

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

The following article appears by permission and is the copyright of the *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* and the author. Fair dealing for the purposes of private study or non-commercial educational, archival or research purposes is freely allowed, but under no circumstances are articles or illustrations to be reprinted in any other publication, website or other media without permission. All rights reserved. It has not been possible to include all the original illustrations with the articles, but these can be seen in copies deposited at The Gibson Library, Saffron Walden. Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

From Jacobean Mansion to Sabotage School: the wartime history of Audley End House

© Ian Valentine

Reprinted from: *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 10 (2005)



Polish flag at Audley End.

Special Operations Executive (SOE) was instigated in 1940 to undertake subversive and sabotage operations in enemy-occupied countries. During WW2 one of its bases was Audley End House.

Although SOE was a British organisation, most of the involved volunteers came from the Polish Forces under General Sikorski's command, stationed in Britain. The Polish section of SOE, formed in late 1940, differed from all other national sections. As soon as the agents and couriers touched Polish soil they came under the control of the Polish authorities and the *Armia Krajowa* (AK), severing SOE's jurisdiction. The call for Polish volunteers brought 2,413 applications by 1943, among them several women. Polish SOE agents were the first of the allied agents to parachute into their own country on the night of 14/15 February 1941.

Audley End House, codenamed Special Training School (STS) 43, was the principal establishment for training Polish SOE agents, 1942-1944. They were called '*Cichociemni*', pronounced 'chicko-chemny', which translates as the 'unseen and silent'. Emissaries had an assumed identity and an acquired knowledge which allowed them freely to operate in conspiratorial situations, situations in which they had never met before. In other words there was a need for rigorous selection and pass rates were always low. Out of 316 volunteers who were parachuted into Poland, 108 lost their lives.

It is difficult to imagine, as one walks through the beautiful gardens at Audley End, shaped by Capability Brown's serpentine style, that the grounds once contained assault courses, water ditches, a tank and part of a Halifax bomber. The stables contained twenty tonnes of explosives and were also used to pack containers to drop over Warsaw during the 1944 Uprising. Wooden screens and panelling were erected to protect the interior of the house from damage. A partition in The Great Hall was erected to close the main Vanbrugh staircase, with access to the other floors by the north stairs.

The British soldiers based at Audley End were from the Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Essex regiments and under the command of former Shanghai Defence Force member Lieutenant Colonel Terrence (Terry) Roper-Caldbeck. When SOE arrived, they were responsible for maintaining the security of the house and estate. They also drove SOE agents to RAF Tempsford and RAF Newmarket Heath when agents received their missions.

Dutch and Danish agents were at Audley End House before the Poles arrived. SOE suffered disastrous losses in Holland between 1942 and 1943 under the German *Der Englandspiel* (English game) counter-intelligence campaign. It is thought that Audley End House was known to the Germans from this point. Whilst being interrogated after capture in Warsaw, a Gestapo official presented a *Cichociemni* agent with a photograph of Audley End House and asked him if he knew the place. He replied that he had no idea where it was. It is probable that the

photograph was taken from the pre-war Baedeker guide. The first two Danish agents to parachute back into their country were at Audley End waiting for their flight in late February 1941. A tragic mission, one of the men was killed when his parachute failed to open.

Specialist instruction in underground warfare at Audley End House was preceded by two main courses. The paramilitary courses were mostly held in the West Highlands of Scotland where SOE used sections of coastline, lochs and countryside. 208 Polish candidates completed their training at Garramor House, one of nine paramilitary schools near Loch Morar. Violette Szabo and Odette Churchill were thought to have undertaken training at the requisitioned lodge.

Specialist training was also preceded by a rapid physical fitness course which included gymnastics, trapeze work and the parachute practice in the grounds of Largo House, in Upper Largo, Fife. Largo was known as the 'Monkey Grove' because students were required to swing from various pieces of apparatus. To practise landings, trainees were hoisted in a 'lowering trapeze' to a great height before the instructor pulled a lever, dropping the parachutist on a wire. The 'Monkey Grove' was invariably followed by the second stage of training at Ringway Airfield, now Manchester airport.

The first Polish course in sabotage was started by SOE in 1940 at Inverlochy Castle, two miles north of Fort William in the Highlands of Scotland. Every volunteer was warned that the course would be rough and strenuous. Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain at 4,406 feet was at the forefront of the strenuous demands put upon the Polish soldiers. The sabotage course at Inverlochy, hailed as a great success, moved from Scotland to Briggens, Lord Aldernham's 17th-century house in Essex, at the beginning of January 1941. Briggens is in a secluded setting within 80 acres of parkland and now a country hotel. It was here that all the forged money, ration coupons, and documents were made. Briggens remained in use as a forgery base when Audley End took over as the principal training Polish establishment. Chicheley Hall, near Bletchley in Buckinghamshire, was used by Czechoslovakians and Poles, before being handed over in 1944 to the FANY to be used as a wireless training centre. Chicheley was an interim command post before underground warfare courses moved to Audley End.

On 1 May 1942 SOE's clandestine warfare course was officially operating at Audley End. Many of the Polish instructors began arriving at Audley End including the famous figure of Major, later Lieutenant Colonel, Józef Hartman. To many Poles, Hartman was seen as the 'Father of the *Cichociemni*.' Under Roper-Caldbeck, Major Hartman, set up his training Headquarters.

