

From Rabbit Warren to Aztec Temple

Headquarters Habitations of the British SIS (U)

(b)(3)

10 USC 424

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The British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) has had four principal headquarters buildings since its modern-day inception in 1909. The history of these buildings reflects Britain's evolving policy toward secrecy in general. Only in recent years has the service emerged from the shadows, a policy consistent with the general level of public knowledge of its headquarters complexes.

Whitehall Court

The first home office was at 2 Whitehall Court, in a magnificent old building constructed in 1886. The headquarters was housed in the uppermost floors of this building, along with a flat for Capt. Sir Mansfield Cumming, RN, who founded the service.

The building sits just behind the old War Office Building, constructed itself in 1906 and still in use today. The SIS shared its own building with the National Liberal Club on one side and with the British and Foreign Bible Society on the other. George Bernard Shaw lived in this building, evidently unaware of the intelligence activity just above him.

SIS headquarters was located in a confusion of passages and strangely shaped rooms, reached by a private lift. One early worker describes the quarters:

I had always associated rabbit warrens with subterranean abodes, but here in this building I discovered a maze of rabbit-burrow-like passages, corridors,

nooks, and alcoves, piled higgledy-piggledy on the roof. Leaving the lift, my guide led me up one flight of stairs so narrow that a corpulent man would have stuck tight, around unexpected corners, and again up a flight of steps which brought us out on to the roof. After crossing a short iron bridge, we entered another maze until, just as I was beginning to feel dizzy, I was shown into a room 10 feet square, where sat an officer in the uniform of a British colonel. Atop every staircase along this journey, a secretary would press a secret bell and, from within, the director would operate a system of levels and pedals to move a pile of bricks and reveal yet another staircase.

Captain Cumming's office was "bathed in semiobscurity," according to one intelligence worker. A row of bottles hinted at chemical experiments, and a table of mechanical devices added further to "an already overpowering atmosphere of strangeness and mystery." Another agent noted that the director's secretary "kept coming up through a hole in the floor."

Cumming called those who were privy to his top-floor offices his "top-mates." Within his office, a visitor noted: A plain worktable, a big safe, some maps on the walls, a vase of flowers, one or two seascapes recalled [Cumming's] passion for sailing, and inevitably, scattered about, various examples of the mechanical gadgets in which he reveled with boyish



Whitehall Court. Photo courtesy of the author. Copyright 1996.

enthusiasm—a patent compass, a new sort of electric clock.”

This headquarters is associated with only one SIS chief, as Captain Cumming died in 1923. Each of the subsequent buildings would be linked to at least several chiefs.

The SIS stayed at 2 Whitehall Court until its brief sojourn near Kensington High Street. This temporary move, for economy reasons, was to a villa on Melbury Road. In 1924, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, found the money to return SIS to a central location, 54 Broadway.

Today the first SIS home is occupied by the Royal Horseguards Hotel, owned by the Thistle chain, whose employees occasionally use these rooftop rooms. The 376-room hotel does not mention its former occupants—fitting for an agency which “never existed” officially until the

early 1990s. The hotel’s current promotional brochure notes that “The unique location of the Royal Horseguards, tucked away in a quiet area of Whitehall, makes it one of the most sought after hotels in London.” As of late 1996, a single unit fetched 130 pounds, a double began at 150 pounds, and a studio suite started at 255 pounds.

Broadway

The SIS’s longest occupancy was in an ancient nine-story brown office structure called the Broadway Buildings. This distinctive edifice with a mansard roof is on the north side of Broadway at number 54, just opposite the St. James’s Park underground station. The service moved there in 1924, and it stayed until 1966.

This headquarters is a far cry from the popular “007” image of the SIS

home office—glossy, glamorous, and sophisticated. The reality is quite different. Arch-traitor Kim Philby described 54 Broadway as “a dingy building, a warren of wooden partitions and frosted glass windows,” which was served by an “ancient lift.” While Philby’s word is totally untrustworthy in other more weighty matters, this description fits with those of other former insiders.

Roy Berkeley, the principal authority on London “spy sites,” notes that the building is quite solid.¹ Its steel frame probably prevented its collapse in 1944, when a V-1 flying bomb demolished a nearby chapel.

During World War II, the building carried the cover title “Minimax Fire Extinguisher Company,” according to Berkeley. One issue for the curious is why a fire extinguisher firm would require a thicket of radio antennas on its roof. The roof also had a pigeon loft, a byproduct of the thinking of Sir Stewart Menzies, who was service chief (or “C”) from 1939 until 1951. An intelligence officer of the old school, Sir Stewart mistrusted radio communications for his assets in France.

The SIS perpetuated the cover story for the building, even after Radio Berlin announced 54 Broadway as SIS headquarters. The Germans had obtained this information from two SIS men kidnapped in the Netherlands—a major black eye for the service.

Perhaps the best explanation for persisting with the cover story is offered by Malcolm Muggerridge, himself an SIS employee during World War II:

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Broadway Buildings. Photo courtesy of the author. Copyright 1996.

