

*The Times**14 NOV '82*

THE HUNCH: How he was caught (just)

ON APRIL 21 this year a 14-year-old girl named Jacqueline was alone at her home near Hereford. She opened the door to a man who said his name was Williams and had come to estimate a painting job.

Once inside, however, "Williams" embarked on a sordid sexual attack. He persuaded Jacqueline to go upstairs to the bathroom where he threatened her with the blade of a bottle-opener. He ordered her to lower her pants, and masturbated in front of her. After he had left the terrified girl the police were called.

As he read the incident report at police headquarters at Worcester, Chief Superintendent David Cole, head of West Mercia CID, had a hunch. He recalled two similar attacks on young girls in their homes, one almost precisely a year earlier, the other a year before that. In both cases, the attacker appeared to have been a voyeur; and each time had vanished without trace.

Cole was as certain as he could be that the same man had carried out all three attacks. But this time there were important clues. People working in a field near Jacqueline's home had spotted the man and—crucially—a distinctive two-tone bronze Ford Cortina with an "S" registration. Jacqueline confidently helped construct a photofit picture.

Cole ordered a computer check on all similar cars in Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester. It seemed a daunting task: there were 426 in all. But within six days the police had traced 300 owners and on April 27, two detectives, Sgt Michael Wilkes and Policewoman Marion Rhodes, arrived at Laburnham Cottage in Pittville Crescent Lane, Cheltenham—the home of Geoffrey Prime.

Asked where he had been on the day Jacqueline was attacked, Prime said he had been at home. The detectives

took his fingerprints—only to eliminate him, they assured him—and left. But when they conferred outside they agreed that Prime's likeness to the photofit picture was remarkable. Both marked their notes that Prime should be reinterviewed "urgently".

It is an overwhelming irony that had the two officers arrested Prime at once, his espionage might never have been detected. But they were unable to do so before checking his fingerprints. Meanwhile, their questioning left Prime unsettled. That night, he decided to confess to his wife Rhona. He told her first about his sexual attacks—but also said he had been involved in "spying" at GCHQ. It was this admission Rhona eventually reported to the police, to launch their inquiries into his espionage. Had Prime been in custody that night, he might never have made that second, devastating confession.

In the morning, Prime telephoned Hereford police station and confessed to the attack on Jacqueline.

But for three weeks the police remained unaware of Prime's espionage. His wallet contained "one-time" coding pads—sheets of paper with grids of numbers on them—but they meant nothing to the investigating officers. Even when Prime appeared in court to be remanded on the assault charges, no alarm bells rang at GCHQ or in the government security services in Whitehall.

Rhona Prime meanwhile was wrestling with her conscience. Prime's sudden confession the night before he was arrested had come as less than a total surprise, for she had been disturbed by his occasional furtiveness about the house. She had also been puzzled by the sudden inflow of unexplained amounts of money.

Now, under a bed, she found a carrier-bag containing items of Prime's spying kit. She sought advice from her priest

—she and Prime are both Catholics—her doctor, and her solicitor. Three weeks after Prime's arrest she went to the police.

The West Mercia police immediately consulted the security services—and were surprised to be told that although advice and "guidance" would be forthcoming, the investigation was to be left in their hands.

Rhona Prime's dramatic information placed the local force in an awkward dilemma. She had assured them she was telling the truth, but she emphatically did not want her husband to know she had shopped him.

Using time-honoured and painstaking methods, the West Mercia police gradually assembled a case. After two weeks of checking credit-card accounts and bank statements, and visiting local travel agents, they had enough evidence to confront Prime. They discovered that he had twice booked flights to Helsinki—something that had eluded GCHQ's own security division five years earlier, when it briefly investigated why one of its section heads had resigned to become a taxi-driver.

For a further two weeks, Prime stuck to his denials. But finally, the day after a seven-hour grilling, he announced: "I now wish to tell you the whole truth of this tragic affair . . . It will take a long time." The local police had finally uncovered the betrayal that had escaped both GCHQ and the security services for a decade and a half.

