

Spies, lies and secret love-lives: Five curious facts about Kingston's 'hidden' history

Many of us are fascinated by the secret, censored and hidden side to history, and this darker aspect of the past is an increasingly important part of studying and understanding the growth of our country and its communities, including at local level in Surrey. Not many people realise that the town of Kingston itself has a 'secret' and less familiar side to its past, and here are five curious examples of this relatively unknown history from the 1930s and 1940s.

1. *Lord 'Haw-Haw' in Kingston.*

One evening in December, 1936, as the possibility of another world war was on everybody's minds, a dramatic public meeting was held at the Old Baths Hall in Wood Street, Kingston, organised by the local branch of the 'British Union of Fascists' (BUF), which at that stage was operating out of an office in Crown Passage in the Apple Market. The main speaker was William Joyce (1906-1946), who was an obsessive pro-Nazi. There was considerable trouble at the meeting, which saw 250 people in attendance. Joyce later defected to Germany, where he made notorious English-language radio broadcasts and became known as 'Lord Haw-Haw' because of his upper-class sounding voice. Interestingly, when war had broken out, there was much concern among Kingston's local authorities about these radio broadcasts. In July, 1940, for example, Bruce Tomkins, a local BUF member, was sentenced at the Old Bailey to six months imprisonment for doing acts 'likely to prejudice' the prosecution of the war. This had included him being found in possession of 'sticky-back slips' on which were printed the radio wave-length of a German English-language propaganda radio station. According to one eyewitness at the trial, Tomkins had told her that he had been 'on holidays to Germany' and that he knew 'Lord Haw-Haw'.

2. *The Top Secret Mansion.*

In 1940, as fears of a German invasion of the British Isles increased, a top-secret interrogation centre was set up by MI5, the domestic Security Service, at Latchmere House, a large mansion in woodlands just outside Kingston, close to Richmond Park and Ham Common. Surrounded by barbed wire and with regular armed foot-patrols, the house (designated in official documents as 'Camp 020') was shrouded in secrecy, but it was here that the British authorities interned many of the top German spies and collaborators captured

during World War Two. Run by Colonel 'Tin-eye' Stephens (so-called because he wore a monocle!), he 'persuaded' a number of these spies to work for Britain instead as double-agents, and they were parachuted back into occupied Europe. A number of others, however, who refused to cooperate with Stephens and his offer of double-agent work, were sent to the Tower of London and executed. In recent years there have been incorrect claims that Rudolf Hess (Hitler's deputy, who dramatically flew to Britain in 1941) and William 'Lord Haw-Haw' Joyce (captured in 1945), were held at Latchmere. In reality, Hess was held at the Tower of London and then transferred to Mytchett Place, a fortified mansion between Aldershot and Camberley in Surrey. Joyce was held at Wandsworth prison, where he was executed for treason in 1946.

3. Agent 'SNOW'.

Ironically, and initially unknown to MI5, a key German spy had been operating since 1938 in the heart of Kingston. Known by the Nazis as Agent A3504, or 'Johnny from Golf Course' ('Golf Course' was the German code-name for Great Britain), this man was Arthur George Owens (1899-1957), an electrical engineer from Wales. After his marriage collapsed, he resided in Kingston from 1936-1939. As an ardent Welsh nationalist, he had no love for England. He thus offered his services to the German *Abwehr* (military intelligence service) in 1938 and was recruited by them as an agent. From August, 1939, he was operating a secret radio in a heavily-curtained room overlooking Kingston churchyard in the middle of the town. He transmitted highly sensitive and valuable information about new British radar systems back to Nazi Germany. He was never caught. Bizarrely, however, and mistakenly thinking that the British authorities must have been watching him, Owens decided to voluntarily give himself up to the police Special Branch. Highly suspicious about his motives, the British at first interned Owens in Wandsworth prison. But MI5 then decided they could make use of him. He became a double-agent, code-named agent 'SNOW' ('SNOW' was a play on his last name). While the Germans thought he was one of their top wartime agents in Britain, Owens was spying for Britain instead, and helped MI5 capture a number of German spies who were sent to Latchmere House for interrogation.

4. The Mysterious Frogmen.

Kingston's main public swimming pool in the 1930s, known as the Coronation Baths, was located in Denmark Road, which lies between the Penrhyn Road and Knights Park areas of the town. It was viewed as a very modern facility in its day. One of the closest-kept local secrets of World War Two was that the Baths, which had underwater lights, were taken over by the British Admiralty in January, 1944. The pool was then secretly used for training many of the

frogmen who carried out a particularly hazardous mission in the very early hours of the D-Day Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6th, 1944. Wearing specially-designed rubber diving suits, some 120 divers had been trained to swim underwater to enemy defence obstacles, cut nets and plant special explosives, which helped to clear a path for Allied landing-craft to safely reach the French beaches.

5. *'Ike' on the Hill.*

The planning for D-Day, one of the largest invasions of its kind ever mounted, was one of the most complex and secret operations of World War Two. It was overseen by the American General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied invasion forces. But what many people don't realise is that 'Ike' Eisenhower lived and often worked in Kingston from 1942-1945. He had his main local Headquarters in Bushy Park, with a large staff working in huts. He also rented a small 3-bedroomed cottage called 'Telegraph Cottage' in Warren Road, near the top of Kingston Hill. Eisenhower loved to relax at the cottage. It is said that, while much of the intricate and top-secret planning for D-Day ('Operation Overlord') was discussed at his local HQ in Bushy Park, briefings also took place at the cottage. Intriguingly, his personal driver, Kate Summersby, was often the hostess at the cottage, welcoming guests, mixing drinks and taking notes in meetings for 'the boss' (as she called him). It was evident to his staff that the pair had become very close. Summersby also accompanied Eisenhower on early-morning local horse-rides. Gossip about their friendship even reached the ears of the married General's wife back in the USA. In recent years historians have suggested that the General and his driver were indeed having a secret love-affair. Eisenhower's presence in Kingston was a closely-guarded secret in the war, as there were genuine fears the Germans might send an assassin if they had found out.

Dr. Steven Woodbridge is Senior Lecturer in History at Kingston University