with the *Review of Reviews* and *Illustrated London News* once again in

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110 ‘Britain’s peril in the air’, *Daily Mirror*, 17 February 1913, 5.
111 ”‘Ships that pass in the night’”, *Manchester Courier*, 24 February 1913, 7. For comparison, a secret estimate made in June put the number of large German airships built or building at 20, 2 naval, 11 military, 7 civilian: TNA, CAB 37/115/35, Aerial navigation. Summary of situation, 1-2. The civilian Zeppelin *Hansa* took part in military exercises early in March: ‘Remarkable hits by German dirigible’, *Western Gazette* (Yeovil), 7 March 1913, 8. Another civilian Zeppelin, *Sachsen*, was in fact converted to military use on the outbreak of war, bombing Antwerp in September 1914, while the older *Viktoria Luise* and *Hansa* were used for training: Robinson, *Giants in the Sky*, 87, note 1. On the commercial bomber concept, of which this is a particularly early example, see Brett Holman, ‘The Shadow of the Airliner: Commercial Bombers and the Rhetorical Destruction of Britain, 1917-35’, *Twentieth Century British History* 24 (2013): 495-517.
112 ‘Ships that pass in the night’, *Manchester Courier*, 4 April 1913, 7.
the vanguard (Figure 4). In heavier-than-air machines, too, the RFC was deficient: when the Secretary of State for War, Colonel J. E. B. Seely, foolishly claimed in Parliament that the RFC had as many as 101 serviceable aeroplanes, Joynson-Hicks and fellow Conservative MP Arthur Lee attacked his figures and by July had forced the admission that the true number was more like 50, once unserviceable and inoperative machines had been discounted. Such was the disparity and the urgency that the Review of Reviews even called on ‘each county, each great city or town, each collection of villages in the homeland and the Empire [to] give one or more aeroplanes to the State’. Parliament reflected the disquiet: one MP, the Liberal Unionist Rowland Hunt, told the prime minister that ‘people all over the country are becoming seriously alarmed at our defencelessness against attack from the air’, thanks to the government’s refusal to acquire ‘big airships’ to counter ‘the big airships of the enemy, which admittedly can be used at night to drop high explosives on our docks, big towns, and other places’. In every way — number, size, speed, capability — Britain appeared hopelessly outclassed in the air, with grave consequences for the land and the sea.

The only apparent response from the Liberal government to the airship menace was to rush an Aerial Navigation Bill through Parliament in just six days, being given the Royal Assent on 14 February. The resultant Aerial Navigation Act, and the regulations enforcing it, for the first time asserted Britain’s sovereignty over its airspace, and provided the government with the legal power to use lethal force to prevent aircraft from entering it. Many newspapers connected the bill with the phantom airships: the Scotsman called it ‘a sequel to the report that airships have recently been seen by night in the vicinity of Sheerness and other naval bases’. While the CID subcommittee

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114 'Why laws are made to prevent unauthorised flying of air-ships over foreign territory', Illustrated London News, 22 February 1913, 240-241; 'The peril in the air', Review of Reviews 47 (April 1913), 256.
117 HC Deb 24 April 1913 vol 52 cc529, 530.
118 HC Deb 08 February 1913 vol 48 col 345; HC Deb 14 February 1913 vol 48 col 1456.
120 'Latest news', Scotsman (Edinburgh), 11 February 1913, 7.
which drew up the legislation had been formed without reference to the Sheerness incident, its members were clearly concerned by the growing suspicion that a German airship had flown over such a strategic location.\footnote{121}{TNA, CAB 17/20, Draft Terms of Reference, 18 October 1912.} Seely, as subcommittee chair, pointed out that as matters stood ‘they would have no powers over a man who flew over Sheerness, landed, and then pleaded that his course had been forced on him by stress of weather’, and the CID was persuaded by the argument that the Sheerness and Dover incidents, along with other Zeppelin flights outside German borders, made passage of the legislation an urgent necessity.\footnote{122}{TNA, CAB 16/22, minutes, Control of Aircraft subcommittee, 29 November 1912, in Report of a Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Control of Aircraft, 3 February 1913, 18; TNA, CAB 16/22, Report of a Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Control of Aircraft, 3 February 1913, 2. See TNA, CAB 38/23/9, minutes, CID meeting, 6 February 1913, 5-6.} Due to Britain’s weakness in the air, however, the Aerial Navigation Act was generally greeted as no more than first step. The consensus of the conservative press was that, as the \textit{Standard} put it, ‘rules which cannot be enforced are as valueless as a law without penalties for breaking it’.\footnote{123}{‘Regulation of aircraft’, \textit{Standard}, 6 March 1913, p. 8. On the enforcement of the Act, see TNA, AIR 1/653/17/122/484, ‘Air policy and acts’.} The overall effect was merely to underscore both the German airship peril and Britain’s helplessness before it.