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VETTING: It was useless

IF Geoffrey Prime had set out to penetrate the National Security Agency—the American equivalent of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ)—he would, in theory, have fallen at the first fence. The inquiry into his background would have lasted at least four or five months. He would have been submitted to a battery of psychological examinations. And, crucially, he would have been given a polygraph, or lie detector, test, which depends heavily on “EPQs”—embarrassing personal questions. On average, the agency rejects a quarter of potential recruits each year and 95 per cent of them fall victim to the polygraph.

Even so, at least one agent has penetrated the agency and in 1960 two of its analysts, disillusioned, defected to Russia; no system is foolproof. However, American officials are adamant that no one with Prime's sexual and psychological problems could have survived undetected in the US for 14 years.

Laxity

Even before Prime was unmasked, NSA officials had been pressing the British to adopt the polygraph. That pressure is now increasing. However, it is the fundamental laxity of security at Cheltenham revealed by Prime's case that has provoked the greatest anger in Washington—and the accusation that GCHQ is “as leaky as an old scow.”

Certainly by American standards, British screening methods are far from rigorous. The “positive vetting” to which Prime was subjected at least four times can take up to three months to complete—but it takes so long, more because of the work-load of the security services, than because of the thoroughness of the investigation. (According to the report of the Security Commission

presented to Parliament last May, 63,000 government posts require positive vetting. The commission recommended that the number should be cut.)

The system depends largely on a questionnaire. Each time Prime was vetted he had to write answers to questions inquiring into his background, his friendships, his finances and his tastes—even down to the newspapers he read. He was also asked to name two referees.

The referees are supposed to be questioned by GCHQ's own security officers and these interrogations can be severe: we know of one referee who found the experience so unpleasant he refused to let anyone else nominate him.

'Loners'

But we also know of cases where nominated referees were never questioned. And there is another flaw in the system.

In theory, Prime should have provided fresh nominees each time he was vetted—a sensible precaution designed to overcome the risk that a referee may be in collusion with the person being vetted. The snag is that “loners” such as Prime could genuinely claim not to know more than a couple of people who could vouch for them.

We do not know if that happened in Prime's case, but we do know of other GCHQ staff who found themselves in that dilemma. They found the security division “most understanding”.

In addition to vetting, GCHQ screens its employees through a Personnel Security Supervision System. This, in theory, should detect suspicious changes in behaviour. It, too, is flawed, however. It depends on the willingness of section heads to “snitch” on their colleagues—something which, according

to our information, most supervisors will not do.

Once a year, the section heads at GCHQ's two Cheltenham bases—Oakley, where Prime worked, and Benhall—are sent a long memo by the Security Division detailing the “suspicious” signs to watch for: too much money, which might indicate that the employee is selling secrets, or too little, which might indicate that he or she is open to bribery. Depression, an “undue” inter-

promising compliance—as they are required to—but we believe they do not always stick to the letter of that agreement. As one former GCHQ section head put it: “If I had thought that anybody was a spy, of course I would have reported him like a shot. But I would not have reported people for some minor personal peccadillo—certainly not without telling them.”

Another criticism of GCHQ is that much of its security is devoted to keeping secrets not from the Russians, but from the British public.

In so much as GCHQ says anything in public about its work, it claims it is devoted to “research and development in the field of communications and communications security”. Employees are sternly and constantly warned not to admit to anyone that GCHQ is in the business of espionage.