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Sometime after World War II, the cover apparently changed. The structure was listed innocuously in the London telephone directory as a sub-branch of the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources

The building in back of SIS headquarters, at 21 Queen Anne's Gate, also perpetuated this secrecy. This nondescript, five-story red brick building was home of the chiefs of the SIS since the 1920s. This building was not all what it seemed to be, for a passageway had been built between it and the Broadway Buildings, the two structures being back to back. This allowed "C" to be only a couple of minutes or so from his desk in the event he was needed.

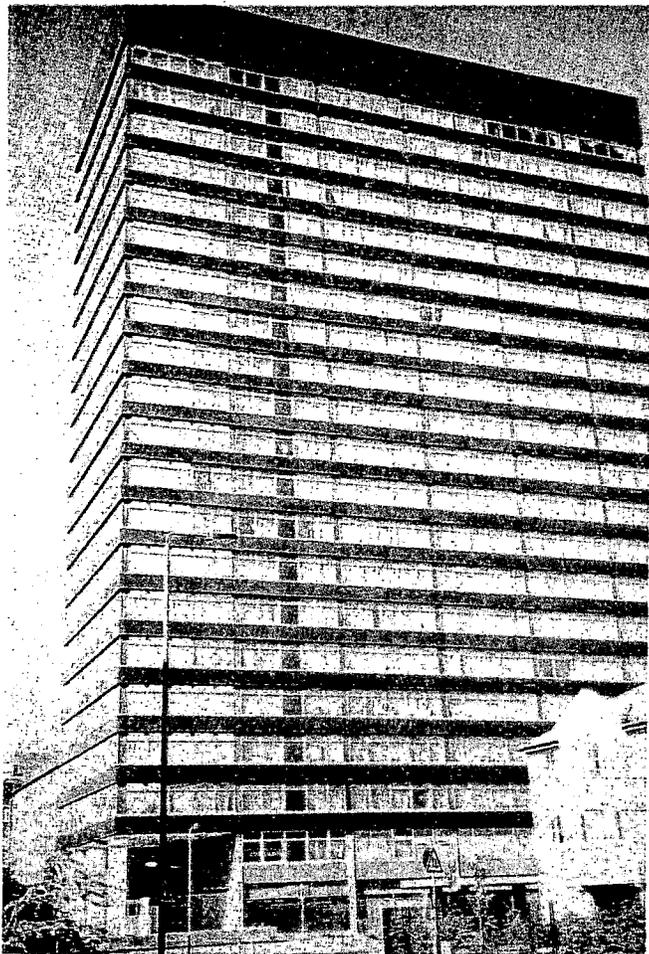
The Broadway headquarters complex hosted four chiefs: Adm. Sir Hugh ("Quex") Sinclair, RN (1923-39), Maj. Gen. Sir Stewart Menzies (1939-51), Sir John Sinclair (1952-56), and Sir Dick White (1956-68). Late in White's tenure, the service abandoned Broadway for Century House.

Century House

About two miles away, or a short taxi ride across the river, is a 20-story glass-and-concrete skyscraper. It is near the Lambeth North underground station, on the north side of Westminster Bridge Road, at number 100. This building, called Century House, was home for the SIS from 1966 until 1994.

Even though this headquarters was well known to many, SIS never hung out its "shingle." Nor, to its credit, did it resurrect the fire extinguisher cover. The building's two entrances were blocked by uniformed guards with a nearby small sign reading: "No entry, Permit holders only."

When it was constructed in the 1950s, the building, was considered glitzy and modern. By the early 1990s, however, it was falling apart. With a move anticipated for years, little money had been spent on its upkeep. As a result, doors did not shut, paint was peeling, and the central heating apparatus worked only intermittently, according to James Adams.² Departments were split between floors, which caused hardships in communicating effectively. Century House was affectionately referred to by many SIS staffers as "Gloom Hall."



Century House. Photo courtesy of the author. Copyright 1996.

Century House was the scene of the making of intelligence history of a sort in the summer of 1992, when the then chief, Colin McColl, formally invited editors to lunch in his office. Over the next year, he entertained every editor of a national newspaper and most of the senior editors from the BBC and ITV. The service was concerned about widespread attacks on the role of intelligence, and there was a general assumption that intelligence services faced drastic budget cuts. At his lunches, McColl would elaborate why SIS was still needed and why it

still required adequate funding, even in difficult economic times. Unable to give formal interviews, he resorted to unconventional measures to try to reach the public and policymakers.

This momentum of "openness" continued and accelerated. The chief was routinely identified in the press. A retired high-level SIS official spoke on television about the future of the service. Various media sources noted its strength ("about 2,000 officers," with "a third of its resources" directed to the Soviet Bloc). Also in 1992, Prime Minister Major publicly