The threats posed by the phantom airships rehearsed many aspects of the better-known spy, invasion and naval panics which preceded them. The idea that they were hovering over strategic points and observing defence installations paralleled the German spies who were believed to be scouring the nation, drawing maps of key defences and taking photographs of new warships.\footnote{124}{French, ‘Spy Fever in Britain’; Nicholas Hiley, ‘The failure of British counter-espionage against Germany, 1907-1914’, \textit{Historical Journal} 28 (1985): 835-862; Thomas Boghardt, \textit{Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain During the First World War Era} (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 27-35.} According to \textit{The Times},

\begin{quote}
Airships are already capable of being used to do a great deal of mischief, and their powers in this respect will certainly be extended. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the possibility of using such powers has entered into the calculations of some foreign country, it is obvious that this reconnoitring in time of peace might be found of great utility should an occasion arise.\footnote{125}{‘Aerial defence’, \textit{The Times}, 12 February 1913, 7.}
\end{quote}
One Selby solicitor thought the airship he saw was ‘a foreign aircraft, attempting to find out the exact position of a Government magazine in the district’.\textsuperscript{126} Even the belief, propagated by novelists and journalists, that the many thousands of male German waiters and hairdressers working in Britain constituted an advance guard of the German army, ready to play their part in assisting the inevitable invasion through sabotage, had their counterpart in the suspicion that a phantom airship had actually carried out such a mission at Stoneywood, near Aberdeen, leading to the deployment of a detachment of reservists: ‘The purpose of the visit seems to have been detected, as several wires of the lofty erection at the Admiralty wireless station have been torn away’.\textsuperscript{127}

The scareships were even more closely aligned with the fear of a German invasion, as popularised in plays and novels such as Guy du Maurier’s \textit{An Englishman’s Home} (1909) and William Le Queux’s \textit{The Invasion of 1910}, serialised in the \textit{Mail} in 1906.\textsuperscript{128} The \textit{Globe} thought that ‘the fact must be accepted that our country lies open not only to the incursions of the secret fly-by-night, but equally to the invasion of a determined enemy’.\textsuperscript{129} One prospective Conservative MP was even blunter, painting a lurid picture for his electors of Zeppelins raiding the British coastline ‘without a declaration of war’, crippling the Navy and leaving the country ‘open to the German army of five millions’.\textsuperscript{130} Just as little faith was placed in Britain’s own aerial forces, apparently so much weaker than Germany’s, few conservative military commentators thought that the new Territorial Force of part-time reservists set up by the Liberal Secretary of State for War, Richard Haldane, could stand up to the might of the German army, even before a huge expansion of the latter was announced in March 1913.\textsuperscript{131} Indeed, due to its presumed destructive power and ability to target coastal defences and mobilisation depots on the outbreak of war, Germany’s Zeppelin fleet made the invasion
problem even worse; it was only due to the airship threat that Bonar Law, a senior Conservative, was finally convinced of the necessity for conscription.  

Above all else, the airship panic most resembled a naval panic, especially the most successful of all the Edwardian panics, the dreadnought panic of 1909. Evidence of an acceleration in German naval construction and the possibility that Britain could even lose its lead in dreadnoughts led to an intense agitation by the conservative press and the Navy League and, eventually, the laying down of eight new dreadnoughts, instead of the four initially planned. The success of this panic was an inspiration for advocates of aerial armaments in 1913: according to the Manchester Courier's special correspondent, 'A similar demonstration is needed to-day even more urgently than it was four years since, but this time the demand must be made in the interests of the air fleet'. The point was frequently made that it didn't matter whether the phantom airships were real or not: what was important was that they dramatised the certain threat of Germany's airships. According to the Observer, 'The hoaxer — if there was one — has done good service by awakening public interest in the matter'. Grey, the first to break the news of the Sheerness incident, was perhaps the most candid exponent of this approach. Well before the phantom airships began to be seen in any numbers, he wrote for the Daily Express explaining that 'The more foreign vessels that come over here and act as scare-ships, the better for this country':

We have not a tenth enough trained pilots nor a twentieth of the proper number of aeroplanes. Without machines we cannot have the pilots. Without trained workmen we cannot have the machines. Without regular employment we cannot have the right class of workmen to

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133 The contemporary, and indeed later, belief that scaremongering was the chief cause of the 1909 panic has recently been challenged: Matthew Seligmann, ‘Intelligence information and the 1909 naval scare: the secret foundations of a public panic’, War in History 17 (2010): 37-59. But even if there was a rational basis for the belief that Germany would overtake Britain at sea, the often irrational response still qualifies as a panic. See also Arthur J. Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2013), 151-185; Morris, The Scaremongers, 164-184.

