

The hoaxes that fooled the world

From baby dragons to mermaids, aliens and giant stone men, some people have stopped at nothing to fool us.

A couple of weeks ago, we told you about perhaps the most intriguing scientific hoax of all time. In 1912, an unusual fossil was found by a man called Charles Dawson near Piltdown, in east Sussex. It seemed to be half-man, half-ape, and became known as the Piltdown Man. It was a huge find. Since Charles Darwin had published his theory of evolution in 1859, scientists were desperate to find fossils to support his idea that humans are related to apes. Although other fossils had already been found, this discovery meant that Britain could claim to be the birthplace of mankind.

However, in the 1950s, advances in scientific testing found these fossils to be fakes. The remains turned out to be an orang-utan's jaw attached to a human skull. Last month, new tests proved that Dawson himself must have created the hoax as he was the only person present when the discoveries were made.

Over the centuries, there have been hundreds of other elaborate forgeries and hoaxes. Take a look at some of the best.

Why do people create hoaxes?

People create hoaxes for lots of reasons. They often go to great lengths to create a convincing story in order to draw attention to themselves, to make themselves feel clever or to make money. Others just like seeing people fall for their pranks.

THE ALIEN AUTOPSY

In the 1990s, a man called Ray Santilli released a 50-year-old film that seemed to show an alien being examined by doctors. The footage was black and white, grainy and looked very strange. Even so, people who believed in UFOs loved it, and it starred in a special television programme called *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction?* As you might have guessed, it wasn't real. In 2006, Santilli admitted he filmed the whole thing using a dummy for the alien.



CROP CIRCLES

In the 1970s, mysterious patterns began appearing in fields all over England. The designs were so intricate that some people didn't think humans could have created them. UFO hunters believed that they were made by aliens trying to communicate with us. In 1991, Doug Bower and Dave Chorley came forward to admit that they had been behind the hoax. They'd created the circles by flattening the crops.

WORD OF THE WEEK

A hoax is a story that someone makes up to look like the truth, even though they know it's not true.

EYE FOR DETAIL

Allistair Mitchell went to the trouble of buying 100-year-old writing paper to create the fake documents supporting the dragon's history.

DRAGON IN A BOTTLE

In 2004, a man calling himself P.R. Moredun claimed a baby dragon had been found in a garage, and supposedly, he could prove it. He produced a tall glass jar with a perfectly preserved, pickled baby dragon inside. In fact, Crawley Creatures, the model makers behind the BBC's *Walking with Dinosaurs* series, created the dragon. It turned out that a man named Allistair Mitchell, who was desperate to get his novel about a dragon published, had concocted the whole thing. It worked: the resulting publicity led to him getting a book deal.

THE CARDIFF GIANT

In 1869, workers digging a well in a small town called Cardiff in the US unearthed a three-metre tall statue of a giant. The sensational discovery made headlines, and many people believed it was a real human giant whose flesh had been turned to stone. In fact, it was the work of a man called George Hull. The giant was actually made of stone and stained with acid to make it look old.

MECHANICAL CHESS PLAYER

In 1770, Wolfgang von Kempelen unveiled a mechanical puppet that could supposedly beat anyone who challenged it to a game of chess. For around 50 years the robot toured Europe and North America, defeating opponents. However, there was a chess master hiding underneath the robot and controlling its moves.

THE COTTINGLEY FAIRIES

In 1917, two young cousins, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, took photographs that appeared to show them posing with tiny, dancing fairies in their garden in Cottingley in Yorkshire. When the photos were published many believed the fairies were real, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the *Sherlock Holmes* author. In the 1980s, Elsie confessed that the fairies were paper cut-outs.



HELICOPTER SHARK

In 2001, this incredible image of a great white shark jumping out of the water, lunging at a man climbing up to a hovering helicopter, was sent to thousands of email addresses. The email fooled millions of people. However, the picture is just a combination of two different images.



FIJI MERMAID

Sailors have told stories about mysterious mermaids for hundreds of years, but in 1842, a man named P.T. Barnum claimed he had a real-life mermaid skeleton he had borrowed from a British doctor. He put the skeleton on display and people travelled from all over the US to marvel at it. Later, the skeleton was examined more closely and it turned out that the "mermaid" was in fact half a monkey joined to the tail of a fish.