Under the banner of the Underground Warfare Course and Briefing Course, agents were trained in their own specialist covert fields. Parts of the Underground Warfare course could easily be mistaken as a curriculum for criminals of every persuasion: robbery; setting booby traps; assassination; breaking into houses; sabotaging trains; picking locks; forgery; quick evasion in different types of vehicle and, in a final honing stage, the ability to be a seamless liar. Physical training was of obvious importance. A precarious crossing of two lengths of rope was strung high up between two large plane trees near the Stables Bridge for candidates to cross the river.

Candidates were set the most fantastic of tasks. Local police in Essex were warned they might be subjected to sudden attacks, not necessarily due to enemy action. Such operations included attacking the nearby railway station and auxiliary RAF airfield and raiding Roydon Post Office. Tiptofts Manor at Sewards End, Wimbish Hall and Shortgrove Hall were used for training activities. Shortgrove was used as an area for cross-country runs but also as an ideally concealed spot for practice in laying mines and explosives. Stansted airfield was also used for practising the procedures for sabotaging airbases and installations.



Home Guard training at Audley End

The British soldiers, local police and Home Guard took part in field exercises in the Essex countryside. The Poles treated these exercises very seriously. When asked about the Polish desire for authenticity and rough handedness in field exercises with the local constabulary, SOE trainee Bronislaw Wawrzkowicz smiled and said 'Yes, we were known as "the

Polish bandits". Their ferocity was due to the fact that most of them had witnessed at first hand the ravage of their country and had fought against the might of the German *Blitzkrieg* and Soviet occupation. Many had been in Soviet camps.

There were fatalities during training and two graves of Polish Officers can be found in Saffron Walden cemetery: Major Jan Lipinski who died in 1944 from a suspected heart attack. The second is instructor, Captain J. Lemme, who died in 1943, age 25. The third grave is a Polish serviceman who died after the war. Lieutenant Lemme was on an exercise as part of the Underground Warfare Course, in the fog, and on a motorbike. He ran into a parked lorry and died later in the Guard Room, set-up in the Bucket Hall.

Having successfully completed the Underground Warfare Course, a candidate had to undertake the Briefing Course, a candidate's final polishing stage of training. This involved being informed of the conditions in Poland at the time, and concocting individual cover stories or 'legends'.

The aim of the Polish agents was not espionage but to inflict heavy German losses, in unexpected targets and to pass on all the expertise that they had learned in the six months period of military training. Many agents fought in the ill-fated Battle for Warsaw in 1944, when the beautiful Polish capital was reduced to rubble under Hitler's orders.

Couriers were also trained at Audley End. Polish courier Elżbieta Zawacka, alias 'Zo' and 'Zelma' was the only woman to parachute back into Poland. Under arduous conditions she and other couriers carried information intended for the Polish Commander-in-Chief in London. The information they carried was incredible in its diversity and concerned intelligence concerning: U-Boats in the Baltic, German troop movements, V-1 jets and V-2 rockets.

Allied Command often wished to confine underground activity in Poland to sabotage, disruption and diversion. However, some partisan activity in Poland was far from diversionary. In the village of Blizna in the Małopolska region of Poland, experiments on V-1 pulse jets and V-2 Rockets were being carried out. The AK decoded the military plans to the rockets and retrieved a fired rocket and dismantled it. On 15 July 1944 a Dakota transport aeroplane landed in Poland to retrieve technical information and parts of the V-2 Rocket.

Audley End remained an SOE training station until special operations were discontinued at the end of December 1944, operations having been transferred to newly-liberated southern Italy which provided shorter, but not always safer routes to Poland. Faces that had become familiar in the

sleepy streets of Saffron Walden were moving on to the warmer climes of Italy. The Polish staff and instructors had mixed socially with the British off duty in the town. The Forces Club was situated above a shop on King Street, a five-minute walk away from Audley End. Saffron Walden town hall had dances three times a week and the *Rose & Crown*, by convention, was used by officers, with other ranks meeting at the *Cross Keys*.

Important dignitaries including Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Forces, General Sikorski and President-in-Exile, Władysław Raczkiewicz visited Audley End House from time to time during the war. Small wonder that there are large photographs of the Essex mansion on the walls of museums in Poland and that the secret activities at Audley End can be considered as an important part in Polish and British wartime history.

The bravery of the men and women of the Cichociemni has been honoured with a discreet memorial urn which sits on the remains of the Jacobean Mount Garden in the West Park, on the right of the road as one enters the gardens through the Lion Gate. The urn was unveiled in the summer of 1983, with martial law still in force in Poland, three years after Lech Wałęsa formed Solidarność. Present at the memorial event were the Polish Prime Minister-in-Exile, Kazimierz Sabbat and the then British Minister of Defence, Michael Heseltine.

The Polish soldiers at Audley End would have enjoyed the summer concert season in the West Park (no doubt devising their own spectacular explosions for the firework displays) and SOE and British Army veterans have revisited Station 43 in the years that the house has been open to the public. Walter Lenny, who was part of the Orderly Room staff, revisited the house last year. Now in his nineties, he was keen to see the room where he worked on the second floor. I helped him up the 90 stairs to the old nursery, and by the time we got to the top I was concerned as he was quite out of breath. Walter turned to me and said, 'I didn't think it was as many steps as that, I thought it was about 30, but then I remembered I used to take the stairs three steps at a time'.

Note: This is an edited extract from *Station 43. Audley End House and SOE's Polish Section* published by Sutton. The book has also been published in Poland by Woloszanski, entitled *Baza 43. Cichociemni*. Images supplied by the author.

Disclaimer: please note that all opinions expressed in articles are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of the *Saffron Walden Historical Journal*. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of articles, but any corrections can be sent to the website editor at saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com