134 “‘Ships that pass in the night’”, Manchester Courier, 3 March 1913, 7.

135 ‘The power of the air’, Observer, 2 March 1913, 12.
build aeroplanes -- a class of work which is a thing apart. Without regular Government orders our aeroplane manufacturers cannot give regular employment. Without money the Government officials cannot give out regular orders. Without the pressure of public opinion the Treasury either cannot, or will not, grant enough money to buy aeroplanes. And without being thoroughly scared, the great British public will not bring pressure to bear on the Treasury, through its various representatives in the House of Commons. Therefore, the more scare-ships which visit our shores, the better chance there will be of moving the English mind and getting something done.136

This cynical viewpoint was echoed from the radical side of the press when the editor of the Economist, F. W. Hirst, argued that after Churchill’s standard of a fixed ratio between the British and German fleets of sixteen to ten was accepted by Germany, ‘the Panic-mongers decided that the naval situation was too unpromising, and fell back upon the Air’.137 Certainly, the airship panic was a naval panic too. According to the Standard’s military correspondent, thanks to the experience gained in ‘these nightly trips to our shores […] a fleet of Zeppelins sent upon an errand of destruction would arrive at their various destinations with the certainty and punctuality of an express train’:

Within eight hours, at most, after the making of a signal in Berlin anything between 40 and 100 tons of high explosive could be dropped simultaneously at twenty different selected points in England. Within that short space of time, the whole of our arsenals and dockyards could be laid in ruins, and if our warships escaped, which is unlikely, the offensive power of the Fleet would be hopelessly crippled.138

Indeed, it was argued that Germany, unable to overtake Britain at sea, was now placing its faith in airpower. The Devon and Exeter Gazette thought that ‘The Germans may be, indeed, justified in calculating that the proportion of ten to sixteen units is compensated for to a considerable extent by the aerial fleet they have already created, and which is being increased with extraordinary rapidity, both in the number of its units and in their power’.139

Excubitor, a pseudonymous naval expert writing in the Fortnightly Review,

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137 F. W. Hirst, The Six Panics and Other Essays (London: Methuen, 1913), 103.
admitted that ‘the naval predominance of Great Britain in Europe to-day is greater than it was before the passage of the first of the [German] Navy Acts in 1896’.

But this did not mean that Germany was giving up its challenge to Britain:

Sea-power is costly, while air-power is cheap: for the cost of a single Dreadnought of the sea, a dozen Dreadnoughts of the air, each with a revolving shed of the latest type, can be constructed. German expert opinion believes that by command of the air Germany can neutralise our superiority on the sea, besides unnerving the civil population and thus embarrassing the Government by cruising over these islands -- high above the reach of artillery -- and dropping bombs. This is the confessed policy of Germany, and we have not a single long-range airship by which we can take the only effective defensive action -- the strong offensive.

As a Review of Reviews headline put it, ‘THE SEA TO US, THE AIR TO THE FOE’.

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139 Devon and Exeter Gazette, 29 March 1913, 2.
140 Excubitor, 'Sea and air command: Germany’s new policy', Fortnightly Review 93 (1913): 868.
141 Ibid., 868.
142 'Britain’s Peril in the Air', 127.
Many navalists accepted this line of argument and resolved to force the government to act. As recently as September 1912, the Navy League had disdained any interest in aviation, telling one of its members to send his ‘communication on the subject of Air Ships in Naval Defence’ to the Aero
Club instead.\textsuperscript{143} This changed very quickly, thanks to the phantom airships. At the League’s Grand Council meeting in February 1913, the prominent navalist and journalist Arnold White noted the ‘airships in the habit of suspiciously visiting this country at night’, and called for ‘immediate action by the Government in the matter of airship defence’:

They knew from reports of the enormous progress made in the direction of bombs from airships, and seeing that the Navy League desired to maintain the power of the Navy, it came within their duty to urge on the Government that at all costs this country must catch up other nations which had passed them in this struggle in the air.\textsuperscript{144}

