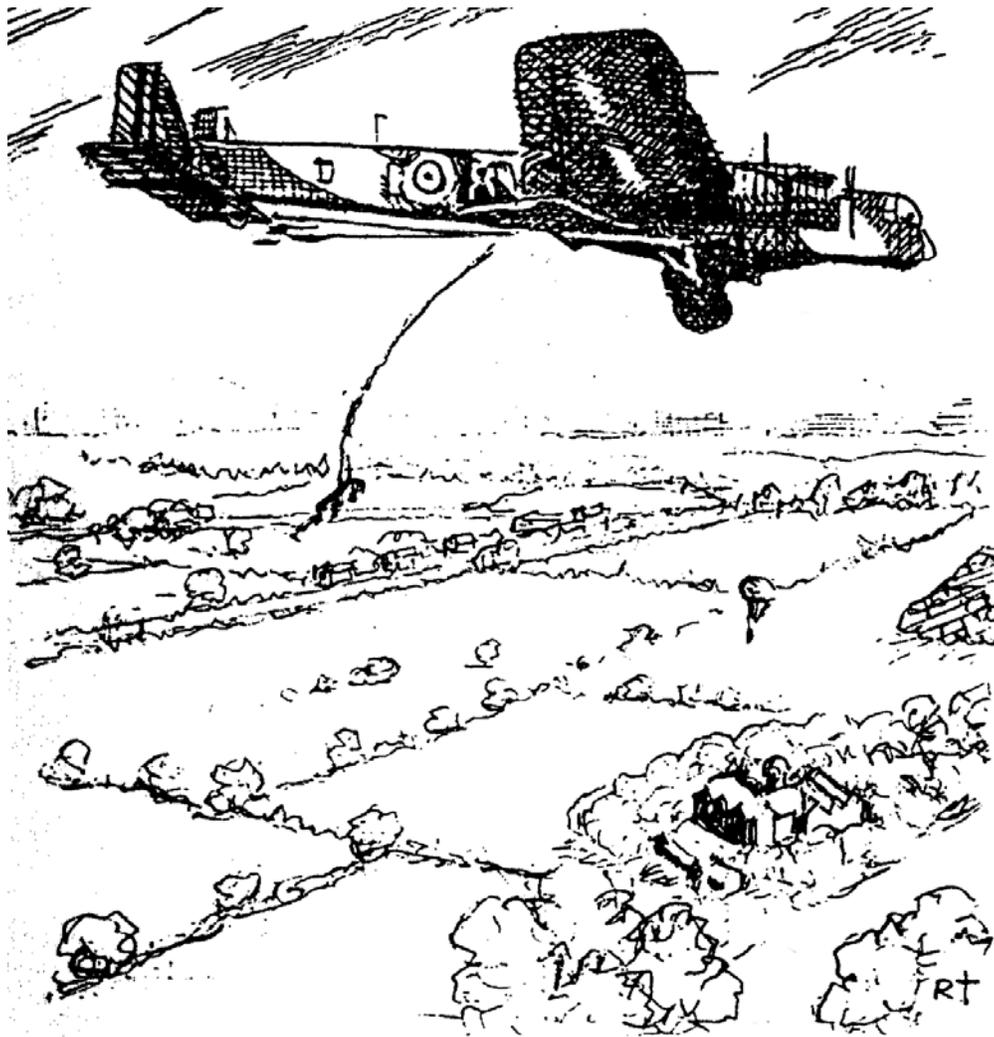


THE TRAINING OF WORLD WAR TWO SECRET AGENTS IN CHESHIRE



by
John Chartres



*Secretive Dunham House, the scene of wartime
Special Operations Executive training in Dunham Massey*

Cover drawing by Ronald Trenbath

**THE TRAINING OF WORLD WAR TWO
SECRET AGENTS IN CHESHIRE**

by John Chartres

In early 1990 two senior members of the Bowdon History Society noted that there was a large house within 'The Manor' of the society where much modern history had been made. The house in question had been, and still is, simply called Dunham House. It is situated on Charcoal Road, Bowdon on the south side, not far from the traffic lights on the main A556 Chester Road. It is now a conglomerate of fairly high-priced maisonettes and flats, is tree-shrouded and almost unnoticed by passers-by.

It and its 'messages' are redolent with the history of the Second World War. Apart from anything else its former temporary residents include two female holders of the George Cross, one alas, rather a long time dead. Dunham House was the first of several large country homes within easy reach of an aerodrome called Ringway to be commandeered and requisitioned for some very special military purposes circa 1941.

It was to become the first billet for secret agents who had to be taught the arts of parachuting to enable them to get into (or back into) France and other parts of Europe after the debacles of 1940. Later it became a billet for others who learned the art of parachuting at Ringway and who entered other enemy held territories in the Middle and Far East, all of them making major contributions to the eventual winning of World War II by The Allies. Official history has now revealed that more than 7,000 secret agents were trained in the art of parachuting at RAF Ringway. It also records that all 7,000 of them lived, perhaps only for a few days at a time, in one of three Cheshire houses fairly close by Ringway - Dunham House in Bowdon; Fulshaw Hall in Wilmslow and (at a late stage of the war) York House in Timperley.

