

Men

of

Metal

Eyewitness Accounts of Humanoid Robots

an excerpt from **Rowland Samuel**
the book by



Casson Publishing Ltd. London

cassonpublishing.co.uk

Published by Casson Publishing, Ltd. London
James Casson, Proprietor

2004 Rowland Samuel

All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

All Casson Publishing titles, imprints, and distributed lines are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotions, premiums, fund-raising, educational, or institutional use. Special book excerpts or customized printings can also be created to fit specific needs. For details, write or phone the office of Casson Publishing.

Casson Publishing, Ltd. and the Casson Publishing logo are symbols of Casson Publishing, Ltd.

First Casson Publishing: January, 2004

To Simon, for doubting. And K.C., for believing.

Every man can see things far off but is blind to what is near.

—Sophocles

Probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities.

—Aristotle

I know what I saw.

—Horace Burrowes

February 9, 2003.

The first time I heard the story I laughed my arse off. Everybody did.

I'm at a party in Oxford, and like almost every party in Oxford, it's boring as hell. People are droning on about cricket and the Labor Party and Parliament and I'm ready to slit my wrists. My girlfriend Jen spots an old friend across the room and drags me over to meet him. Brilliant.

His name is James Casson and he tells me he's a publisher and I tell him I'm a freelance journalist and I brace myself for a bit of excruciating small talk. But James isn't as boring as James looks. He says he publishes books about the occult. Unexplained phenomena. Doesn't take the stuff too seriously, just puts it on paper with a wink and a nod. Funny. The conversation turns to urban legends and we try to out-urban legend each other. I start with the alligators in the sewers in New York and he counters with people stealing kidneys in Mexico. Doberman choking on thief's finger is met with hook found on the door of a car. We go on and on, until he throws out a story I hadn't heard.

Apparently, a mate of his had a classic "bright lights came out of nowhere" experience on a road outside of town. Where these things always seem to happen. He is driving along on a rainy night and skids off the road and sees something – he's not sure what – and before he knows it, he's magically back on the road, safe and sound. Very Hollywood. We all have a big laugh and then James plays his trump card.

Seems this fellow took a snapshot.

February 11.

Another grey winter day in Oxford. I'm writing a story on the upcoming elections. I look down at my desk and see James' business card.

I don't want to look like a wanker, but I want to meet the guy with the bright lights story. Might make for a good piece. Or at least a good laugh. So I say sod it and swallow my pride and ring James. He gives me a condescending chuckle and I'm already regretting the call.

"His name is Horace Burrowes."

He gives me the number.

"Oh, and if there's anything to it, remember where you got the story."

Red-faced, I thank him for the number and reassure him that yes, once I prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Horace Burrowes was visited by aliens, he'll be the first to know. I hang up.

Horace Burrowes.

I ring his number and a woman answers. I ask for Horace. A surprisingly sane voice appears on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Horace? Rowland Samuel. Sorry to bother you, but I've been given your number by a mutual acquaintance, James Casson, and –"

"Oh. It's about the other night then."

When people have been subjected to a sufficient amount of ridicule, they get a certain resignation in their voice. Horace has that voice in spades. I tread lightly.

"Listen, I was just wondering if I could come out and chat for a bit. I mean to do a story. I'm a journalist."

Long pause. He's weighing his options.

“This afternoon okay?”

Horace has a normal house in a normal neighbourhood. He has a normal wife. So far, I’m encouraged. He’s middle-aged and short and squat and doesn’t have a crazy look in his eye. Of course, they never do.

Horace tells his story. He’s on the A40 back to Oxford. Just attended an economics conference in Wheatley – he’s a college professor – and there’s driving rain. He hits a patch of water and his car begins to aquaplane. He panics. Slams the brakes, over-steers. If you can do it wrong, Horace did it. His car starts to careen off the road and things look dodgy.

That’s when he saw it.

There’s a bright light, so bright he has to look away. He feels his car being lifted into the air and gets disoriented. He braces for impact and thinks about his wife and children. There is a loud thump and he looks up.

The light has diminished. His car is back on the road, apparently undamaged, and he’s unhurt. There is a loud humming sound and he looks up to see an object, or at least a piece of an object. He only catches a glimpse of it, but to him, it looks almost like a hand. Definitely not human. He fumbles for his camera and snaps off a picture before it disappears.

Horace stops for a moment. Assesses my reaction. The incredulous look on my face is one he’s seen before. I try to look as if I’m open-minded, but I know it isn’t working. He fixes his eyes on mine.

“I know what I saw.”

He continues. A few seconds after the thing disappears, an old Land Rover drives up and pulls to a stop. The driver rushes up to Horace and asks if he’s okay. Horace stops to collect himself and everything seems to be in order. They chat for a moment about what they’ve seen, and as Horace is getting back in his car, the bloke tries to rip the camera out of his hand.

