

Kyrle Probus Club members enjoyed an entertaining talk by guest speaker Mike Aggleton as he revealed fascinating background details of radio and TV hoaxes in Britain and the USA, at their meeting on Thursday 18 October.

The hoaxes were successfully perpetrated by BBC radio and TV and American radio with some dramatic results. Probably the most famous and effective hoax in the 20th century was the radio performance by actor and theatre manager Orson Welles, based on H.G. Wells book "War of the Worlds". Thousands of listeners were so convinced that they were being invaded by extra-terrestrial aliens that the 1938 broadcast created alarm and near panic, and established Welles' reputation in later theatre and Hollywood film productions.

Even when the broadcasters confessed that the scenarios were 'not real' many listeners remained in a state of shock, Mike said.

Reports of fiery explosions on the planet Mars were intermingled with stories of dead Martians being found, bodies being burned and mutilated and the Commander of the state militia imposing martial law.

Hordes of people roamed the streets, some jumping off buildings, and others suffering heart attacks, according to the 'fake news' items.

Newspapers established, however, that there were no hospital admissions, although calls were received from members of the public offering to 'give blood for the wounded'. The hostile press, who were suffering advertising losses to the radio, attacked the hoax, although a delighted Orson Welles achieved his objective in raising sponsorship for his Mercury theatre enterprise as a result of his spectacular tour de force.



A 'Martian Ball' was held in New Jersey to mark the 50th anniversary of the programme, said Mike. BBC Radio also staged a previous hoax called 'Broadcasting the Barricade' in 1926, in which a live broadcast featured a clock tower collapsing and a hotel being burned to the ground to the background of realistic sound effects and the Ministry of Defence being ordered to send a gunboat to 'quell the crowds'. In 1957 the revered Panorama commentator Richard Dimbleby was enrolled to do the voice-over for a 'spoof' documentary film asserting that a mild winter on the Swiss-Italy border had resulted in a heavy spaghetti harvest cultivated and home-grown on trees! "The cameraman was complimented on his great idea, and most of the public thought it was a great joke," said Mike. "It was the last item on Panorama.....on April 1st!".