Bowdon History Society's interest in the matter arose from a recall by Peter Kemp of a modest leaflet called *Discovering Wartime Cheshire 1939-45* published by Cheshire County Council at an unknown date. This leaflet mentioned that as one turned off the A56 Chester Road towards Dunham Massey Hall one would see on one's left, some groups of large houses, partially hidden by bushes. The leaflet went on to say, slightly erroneously, that one of these groups of houses, called Dunham LODGE, had been occupied by secret agents of SOE (Special Operations Executive) during World War II including Odette Churchill (George Cross) and the Violette Szabo (George Cross). The only error in this leaflet was that the most

important group of buildings, lying on the South side of Charcoal Road, should have been referred to as Dunham HOUSE, not Dunham LODGE.

However the whole matter obviously deserved further inquiry since Bowdon History Society, like most of its kind, has a justifiable interest in houses which have been occupied by famous people. This member of the society, known to have had some experience in what is nowadays called 'investigative journalism' and to have a special interest in the activities of the Armed Forces of the nation, was therefore, asked to 'make further inquiries'. The initial result of these was the article which appeared in the October 1990 issue of the *The Bowdon Sheaf*, which is published several times a year by the Bowdon History Society.

Several things had happened by then, however. Some of those who had supplied information for the first article, especially three instructors, had written back to say that our correspondence had stimulated their memories and they were supplying more material "off the top of their heads."

Helpful publications in such august organs as the newsletter of the Special Forces club; *Pegasus*, the journal of Airborne Forces; and *Airmail*, the Newsletter of the Royal Air Forces Association, had produced new material and new contacts, a bit too late for the deadline of the October 1990 *Bowdon Sheaf*. One of the most important things, however, was a letter from the Keeper of the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum expressing appreciation of receipt of a copy of the *Bowdon Sheaf*. Others have pointed out to me that for very good reasons SOE kept an absolute minimum of written records. Still others have gently pointed out that those with clear memories of events circa 1940 and 1941 are now in, or approaching, their '80s' and that it is important to get these memories down on to paper before it is too late. Hence this document.

A stretch of farmland near the boundary lines of the City of Manchester and the County of Cheshire (now of course better known as MIA or Manchester International Airport) became an 'aerodrome' in the 1930s and, after some argument, was selected to become the airport for Manchester rather than another airfield called Barton, not all that far away but on the foggier side of The Manchester Ship Canal. In the late 1930s and up to the outbreak of World War II Ringway accommodated small commercial aeroplanes of that period, such as De Havilland Dragons, Rapides, Fox Moths, and sometimes

the occasional DC2s or DC3s, which with their pilots and others were trying to pioneer air travel before the outbreak of the war set everything back to square one.

Ringway had also become an RAF base, first housing the volunteers of No. 613 (City of Manchester) Squadron Auxiliary Air Force (later Royal Auxiliary Air Force) who flew 'smart biplanes' like Hawker Demons before World War II broke out and then departed to fly Spitfires and the like in the Battle of Britain from other bases further south. After the disasters of 1940, stemmed by the winning of the Battle of Britain, Ringway became an important aerodrome, and this writer feels that its importance in the winning of World War II has not been as well recorded in history as it should have been. The first significant wartime chapter in the history of Ringway was probably written on 6 June 1940 when Winston Churchill called for the establishment of a corps of at least 5,000 parachute troops. Senior Army officers and senior Royal Air Force officers, perhaps really getting together for the first time, looked for a base at which this task could be achieved.

Ringway was not ideal. At that time it was surrounded by the smoke-producing factories of Lancashire and Merseyside (smoke abatement was of course invented much later) and it was often 'fogged-out', but it was a fairly long distance from the Luftwaffe bases, by then on the Channel coast, so that photographic reconnaissance, revealing what was going on in the way of training parachutists, would be unlikely. So, Ringway was selected as the site for what was first called The Central Landing School, a title which was probably selected to "confuse the enemy" but which was fairly soon afterwards changed to No. 1 Parachute Training School.

There, it was reckoned, some 60,000 parachutists of various nationalities and sexes were trained, and more than 400,000 descents made into the adjoining Tatton Park, MOST of them safely. The British Army and Royal Air Force officers, NCOs, soldiers and airmen assigned to the task of creating a parachute training school fairly rapidly developed methods which were to stand the test of time.

They were rather sparsely provided for at first. On the fundamental matter of the provision of aeroplanes from which their pupils could jump, the Royal Air Force, and especially Bomber Command, was pretty mean. This was understandable. Bomber Command needed all its best aeroplanes at that time

to carry out the task which it had been set. It did however part with a number of aeroplanes called Armstrong Whitworth Whitleys. These had been amongst the first monoplane bombers supplied to the RAF in the 1930s rapid expansion period.

One could say in retrospect that the Whitleys were “not bad, but not good.” The Whitley was capable of about 190 mph maximum speed (“downhill and with a following wind”). It also had a rather high stalling speed which meant that it could not really slow down enough to enable parachutists to depart from it in comfort. It was also, according to a publication made by the Parachute Regiment during its 50th anniversary “Cold, cramped and badly ventilated.” Nevertheless, the newly created Parachute Regiment, the newly named No.1 Parachute Training School, and soon after the Special Operations Executive HAD to accept the dear old Whitley and get on with it.

One of the weaknesses of the Whitley as a parachute training aeroplane was that it was difficult to get out of, by, say a door in the back. At a very early stage a variation on a ‘stunt’ performance carried out at the Hendon Air Displays, during which gallant young airmen standing on the lower wings of lumbering Vickers Virginia bombers, clutching the struts in front of them, then releasing their parachutes to be dragged off and deposited in front of an admiring crowd, was tried out at Ringway.

