Is there anybody out there and if there is, are they friendly? Those are questions human beings have been asking for centuries as they wonder whether life exists on other planets. On the evening of 30 October 1938, many Americans thought that both those questions had been answered when the Earth was invaded by Martians. The fact that many ordinary people believed they were under attack by extra-terrestrials seems extraordinary, but it relied on a series of coincidences and misunderstandings.

In 1938, there was no television and Sunday evening was a time when average Americans sat at home and listened to the radio. At the time, the young Orson Welles was a well-known actor and director. At 8 p.m. on 30 October 1938, the radio announcer introduced that evening’s play: Orson Welles in War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells. At exactly the same time, on another channel, there was a popular comedy show. Many people listened first to that and did not start to listen to War of the Worlds until fifteen minutes into the programme. And they were just in time to hear that explosions from Mars had been detected and that a farm in New Jersey had just been the site of a meteor crash. The announcer described how hideous Martians were slowly appearing and firing ‘heat-rays’ at their victims. When the US military finally attacked the Martians with planes and artillery, the aliens responded with poisonous gas.

This was, of course, not actually happening. But as the play described how ordinary Americans were running for their lives, up to a million people were said to have believed that the invasion was actually happening. Men, women and children went out into the streets or tried to hide from the Martians. Police received calls from people asking for gas masks, convinced that New York had been destroyed.

It was not until the programme had almost finished that Orson Welles himself went on air to remind listeners that the play was fictional. Welles thought he had made a big mistake by making what seemed like a real news report and felt he would never work again, but the opposite was true. He subsequently went on to make Citizen Kane, thought by many to be the best movie ever.
Unit 7 Extension

4 What did people do when they thought the Earth was being invaded?
   a They bought gas masks and hid in their cars.
   b They tried to escape or hide.
   c They turned their lights off.

5 Why was Orson Welles worried that he would never work again?
   a Because the police thought he had deliberately tried to trick people.
   b Because he had not asked for permission to broadcast the show.
   c Because he should have made it clearer that the story was fictional.

3 Did you already know this story? What, if anything, surprises you about it? Do you think something like this could happen today? Why? / Why not?

4 Research information about an unusual or interesting event from history. You could write about an unusual discovery or an interesting feat. Then complete the notes.

   Event:
   When it happened: ______________________________________________________
   Events leading up to the event itself:
   Details of the event:
   What happened afterwards as a result:

5 Write your account of the event from history using your notes from Exercise 4.