The League’s executive committee was persuaded. Not two weeks had passed before it decided to take an interest in the question of aerial defence: ‘By lectures and by leaflets, and in every other way possible, the urgency of the matter will be kept before the eyes of the people’.\textsuperscript{145} In March, it commissioned an eight-colour poster publicising its demand that the government spend £1 million on aerial defence, showing Britannia hovering over the British Isles with the aid of a large airship, waving forward the clouds of aircraft behind her, ruling the clouds as she already ruled the waves. In an echo of Grahame-White’s campaign the previous summer, it implored “Britons [to] wake up!” (Figure 5) This was ‘displayed at most of the London Railway Stations and on London hoardings and […] widely distributed throughout the country’.\textsuperscript{146} There followed in May the creation by the Navy League of an Aeronautical Defence Fund and the National Aeronautical Defence Association (NADA), with an executive committee filled with worthies: six peers, three admirals, four generals, seven MPs, the editors of the \textit{Express} and the \textit{Standard}, the Lord Mayor of London, the chairman of Lloyds and several aviation experts, including Grey, editor of the \textit{Aeroplane}.\textsuperscript{147}

The conservative press supported the Navy League’s demand for a substantial and immediate increase in the sum allocated to aviation the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[144] ‘Defence against airships’, \textit{The Times}, 20 February 1913, 4.
\item[145] ‘The power of the air’, \textit{Observer}, 2 March 1913, 12.
\item[146] MSSC, minutes, Navy League executive committee meetings, 19 March 1913 and 16 April 1913.
\item[147] MSSC, minutes, NADA executive committee meeting, 16 May 1913.
\end{footnotes}
forthcoming Army Estimates. The Pall Mall Gazette, supported by the Observer and the Mirror, had argued for a three year, £3 million aeronautical defence programme in December 1912, but this attracted little attention at the time. The phantom airships now provided the opportunity to revisit the proposals. Newspapers lined up to echo the call for at least £1 million to be spent on aviation in the forthcoming Army Estimates, more than triple the 1912 level. The Aerial League and the Navy League both issued memorials in support, sent to the prime minister, members of parliament, and the press; Grahame-White was an early supporter, as was the trade journal Flight, with the Aeroplane trailing, somewhat sceptically, behind. Even the radical Manchester Guardian, while denying 'the slightest need for panic or for extravagance', admitted that 'the inadequacy of our aircraft service should certainly be discussed at length in Parliament, both on the Army and the Navy Estimates'. Invoking the spirit of Nelson, Flight claimed that this near-unanimity of opinion 'made it quite evident that the country at large expects the Government to do its duty in setting about the establishment of England’s supremacy in the air'. The amount of £1 million was understood to be the barest minimum necessary for national safety; the Manchester Courier instead demanded £1.5 million, soon increasing this to no less than £2 million. These figures usually came with few details as to how the money should be spent, though the Navy League’s widely supported memorial contained an itemised budget totalling £1.16 million, including £410,000 for ‘Four large rigid experimental dirigibles’ and associated infrastructure. Instead, the proposed £1 million aerial budget was used as a benchmark by which the government’s air policy could be judged — and hence criticised. When the Army Estimates were announced, the total provision for aviation

152 ‘The million’, Flight, 8 March 1913, 272.
153 ‘“Ships that pass in the night”’, Manchester Courier, 3 March 1913, 7; ‘The shadow’, Manchester Courier, 13 March 1913, 6.
was only £526,000 which, while a substantial increase from 1912, now fell far short of expectations. The *Daily Telegraph* denounced Seely’s proposals as ‘cheese-paring’, and continued to insist on ‘a round million’ instead. Joynson-Hicks pointed out that ‘We are going to spend, at the outside, half a million this year. France is to spend one and three-quarter millions, Germany well over one million’. Worse, for the *Express*, was that ‘No mention was made of the danger of the aerial invasion of this country, nor how it was to be met’.

**Conclusion**

The phantom airships continued their mysterious visits into March and April 1913. However, evidence of widespread hoaxing began to mount; and the great number of witnesses now became embarrassing: ‘The very multiplicity of these reports discredits them’, as the *Daily Mail* had suggested at the end of February. Press reports of phantom airship diminished rapidly thereafter. An airship seen by many over central London on the evening of 7 March seemed to have ‘the dome of St Paul’s as its objective’; an ‘aeroplane’ over Galway, Ireland, three weeks later suggested to residents ‘highly imaginative pictures of a German invasion, evidently an echo of the recent airship scare in England’. Captain Lindsay saw another at Cardiff on 8 April, another was reported from the Orkneys the following evening. Soon, however, either sightings were no longer being made, or the press had lost interest.

