

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) at Brickendonbury, 1940-45

Following the outbreak of the second world war the Brickendonbury Estate was requisitioned by the War Department and used firstly by the Section D of the Special Intelligence Service (SIS) and then following the formation of the Special Operations Executive, in July 1940, for training in sabotage. It was known as Station 17, the headquarters of the Special Operations Executive, European Theatre of War.

It became the place where many important industrial sabotage and espionage operations, to be carried out on the continent, were planned and where specially selected allied servicemen and women trained for their part in such exploits.

Stations involved in experimental work, storage and production were given Roman numerals. Like Brickendonbury, these were mostly in Hertfordshire, hence Brickendonbury was first known as War Station XVII – for explosives trials. Later it became a training school, STS 17.

Captain Frederic Thornton Peters ('Fritz') was a Canadian Naval Officer who became the first Commander at what was commonly known as Brickendonbury Hall. During his time at Brickendonbury (August 1940 – July 1941) he is understood to have been involved in some of the planning for the November 1942 attack on Oran harbour, Algeria, for which he won the Victoria Cross. Major C.V. Clarke, an inventor of sabotage weapons, also had a significant role during 1941.

Colonel George T. Rheam, Commander from around the end of 1941 onwards, was known as 'the founder of modern industrial sabotage'. He taught how to identify the most critical piece of equipment in a factory and how to disable it and he was able to teach Polish saboteurs in their own language.

Two major operations planned from Station 17 are said to have been the assassination of Heydrich, the governor of Czechoslovakia, in June 1942 and in 1943 the destruction of the Norsk-Hydro 'heavy water' plant at Vemork, Rjukan, in Norway, which was held by the Germans, and could have enabled Germany to produce a nuclear bomb.

Czech and Slovak agents involved in the Heydrich plot 'Operation Anthropoid' were first trained near Mallaig in Scotland and then at Brickendonbury under Colonel Rheam. Groups of Norwegian agents were trained at Brickendonbury, and at Meoble, in Arisaig, and Aviemore in Scotland. The leader of 'Operation Gunnerside', Joachim Rønneberg trained men at these locations.

Techniques taught by Rheam were used in the disablement of the Renault Engineering plant and of the Dunlop factory in Montluçon in 1944.

Two of the agents who are alleged to have trained at Brickendonbury at this time are Kim Philby and Guy Burgess, who both later became Soviet spies.

Victor Hazan was one of Rheam's students. William Grover-Williams (aka Vladimir), a racing driver, almost certainly also spent time here. One of the most famous agents was Odette Sansom Churchill, the subject of the eponymous film (Odette). Another agent was Jack Danby, a Frenchman, (aka Jacques Dandicolle). Sue Ryder was also trained here.

Station 17 has featured in several films. Training films shot at Brickendonbury by Major Clarke, for instruction of the SOE agents, are now in the Imperial War Museum. Other archival material which includes reference to Brickendonbury are interviews of Sue Ryder, also at the IWM.

A public information film, *Now it can be told*, was shot at Brickendonbury shortly before the end of the war, showing the part played by the SOE behind enemy lines. A television documentary filmed in the 1970s, *The Secret War*, showed archive film of familiar parts of the Estate being used for such activity. One shot in the film demonstrated a transformer being blown up.

During renovation works after Brickendonbury had been acquired by the Malaysian Rubber Producers' Research Association several grenades and unexploded shells were found in the moat in 1973, requiring removal by the Army Bomb Disposal Unit.

There are two isolated buildings towards the east end of the grounds which appear to have been used as ammunition stores, or bomb shelters. Recent communication with experts suggests they are detonator stores. It has also been reported that a replica of the storage facility at the Norwegian heavy water plant was built at Brickendonbury, but this has not been substantiated.

A Special Forces Association plaque, commemorating the contribution of the Special Operations Executive based at Station XVII, mounted on the south wall of the Mansion, was unveiled by Professor M.R.D. Foot on 12th April 2010. Evidence of an older commemorative plaque and a 'replica' exists in a photograph, taken at Brickendonbury in 1981. It is understood that the modern replica plaque was made from an original, from another SOE station, with the assistance of the rubber research scientists working here.

Sources: Various websites and personal communication with experts.