



Hall Place During World War II

The last resident owner of Hall Place was Lady Limerick. After her death in 1943, the house was used by the U.S. army in connection with the top-secret code-breaking project named 'Operation Ultra'.

The U.S. Army Special Projects Branch Signal Intelligence Division was set up in Southern England to work with Bletchley Park. Bletchley Park was the headquarters for the top secret ULTRA project that would eventually break the German Enigma codes.

Hitler believed his Enigma code was unbreakable. The Polish were the first to try and crack it, then the French. Once France fell to German occupation in 1940 the British took over. It was finally broken by British Cryptanalysts working in temporary huts in the grounds of Bletchley Park. However they didn't do it alone, all the allied nations played a part.

ULTRA gave an unparalleled insight into the workings of the German High Command. The only significant intelligence failure of the war in Europe came when the Germans adopted complete radio silence before launching their counter offensive in the Ardennes.

The BRUSA agreement of co-operation in 1943 led to the U.S. and British sharing communication intelligence. As a result the U.S. created the Special Projects detachments; which were in place by early 1944. The detachment at Hall Place arrived in January.

There were three detachments working on ULTRA - Hall Place (6811th regiment) and Eastcote in Ruislip (6812th regiment) with Bletchley Park (6813th regiment) controlling the operations of these units.

Each unit were specially trained radio operators. It was their duty to listen into German Military radio transmissions and write down everything they heard. What they heard was unintelligible, the German encoded by Enigma sent in Morse code. Their meaningless transcripts were then sent to Bletchley Park.

There was a guard hut outside Hall Place, which was patrolled 24 hours a day. As more GI's arrived at Hall Place from the US, there were two shifts of forty operators working on 20 networks. Every night at 2 am the Germans would change their call signals. Although the troops at Hall Place had a phone line to station X (Bletchley Park), they did not know where it was.

The work for Operation ULTRA remained a secret for over thirty years after World War II, but even today the exact nature and role of the Americans in the 'code breaking' war on Hitler has never been revealed.

Life at Hall Place

The American troops were living and working at Hall Place from 1st March 1944, whilst the officers were stationed offsite at the Black Prince Pub.

The GI's (US soldiers) at Hall Place took kitchen duty in turns, to cook and serve food to their fellow GI's and officers. One man refused and was sentenced to six months hard labour.

The Great Hall was used as the main communication centre set up with eight tables each with five transmitters of radio operators. The room off the Great Hall, the Tudor Kitchen, was used as a communications room with three teleprinters at the far end.

The Chapel became the mess room and was used for films and church services, etc. The North West and North East wings were barrack rooms, where two tiers of bunks with straw mattresses housed fourteen in a room.

All the main historic features were sealed off and covered to protect them throughout the war, including all the fireplaces, the glorious old ceilings and the 17th century stair banister. This meant the house was extremely cold in the winter.

The walls were covered with a coarse canvas made of hemp called burlap and the floor was protected with a temporary red wooden one. Latrines were built outside at the rear of the house and accessed via the large courtyard doors.

Bexley suffered numerous bombings during the war and the off duty GIs would help the wardens/rescue services. In the autumn of 1944, a V2 bomb exploded near Hall Place shattering the windows. Even though it injured one GI, he refused to leave his work until a replacement had picked up the message he was transcribing. Every message was believed to be important; any message could potentially save lives.

Some of the GI's toured around the local area on bikes and found the local people to be excellent hosts. Dances were held at the Black Prince on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

10,000 people were involved in the process of cracking the Enigma codes and the secret was never divulged until quite recently. With their duty at Hall Place complete, many of the GI's were transferred to Germany in 1945.

For more information about the ULTRA project see the publication 'The ULTRA secret' by Captain Whistler, 1974.