

# Elstree & Borehamwood Museum Friends Newsletter January 2023 : Issue Number 26



## Into The Dark Side...

Our new Exhibition opening at the end of January features stories that many Friends will know about and hopefully a few that may be unfamiliar. Local history legends such as Martha Ray and William Weare are featured, but so too are less known criminal perpetrators as Frank May and William Tyler - one an embezzler and the other a bigamist.

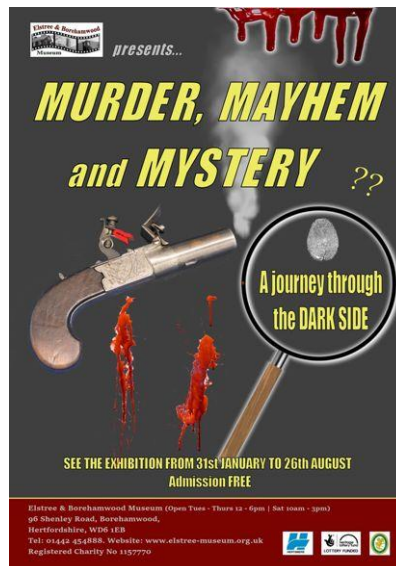
We have a reconstruction of a post-war police box, tardis-shaped, and we do a fair bit of time travelling too. Travelling back to 1735 when Dick Turpin invaded an Elstree farm with his gang, we progress through nearly 250 years of local history to 1971 when another violent gang attacked Barclays Bank in Shenley Road. Years of Murder, Mayhem & Mystery indeed. In between you will find stories of dastardly

deeds, murders punished and unpunished, secret houses hidden in plain sight and 'celebrities' in trouble - from the aforementioned Martha Ray in 1779 to Sophia Loren in 1960.

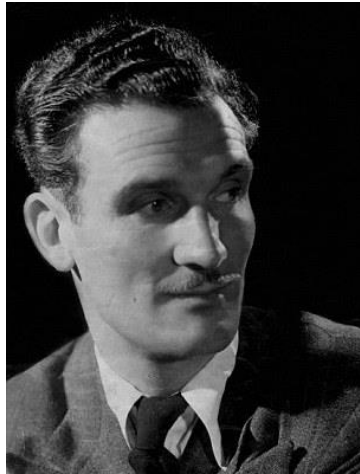
We examine the first 'trial by newspaper' of the murder of William Weare in Radlett. We have the pistol that John Thurtell used to

commit his brutal crime, and the newspapers from that time. And then we have plenty of stories of local misdeeds which you may have heard about, but never in this detail before.

In fact we had no space in the end for the following story. We prepared a short panel, but here is the full story starting with the **Official MI5 website version**, and brought up to date from other sources.



## AGENT ZIGZAG : EDDIE CHAPMAN : A SHENLEY SECRET



Eddie Chapman was a professional criminal in the years before the Second World War. He was a member of a 'jelly gang', which specialised in robbing safes by blowing them open using the explosive gelignite. His skill as a thief made him a good deal of money and allowed him to live the life of a wealthy playboy in Soho, mixing with the likes of Noel Coward, Ivor Novello and Marlene Dietrich.

By the start of 1939, however, he was being hunted by the police and fled to Jersey. He was caught by the Jersey police in February 1939 after burgling a nightclub and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, with an extra year being added on after an attempted escape in September 1939. He remained in prison even after the Germans invaded and occupied the Channel Islands in July 1940, and was finally released in October 1941.

Life on the occupied Channel Islands was harsh, and Chapman sought a way to return to Britain. He volunteered his services to the Germans as a spy and was eventually accepted by the German secret service, the Abwehr. The Abwehr was in a desperate position; it was getting only very low-quality intelligence out of Britain from its network of spies there. (In fact, though the Abwehr was unaware of this, MI5 had already caught almost all of the German spies in the UK and recruited several of them as double agents).

The Abwehr saw Chapman as an ideal candidate for a spy. He claimed to be hostile to the British state, not least because he was still wanted by the police for his crimes on the UK mainland. His connections with the criminal underworld offered the possibility that he could recruit additional agents for the Germans, and his expertise with explosives would enable him to carry out acts of sabotage. In particular, the Germans wanted him to attack the De Havilland aircraft factory in Hatfield, which made the much-feared Mosquito bomber.

After a year's training in German-occupied France, Chapman was dropped by parachute into a field in Cambridgeshire on 16 December 1942. Instead of disappearing into the criminal underworld, as his German handlers intended, he promptly turned himself in to the police and MI5. His arrival was expected; unknown to him or the Germans, the British had cracked the Germans' secret codes and knew in advance when agent *Fritzchen* ('little Fritz'), the Germans' codename for Chapman, would be dropped into the UK.

Chapman was taken to a secret MI5 detention centre in west London known as Camp 020. He was interrogated by the formidable Lt Col Robin 'Tin Eye' Stephens, who owed his nickname to the steel-rimmed monocle which he wore at all times (even, it was said, in bed). Chapman was fully willing to cooperate: he told his interrogators everything about his time in occupied France and the mission that the Germans had given him. He even volunteered to work for the British against the Germans. Although Chapman's criminal past was a cause for concern, Stephens concluded:

"In our opinion, Chapman should be used to the fullest extent... he genuinely means to work for the British against the Germans. By his courage and resourcefulness he is ideally fitted to be an agent."