“He tried to grab the camera? Why?”

“I don’t know. He just did. But I wouldn’t let go. Then when the police car drove up, he scrambled into his car and drove away.”

Now for the money shot. Horace walks over to his desk and pulls out an envelope. Without any fanfare, he hands me the picture.

It looked like every other close encounter image. Blurry and inconclusive. There was a road. There was rain. There was something shiny, out of focus. Maybe it was an alien or a spacecraft. For all I knew, it was a parking meter.

Horace tells me the picture is mine, he has others. I tuck it into my bag, thank him for his time and head for the door. He has a long face.

Poor Horace.

February 13.

Bloody Horace.

After a few calls to his friends and colleagues at the university, a different picture emerges. Horace, it turns out, is a conspiracy buff. He's mad about UFOs. Dragged the entire family to Loch Ness a few years ago. Been to Area 51. He's the laughingstock of his entire social circle.

I'd been duped.

At this point, I have half a mind to ring Horace and let him have it. And James, too. I look at Horace's number. I look at the notes I'd taken during our meeting. I pick up the phone.

Instead of ringing Horace, I call the Oxford police. I ask to speak to the officer who came upon Horace after the so-called incident. Fifteen minutes later, a voice comes on the phone.

"Hello?"

I push past the embarrassment, introduce myself and ask the officer about the night in question. He remembers it. Most of the details match up with Horace's account of things. The weather. The location. The other man who had pulled up on the scene first.

“And Mr. Burrowes’ demeanor?”

He was very composed, says the officer. Rational, articulate, not hysterical. Gave him a breath test for alcohol and he passed with flying colours. Seemed fine to him. A lot more composed than the lady two nights before.

I want to make sure I’m hearing him right.

“The lady two nights before?”

According to the officer, there had been a similar incident on Iffley Road. A woman was in a near collision at an intersection, and reported seeing something unusual. No injuries, but there was an odd-looking dent on her car. She was completely hysterical when he arrived. Apparently she still was.

I ask for the police report he filed, as well as the report on Horace Burrowes. They show up in the mail two days later.

February 15.

72 Magdalan Road. A man answers the door and he’s none too happy to see me. He’s a big bloke, easily twice my size. I introduce myself.

“Is Mrs. Graham at home?”

“What do you want with her?”

I explain that I’ve a couple questions about the incident on Iffley Road. Tell him that I’m writing a piece and won’t be a minute.

“Mrs. Graham isn’t well,” he says, flitting his eyes about the neighbourhood. “She can’t talk at the moment. Especially not about that.”

With that, the door shuts abruptly in my face and I’m left standing alone on the front porch. Weird. I turn to walk to my car.

As I start to pull out of the drive, I notice the Grahams have a hired car parked in front of their home. It makes me wonder. If the Grahams are driving a hired car, where’s the car that Mrs. Graham was driving that night?

February 16.

I call the police officer back. I can tell by his tone that I'm wearing out my welcome. I ask if I can get just a little more information about that evening.

Long pause. Deep sigh.

"Let's make this the last of it then."

"Right. That evening, when you came upon Mrs. Graham, you said there was a dent in her car. Did she drive her car home?"

"She was too hysterical to drive. Her husband came and collected her. The car was towed."

"Who towed it?" I ask.

"Sloane Breakdown."

February 17.

The woman on the other end of the line is disinterested.

"Graham, Graham," she mumbles to herself. "What was the date?"

"February 3," I tell her for the third time. Tooth extractions have been less painful.

"Here it is. It went to Murphy's Respray. On Cowley Road."

I thank her and get in my car.

Murphy's Respray. I weave my way through caustic fumes and deceased auto parts and approach the man at the desk. I hand him my card and explain that a friend of mine was involved in an accident, and I was curious to see her car. The name was Graham, I say. He looks at me suspiciously but finally relents. He disappears into another room and returns.

“It’s gone. Finished yesterday. The customer picked it up this morning.”

I think for a minute.

“The parts you replaced, are they still here?”

They were. He takes me out back and shows me where they are.

I see a rear quarter panel and a rear bumper, each bent in an odd manner. Very unusual. I’ve not seen many accidents, but I’ve never seen a dent that looked like this. I look at the man and wrinkle my forehead. He shrugs his shoulders.

“Can I keep this?” I ask.

He says okay, so I lug the quarter panel and bumper out to my car.

February 18.

Dr. John Newman is an engineering professor who specializes in metallurgy. He teaches at the university, and he’s been kind enough to give me a few minutes.

I can see by his expression that he’s more accustomed to seeing papers on his desk than bumpers and quarter panels. He steps a little closer and peers through his bifocals.

“This wasn’t caused by a collision with another car. Nor a collision with a wall or a tree.”

He takes his glasses off and stands up. He’s tall and thin.

“This was caused by opposable forces. Two large controlled forces of equal pressure – very great pressure – on either side of the fender.”