In the ‘Ringway Trial’ the parachutist was positioned in a cut-off of the tail-gunner’s position of a Whitley. That idea did not work very well so the next ‘Ringway Invention’ was the creation of ‘The Whitley Hole’. Many of the temporary residents of Dunham House, Fulshaw Hall and perhaps to a lesser extent York House at Timperley have unfriendly reminiscences of the Whitley Hole. What it really amounted to was the cutting of a hole in the bottom rear of a Whitley fuselage and surrounding it with a rim, making the whole affair look rather like a miner’s hip bath without a bottom to it. It worked well unless the parachutist and his or her dispatcher (normally an RAF Sergeant) got their timings a little wrong whereupon the parachutist ended the day with at least a badly bent nose. This malfunction was dubbed as ‘Ringing the Bell’ at Ringway.

Odette Churchill (Odette Sansom Hallows later) who died in 1995 recalled doing just this in a dummy Whitley fuselage set up in the grounds of Dunham

House. She thinks she also broke an ankle. Odette was later taken into France, like many other SOB agents by means other than parachuting.

Parachuting was not, in fact, always the best method of delivering secret agents into their territories. In the 1940s parachutes were still relatively crude devices, really designed and made only to enable airmen to save their lives. They could not be steered – at least only a little bit – unlike the modern devices used by organisations like The Red Devils and hundreds of amateur Sky-Divers around the world.

Delivery by Lysander short-take-off-and-landing aircraft was often the preferred method of taking agents into France – and indeed sometimes extracting them. Delivery by submarine and by small surface vessels was frequently the preferred method in the Middle and Far East and sometimes in Europe. Nevertheless MOST agents HAD to learn to parachute. Nearly all of them learned this art at Ringway and nearly all of them lived in one of the three Cheshire houses named above while they were doing it.

One other Cheshire location was to play a very important part in the winning of World War II – Rostherne Mere. Towards the middle of the war it was appreciated that there would be a special need for Allied parachutists to be able to descend safely into water, particularly into inland lakes. This matter became one of special urgency when it was assessed that a number of absolutely vital targets for sabotage in Europe were within short striking distance of lakes – the ‘heavy water’ plant in Norway being a prime example.

The first trials of controlled parachuting on to water were carried out in October 1942 at Rostherne Mere by an Army officer named Ray Wooler, about whom much more later. He very nearly killed himself doing it but fortunately for all concerned DID survive with rather sore nether regions to contribute much to the art of parachuting and also a great deal to the preparation of this document.

Many other training devices were invented at Ringway and used at the three ‘Cheshire Houses’ to simulate the effect of jumping out of an aeroplane. They included contraptions of ropes, pulleys and weights, one which used an enormous fan, plus of course lots of soft-landing aids like mattresses and trampolines. Apart from the faithful old Whitleys, which were later superseded by more modern aeroplanes such as Dakotas and Halifaxes,

balloons were also used for training. Everyone hated them as 'platforms to jump from' as members of the Parachute Regiment do to this day.

To maintain the continuity of this narrative, however, it now has to be pointed out that the need for the creation of the organisation called Special Operations Executive (SOE from now on) came about because of Dunkirk and The Fall of France.

The SOE story has been told in many books, the definitive work, perhaps, being that of Professor H R D Foot, who was Professor of Modern History at Manchester University for six years. His work is simply called *SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-46*. It was published by the BBC in 1984 and I am deeply grateful to Professor Foot for many of the basic facts contained in this paper.

The first necessity was the provision of a co-ordinating organisation, based in the United Kingdom, to bring together the spontaneous efforts of the almost self-generated French Resistance Movement. This organisation would also have to provide 'back-up' in the form of weapons, explosives and, perhaps most importantly of all, a means of communication either by wireless or by personal message carriers, called couriers. Finally it had to provide leadership hence the SOE, founded in 1940 and disbanded in 1946. In compiling this report and that of the briefer version which appeared in the October 1990 issue of *The Bowdon Sheaf*, I was especially fortunate to have a personal link with Colonel Maurice Buckmaster OBE, Legion d'Honneur, former head of the 'F' (French) Section of SOE, who opened the first of many doors to me.

Before proceeding to more detailed accounts of what went on in and around the three Cheshire houses between 1940 and 1946 it will probably be appropriate to say a little more about the houses themselves.

For the history of Dunham House I am especially indebted to Miss Joan Gaddum, a member of Bowdon History Society, whose step-grandfather, Mr Walter Joynson, built it, very much as a labour of love, in 1899. Sadly he did not live long to enjoy the lovely house he had created for himself and his wife, Dorothy. Walter Joynson, a Justice of the Peace and a much respected member of the community of Bowdon, died suddenly while on holiday in Corfu on 19 November 1904. Dorothy died only ten months later.

In telling the whole story of Dunham House one is left with something of a gap between the death of Dorothy Joynson and the probable requisitioning of the house for war purposes towards the autumn of 1940.

However, Ronald Trenbath of Bowdon History Society has been able to tell me much of what went on there during the inter-war years. Ronald recalls that Dunham House was the residence of Major Sincton, “a very popular sporting man who is still remembered with great affection and some amusement by many of the older members of the rural community.”

He was, Ronald Trenbath recalls, a keen dog fancier with a particular interest in German Shepherd Dogs (or Alsatians as they had been named for patriotic reasons in 1914) and he had turned the stables at Dunham House into what might be described as luxurious kennels under the direction of a kennel manageress who lived in an adjoining lodge, probably used later to accommodate young ladies of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs) who provided the administrative back-up to the SOE agents about to be parachuted into Occupied France or into other inhospitable places a little later on in history.

