



We're going underground

GRAHAM CARTER visits the remnants of the unlikely Second

World War training centre under the beautiful Coleshill Estate

You couldn't make it up. Buried in and even under one of the most beautiful swathes of countryside in the whole of England, around the picture-postcard village of Coleshill, was a training complex with a deadly serious purpose.

Coleshill House and the surrounding estate – a jewel now carefully managed by the National Trust – became a training centre for the GHQ Auxiliary Units during the Second World War, a stealthy force that Prime Minister Winston Churchill took a personal interest in.

In the event of invasion by the German Army, which seemed inevitable following the British defeat at Dunkirk in 1940, the Auxiliary Units would have sprung into action and waged guerilla war, just as the French Resistance did, across the Channel.

Coleshill wouldn't actually have seen much action. Rather, it was chosen as the ideal place to hide a large training facility.

Would-be saboteurs were first sent to the Post Office at Highworth, where they reported to an unlikely wartime hero in the shape of Postmistress Mabel Stranks, and

she directed recruits to nearby Coleshill on production of the correct code word.

Most eventually went home to a network of bunkers across the eastern half of Britain that had been dug almost invisibly into the landscape, but not until they had been expertly instructed in a range of covert operations in training bunkers.

These still exist, and now a replica bunker is also under construction by the National Trust and volunteers, aided by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant.

The complex stretched across the estate,

west of the site of Coleshill House, which was destroyed by fire in 1952, and the area is still giving up its secrets.

A guard house remains intact, plus the foundations of various other buildings, but thanks to archaeological excavations and the excellent work of researchers and volunteers in uncovering the whole tale of Coleshill, the landscape is still throwing up new features and artefacts.

One thing that is already clearly understood is the seriousness of the operations that were being prepared for

at Coleshill. If they had ever been called upon to serve on home soil in the capacity for which they were trained, members of the Auxiliary Units would have slipped away without leaving explanations to their loved ones, and such was the danger of the work they were intended to do when they emerged from their underground bunkers, it seems unlikely that many would have lived to tell the tale.

No wonder those who died in related operations behind enemy lines are remembered by memorial trees on the

estate. It's no wonder, either, that walking tours of the complex during CART events, which are on restricted land, are quickly booked up.

This year's events are already sold out, but tours for organised groups (with a minimum of 15 people) may be arranged through the National Trust.

The CART website is an excellent resource for all kinds of information about the amazing work of the Auxiliary Units. So see www.coleshillhouse.com to find out more.

Below (from left to right): National Trust volunteer Roger Green, our tour guide, at the entrance to the new replica bunker and the

entrances and exits to an original bunker; inside the original bunker; a sign marking the estate boundary; and the guard house.

