

# Dispatches



## Secret resistance



A team of archaeologists is investigating the grounds of Coleshill estate, the WWII HQ of Churchill's secret British Resistance in the Cotswolds. They hope to unearth a new underground operations base, shedding light on a secret preventative measure that Churchill instigated in the early summer of 1940.

As the troops were being evacuated from Dunkirk, back in Britain, precautionary measures were being taken against an increasingly probable German invasion. Field fortifications

were erected and emergency coastal batteries were constructed to protect vulnerable landing spots and ports. Anti-tank and anti-personnel mines carpeted the beaches, lying underneath concertinaed criss-crosses of barbed wire.

However, these passive defences would only go so far. The troops returning from France were fatigued and demoralised, and it became clear to Churchill that in the event of an invasion, another force would be required to provide Britain with protection.

And so, a secret and elite body of men was established to act as a final resistance against the expected Nazis. These Auxiliary Units were made up of members of the Home Guard and civilians who knew the surrounding areas and could use the terrain to their advantage. They were trained to go to ground as the Nazis advanced inland, and to lie in wait in specially-made underground bunkers. When the time was right they would emerge, disrupting Nazi supply lines, destroying railway tracks, and dispatching any German sentries that might have stood in their way.

While such a force could not have withstood the onslaught of an entire German army, they could perhaps have supported regular operations by other forces elsewhere on the island. The nature of sabotage missions and the incorporation of guerrilla tactics would have frustrated the German forces, but would also have made being a member of an Auxiliary Unit highly dangerous. Each bunker was supplied with food to last two weeks for the simple reason that, following an invasion, an Auxilier was not expected to live much longer.

Despite the obvious risks, between 2,000 and 5,000 men came to Coleshill House, where they were trained to handle specific equipment, to recognise the different badges and stripes of enemy uniforms, and to live in the claustrophobic underground hide-outs with patrols of up to eight men at a time.

The Auxiliers would not have been permitted to disclose any information about, or even acknowledge the existence of the Units, to either friends or family. If they received the call, they would go to earth without question or hesitation. The entire operation was top secret, and as a result, it is only fairly recently that information about them has begun to emerge.

In the parkland of the Coleshill Estate, archaeologists are at work searching for buried bunkers, recording hut platforms, and collecting the detritus of special forces-type training. The project is a collaboration between

Bristol University and the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) set up by Tom Sykes in order to research, document and preserve the history of this secret force, and Keith Blaxhall, the National Trust's head warden at Coleshill, is hoping to turn the old guardhouse into a museum dedicated to telling the story of the Auxiliers.

The importance of such discoveries is stressed by local landscape archaeologist and postgraduate researcher at the University of Bristol John Winterburn: 'Coleshill House offers a special opportunity to investigate the secret

landscapes of the Auxiliary Units. We will use Modern Conflict Archaeology to provide the multi-disciplinary approach that will allow us to investigate not only the physical remains but the social and cultural aspects of the Auxiliers training and operations.'

The team will be asking the National Trust for permission to carry out further archaeological investigation of the Coleshill House WWII training landscape later this year.

For more information on the findings and aims of CART's investigations, visit: [www.coleshillhouse.com](http://www.coleshillhouse.com)