Ronald Trenbath remembers that Major Sincton often took in other dogs as ‘boarders’ including those belonging to his (Ronald’s) family. During the early years of World War II Ronald Trenbath also recalls an incident during which he and his father were trying to offer some assistance over a fire which had broken out near to Shepherds’ Cottages and that they found Dunham House to be totally inaccessible. Many years have passed since Ronald has been able fully to assess the reason for that encounter, and for him to know that Dunham House was in fact a very secret billet for agents of Special Operations Executive.

Ronald Trenbath also recalls a local man who knew all about the wartime activities at Dunham House and who always kept his mouth shut. This was Harry Asby, who had been Major Sincton’s gardener and who had been retained by The War Office to stay there ‘for the duration.’ As a World War I soldier Harry Asby could of course be completely trusted and he did indeed keep his mouth very firmly shut until well after World War II when he did tell a tale or two of what went on at Dunham House to selected listeners.

More will be told later of what went on at Dunham House during the war. It has been possible to establish that in the late 1940s, after the disbandment of

SOE and presumably the de-requisitioning of Dunham House a family named Lloyd became the landlords. An organisation called Dunham Properties took over the ownership circa 1963.

As World War II wore on the need for more accommodation for secret agents within reach of Ringway developed. Fulshaw Hall was the first additional billet to be requisitioned. It lies just South of Wilmslow village centre. In post-war years it became first an administrative headquarters for the Pharmaceuticals Division of Imperial Chemical Industries; later the head office of Refuge Assurance. The need for extra accommodation beyond that provided at Dunham House was not only related to sheer numbers. There were occasions when members of different nations in SOE had to be segregated for understandable reasons.

The need for segregation led, in particular, to the requisitioning of York House in Timperley, quite late in the war. Most of the residents there were very carefully selected German prisoners-of-war with strong anti-Nazi views who had volunteered to return to Germany to carry out very special tasks for the Allies. So far as this writer is concerned “history remains silent” on what they actually did but it probably concerned the location of specific military sites. The occupants of York House were given the extraordinary code names of ‘BONZOS’ and ‘PERIWIG BONZOS’.

Mr Maurice Chuwen of Fallowfield, Manchester, one of the relatively small number of Royal Air Force parachute instructors to deal with the secret agents at Ringway, recalls that he and his colleagues usually referred to them as ‘Specials’. Mr Chuwen remembers that many of the Specials seemed to be very young indeed compared with the fairly mature World War II soldiers who were volunteering for service in the Parachute Regiment. He particularly recalls some very young men indeed coming for training towards the end of the war, possibly the German Bonzos.

An official document, released a few years ago by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, states: “The work which SOE students were destined to carry out in the Field had a natural tendency to induce a high state of nervous tension. The last consideration, and in some ways the most important, was that SOE students were of many nationalities. The only solution to these problems was to have a ground training establishment where special care could be given to the preparatory training of men and women

who in many cases had come straight from a sedentary life before joining the Organisation, and where individual attention could be given in order to deal with the differing temperaments and languages of the students. It appears that only in this way could the necessary high confidence and morale be obtained.”

It seems that those very difficult conditions were met in the three Cheshire houses by some very remarkable men and women. Readers of this publication might, however, now like to know a little more about Fulshaw Hall and York House. The following account of Fulshaw Hall first appeared in *The Fulshaw Times*, an ICI publication, in 1952.

“The first Fulshaw Hall was built about 1200, not far from the site of the present building. About the middle of the same century Sir Richard Phytton, Lord of Bolyn, gave the hall and all the demesne lands of Fulshaw to the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. In 1277 the Prior of the Order leased the manor and all its lands to Richard del Shert and Robert Crosse of Fulsagh; rent 50s a year and the second best pig of each; and lodging and board at least once yearly to the warden of St John’s Hospital.”

“Fulshaw subsequently passed through many hands, bearing names still famous in Cheshire today — the Newtons, Davenports, Vernons, Finneys. The Finneys were an outstanding family; one of them wrote the famous Finney MS, an intimate history of this part of Cheshire.”

“In 1688 Samuel Finney, a merchant, bought the estate for £2,100 and came to live at Fulshaw. It was a black and white timber building, neglected and ruinous. Now at that time, on the site of the present Fulshaw Hall, was another house, Sherd Hall (a one-time seat of the del-Sherts). Samuel acquired this, pulled down the old Fulshaw Hall, and rebuilt it on the site of Sherd Hall, where it now stands.”

(The *Fulshaw Times* account goes on to describe work done on the Hall by several generations of Finneys, then remarks that until 1939 the Hall was famous for its peacocks. Some former SOE instructors and students recall these peacocks and noted their absence when World War II hostilities ended in 1945; perhaps unjustly casting aspersions upon some of the ‘temporary residents’, their culinary skills and the food shortages in the UK during those years. In my earlier account of Dunham House published in the *Bowdon*

Sheaf I may have erroneously located the peacocks there, instead of at Fulshaw Hall).

The occupancy of Fulshaw Hall passed from ICI to the Refuge Assurance Company who made it their headquarters on vacation of their famous building in Oxford Road Manchester.

Former warriors, including those who dwelt in Fulshaw Hall, either as trainee secret agents or as instructors, might like to know that the house was cared for with great respect by its tenants, the Refuge Assurance Company. A most interesting feature is the Company's own war memorial bearing the names of many hundred employees who lost their lives in the two World Wars. This memorial, originally located in the centre of Manchester, now stands alongside the Hall, in some trees, with a lake nearby, and is a place anyone can go to for quiet contemplation, perhaps about the stupidity of war. The adjoining Harefield Hall was also used as a military billet during World War II but was not directly linked with SOE or secret agent training.

