

A Note of the Auxiliary Units at Coleshill House, 1940-44

By Dr Bryan Lawton of Highworth.

Several myths have grown up around the parts played by Jack Archer, Mrs Mabel Stranks, and others, in the British Resistance Movement, known as the Auxiliary Units, and trained at Coleshill House.

I did not know Mrs Stranks but her connection with the Units seems real, although relatively minor. She is unlikely to have known anything of the objectives or training of the Units at Coleshill House. It seems that trainees arrived at Highworth by rail and made their way to the post office for further travel instructions. As the Highworth sub-postmistress it seems to have been her task to check the trainee's travel papers and then to telephone someone requesting transport. It was unlikely that she knew more than this, or if she did it may have been through a breach of security. It is said that she appears in German lists of those who were to be arrested and perhaps executed after a successful invasion. I can find no evidence for this. Certainly she is not in the list published in David Lampe's book "The Last Ditch" which first revealed the existence of a British resistance movement when it was published in 1968. During her life Mrs Stranks appears never to have said anything of her involvement, but she died before 1968 so perhaps she felt obliged to keep her role a secret. On the other hand it may be that she was unaware that she played a significant part. Although Jack Archer's description of her as "a very brave woman" may be an overstatement she nevertheless deserves the plaque above the former post office in the High Street that commemorates her involvement.

Jack Archer was my good friend and co-founder of Highworth's Historical Society, along with Eric Chick. Although Jack liked a good story he was, nevertheless, respectful of the truth. Many myths have grown around Jack's involvement with the Auxiliary Units and he genuinely tried to deny these and remain truthful and factual, but he could do little to prevent them and may, in the end, have given up trying.

Jack was an NCO in Highworth's Home Guard during the Second World War and he often told me, when we discussed David Lampe's book, that none in Highworth, except perhaps Mrs Stranks, knew what was going on at Coleshill House. Jack did not know anything about it until he read Lampe's book and Jack never claimed to have been trained at Coleshill. Newspaper reports have described Jack as a captain in the auxiliary units; he was not. At the re-union of Coleshill trainees in 1994 Jack, as a surviving member of the local Highworth Home Guard, was invited to speak. He did so but was told by the Chairman not to admit that he had not been trained at Coleshill or that he knew nothing of it prior to 1968. I did not hear Jack's talk but he told me later that when he attempted to confess that he was neither a Coleshill trainee nor a member of the Auxiliary Units, his voice was drowned out by a fit of coughing from the Chairman, so he shut up and left the impression that he was a member. Afterwards he found it very difficult to admit the truth, and so the myth of his involvement has grown. In 2000 "Link" magazine chose Jack as Highworth's "man of the century". He deserved this regardless of these myths.

Others (Ted Jeffries and Grace Summers) who were children during the Second World War claim to have carried messages for the people at Coleshill. I am sure they did, but inadvertently they may have given the impression that they knew what was happening and were somehow involved; they were not and do not claim to be, although Mr Jeffries, who often speaks to local groups and societies, does leave the impression that he was deeply involved.

Dr Bryan Lawton, 13th August 2002.