GATEWAY TO CHURCHILL'S SECRET ARMY REMEMBERED

LEFT: Mrs Mabel Stranks pictured outside the Highworth post office. (Courtesy of CART)

ABOVE: The old post office in Highworth – the so-called "Auxiliary Gateway". (Courtesy of Bill Ashby)

BELOW: The panel that was unveiled by CART. (Courtesy of CART)

DURING the dark days of 1940, with the threat of a German invasion hanging over the UK, a secret resistance force was being set up across the country. Scores of volunteers who were engaged in reserved occupations were being asked to undertake what amounted to a suicide mission in the event of an invasion. It is difficult to imagine what role the sleepy Wiltshire market town of Highworth and its postmistress, Mabel Stranks, could have played in this drama but over the last few years their considerable significance has been revealed, and now a new panel is being placed at the former post office in Highworth commemorating their part.

The aim for the resistance force, or Auxiliary Units as they were officially known, was to have small groups of highly trained, well-armed men who in the event of an invasion would disappear to their operational bases hidden beneath the British countryside. They would wait for the invasion to literally pass over them and then appear at night to disrupt the enemy supply chain, destroy transport and supplies, "deal" with collaborators and generally make a nuisance of themselves to allow the regular army to counter-attack.

In order to get the level of skill needed a training camp was required and Coleshill House, less than three miles from Highworth, was selected as the perfect location. All of those that volunteered signed the Official Secrets Act and had to be properly vetted before being allowed near Coleshill. To maintain this secrecy and to ensure that those who had not been selected and vetted did not get through to the camp, recruits were ordered to arrive at Highworth and report to Mrs Mabel Stranks.

The post office was the perfect "go-between" with strangers visiting all the time and the postmistress known for her unassuming nature and discretion. When they arrived the recruits would ask for Mabel Stranks, give a password and be told to wait. Mabel would then go into her office and make a series of phone calls. A car would then arrive and those "screened" as official by Mrs Stranks were driven to Coleshill House by the most indirect route. Those suspected as being unofficial by Mabel were taken elsewhere. The post office at Highworth proved to be such an effective tool that it was aptly given the name the "Auxiliary Gateway".

Now a panel has been unveiled by the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART), the group behind the British Resistance Archive, which is dedicated to finding out more about the Auxiliary Units. The panel provides information about the Auxiliary Units and the role that Highworth post office and its postmistress played.

Tom Sykes, founder of CART, said: "This is a remarkable story of an incredible woman and the part she played in one of the most secretive organisations of the Second World War. The bravery of Mrs Stranks cannot be underestimated. The life expectancy of an Auxiliary Unit member was just fourteen days, and she was all too aware of the reprisals that had been meted out by the Germans to anyone found to be resisting or helping those that were. She never accepted recognition for her part in this secret operation and like many of those she screened, never talked to anyone about her role until her very last days." ■

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