I must have a blank look on my face, because he proceeds to dumb it down.

“Think of a vice. When you put a pipe in a vice, and tighten it, the vice applies the same amount of pressure to both sides of the pipe, right?”

I nod my head. He’s treating me like I’m five.

“Or a finger and thumb. This is really a lot like a finger and an opposing thumb. A really, really strong opposing thumb, with the level of control you might see in manufacturing. Complex shapes like these usually involve robotics.”

Dr. Newman pauses and asks me how it happened. I tell him he knows as much as I do and I thank him for his time.

As I’m leaving the building, I walk past portraits of the more famous graduates from the university. Robert Boyle, scientist. Edmund Halley, astronomer. Colin Mayhew, engineering and robotics. Dr. Newman was keeping good company.

February 25.

The phone rings. It’s the guy from Murphy’s Respray, only it doesn’t sound like him, because he’s talking fast. Apparently another car came into the shop last night and the damage is identical to the Grahams’ car. I can come look if I want to. He’ll be there until six.

I was there in 20 minutes. He was right about the damage. Same crinkle effect, same spot on the car. Opposing forces at work.

I ask for the owner’s name and he disappears into the same room and comes back with a sheet of paper.

Pelham Stevens
47 Rawlinson Road
Oxford

This is the land of the rich. Iron gates, family crests and servants' quarters. Very posh. I wind past the hedgerows, looking for the Stevens' home. I don't know who Pelham Stevens is, but he either has a very good job or a very good lineage. People like me don't muck about in these neighbourhoods unless we're delivering packages or pruning shrubs.

I ring the bell and a distinguished man answers the door.

"Mr. Stevens?"

"Yes?"

I'm a little surprised, because people in homes like these usually don't answer their own doors.

"Rowland Samuel. I'm a journalist."

I explain myself, give him a little background on what I've been doing. I can see he's about to give me the bum's rush, so I mention that another car had damage identical to his. Now he's listening. He asks what Mrs. Graham saw, and I say she won't talk. I ask him for his story.

He invites me inside and we sit down. It seems he and his family had been on holiday and were coming home. Just outside Oxford, the gates at a railway crossing go down. He comes to a stop and waits for the train. The train doesn't come, so he decides to go around the gates.

Wealthy people, I think. They never like to wait.

As they cross the tracks, the car hesitates. Then he hears a train horn and looks up to see a commuter train barreling down on him. He panics and pops the clutch, stalling the car. His wife is screaming. His children are screaming. The train is getting louder and starting to shake the car. He desperately tries to open his door to push it off the tracks. It's like a film, he says.

Then the sound of the train is replaced by a hum and a loud pounding. The pounding grows more intense and his daughter is hysterical and the train is almost on top of them. Suddenly, the pounding stops and they find themselves in the air, with the train beneath them. They see a streak of yellow outside the car and then feel themselves being lowered to the ground. Moving west, away from the car on what appear to be hind legs, is some sort of object. They get out of the car, and they are a good 20 meters away from the railroad tracks, safely on the side of the road.

That's when he noticed the dents.

February 26.

I reason that I'm going to need some help sorting out what's going on here. The search engine uploads and I enter a name. "Colin Mayhew."

65,800 hits. Colin Mayhew the plumber. Colin Mayhew the chimney sweep. Colin Mayhew the composer.

I scroll down and see what I'm looking for. Colin Mayhew, Ph.D.

It's a rudimentary web site showing an extensive collection of miniature locomotives. There's a little bio about Dr. Mayhew and his family. But that's about it.

Seems Dr. Mayhew is an engineer, all right. The kind who drives trains.

Just then, the phone rings. It's Mrs. Graham. She's ready to talk.

We agree to meet at a café on Gloucester Green. The further from her giant of a husband the better, I think.

"Mrs. Graham?" I ask.

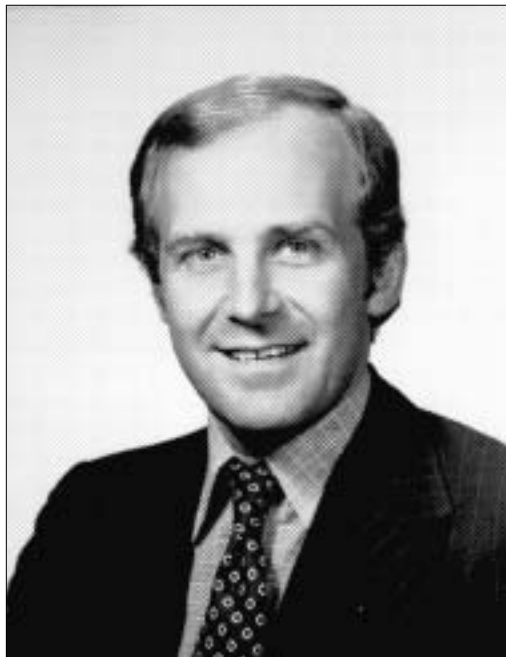
She nods. She looks fairly together. Hair done up, nice skirt and blouse. Not the Queen Mother, but still quite conservative.



