

Local History Society – Secrets and Spies in Hertfordshire

The meeting began with a tribute to the late Kenneth Pitts, much loved husband of our president, Dawn, and a founder member and enthusiastic supporter of the society

For most people, a mention of the county of Hertfordshire sadly conjures up a rather characterless area of the Home Counties. How surprised would they be to discover, as we did from this talk, that our County was a hotbed of spies and intrigue from medieval times to the 20th century. And I do not include the fictional characters of John le Carre!

The earliest ‘Spooks’, connected to the Royal Palace at Kings’ Langley, were nameless and faceless as we now expect successful spies to have been. But how many of us knew that Geoffrey Chaucer, author of the first great work of English literature, *The Canterbury Tales*, had a home in Hertfordshire and was an important member of the Royal Secret Service under Richard II. William Cecil, of Theobalds and Hatfield, the great Tudor Statesman, was certainly involved in espionage at every level. Sir Francis Walsingham, another Herts man, was known as ‘The Spy Master’, and although Sir Francis Bacon, of Goramby (St Albans) is remembered for his scholarship, his library and his passion for horticulture, it was for his secret activities as a spy that he was rewarded with the Great Seal of Office by James I.

From great houses in Ware, Stevenage, Tring, Moor Park, and others, apparently respectable and successful Hertfordshire men and women spied and snooped for King and Commonwealth. Daniel Defoe, known to us for his ‘*Gulliver’s Travels*’ was also a master spy. Sir Richard Burton, traveller, diplomat and collector of pornographic writings, found ample time to spy for his country. Later, John Buchan of ‘The 39 Steps’ fame, headed the Secret service in Letchworth. Sir Compton Mc Kenzie (Whisky Galore) ran the Secret service in Greece in WW1 and John Betjamen, Graham Greene, Malcom Muggeridge, Lous Mcniece and Elizabeth Bowen, all living at some time in Hertfordshire, added spying to their other accomplishments.

Espionage can be treasonable or noble. At the conclusion of the talk, our speaker’s neighbour from Stevenage, Doris Devenish aged 92, concluded the evening by speaking most movingly of her late husband’s exploits as a member of the SOE in the last War, for which he received the DSO. Hertfordshire certainly hides an intriguing past.

Angela Colman

Our next meeting is ‘York House and Red Heath’ by Claire Rolfe – 7.30 for 8pm on Tuesday 23 November at Sarratt School.