

Sarratt Local History Society

Latimer House in World War Two Dr. Helen Fry



Just as the English are thought to have a common perception of the Germans in the War... reflected so well by John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*, and in *'Allo, Allo!'*, so German soldiers (and particularly their Senior Officers) in the Second World War had a common perception of the senior British Officers..... Upper Class, Good Company, Hard Drinking and basically naive and fairly stupid.

It was an awareness of this belief that inspired one particular, little known to us, British 'master-spy' and his colleagues, to create at Latimer House in particular but also at two similar places, Trent Park and Wilton Park, a special holding place for German prisoners- of -war. This lulled them into such a state of security and relaxation that their uncensored conversations among themselves provided the British government with vital information that almost certainly helped us to defeat Germany.

Thomas James Kendrick, a Catholic born in Capetown in 1881, was, by the 1930s a senior member of the British Passport Office in Vienna. He was also a master spy with a large circle of agents and it is now believed that while in Vienna he procured the escape of literally thousands of Jews from the tentacles of the ever more powerful fascist regime in Germany. In 1938, he was betrayed, arrested but surprisingly returned to England with his wife. Here he continued in the Secret Service. Kendrick's unlikely talent was his ability to socialise at every level. He charmed, entertained, and even played the piano for his guests, wining and dining them and talking knowledgeably on a wide range of subjects. And this ability was extended to the inmates of Latimer House. The 'bugging' of the POWs quarters at Latimer was so extensive that years after the War, wires were still being found in trees and benches in the grounds. Kendrick, in the guise of a possibly aristocratic British Colonel took the German Generals from Latimer (and the other two 'houses') on 'outings' to his own home and to places like Simpsons in the Strand and even the Ritz for sumptuous meals and champagne. Some even sent the gilded menus to their wives in Germany! As a result, they dropped their guard completely, and returned to Latimer chatting among themselves about vital affairs in Germany. When a new senior PoW arrived they would openly question him about the very latest arms, submarines and bombs

being built back home.

Every conversation was secretly recorded, translated and passed up to British Intelligence. The buildings around the actual house at Latimer were so complicated and secret that few people had any idea what went on there. When not enough German speaking 'Listeners' were available, Kendrick decided to recruit young sergeants from the Pioneer Corps, a special fighting unit set up for young Jewish men who had escaped from Germany and wished to fight with the allies. But even they may not have known that the prisoners they were listening to were just next door. Indeed the wartime events at Latimer House were so secret that it is only in the past few years that the papers referring to this period (over 75 years ago) have been declassified.

Dr. Fry, a distinguished historian and biographer told us that the almost unacknowledged Thomas Kendrick was possibly one of the most important spies and masters of espionage. Yet even his wife probably had no idea what he did. And Dr Fry also said that with the release of the latest Latimer House papers it was now beginning to be thought that it's part was probably as great as Bletchley Park in the winning of the War.

So next time we 'locals' stroll along the Chess Valley and look up at Latimer House, we should remember that we may owe our very lives and freedom to what went on up there during the War.

Angela Colman