Press photo of Dr. Mayhew, taken shortly after the introduction of the new Mini.



Even in his youth, Dr. Mayhew was an avid car enthusiast. He built this race-car from salvaged auto parts in his parents' garage outside London. The woman to the right would later become his wife.



Dr. Colin Mayhew, circa 1975. By this time, according to his colleague, his interest in robotics was well established.



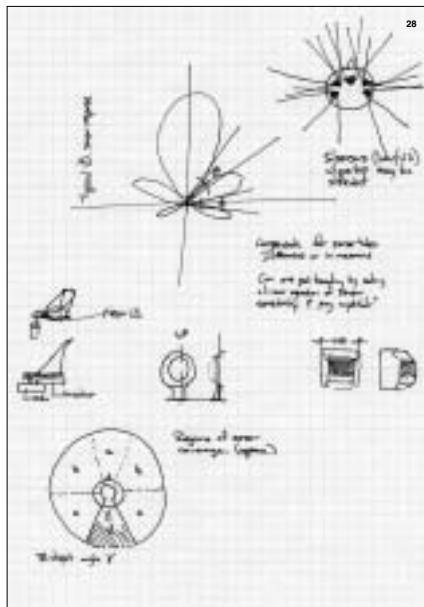
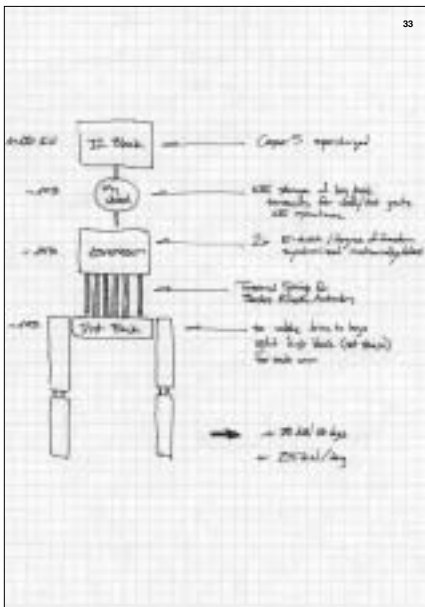
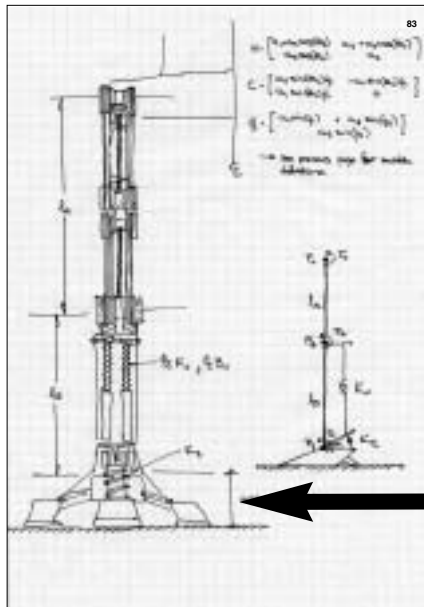
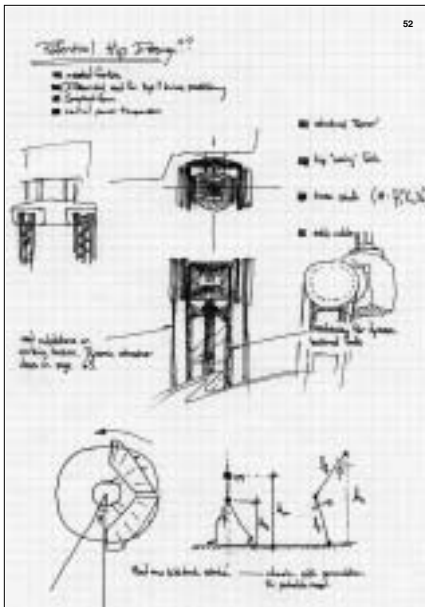
Surveillance photo taken of Dr. Mayhew, April 23, 2003. He has yet to comment on the sightings in Oxford.



© 2004 MINI, a division of BMW of North America, LLC. The MINI name and logo are registered trademarks.



The object on the left was removed from a train track, 20 yards from the sighting on Botley Road. It has been identified as the tailpipe of a Mini Cooper (above) based on its classic beer can shape.



On my second visit to www.r50rd.co.uk/research/internal/v2i/engin/, I found several of Dr. Mayhew's drawings. They appear to be a blueprint for some sort of robot. One image (top right) is consistent with the depressions found after two of the sightings.



Depressions found along Iffley Road, in the direction Mrs. Graham claimed the object was moving. Similar depressions were found after a sighting by an Oxford police officer.



