

Auxiliary units: Faringdon and Coleshill

World War II

It will probably never be known who was behind the decision to select Coleshill House as the HQ and Training Centre for Auxiliary Units. There has been speculation that it might have been at the suggestion of Major Michael Henderson who as the younger brother of Lord Faringdon knew the area intimately. The family seat was at [Buscot Park](#) directly adjacent to [Coleshill](#) and only a few miles away across country.

In the late 1930's it became obvious that there would be another war and that Germany would be the opponent. Britain was woefully unprepared for a war against such a powerful adversary and preparations were made in secret for a clandestine organisation to come into operation should the country be threatened with invasion. In the event of invasion small groups of specially selected men trained in all aspects of clandestine warfare - concealment, communications, sabotage and assassination - would have literally gone underground and as opportunity permitted emerged behind the enemy lines to gather intelligence, disrupt communications through acts of sabotage and assassinate key personnel. This organisation would, as part of its concealment, be known as the 'Auxiliary Units'.

Following the debacle in France and the evacuation from Dunkirk, Britain stood alone and under threat of invasion by an enemy now only a few miles away across the English Channel.

Throughout the war Auxiliaries came to Coleshill to receive training in the arts of clandestine warfare. They were the forerunners and prototype for all the later European clandestine resistance movements which contributed to the eventual victory over Nazism.

Auxiliaries were civilians selected for their specialised skills and intimate knowledge of the countryside and of the arts of fieldcraft. Many were country Doctors and Veterinary Surgeons, Farmers, Gamekeepers, Poachers, Butchers, Hunt Servants, and other country tradesmen. The Boy Scouts and Legion of Frontiersmen were also fertile recruitment areas. They were recruited secretly to the organisation. Under the cover of their civilian roles and unknown to their families and friends these men, all volunteers, organised in cells of 6-8 men, operated in this secret role throughout the period 1940-44. Each cell, known as a 'patrol' had a number of underground hides known as Operational Bases (O.B.'s). At a given signal or as the invaders approached, patrol members would have moved into their OB's ready to begin their work. Patrol members were known only to each other and security held tight. If an invasion had taken place the operational life expectancy of a patrol was considered to be no more than two weeks.



During the confused period of June/July 1940 when the threat of invasion was acute, Auxiliary Units HQ was temporarily located at Northgate House, a small requisitioned property close to the centre of Faringdon a busy little market town on the Oxfordshire / Berkshire / Gloucestershire / Wiltshire borders on the A420 road between Oxford and Swindon.

Faringdon had probably been chosen for its central position and relatively good communication links being located close to main line rail links and at the centre of a North-South and East-West road network.

Northgate House was suitable during the formative period but was far too small and public for the types of activities envisaged for the HQ and training base of a clandestine organisation.

Coleshill House ([then owned by the Pleydell-Bouverie family](#)), situated some four miles from Faringdon, isolated in its own parkland, hidden behind a high stone wall and protecting belts of trees, provided the ideal location.

So it came about that in late August 1940 the embryonic HQ and training arm of Auxiliary Units was relocated to the newly requisitioned Coleshill House. The large Jacobean house with its attached stable yards and supporting buildings and surrounded by 2500 acres of parkland became the headquarters and training centre for the amazing organisation known as 'Auxiliary Units'. Auxiliaries came to Coleshill from all parts of the British Isles to receive training in all aspects of clandestine warfare - weapons handling, unarmed combat, and the techniques of sabotage, handling and use of explosives, camouflage and assassination.

In 1942 a small factory-type unit was created at Coleshill to build and supply wireless sets for use by the Special Duties section of the organisation and resistance organisations operating in Europe, the Balkans, Middle East and Far East.

A further part of the organisation known as the Special Duties section was set up to undertake intelligence gathering and communications. The Special Duties HQ at Hannington Hall, some four miles west of Coleshill, (and then owned by the Fry chocolate family) was used by the women's branch of the army, the Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS. Women were trained in the arts of intelligence gathering and clandestine communications and in wireless operations.

As the war neared its end the need for the Auxiliary Units declined and the organisation was formally 'stood down' in December 1944. Coleshill House and grounds were cleared of their military trappings and vacated in late 1945.

In 1994 a ceremony and 'Reunion' was held at Coleshill to commemorate these unsung men and women. From information gathered among surviving members and from the correspondence files of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and others held in the National Archives, parts of the story of the 'Aux Units' have gradually emerged.

On 4 July 2010 the 70th anniversary of the formation of Auxiliary Units was commemorated by an event at Coleshill.

Their full story will never be known.

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www.coleshillhouse.com

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