The phantom airship scare may have been over, but the airship panic it had launched rumbled on into early May. An ambitious public meeting held on 5 May at the Mansion House by the Navy League with the support of the...
Mail failed to meet expectations. By the autumn, NADA was moribund. For that matter, other than the low-key announcement that the Navy intended to build several large rigid airships for experimental purposes – only one of which, the Vickers-built HMA 9, was actually ordered, in June – the airship panic had apparent little result in the short term. In this sense the agitation was not as effective as the dreadnought panic of 1909 had been; despite the phantom airships, Flight lamented that ‘the seriousness of the position has not yet gripped the minds of the majority of the British public’. But, coincidentally or not, the amount devoted to aviation in the 1914 Army Estimates came to £1 million, just as the scaremongers had demanded a year earlier.

The importance of the phantom airship scare and the ensuing airship panic cannot be measured only in political, financial, or military terms, however. The scare and the panic confirmed the idea that airships were a potent threat to Britain. Perhaps surprisingly, there was, as yet, relatively little concern about the possibility of cities being bombed. The Illustrated London News did publish an aerial photograph of a Libyan oasis bombed by Italian aircraft showing ‘the damage a dirigible can do’, pairing it with another aerial photograph of a town to show ‘the kind of target a military dirigible would have’. The Berlin correspondent of The Times wondered what would happen ‘if one fine night it were discovered that a dozen enormous hostile airships were floating over London, or Portsmouth, or other centre?’

After the detonation of some 600 powerful bombs in one night, next night or the night after the enemy might return and ‘go on doing it’ every day that the wind allowed. We could do nothing to prevent them!

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162 ‘Two to one in the air’, Daily Mail, 12 April 1913, 5; ‘Defence of England’, Daily Mail, 5 May 1913, 7.
163 An executive committee meeting was called in October, but the minutes were not recorded, suggesting an abrupt termination of its activities: MSSC, minutes, Navy League executive committee meeting, 24 September 1913. The last recorded executive committee meeting was in June: MSSC, minutes, NADA executive committee meeting, 25 June 1913.
165 ‘Paper defence’, Flight, 12 July 1913, 754.
166 ‘Army estimates’, Flight, 14 March 1914, 282.
167 ‘Is it “The sea to us, the air to the foe”’, Illustrated London News, 22 February 1913, 239.
Even if such tactics have not that decisive result that we have been accustomed to consider as necessary to defeat, yet, could we put up with such a bombardment day after day without soon coming to terms?\textsuperscript{168}

This came close to anticipating the theory of irresistible aerial bombardment that would emerge during the war, the knock-out blow from the air.\textsuperscript{169} But while in some ways it foreshadowed the fear of the bomber which became so pervasive in Britain in the interwar period, the fear of the Zeppelin before 1914 was not the same as the fear of the bomber after 1918. This was because aircraft were not yet believed capable of winning wars unaided; the experience of aerial bombardment itself, especially the Gotha raids on London in 1917 and 1918, was required in order to develop the theory of the knock-out blow.\textsuperscript{170} For the present, the airship peril was only partly that it endangered civilians directly; it was more that it would compound the danger of German spies, dreadnoughts, and invasion. Zeppelins could spy out Britain’s defences, destroy its ports and arsenals, and prepare the way for invasion. 1913 was the perfect Edwardian panic.

The airship panic could not have happened without the phantom airship scare that preceded it, and the phantom airship scare could not have happened without the aerial theatre. The British people had already learned from the flying displays at Hendon, the exhibitions at Olympia, the cinemas and music halls of the importance of aviation. They knew from the fighting in North Africa and in the Balkans that airpower was now a part of war. From the press, they learned that the most powerful aircraft were airships, that the German airship fleet was unsurpassed by any in the world, and that Britain had nothing to stand against it. \textit{Hansa}’s flight from Hamburg to Copenhagen in September 1912 showed that Zeppelins were experimenting in long-distance flight; the Sheerness incident the following month apparently proved that Germany was now extending its aerial reach to Britain itself. The result was the widespread belief that not only could German airships fly over Britain, but that they were already doing so. The conservative press reversed this, arguing that whether or not Zeppelins were really visiting Britain, they possessed the ability to do so. Hence the airship panic, the result over

\textsuperscript{168} ‘Airship rumours’, \textit{The Times}, 27 February 1913, 6.
\textsuperscript{169} Holman, \textit{The Next War in the Air}.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 23-54.
Britain’s inability to prevent attacks by German airships in time of war, or to strike back with its own airships.