Opposable forces at work. Mrs. Graham's bumper, recovered after her encounter. A similar pattern was found on Pelham Stevens' car.



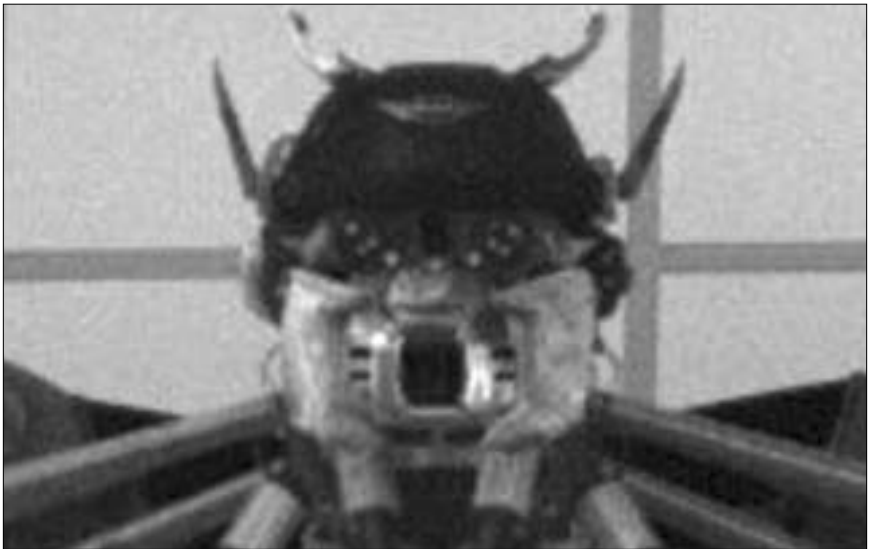
This photo, which also appears on the cover, was taken by Horace Burrowes on the A40, two days after the Graham sighting. Note the object to the right. Photo courtesy Horace Burrowes.



Block figure made by Pelham Stevens' son, age 6. I noticed it as I was leaving the Stevens' residence. His son was in the car at the time of the sighting.



When I met with Mrs. Graham, I asked her to draw a picture of what she had seen. Her sighting, February 3, was the first on record.



I downloaded this image from www.r50rd.co.uk/research/internal/v2i/engine/ and showed it to both Horace Burrowes and Pelham Stevens. Each felt the object was similar to what they had seen.

Her story was similar to the others. Like Horace Burrowes and Pelham Stevens, she had her encounter when she was in danger. In her car. On the road. At night. She too saw a large object, maybe 15 feet tall, and as it left, it was going like the clappers. And she had no idea what she had seen.

I ask her if she managed to take a picture. She says that at the time, taking a picture was probably the last thing on her mind. I ask if she got a good enough look at it to draw a picture of it. She says she'll try. I give her paper and pencil, and after a few minutes, she presents me with a drawing.

I'm not exactly sure what I'm looking at. But whatever it is, it's looking back at me.

Before we get in our cars, I ask her one more question.

"Mrs. Graham, when the object left your car, in which direction was it traveling?"

"I don't know. Down Iffley Road, so I suppose westwards."

February 27.

"Here you go. It's an Oxford number."

I write it down.

"And the address?"

"2438 Binsey Lane."

"Thanks, Michael," I say. "Give my regards to Anna."

I have a mate at the phone company. I don't ask him for many favors, but when I do, he usually comes through. I ring Dr. Mayhew's number.

"Hello?"

The voice sounds like the voice of a 65-year-old man.

“Dr. Mayhew. Rowland Samuel. I’m writing an article and I’d love a moment of your time.”

“An article about what?” He sounds annoyed, distracted.

“I feel a little silly even saying it, but there have been some unexplained sightings in the Oxford area as of late, and I was wondering if you could help me get to the bottom of it.”

Long pause.

“I’m afraid I’d be of no help.”

Dial tone. I’ve been hung up on.

February 28.

Iffley is a quiet little road not far from the Graham’s neighbourhood. I drive along in the direction Mrs. Graham said the object had moved. So far, all I see are big houses and iron gates.

A mile later, I notice a fence that is lying on its side. Unusual, because things are seldom in disrepair in neighbourhoods like these. I pull over and find that a 10 foot section of wrought iron fencing has been crushed.

A few feet from the fence is a series of four depressions. The depressions are rectangular, one about 17 inches by 10 inches. Another, 15 by 13. Then two smaller depressions, 5 by 7. There are four of them and together they make the shape of a cross.

Ten feet away there are four more depressions. And beyond that, four more still.

I look around and no one else is about. Apparently, I’m the only one who thinks a crushed iron fence and a series of huge depressions in a neighbourhood like this are unusual. I go back to my car for my camera, and snap off a few shots of the scene.

I drive further along Iffley Road, another three miles. Nothing.

March 3.