For details of York House, Timperley, I am indebted to another member of Bowdon History Society, Hazel Pryor. She has established that this building or rather grouping of two buildings remained in-situ until only a few years ago on Brooks Drive, Timperley, near to what is now generally known as The Brooklands Roundabout. Both buildings have now been demolished and the site has been redeveloped. Known successively as Redbrook (House); York House and Rimmersdale House, the property seems to have dated back to 1861 with various occupants named as Thomas C Baird, John Walkden, Jas. Dawson and James L Carr (JP), the last named living there in 1916. At various stages before being requisitioned for war purposes circa 1942 or 1943 it had been used as a school and as a nursing home.

At this stage one might now record the memories of some of those who 'dwelt' in one of these three Cheshire houses during World War II either as instructors or students learning how to leap out of an aeroplane and descend by parachute at least roughly to the spot where their presence was required.

In official records some confusion has occurred as to whether Dunham House should be recorded as STS (Special Training School) 33 or STS 51. There is some conflict between Professor Foot's book on the SOE and other accounts. Professor Foot refers to Dunham House as being STS 33; other accounts refer to it as STS 51. One explanation proffered by The Special Forces Club is

that the whole of Ringway parachute training operation related to secret agents was labelled STS 51 and that the individual houses such as Dunham were given separate numbers. The other vitally important STSs of course included Beaulieu in Hampshire, Wanborough Manor near Guildford and Arisaig in Scotland where special martial arts other than parachuting, were taught with great skill.

During 1990 I was able to make contact with a number of people, now dwelling at widely-scattered addresses in the world, who had clear memories of what went on at Dunham House, Fulshaw Hall and on (or in) Rostherne Mere, and of course at Ringway itself during those critical early 1940s years.

My first contacts were with Mr Ray Wooler, now living in Florida, who was the Chief Instructor in parachuting at Dunham House; and with his fellow instructor, Mr Royston Rudd who now lives in North Humberside and who can claim the labels of both Professor and Barrister. Between them they supplied much of the information about 'what went on' at Dunham House. They both recall some of the names of the students who passed through their hands – they include Odette Churchill GC, Violette Szabo GC, Wing Commander Yeo Thomas ('The White Rabbit'), Peter Churchill, and General Sikorski, to mention but a few.

The training system for secret agents needing to learn how to parachute was in fact pretty brisk and quick. While billeted in one of 'The Cheshire Houses' they would be collected early in the morning and driven to the Parachute School just down the road at Ringway and either do a jump from a Whitley, perhaps one from a balloon, or go through one or more of the simulators. They MIGHT have time to practise dropping through 'The Hole' of an old Whitley fuselage erected in the grounds of either Dunham House or Fulshaw Hall. Most, however, were given time to relax and enjoy themselves, some details of which procedures will be recorded shortly.

The training of secret agents in the art of parachuting was normally carried out by officers and NCOs, unlike that of the Parachute Regiment where Senior NCOs of the Physical Training Branch of the Royal Air Force were for the most part, the Instructors. The latter arrangement pertains to the present day and an RAF Sergeant bearing a white parachute symbol on his shoulder is treated with great respect by all who meet him.

Ray Wooler's own route to Dunham House and thereon was circuitous, to say the least. He was an officer in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of World War II and then became a volunteer ski-trooper attached to the Finnish Army during their disastrous 'little war' against the Soviets in 1940. He and Royston Rudd have supplied me with many details of life at Dunham House. Most of it was obviously intense, highly stressed and perhaps grim. There were many lighter moments, however, some perhaps being deliberately contrived to relieve tension.

There was the occasion when Ray and some fellow instructors decided to enliven a party by doing a night drop on to Dunham House. Ray's parachute neatly wrapped itself around one of the roof turrets leaving him dangling, thirstily but happily within reach of some of the ladies of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs) who constituted the administrative staff at all the STSs. They extracted him. Ray has identified the precise mini-turret at Dunham House from a recent photograph I have sent him and merely comments that the incident took some living down but that it did raise morale at the time.

Supplies of the 'vins du pays' for various nationalities were sometimes obtained and there were some clandestine visits 'up the hill' from Dunham House to the Stamford Arms and the Griffin in Bowdon village centre with the non-British agents under strict orders to keep their mouths shut when within earshot of local customers.

One of the most spectacular of these parties occurred in December 1941. By that time the American equivalent of SOE, entitled OSS (Office of Strategic Services) had been infiltrating some of its agents across the Atlantic, under false names and wearing civilian clothes, to exchange information on training methods etc. One of them bearing the unlikely false name of Fred Smith was resident at Dunham House. He was in fact Lieutenant Sterling Hayden, US Army; in civil life a film actor of some note, being married to a film actress of note, called Madeleine Carroll.

