

The Beaconsfield Society AGM and Talk a report.

Bugging the Nazis

The Secret History of Wilton Park & Latimer House. a talk by Dr Helen Fry

Thursday 5th Nov 2015 at The Fitzwilliams Centre Beaconsfield.

For members and non-members.

A maximum audience of over 120 greeted Dr Helen Fry the speaker at The Beaconsfield Society's AGM. They were all excited to hear her talk entitled "Bugging the Nazis the secret history of Wilton Park and Latimer House and they were not disappointed.

Firstly in the introduction to the speaker it was emphasised how important it was to raise awareness of Wilton's Park secret history. The Beaconsfield Society wants to find fitting ways of commemorating it before this part of our town's heritage is lost to view. This is because most of the Wilton Park site is soon to be demolished. The developers Inland Homes have submitted plans to build 350 new houses there, but it may be possible to save one of the original buildings there as a small museum. It was felt that the important work carried out there in WW2 must surely be acknowledged and remembered.

The Secret Listeners

During WW2, Wilton Park at Beaconsfield and Latimer House near Amersham became highly significant sites in the 'secret war' against Nazi Germany and their existence totally hush-hush on a par with Bletchley Park. It was here under the overall command of Colonel Thomas Kendrick, a longstanding MI6 spymaster, that British Intelligence bugged the conversations of German prisoners-of-war to glean information that they would not offer during interrogation. The cells were fitted with the latest bugging devices from America and, from a secret room '*The M Room*' (M for 'miked'), a team of listeners monitored and recorded the conversations of the prisoners from the moment they woke until the time they went to sleep, every day of the year, including Christmas Day.

Granted an unlimited budget by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to open in mid-1942, Wilton Park and Latimer House had a number of clandestine operations under their wing that have barely been acknowledged in the public domain – all under the auspices of MI9, a branch of MI6. It was interesting to learn that the eavesdropping equipment was purchased from America (RCA Radio Corporation of America) and that much of the installation was carried out by the Post Office research people from Dollis Hill. Also the cost was £400,000, a fortune both then and it's equivalent now.

The sheer volume of military, naval and air intelligence gained from bugging the conversations of over 10,000 German prisoners-of-war changed the course of the war. It was here in 1943, for example, that British Intelligence discovered Peenemünde where Hitler was developing the deadly 'secret weapon' –

the V1 and V2. This discovery led to the RAF bombing of Peenemünde that set back Hitler's weapon programme by nearly six months – enough to buy time for the Allies, and without the discovery of which, it is doubtful the Allies could have successfully mounted the D-Day landings the following year.

One former interrogator at the site was told by his commanding officer that their work shortened the war by four years.

Summary importance of the intelligence from Wilton Park & Latimer House:-

Lieutenant Colonel St. Clare Grondona (Kendrick's deputy who commanded Wilton Park on a daily basis) later wrote: *'Had it not been for the information obtained at these centres, it could have been London and not Hiroshima that was devastated by the first atomic bomb.'*

So protected was the secret work there that one intelligence officer was handed a pistol by Kendrick on arrival and told that if he ever betrayed the work there, he should do the decent thing. And if not he, Kendrick, would.

In conclusion, Helen gave us a fascinating talk on the clandestine and important work that took place at Wilton Park. She told the secret story with great enthusiasm and humour. Dr Helen Fry author and historian has written over 25 books and is always researching for more information. In fact she was keen to find out from the audience if they had any connections with Wilton Park and was rewarded with many interesting contributions and questions from the floor.

Kari Dorme

Committee member and organiser of the talk