Dr. Newman has an amused look on his face. His eyes dart around his office.

“Colin Mayhew,” he muses.

I’m here to see if he can arrange a meeting with Dr. Mayhew, to help me understand the damage to the Grahams’ and Stevens’ cars.

“Colin Mayhew was a friend of mine. We graduated together in 1963. He was interested in cars, always was, and eventually took a position at British Motor Corporation, to work on the Mini. Years later, he became very involved in the new Mini, from what I understand. The engineering of the parts, the machining. That’s when the university put his picture on the wall.”

His eyes shift toward the hallway.

“But as I understand it, there had been some disagreement between Colin and the rest of the engineering team. Some felt he was adding technology to the car needlessly.”

He doodles while he speaks.

“Colin’s second love was robotics. Wrote a few papers, but most of his work was never taken very seriously. Over the years, he became more and more reclusive and we drifted apart. He lives here in Oxford now, but we haven’t spoken in ages.”

I explain my conversation with Dr. Mayhew last week. I ask what he’s like personally.

“Colin is, how should I put this, he has a tough exterior. But he’s warm, at least he was. Has an odd sense of humour. Once spent the better part of a year going by an anagram of his name. Can’t remember what it was now. Collected miniature locomotives as well.”

I leave Dr. Newman’s office and walk past Dr. Mayhew’s portrait again. He looks happy.

March 4.

Reading the morning paper. Page 3. There's an article that catches my eye. Someone drove through a roadside barrier on the outside of town but was apparently unhurt. No mention of an unexplained object moving at high speed, but I grab my keys anyway.

His name is Matthew and he's already suspicious of me. He's got that Horace Burrowes look in his eyes. He reluctantly goes through the story again – you can tell it's not the first time he's recounted it – and it goes something like this.

He is by himself on the road. It's half past twelve in the morning. He's been working late and hasn't slept in a day and falls asleep at the wheel. He wakes up to a clattering sound, and realizes his car is headed off the road. Before he can react, he's plunging through the roadside barrier. There is a flash of light to the side of his car and he feels the car suspended in mid-air. Things become very quiet. The next thing he knows, he's back on the road, unhurt.

He waits for me to laugh, but I ask a question instead.

“What did it look like?”

He doesn't want to answer but he does anyway.

“It looked like a big bloody robot.”

March 5.

Back online again, searching. If my grandmother's mince pie recipe comes up when I search for it, Dr. Mayhew's robotics papers should too.

I search “robotics” and come up with nothing. I search “engineering.” Bugger-all. I wonder if Dr. Newman and I are the only ones who know Dr. Mayhew exists.

I'm getting desperate, so I take a good look at Mayhew's last name. I remember the anagram story.

I search “hemway.” Nothing of interest. “Whamey.” Nope. I could be at this forever. Then I try “yahwem” and there are six hits. My hopes are quickly dampened when I see the first site is titled “MAT - M̃ty a skutecnost.” It looks like some sort of prayer, but it’s all gibberish to me. I click on a few more pages and realise I’ve hit the mother lode of theological web sites. Wonderful.

Just to be safe, I scroll through the rest of the sites to make sure I haven’t overlooked anything. I see something about the book of Genesis, then something catches my eye. It doesn’t have a description, it’s just a bare link. But it’s the text in the link that has me interested.

www.r50rd.co.uk/research/internal/v2i/engin/

I go to the web site and I’m looking at a rudimentary HTML page with video clips and text. I click on one of the mpegs and it loads. I see a poorly lit warehouse. There are Mini Coopers in various stages of disassembly strewn around. A white haired man is speaking to the camera. It looks like a bad home video.

“This is lab record 12, December 2, 1999. Robot arm dexterity test.”

To his right, there is an axle of a car with a wheel attached, propped up on a workbench. On his left is a kind of metal arm wedged into a vice. Something is hanging behind him, but I can’t make it out. The whole scene is awkward.

I get the feeling I shouldn’t be on this web site.

The man steps back, pulls a big screen behind the workbench and strikes a key on a computer.

The arm moves towards the wheel. Using its fingers, it appears to fasten a lug nut, and then it returns to its original position. The white-haired man looks pleased.

That’s when I recognise him.

It’s Dr. Mayhew. He’s aged considerably since he sat for his portrait at Oxford, but he’s got a curious energy about him.

I spend a little more time on the web site, looking at a few more tests. After I've seen the clips three or four times, I decide I've seen enough. I print a few pictures and tuck them into my bag.

March 6.

Horace Burrowes' wife rolls her eyes. Without speaking, she opens the door, lets me in and directs me towards the armchair where her husband is sitting. I see his happy round face and feel guilty for thinking him such a prat.

"I've something I'd like you to see," I tell him, and I dig into my satchel. I produce a picture of Dr. Mayhew's robot and place it in front of him.

"Does this look familiar?"

He looks the picture over and shrugs his shoulders.

