

Hughenden Manor Connection to Benson RAF and the PRU

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In 2004 a long-buried wartime secret, with a connection to Ewelme, was revealed at Hughenden Manor, the Buckinghamshire home of Victorian Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, now owned by The National Trust. On an October afternoon in 2004 a curator overheard a visitor with his grandson, mention Spitfires, photographs and maps. On enquiry, the elderly gentleman, Mr Victor Gregory, revealed he had worked in that very room making maps of enemy territory from the photographs taken by the Photo Reconnaissance Unit's (PRU) Spitfire and Mosquito Squadrons based at RAF Benson. The cameras were unloaded from the aircraft and the film developed in Nissan huts erected in the orchard (now Cottesbrooke facing the Benson Road) next to The Old Mansion. The Old Mansion (in Cottesmore Lane) was also taken over by the Air Ministry and used for first phase interpretation and housing personnel. The photographs were then taken by motor-bike couriers to Danesfield House at RAF Medmenham to be meticulously interpreted by skilled personnel.

It was assumed the aerial photographs had been archived after key intelligence had been obtained at Medmenham. However, they were passed on to Hughenden Manor which had been requisitioned by the Air Ministry in October 1941. 'Codename Hillside' a secret operation to improve target accuracy for Bomber Command was the making of up-to-date maps of enemy territory, using the RAF Benson reconnaissance photographs. This was essential, as when the bombing campaign started in 1941/42, Bomber Command initially had inadequate navigational aids and unsuitable maps. This resulted in a very low accuracy rate when attempting to avoid civilian targets and concentrate on military installations, factories, railways and ports. (German civilians described their efforts as 'agricultural bombing' as bombs dropped in fields miles from the targets). Also, Hughenden's geographic position was ideal for connecting RAF Benson, RAF Medmenham and RAF High Wycombe at Walters Ash (Codename Southdown), the HQ of Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur (Bomber) Harris.



Hughenden Manor

Under the command of Major Quaife, Hughenden Manor was soon filled with a mixture of over 100 military and civilian personnel. Professional Ordnance Survey cartographers, printers, photographic experts, draughtsmen, commercial artists and even National press cartoonists were recruited for the vital work. Accuracy was essential, and maps were drawn with great skill to contain key geographic features. As the majority of bombing missions occurred at night, navigators had to read them in low light conditions, and it was discovered that the most effective colour to display key features was

magenta. Usually, maps were produced sized 15 x 10 inches, but when there was a requirement to identify and expand a specific area, maps could be enlarged in the Ice House. The map was pinned to the wall, photographed and enlarged with an enlarger. (The Ice House has recreated this operation in an exhibition open to visitors today).



The war-time exhibition at Hughenden

Every night a convoy with armed guard's convoy drove the day's production of printed maps the few miles to Bomber Command HQ at RAF High Wycombe. There, bombing raids were prioritised and planned and the target maps sent to the relevant Squadrons on 58 bomber stations. Also, when the American 8th Air Force had a PRU base at Mount Farm (now Berinsfield) it was supplied with huge numbers of copies of every one of the over 3,500 individual target maps produced at Hughenden.

The Spitfire pilots who first arrived at RAF Benson in December 1940 had a 67% chance of not surviving their first 3 months and initially flew with no radio or cockpit heating. They risked their lives on every mission and the casualty rate was high, flying unarmed over enemy territory, relying on speed and height. (The Mosquito Squadrons first operated in September 1941, with the benefit of a navigator). The PRU aircrews were probably unaware of the final destination of their photographs under 'Need to Know' security, but hindsight reveals the products of their efforts were utilised to the maximum.

Ewelme Village Archive