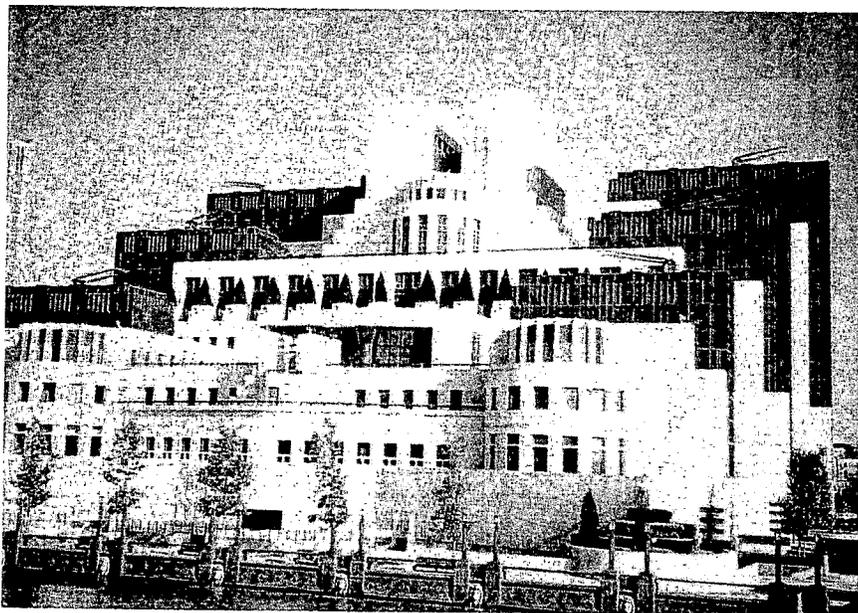
acknowledged the existence of SIS, promising to "sweep away some of the cobwebs of secrecy." By 1994, the service had ceased the age-old practice of burying its budget within those of the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence.

Century House hosted more chiefs—seven—than any other headquarters. They included Sir Dick White (until 1968), Sir John Rennie (1968-73), Sir Maurice Oldfield (1973-78), Sir Dickie Franks (1978-81), Sir Colin Figures (1981-85), Sir Christopher Curwen (1985-89), and Colin McColl (1989-94). The old "Broadway era" of chiefs with extraordinary longevity was clearly over.

A recent nostalgic visit to Century House in late 1996 confirmed that the building is due for a total make-over. It is still rundown and thus fits in well with the surrounding neighborhood. The only bright spot nearby is the Imperial War Museum, a five-minute walk away. One pedestrian volunteered the information that the old "MI6 building," (as he called it) would soon be turned into a complex of flats. One can readily appreciate the likely eagerness of SIS employees to move into their new complex at Vauxhall Cross.

Vauxhall Cross

Rising high above the south bank of the Thames over Vauxhall Bridge is a honey-colored concrete building which is thought by some to be the most magnificent intelligence headquarters in the world. This building, at 85 Vauxhall Cross, rises in four tiers from the riverside and presents a sheer wall to the traffic artery behind it.



Vauxhall Cross. Photo courtesy of the author. Copyright 1996.

A far cry from "Gloom Hall," this unusual building was designed by Terry Farrell, a post-Modernist architect whose buildings typified corporate Britain of the 1980s. Several large atriums have been built in, with plenty of glass and aluminum on the inside, along with ochre panels and wide lobbies. One upper floor features a line of yew trees (grown in Italy) facing the river; four tons of earth were used to plant them in containers with water, with a feeding and drainage system built in. At ground level, plane trees, box hedges, wisteria, and lavender have been planted in a gazebo, with fountains and a kiosk facing the river. The building's features have drawn comment from intelligence writers Roy Berkeley and James Adams, not to mention accounts in the British press.

Some degree of mystery has been maintained, for nobody is able to make an accurate count of the number of floors. Most believe that there

are between nine and 12 visible floors, with perhaps five levels of a "computer citadel" below. In addition, there is said to be an intelligence museum comprising two rooms—perhaps the British version of CIA's little museum at Langley or the Russian "Memory Room" in Moscow.

There was little mystery, however, about the cost of the building. The government had originally bought it for 130 million pounds in 1989, but, by the time the necessary modification and improvements were made, the cost had risen to an estimated 240 million pounds by 1993. The SIS insisted on triple glazing over the windows to defeat laser-based audio intercepts, for example. The new building became the subject of Whitehall jokes; it was variously referred to as the Aztec Temple, the Transpontine Babylonian Palace, Ceausescu Towers, and the Mighty Wurlitzer.

The new headquarters building stands in stark contrast to the surrounding neighborhood. Just behind it is one of the bleakest and most depressing traffic interchanges in London, the center of which is the Vauxhall railway station.

Vauxhall Cross is far more prominent than any of the previous SIS headquarters. Unlike any other major world power, the UK has made available one of the showiest new architectural landmarks to its intelligence service. By coincidence, however, SIS was still technically nonexistent when the construction started! Today, with the high profile of the new headquarters, comes sustained and unabashed speculation about the organization housed within it.

By the time the service occupied the building, it had attained a degree of openness that would have sent Sir Mansfield Cumming spinning in his grave. In early 1994, the British Government announced that 2,303 staffers worked for the SIS, and, later that year, announced David Spedding as the new selectee to head the service. Looking out from his office high above the Thames, he will continue to face the daunting task of balancing secrecy and openness.

NOTES

1. Roy Berkeley. *A Spy's London*, London: Leo Cooper, 1994.
2. James Adams. *The New Spies: Exploring the Frontiers of Espionage*, London: Hutchinson, 1994.