"It could be. Like I told you before, I only caught a glimpse of it, so I can't be sure. But it does look similar, yes."

Even though Horace isn't sure it's what he saw, I can tell he feels vindicated. He looks a little closer and squints. He's discovered Dr. Mayhew in the background, behind the robot. He speaks without looking away from the photo.

"The night of the incident, when that man tried to grab my camera. I think this is him."

"Are you sure?"

His eyes drift off. "I'm not sure of anything anymore."

I say farewell to Horace and his wife, and make my way to the land of the rich again.

The Stevens are having tea and Pelham invites me to join them. I tell him thanks, but I'm in a bit of hurry, and could I just show him a picture. He seems confused but doesn't protest.

Pelham studies the picture for a moment. There is an awkward silence.

“There is a resemblance, to be sure. I didn’t get the best look at it that night. But it very well could be what we saw.”

Pelham starts to walk me out to my car, and I glance down to look at his son, who’s playing with blocks on the floor. He can’t be more than six. When I see what he’s made with the blocks, I’m dumbfounded. I run to the car to get my camera.

March 7.

I dial Dr. Mayhew’s number and wait for a ring. Instead of hearing his voice, I hear a recording. It’s from the phone company.

Dr. Mayhew’s phone has been disconnected. Instead of getting closer to an answer, I’m getting farther away.

March 9.

“Ludicrous.”

Dr. Newman is adamant.

I know he is right, but I had to propose the theory anyway. It was something right out of the pictures. Dr. Mayhew accelerates his robotics program. He retools the Mini Cooper so that its parts can be used to make huge sentinels of the roads. He over-engineers the car on purpose. He specifies a 163 hp supercharged engine and 6-speed transmission in the Cooper S to give the robot more speed and power. Accident sensors are added to detect imminent danger on the roads. The car’s nav system is not intended just for driver convenience, but for artificial intelligence as well. He then proceeds to use Mini parts to feed his robotics program. Finally, knowing his robots need real world challenges, he releases them at night into the outlying areas surrounding his research facility. Oxford, England.

"I'm not saying a robot of this caliber would never be possible," Dr. Newman continues. "But to perform as your eyewitnesses report, and achieve that level of intelligence, it would have to carry a computer nearly three times its size. A robot like this won't be feasible for another 40 years. Thirty at least."

I tell him I'm stumped, and I review the facts.

Something resembling a robot has been seen four times.

Each sighting has been in the Oxford area.

Two fenders have been crushed in a highly unusual manner.

Several large depressions have been discovered.

And an engineer with a strong interest in robotics, who happens to live in Oxford, has gone AWOL.

"Coincidence," says Dr. Newman.

I'm not so sure.

March 28.

Things get quiet for a while. I go back to working on articles I'd fallen behind on. Then out of nowhere, another sighting.

Apparently, a police officer writing a motorist a ticket saw something unusual moving along Stockmore Street. By the time he got in his car to check it out, it had vanished. But he discovered two more depressions.

I sit down and plot out a timeline. There seems to be no significance to the dates. I pull out a map of Oxford and mark where each sighting occurred. It's all random, no pattern that I can see. Then something occurs to me.

I flip back through my notes. After their encounters, Mrs. Graham and Mr. Stevens both saw the object moving west after contact. I ruffle through my bag and find Horace Burrowes' police report. He also reported it moving west. As did the police officer on Stockmore Street.

On my desk is Dr. Mayhew's address. 2438 Binsey Lane, Oxford.

West Oxford.

March 30.

There wasn't much time to consider the possibilities, because new information was coming to light.

According to city records, Dr. Mayhew applied for a permit to have 450V power lines dropped into his home. The permit was granted. Tree limbs as high as 15 feet tall have been broken around the city, most commonly along streets. A steady stream of Minis had been delivered to Dr. Mayhew's home for the last 16 months. And he'd had two garage doors recently installed. Each was 20 feet in height.

There has to be another explanation, I think. The phone rings.

It's the police officer from the Graham and Stevens cases. He's got optimism in his voice.

"I think you may want to see this."

I drive at breakneck speed down Botley Road, not sure what I'll find. Then I see the police car, and pull off to one side. A police officer comes over and greets me.

"Mr. Samuel?"

I nod my head.

As it turns out, a couple was driving home on Botley Road. A rabbit darts across the road, the husband swerves to miss him and the wife screams. She's sure they've hit the rabbit, he's sure they haven't. She insists he stop to check, so he pulls over, switches the car off and has a look. There's no sign of the rabbit. There's no sign of anything. So he goes to start his car again, but the battery is flat. The car won't start.

He begins arguing with his wife when a bright light appears. So bright they can't look at it. The car shakes and they both duck under the dash board. They hear a violent struggle not far away. It sounds like metal twisting. After a few seconds, the struggle stops and they hear the bonnet of their car go up and an instant later, their car has been started. By the time they look up, whatever was there had vanished. They look around and see nothing but a cattle grate in disrepair, not far from the car. Then they called the police.