The 1913 phantom airship scare and airship panic support, from a different direction, Rüger’s observation that ‘The “great game for mastery in the North Sea” was as much a cultural phenomenon as it was a strategic one’:

Long before the North Sea became a theatre of war in August 1914, it was a theatre of power and identity. It translated the increasing willingness to run the risk of war — while not necessarily intending to go to war — into a multi-faceted spectacle that was watched by domestic and foreign audiences alike. It nurtured a culture of conflict that limited the scope for diplomacy and détente.171

Like the naval theatre, the aerial theatre failed to reflect the recent improvement in diplomatic relations between Britain and Germany. Unlike the naval theatre, the aerial theatre projected British weakness. The greatest aviation spectacles in the Edwardian period were organised by civilians, and conveyed the message that Britain was dangerously behind in the air. This lack of perceived superiority or even parity in the air meant that even more than the naval theatre, the aerial theatre seemed to affirm German deceit and malice. For if navalists could not understand why Germany would build a powerful navy if not to overcome British naval superiority, their airminded counterparts could see no other reason for the German obsession with long-range airships capable of attacking anywhere in Britain, given the lack of any corresponding aerial threat from Britain. From across the North Sea, Germany’s Zeppelin fleet appeared to have only one purpose: to enable the destruction of Britain. The phantom airship scare of 1913 shows that this was not merely an elite anxiety: it was something felt, and imagined, by ordinary people all over the nation.

When war did come the following year, no attacks came from the air, at least not at first; but the fear of German airpower re-emerged almost immediately.172 Lady Annette Matthews of Tunbridge Wells ‘used to dream of bombs dropping from the sky in early August, when there was no likelihood

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171 Rüger, The Great Naval Game, 249.
of such a thing occurring'. A sentry guarding an Aberdeen railway tunnel fired on a supposed airship in September, only to find he was shooting at the moon. In October, the village of Pitlochy was mesmerised by a starlike object, ‘anxiously wondering if the long-threatened Zeppelin raid had at length materialised’. Rumours of German aircraft bases in the Chilterns, the Highlands and the Lake District led to fruitless searches throughout the autumn by police and the military. It is not true to say, then, that ‘imaginations literally could not foresee an attack from the air’, as Catriona Pennell suggests; such an attack was in fact foreseen, expected and, if only in a purely subjective sense, even experienced long before the first air raids took place in December 1914 and January 1915. But the form which this attack was believed would take was much more espionage and subterfuge than it was bombing. Only from October 1914, with news of the aerial bombardment of Antwerp and the dimming of London’s lights, did this begin to change. The conclusion must be that the British people were still drawing on their prewar images of aviation, and the prewar aerial theatre in particular, for their understanding and their anxieties in the first few months of the war, before they had any actual experience of aerial warfare to go on. Of course, it is not surprising that many would be nervous in wartime, and start jumping at shadows both figuratively and literally: the urge to do something, anything, could be powerful, particularly on the home front where chances to directly confront the enemy were minimal, leading to the need to, 

173 Imperial War Museum, Documents.17087, diary, Amelia Matthews, 15 October 1914.
175 ‘Atholl’s air mystery’, Evening Telegraph and Post (Dundee), 15 October 1914, 3.
176 ‘A supposed Zeppelin base’, Newcastle Daily Journal, 20 October 1914, 5; TNA, AIR 1/826/204/5/150, Reports of hostile aircraft being seen in N.W. of Scotland; TNA, AIR 1/565/16/15/89, GHQ. Home Forces. Intelligence reports of reported movements of hostile aircraft and ships.
177 Pennell, A Kingdom United, 135. Hundreds of mystery airships and aeroplanes were reported to the authorities between August 1914 and January 1915: see TNA, AIR 1/565/16/15/89, GHQ. Home Forces. Intelligence reports of reported movements of hostile aircraft and ships.
178 See the summaries for August and September 1914 in TNA, AIR 1/565/16/15/88, GHQ. Home Forces. Intelligence reports of reported movements of hostile aircraft and ships.
as Michael McKernan describes in the Australian context, ‘manufacture threats and crises to make the war real and immediate’. But that just makes it all the more interesting, then, that the British people felt the same need in a time of peace, and imagined a German threat in the sky above them where there was none.

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