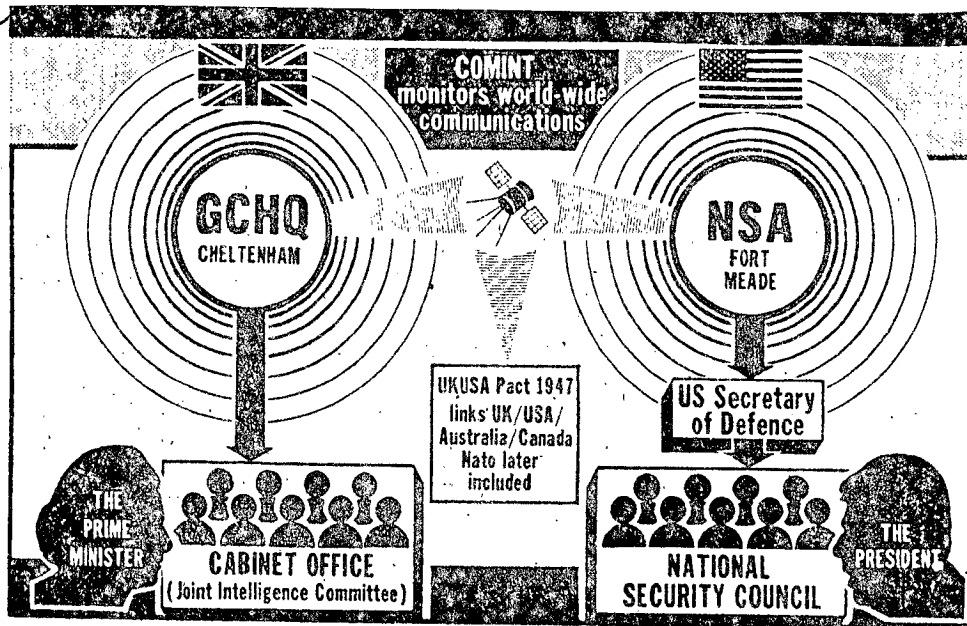
When, in 1981, a senior GCHQ linguist, Alex Lawrie, made a speech to the Fabian Society in his capacity as a Labour councillor, during which he acknowledged that GCHQ was part of the “intelligence community”, he was severely reprimanded and fined £25. He later took early retirement after GCHQ's director, Sir



Tovey: he objected

est in sex, and over-indulgence in alcohol are among other signs listed. Section heads are instructed to report to security *without telling the person concerned* if they spot any of these signs.

It is to that final admonishment that most section heads object. They sign the memo



How the West spies on Russia

Brian Tovey, objected to involvement in such "political controversy" as the deliberation over whether Denis Healey Tony Benn should be dep leader of the Labour Party.

GCHQ's obsession with keeping its secrets from the public has sometimes led it actively to loosen security. For example, employees were once issued with security passes for their cars. These were later withdrawn because they gave away the fact that their bearers worked at GCHQ. Undoubtedly it is now possible for an authorised person to penetrate the perimeter fences. (A Russian agent who wants to identify GCHQ employees need do no more than wait outside Oakley or Benhall, then follow one of the hundreds of cars that stream out of the base every evening.)

The harsh light that the Prime case has cast on what really goes on at Cheltenham may persuade GCHQ to drop its pretence of innocence and concentrate on security rather than secrecy.

But it is plain that American intelligence officials will require a lot of convincing, and Britain will have to add the polygraph—if they are to continue sharing such major secrets as Prime betrayed.

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Security:
what Prime
betrayed
to Moscow

EXCLUSIVE

GEOFFREY Prime, the man convicted last week of spying for the Russians, gave away details of the most sophisticated satellite surveillance system the West has ever developed.

Codenamed the Eyeman Project, the system enabled the Government's communications headquarters at Cheltenham (GCHQ), and its equivalent in America (the NSA), to monitor communications within the Soviet Union. Until Prime handed over his secrets in the spring of 1975, the Russians were unaware that GCHQ and NSA could listen in to any conversation they considered significant.

Sunday Times inquiries have established that Prime handed over his secrets at the same time as two Americans, Daulton Lee and Christopher Boyce were also leaking details about other parts of the Eyeman system. The combined information showed Moscow just how vulnerable they were to western scrutiny. It allowed them to switch channels of communication or to feed "disinformation" to the West.

The Shadow Home Secretary Roy Hattersley said yesterday that the opposition would continue to press for a House of Commons inquiry into Britain's security services.

Meanwhile, a group of left-wing Labour MPs has tabled a Commons motion demanding that the security services should be more accountable.