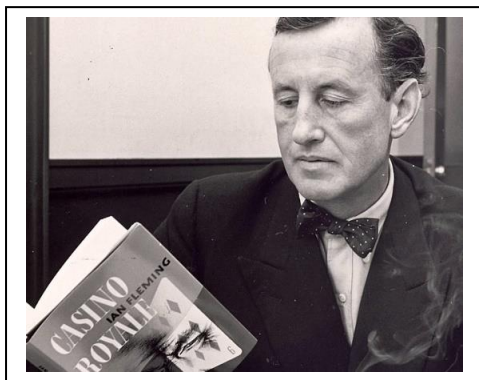


Spies of SW3

Hallie Swanson reveals the cloak and dagger denizens who called Chelsea home

In his 1955 thriller *Moonraker*, Ian Fleming describes his legendary spy James Bond as living in 'a comfortable flat in a plane tree'd square off the King's Road'. Bond expert and author, William Boyd, deduced the location was 25 Wellington Square as it fits the description and was the home of a fellow Old Etonian friend of Fleming's, Desmond MacCarthy. Why would the famously sybaritic spy choose Chelsea? Badly bombed during the Blitz, in the 1950's Chelsea was hardly the haven of wealth and chic it is now. Back then it was much more raffish, bohemian, and affordable, attracting intellectuals, artists, writers, non-conformists of all kinds--and a surprisingly number of spies. Over the years SW3 has been home to some of the most celebrated and infamous characters, both real and fictional, in the world of espionage.



Fleming himself was recruited into the Secret Service by MI5 spymaster Maxwell Knight (considered the inspiration behind 'M') who lived in Sloane Street. Knight was a brilliant operator, responsible for infiltrating the UK Communist and Fascist parties and providing critical information to the Government, who feared extremists would support a Nazi invasion.

Fleming spent his adolescence and early twenties at 119 Cheyne Walk, where his mother entertained such local luminaries as the artist Augustus John. Fleming always loved Chelsea, and after the war he moved back to Cheyne Walk, to 24 Carlyle Mansions, living there from 1950-1953. It was here that he wrote *Casino Royale*, the first of the James Bond books, based on his daring exploits working in naval intelligence during WW2.



One wonders if Fleming was inspired by the writer Somerset Maugham, who years earlier also lived in Carlyle Mansions. In 1916 he was recruited into the British Secret Intelligence Service. His adventures abroad in espionage became the basis of his hugely influential book, *Ashenden: Or the British Agent* (1928), considered the forerunner of the spy thriller genre.



And then there was Erskine Childers (1870-1922), who lived at 10 Carlyle Mansions. Although known as a writer, he served in naval intelligence. His most famous work is the 1903 espionage novel *The Riddle of the Sands*, about German plans for a nautical invasion of Britain. It's quite

extraordinary that three actual spies who then created fictional spy stories all lived not only on Cheyne Walk, but in the same block of flats.

Nearby, one of fiction's most famous spies, George Smiley, lived at 9 Bywater Street, (coincidentally just across the King's Road from Bond's fictional home in Wellington Square). His creator, John Le Carré (who, like his character, also worked in MI5), often came to Chelsea to see his literary agent and was inspired to locate the enigmatic ringmaster of 'the Circus' here.



One of the great intelligence agencies of WW2 was the Special Operations Executive (SOE) formed to 'set Europe ablaze' as Churchill put it. Its unorthodox methods focussed on sending agents specially trained in skills such as espionage, sabotage, radio operation, recruitment, and destabilisation, to gather crucial information about enemy movements.

Maurice Buckmaster, OBE (1902 - 1992) was the renowned head of SOE's 'F' (France) Section. He would ride his bicycle from his home in Chelsea to the top secret SOE headquarters in Baker Street, where he would often work all night. His PA was the indomitable Vera Atkins who was considered the inspiration for Miss Money Penny in the Bond series. By the time D-Day arrived, four hundred and eighty active agents were employed by the French section of S.O.E.



Buckmaster championed the use of female operatives, a radical concept at the time. He recruited many of the top female spies of the war, like 'Pearl' Witherington, who led a small army of 3,000 clandestine French resistance fighters with great success against the Nazis. Under her command, roughly 1,000 German soldiers were killed and 18,000 surrendered after the D-Day invasions.

The Cold War, with its threat of Communism, brought a new level of urgency to clandestine operations. Chelsea once again became a hotbed of intrigue. At 42 Cheyne Walk, spymaster Guy Liddel (1892-1958) presided over a vast network of intelligence agents as the Deputy Director of MI5 from 1947 to 1952. His brilliant work both during the war and afterwards was overshadowed by his friendship with perhaps the most notorious double agent ever, Kim Philby.

Philby lived just a few minutes' walk from Liddel at 18 Carlyle Square. He was considered one of the greatest assets the Soviets ever had, passing hundreds of state secrets to the KGB over a career spanning more than fifty years. He was the lynchpin of the infamous Cambridge spy ring of Philby, Burgess, Blunt and Maclean. His immersion as a mole in the top echelons of British intelligence was remarkable. He fooled everyone, and even managed to be appointed to head

up an MI6 section set up cost the lives of many supreme moment as a exonerated by the then who told the House of believe that Mr Philby has his country.” A year later, a Russian trawler to lived until his death in KGB intelligence that he



to *combat* Communism. His betrayals agents in Eastern Europe. Philby’s super spy surely came when he was Foreign Secretary Harold Macmillan Commons, “I have no reason to at any time betrayed the interests of with the net closing in, he escaped on Odessa and on to Moscow, where he 1988. Such was his contribution to was commemorated on a 1990 stamp.

In 2015, an extraordinary spy plot involving a Russian and British agent took place in Chelsea. In an episode that would seem outlandish even in fiction, this true story made headlines when it was reported that 19 Upper Cheyne Row served as the meeting place for Oleg Penkovsky, considered the most valuable Soviet double agent of the Cold War, and his MI6 handler, Greville Wynne. As if that weren’t story enough, on the pretext that flowing alcohol would lead to further revelations, the men convinced each of their agencies to pay for a bar to be installed at 19 Upper Cheyne Row. It must have been a great success because Wynne was given a £50,000 payout from the US government for his game-changing information, gleaned from Penkovsky, detailing Russian military sites in Cuba which helped Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Russians retaliated by tracking down and executing Penkovsky, then arresting Wynne in Budapest, spiriting him off to jail in Russia, where he was rescued in 1964 in a spy exchange worthy of a John Le Carré thriller. Back in Chelsea, he wrote two books about his life as a secret agent, *The Man From Moscow*, in 1967 and *The Man From Odessa* in 1981. He died in 1990, one of the last of Chelsea’s great Cold Warriors.

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