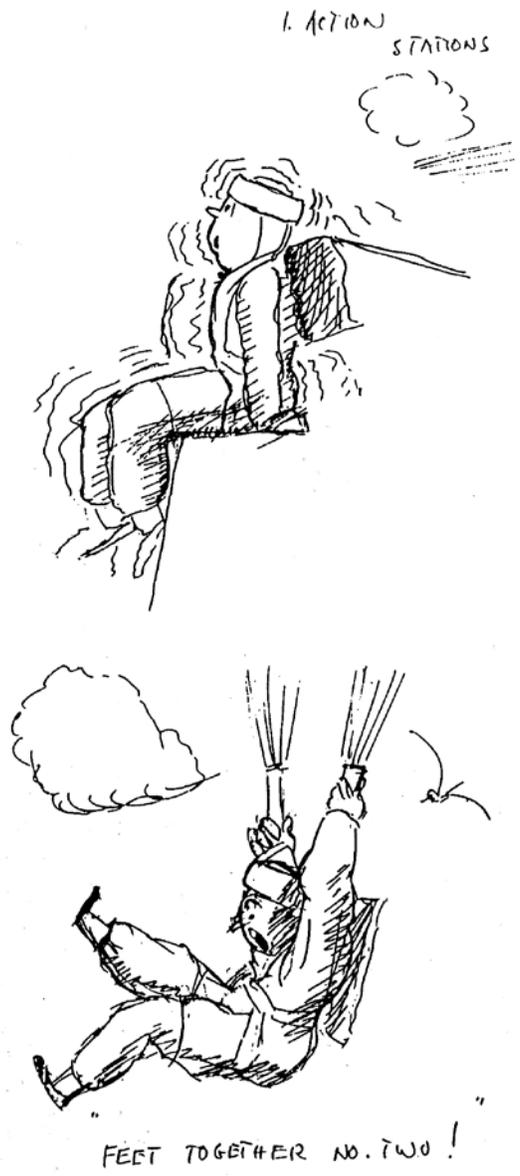
Ray Wooler recalls that on 7 December 1941 the news of Pearl Harbour came over the radio. Hayden ran upstairs to his room and descended in his US Army uniform. What could only be described as 'a monumental party' then ensued either at the Stamford Arms or the Griffin, or perhaps both, with Lt Sterling Hayden probably being the first US Serviceman to be seen in

uniform in public, in the British Isles during World War II. After what could only be called a colourful and chequered life, Sterling Hayden died in 1986 at age 70. After his days at Dunham House he carried out a number of secret agent missions, many with Tito's Partisans.

Ray Wooler, Royston Rudd and many others have clear memories of the first, last and only Commandant of Dunham House. He was Major C J Edwards of the Northumberland Fusiliers. He had achieved earlier fame in the 1920s as the composer of the song *All By Yourself In The Moonlight*. Available military history remains silent about what happened to him after the disbandment of such organisations as STS 33 circa August 1945, but from all that one can glean he was a very popular commandant who trod a very difficult path most carefully.

A brief reference has been made above to the FANYs who handled the administrative work at Dunham and the other 'Cheshire Houses'. Many of them did much more heroic work and much has been written about this remarkable organisation in other publications. Ray Wooler does remember however, that during some of the parties held by certain nationalities at Dunham House it was considered wise to "look the FANYs up" in their own quarters. No really hard feelings nor serious consequences were ever recorded however, as a result of this sort of 'letting down of the hair' as a much needed form of relaxation.

One of Ray Wooler's most vivid memories concerns the parachute drop he made into Rostherne Mere during the early experiments into this special technique, referred to above. Ray was testing out a type of harness designed to allow a very quick release once the user



had touched the water. Unfortunately it released Ray about 50 feet above the waters of Rostherne, which appeared very hard indeed when he hit them.

Mr Charles Tice, who lives in Victoria, Australia, wrote in 1990 to tell me about some of his experiences while serving as a parachute instructor to the SOE, based both at Dunham House and Fulshaw Hall. In the rank of Lieutenant Charles Tice he was primarily responsible for the 'ground' training of SOE and other secret agents passing through the 'Ringway System' who were billeted at Fulshaw Hall.

By about 1943 Fulshaw Hall was in fact the larger and more important billet for secret agents, Dunham House beginning to become more of an administrative headquarters as the war went on. Among the most important residents at Fulshaw Hall were members of what were called 'Jedburgh Teams'. These 'Jedburghs' consisted of groups of usually three officers, one British, one American, one French. Their task was to drop into areas of France, right alongside the advancing Allied Forces and act as liaison teams, making direct contact with the many and rather varied Resistance groups.

Charles Tice remembers that the colourful Commandant at Dunham House, Major Edwards, was not only the composer of *All by Yourself in the Moonlight* but was also a member of the Magic Circle and could perform many sleight-of-hand tricks in spite of some on-coming arthritis, all of this contributing to the all important relaxation of secret agents under training.

Charles and others recall that courses for secret agents were usually of five days duration with four live jumps in the syllabus. He remembers the close co-operation provided to the Army by the Royal Air Force at Ringway, recalling especially the name of Group Captain Maurice Newnham as Station Commander.

He also remembers details of being at 'the receiving end' of trainee parachutists arriving in Tatton Park, sometimes with instructors using loud hailers to give their pupils advice in the final stages. He recalls shouting: "Legs Together" to a French SOE agent; hearing the reply: "Quest que tu dit?" and then giving first aid for a broken ankle. There were, of course some deaths and serious injuries, but if one assesses the 'state of the art' of parachuting in the early 1940s, relatively few.

Like many other SOE instructors Charles Tice had special respect for the agents of certain nationalities, which it might be invidious to mention or single out. He does have a special memory of a Russian lady who could not bring it upon herself to jump even from the practice fuselage on the ground at Fulshaw Hall. He remembers her 'large conducting officer' saying: "She will never jump – you must push her!" Charles's own answer to that was "Nyet." The lady in question then disappeared from Fulshaw Hall but returned a few weeks later and completed a full parachute course successfully.

Charles said in one letter to me: "I can hardly put a figure on the number of agents who passed through our hands. There were many wonderfully dedicated people amongst them. The act of parachuting was probably going to be the least of their ultimate worries, but in these early wartime days, with parachuting in its infancy, many insights into character could be gained by individuals reactions to the perceived dangers of a leap into space."