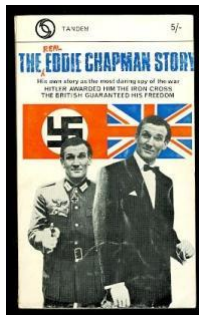
Eddie Chapman thus became Agent Zigzag, one of the most important British double agents of the Second World War. MI5 decided to re-infiltrate Chapman into Germany and obtain more information about the Abwehr. Under the supervision of an MI5 officer, Chapman made radio contact with the Germans and informed them that he was preparing to carry out his sabotage mission at the De Havilland factory. He was sent to the factory, along with an MI5 minder, to work out a plan of attack so that he could tell his German controllers later what he had done.



Fake Damage At De Havilland

**The 'attack' itself was one of the most remarkable deception operations of the Second World War. During the night of 29/30 January 1943, an elaborate system of camouflage was installed at the De Havilland factory to make it appear to German reconnaissance aircraft that a very large bomb had exploded inside the factory's power plant. Bomb-damaged transformers were created out of wood and papier-mache, and buildings were disguised with tarpaulins and corrugated iron sheets painted to appear from the air as if they were the half-demolished remains of walls and roofs. Rubble and debris was spread around the power plant, to make it appear as if it had been thrown there by an explosion. Separately, MI5 arranged for a fake story to be planted in the Daily Express reporting "an explosion at a factory on the outskirts of London."**

**The ruse was a complete success, even deceiving the factory's own staff. Chapman radioed the Germans to inform them of the successful "demolition" of the factory's power plant. The Abwehr was delighted with Chapman's work. In March 1943 he returned via neutral Portugal to Germany and travelled on to an Abwehr safe house in German-occupied Norway. To his amazement, he was awarded Germany's highest honour, the Iron Cross, in recognition of his work for the Abwehr. He was, and remains, the only British citizen ever to have been awarded this medal. Chapman returned to Britain in June 1944 and survived the war, later publishing an account of his exploits in three books.**



That's the conclusion of the official government version of the story, but of course there is much more. After D-Day Eddie was sent back to the UK to report

on the accuracy of the V-1 rocket attacks. He so misled the Germans that they consistently dropped most of the rockets south of London and in Kent. After the War he was paid off by both MI5 and the Abwehr, and returned to various criminal activities over the next few years such as gold smuggling and greyhound doping. He also used his double agent story to the fullest with books, TV serials and screenplays including *Triple Cross* in 1966.



Eddie with Roller - in Shenley?

He married Betty Farmer in 1947 and they had one daughter. They owned a castle in Ireland and opened a health farm in the 1960s in Shenley at Shenley Lodge. It was a popular meeting place for movie stars and the Freemasons. Later, it was the settings for a scene or two in *A Clockwork Orange*. Eddie died of heart failure in St Albans in 1997. Betty was the woman who was with him in Jersey in 1939 when he was arrested, and she ended up writing her memoirs after Eddie's death. These quotes from the book give a flavour of their relationship and Eddie's character :

*'I was 22 and in love with the most handsome and charismatic man I had ever seen. I couldn't remember being happier'. However Chapman's life during the War was not all derring-do. He had acquired two fiancées, Freda Stevenson in England and Dagmar Lahlum in Norway. But he never forgot Betty.*

*'When we were together he was all attention. But when he was on his way to meet a chum or have a drink in a local*

pub I could be sitting around waiting for him for the rest of the day or even a couple of days or more. Time had no meaning for Eddie.'

He proposed but Betty had doubts. 'He asked me every day for months. In the end I decided that life would be more interesting with him than without him. I wasn't going to have anything like a 'normal' married life but at the same time I found my life with him was exciting. He had six mistresses in his life and I used to say, when he was getting towards his end, 'You know, you had all those mistresses. How I wish there was one here now who could help me with you!' This usually elicited a laugh,' Betty recalls.

'Eddie once said it was better to live one day as a tiger than a whole life as a lamb. With Eddie life was lived at fever pitch, the adrenaline working overtime. You were never sure what country would be next or what scheme was coming up. I guess after such a war he never ceased to look for excitement.'



**NEW FRIENDS EVENING EVENT :  
WEDNESDAY 22nd MARCH AT 7pm**

Vicki Pipe the manager of Bow Street Police Museum will be talking about the early history of policing in London, the Bow Street Runners and the early Met.

Please contact the Museum to book your place.

Sources :

1. <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/eddie-chapman>  
This website includes wartime documents relating to Eddie & MI5
2. Ben Macintyre - *Agent Zigzag: The True Wartime Story of Eddie Chapman, Lover, Betrayer, Hero, Spy*. London: Bloomsbury. (2007). ISBN 0-7475-8794-9. Ben turned this book into a BBC2 *Timewatch* documentary : *Double Agent: The Eddie Chapman Story*. It can be found here - <https://vimeo.com/32784702>
3. Betty Chapman & Dr. Ronald Bonewitz - *Mrs Zigzag: The Extraordinary Life of a Secret Agent's Wife*. London: The History Press. (2013). ISBN 9780752488134.

**DON'T FORGET THE NEXT  
REMINISCENCE MEETING, Going  
Down The Village, ON MONDAY 13th  
FEBRUARY at 96 SHENLEY ROAD at  
10.30am**

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Open : Tues, Wed & Thurs : 12pm - 6pm

Sat : 10am-3pm

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