"Where are they?"

"They've gone already. But have a look at this."

He leads me through 20 yards of sand and brush and points toward the cattle grate. It is twisted almost beyond recognition. Hard to do, because it's made of steel.

I walk over closer and see something wedged into the grate. It's long, its silver and it appears to be made out of metal.

April 3.

My mate Chris Shardlow has owned Minis all his life. Collected models as a child, rebuilt a Mini when he was 14 and was the first person in Oxford to buy a new one when they came out. His father worked at the Longbridge plant for 30 years as a machinist. Chris knows Minis.

"This is part of a tailpipe from the new Mini Cooper. Where did you get it?"

As he talks, I think back on how consumed I've become by this story. Visiting eyewitnesses, plotting sightings on maps and now, dragging auto parts around Oxford, looking for evidence of some metallic monster. I wonder what James Casson would think of me now. Chris gives me a jolt.

"Rowland. *Rowland*. Where did you get it?"

I tell him the cattle grate story and he raises his eyebrows. I ask him how he knows it's a tailpipe from a Mini Cooper.

“You can tell a Cooper tailpipe anywhere. It’s got a round shape, like a beer can.”

Now he’s talking down to me. I tell him thanks and grab my keys.

Back home now. My mind is reeling. The only thing I can think to do is to keep asking questions until someone answers. I reach for the phone and ring the Mini press office.

I introduce myself as a reporter and ask if they have any knowledge of the recent sightings in Oxford. They have no comment. I ask if they are aware of Dr. Mayhew’s experiments in robotics, using parts from Mini Coopers. No comment. I ask why they build artificial intelligence into the airbag sensors. Still no comment. I ask why so many parts of the Mini Cooper are over-engineered. Again, they have nothing to say.

October 24.

I wish I could tell you I’ve learnt the truth. That I somehow hid outside Dr. Mayhew’s residence and captured one of these robots and held it up for the world to see. But the truth is, I haven’t.

In fact, the sightings have come to an abrupt halt. Things in Oxford have settled back down. I’ve gone back to more mundane stories and people have gone back to their ordinary lives. But certain things continue to pique my interest. Like the fact that Dr. Mayhew has not been seen for six months, yet lights go on and off in his home every night. And the fact that his home consumes 10 times the electricity of homes equal in size.

As to Dr. Newman’s statement, that the computing power needed for a robot this size would require a computer of gigantic proportions, it makes me wonder: Has Dr. Mayhew discovered a way to untether his robots, using new technology that allows him to send large amounts of data wirelessly? Is he storing equipment in his car that makes large-scale remote data transmission possible? (Remember, Dr. Mayhew was seen close to the Burrowes incident.) And if he does have this technology, what are the ramifications for the way we will be able to communicate and live our lives?

Perhaps most curious is, if Dr. Mayhew does indeed have this technology, why has he yet to come forward? Does he plan to introduce his advancements in the future? Or is this all part of a plan we cannot yet understand?

As to whether these robots are loose in Oxford, we may never know. What we do know is this. There are pictures. There are eyewitnesses who seem perfectly sane. There are large depressions, the likes of which I've never seen. There is an exhaust pipe of a Mini Cooper that was found 60 feet from one of the sightings.

Perhaps most importantly, the one thing we can take away from these experiences is this. Whatever is out there, it means us no harm.

As to whether these robots are among us, I believe two things.

It would be unwise to say they are.

And it would be unwise to say they aren't.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Skeptics may discount the physical evidence as unreliable, while eyewitnesses will stand firmly by their accounts. But this much is indisputable:

Internal combustion robots are a reality. Recently, the robotics world was shocked by an autonomous walking dinosaur that was powered by IC. Quadraped trucks, hexapods and walking robots designed for the timber industry also run on IC power.

Many parts of the Mini Cooper are overbuilt. Consider the multi-link rear suspension alone. Any car enthusiast will tell you that on a front-wheel drive car, a multi-link rear suspension is overkill. Yet there it is on the Cooper. To this day, Mini has offered no formal explanation.

The amount of electrical energy needed for a 12 foot tall robot is estimated at 50 kW. For a gas powered engine to generate 50 kW (accounting for the 10% loss of power at the flywheel and 15% energy loss at the transmission), it would need to be able to produce just over 162 peak horsepower. Coincidentally, or not, the supercharged Mini Cooper S generates 163 hp.

In addition, what was considered impossible in robotics just a few years ago is now commonplace. For example, in 2002, scientists in South Florida developed a robot that could sense danger. Specifically, humans in danger. Heart surgery is now performed not just with the assistance of robots, but completely by robots. Advancements are being made at lightning speed.

All the while, the line between man and machine becomes ever more blurred.

Rowland Samuel
Oxford, England
November, 2003