Mention has already been made of two public houses in Bowdon, The Griffin and The Stamford Arms, where agents and their instructors were occasionally able to relax. Charles Tice has happy memories of a third – The Swan with Two Nicks, down the hill from Dunham House to Bollington, rather up than the hill to Bowdon. The helpfulness of the landlords and the staff of all three establishments during those dire 1940s days certainly remain firmly fixed in the memories of the survivors of the whole SOE training operation in Cheshire.

Mr Ken Hoyne MC, now living in Stafford, remembers that as an instructor at Fulshaw Hall he and two colleagues received what he describes as "very hush-hush consignments of bods on Sunday nights." He continued in a letter to me: "They stayed until the following Saturday. Normally five jumps done. Two from captive balloons (horrible), two from planes, one with a 20 lb kitbag strapped to the legs and one night jump. Sometimes in special circumstances a jump was made into Tatton Mere."

Ken Hoyne, who became a parachute instructor after being wounded at Alamein, also recalls Dunham House as being "very comfortable, with a billiards room and a tennis court." He remembers that if female agents arrived they were allocated to one particular officer instructor for a week. Ken remembers with pride that he was honoured to have Odette as one of his 'pupils' during one of her return trips from France. Ken says that Odette

persisted in landing on her bottom during parachute training, saying it was more comfortable than the normal 'legs-together-and-roll' method.

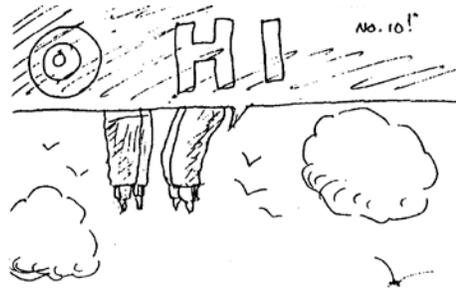
Towards the end of World War II Ken Hoyne was 'Officer i.c.' of York House in Timperley which he thinks was specifically set up to accommodate the 'ex-Nazi Bonzos'. He does not wish to go into any more detail about that very sensitive operation. Very little so far has been released about it even under the 30-year rules and more. There may be scope for other military historians to delve into what the temporary residents of York House, Timperley actually did circa 1945! Perhaps some facts may now be available from the Public Records Office at Kew.

Several references have been made of the dislike of both secret agents and of regular parachute troops of jumping from balloons as a training method. One explanation is that the horrible sensation of vertigo is only experienced when one is attached to the ground, either by a cliff or a mountain, or even by the cable of a balloon. Many airmen I have met are perfectly happy at 40,000 feet or more in an aeroplane, yet can 'go to pieces' at 20 feet up a ladder. NO ONE has yet offered me a satisfactory explanation of this phenomenon and I have experienced the same problem myself.

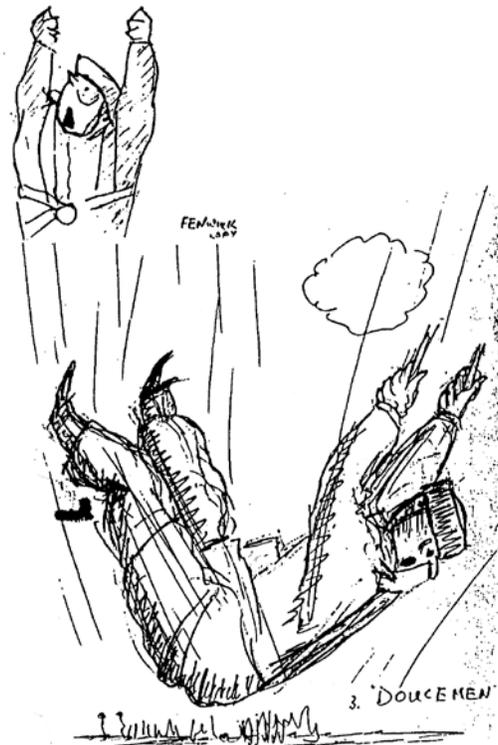
Among local people who have memories of Dunham House during the war years is Ken Greenwood who for many years operated a leather goods and shoe repair shop in Stamford Street, Altrincham. He recalls being a member of the local Home Guard and being "used as a guinea-pig" for SOE agents to shoot at during some black nights in Dunham Park.

Ken also remembers being present with fellow Home Guards at Rostherne Mere during those early experiments into the art of parachuting into water referred to above. He also remembers that his Home Guard Sergeant, Frank Dutton MM, was a barber in civilian life for a firm called Wootams on Stamford New Road, Altrincham. Frank, according to Ken Greenwood, often 'attended' Dunham House with the job of changing hair styles and beard trims for certain gentlemen living there and who wished to "change their appearances."

Some rather special reminiscences have reached me via a former SOE agent, who even after the passage of 50 years, prefers only to be identified by the name 'Arthur' and who has preferred to pass on information to me via a mutual friend who would have been labelled in the past as a 'cut-out'. Arthur does have distinct memories of the peacocks on the lawns at Fulshaw Hall and of being a member of a training party consisting of two French Foreign Legionnaires, a Pole, and an American Sailor. History remains silent on whether they ever actually went into action together. Arthur also recalls the very frequent singing of many, many versions of *Alouette* in the back of trucks plying between Fulshaw Hall, Dunham House and 'the actual Ringway' and indeed during descents on to Tatton Park.



ARE YOU SURE
YOU'RE PROPERLY
HOOKED ON?



In 1963 H G Watts, an employee of ICI in Belgium wrote to the Editor of the Fulshaw Times, replying to a previous article and saying: "You do not, however, mention the part that Fulshaw Hall played in the 1939-45 war when it was a hostel for Allied parachutists during their training at Ringway. I took part myself in this training in the summer of 1944."

This drawing together with the previous one are by an unknown artist but were on display at Fulshaw Hall in the 1940s. The photocopies were supplied to the author by Mrs Suzanne Charise who is referred to in the text. They illustrate the occasional lighter aide of a trainee agent's life in Cheshire

"During this period the little window in the left hand gable of the west front was removed. Outside was a staging with a hole resembling the hole in the

floor of a Whitley bomber. On the ground below this staging was a coconut mat. In the room under the gable there was a drum to which was attached an air fan. The victim, having been dressed in a parachute harness attached to a rope round the drum, stepped out onto the staging, dropped through the hole and landed on the mat below. His speed was controlled by the fan attached to the drum. In the garden were various devices of a similar nature including swings from which one had to jump and an aeroplane fuselage out of which one jumped through the hole. The present conference room in the Hall was a demonstration room in which a nervous candidate was shown the way in which parachutes were folded and packed and how the static line took them out of the bag and caused them to open after jumping. After two days of this the trainee was taken to Ringway, rigged in a real parachute and pushed through the hole over Tatton Park.” Such were Mr Watts’ memories of Fulshaw Hall.

Mrs Suzanne Charise, now living in Wimbledon, recalls being a trainee SOE agent at Ringway for a week in July 1944 – the only other woman around at the time being her conducting officer, Diana Davenport.

Suzanne says that in October 1944, instead of taking a week’s leave, she asked to go back to Ringway as she thought the more jumps she made the less chance she had of breaking a leg or an ankle during an operation. She remembers another girl jumping with her, named Anne Marie Walters. Together they ‘had a go’ at jumping in a stick from the side door of a Dakota – “much more pleasant than the ‘hole’ in a Whitley,” Suzanne told us recently. Again, Suzanne disliked balloon jumping. “Nobody bothered to tell us that the parachute takes twice as long to open from a balloon as it does from a plane because there is no slipstream,” she said in a recent letter.

Another activity connected with Special Operations Executive which went on clandestinely in Cheshire and other parts of the country concerned the training of the all-important wireless operators. Certain persons and families whose loyalty to the nation was unquestioned were invited to act as hosts in their homes to train SOE wireless operators of many nationalities. The general arrangement was that a trainee operator would be given a spare room in which he or she could live and also store certain mysterious equipment. One requirement was that the house should possess a garden with some trees from which aials could be suspended.

One such family consisted of The Proberts of Cheadle. The son of this family eventually became Air Commodore Henry Probert, Head of the RAF's Air Historical Branch and a great friend to many an aviation author including this one! In recent reminiscence he said: "The normal routine as far as I can remember, was for us to receive a phone call asking if we could take a guest between certain dates, usually two or three weeks ahead."

"The guest would duly arrive by train or bus, carrying two suitcases, one of them containing his or her belongings and the other the radio — to external appearances, of course, it was just an ordinary case though rather heavy. We allotted our guests the spare bedroom, from where the business would be conducted, and we quickly became accustomed to their looking round the garden to see if there was a suitable tree to which they could attach the aerial that was essential to their activities."

A great deal has been written and published about the heroic work done by the members of Special Operations Executive and other secret agencies during World War II. This author hopes that the above may contribute a little more to history by recording the hard and often gallant work done by their instructors especially in the County of Cheshire in those 1940s years when so much was at stake.

Acknowledgements

Apart from those mentioned by name in the text above the author would like to thank the following for their help:

Lieutenant General Sir Michael Gray, KCB, OBE, Colonel Commandant, The Parachute Regiment.

Mr Peter Lee, Historian, the Special Forces Club.

Mr Brian Robinson and Mr John Battersby of Manchester International Airport Archives Department.

Mr Peter Riley of Hale Barns.

Mr Reg Thackeray DFC of Timperley.

Mrs Linda Hawcroft of ICI Corporate Management Services.

Mr Keith Hartley of Refuge Assurance PLC.

Mr Garth Lindrup of Bowdon.

My thanks also go of course to Mrs Marjorie Cox, the Chairman of Bowdon History Society and all the members of its Committee for their encouragement to him to embark on and continue this work.

The Author

John Chartres was a member of Bowdon History Society. He was a national newspaper journalist for more than 40 years, 20 of them on the staff of *The Times*. He was made an OBE for Services to Journalism in 1990. He also served in the Territorial Army for more than 20 years, six of them ‘under the Colours’ in World War II.

He wishes to make it clear that he never had the slightest desire to hurl himself out of an aeroplane by parachute and would only contemplate so doing if the said aeroplane was on fire or about to disintegrate. Nevertheless he has profound admiration for those who have done so in the past and who continue so to do.

Author’s Note April 1992

After the circulation of the ‘first print run’ of this booklet I learned from Mr Charles Tice that the ‘unknown artist’ mentioned alongside the drawings was in fact Ian Fenwick, a regular contributor to the original *Men Only* pocket magazine — which one could safely leave on the coffee table even if the Vicar was due to call. Charles Tice recalls Ian Fenwick passing through Fulshaw Hall and Ringway but does not think he survived the war, after qualifying as an SOE agent.

A little later still I learned from Squadron Leader Ron Smith who had been a parachute instructor at Ringway that Ian Fenwick was killed in France in July 1944. He was by then a member of the SAS working with a Resistance Group which was caught in a German ambush.