

The Spy left out in the Cold.

By Roy Webster

The man was wearing a light blue suit, slightly threadbare at the elbows, a battered, snap-brim Trilby hat tilted at a rakish angle and a crumpled dog collar.

The Boy spotted the stranger through his special peephole in the garden hedge. He was pedalling a ramshackle pushbike erratically along the rutted cinder track leading to the cottage. His face was framed by reddish sideburns and a hint of ginger stubble masked freckled cheeks.

Unaware he was being watched, the traveller had already dismounted from his rusty steed to brush wisps of straw from his trousers, button his black shirt to the top and adjust the clergyman neckwear fished from the bulky case strapped to the bicycle carrier above the rear mudguard.

In a matter of minutes, this man who obviously had spent an uncomfortable night sleeping outdoors transformed his appearance from scruffy itinerant to a respectable-looking man of the cloth.

The Boy hurtled from his hiding place and was in the house before the visitor had reached the gate. Mum, there's a funny man coming down the lane," he panted.

"What do you mean funny? What does he want?" demanded the irritable woman, who had worked since dawn, feeding the weekly wash into the outhouse copper, then wringing the rinse through a 19th century mangle, before pegging out the bed linen and the laundered family clothing on the taut wire line stretched between two iron posts sunk in the ground by the garden path "I don't know what he wants. He looks a bit like Mr Kershaw, the parson," scowled the Boy.

The man rapped his knuckles on the open door. At once the mother understood what her son had meant by "funny" for, most definitely, this fellow did not fit the accepted description of a rural North Norfolk citizen. "The tarp of the marnin' te ye, madam. You are looking utterly charmin' this chilly day," he greeted.

Not flattered by this contrived compliment delivered in thick Irish brogue, the housewife, with her eight-year-old son leaning on the door jamb, eyed this intruder with suspicion.

An Irish parson visiting a humble country cottage situated in Fenland, the outback of nowhere? It simply did not make sense.

"How can I help you?" she enquired suspiciously.

Producing what appeared to be a rough copy of an North East Norfolk map, he explained: "I am completing a geographic survey of this area for the Ministry of War as a part-time job. Perhaps you could help me?"

"How"?

"Well, according to this map, there are rivers or canals hereabouts. Is there a bridge down there?" he enquired gently, pointing towards the sloping path running from the bottom of the cottage garden..

"There is a bridge over The North Walsham, Dilham Canal down Oaks Road, Dilham,

Another linking the Dilham/Honing village boundaries," she responded hesitantly, also disclosing a street crossing over Dilham's dilapidated Taylors' Cut.

However, it was the next probe into her mind that stimulated the hairs to rise on the back of her neck with a sudden frisson of fear.

"Are any of those bridges primed with explosive devices?" the odd stranger murmured softly, his eyes narrowing to sinister slits.

The Boy knew the answer. So did the whole village, with adults and children alike being warned that under no circumstances should they tamper with the loose brickwork at the base of these ancient viaducts. All three were mined with high explosive in the event of a possible invasion by the German Wehrmacht riding in on their relentless Tiger Tanks. And much of the NWD Canal had been deepened and converted into an effective tank trap by a hasty dredging operation that most certainly boosted the quality of fishing for the Boy Roy and his Primary School mates,

But before the innocent lad could utter a single word relating these facts to the stranger on the ancient concrete door step worn thin at the edges by constant knife sharpening, his mother had yanked him into the house and slammed the door.



Suddenly the penny had dropped - this Irish bloke who had obviously been sleeping rough was a German spy – one of the many English-speaking enemy agents recruited from the so-called neutral nations where there existed religious elements sympathetic to the Fascist movement and ready to support the Nazi regime during the Second World War. She remembered the frequent warning – careless talk costs lives. She realised beyond doubt that bulky case strapped to the back of the bike leaning against the honeysuckle bower was a radio transmitter. But what should she do now?

“Run upstairs, Boy, and see if he’s going,” she directed. “He’s at the top of the lane and is biking away,” he yelled down the winding staircase.

The woman decided to wait for her husband to return from work. After he had eaten, the Old Man cycled into the village and informed the local Home Guard sergeant of the incident. This directly led to the enemy agent being captured a few days later while snooping around the site of the new US airbase on the outskirts of Norwich

After that, the whole affair was shrouded in secrecy until information leaked out along the local grapevine that the spy had been operating along the east coast, plotting on his map important features, such as bridges over canals and rivers and, more importantly, pinpointing the then ultra secret “radio location” installations (early radar).

It was early April, 1941. Hitler had not yet decided to turn his mighty armies from Europe towards the high-risk logistics of the Russian eastern front. Although the outcome of the Battle of Britain in the air had swung in the Allies favour, the terrifying spectre of the Wehrmacht pounding relentlessly over the Norfolk sand dunes from the North Sea still haunted the local populations after hearing Winston Churchill’s “blood, sweat and tears” message.



However, the German dictator Hitler was well aware the “Sceptred Isle” could never be subdued without destroying the supremacy of the Royal Air Force. He could only achieve that by demolishing the new interlocking radar detection system such as those being built at Trimingham and Neatishead that would become operational in the early autumn that year.

The Luftwaffe favoured low-flying single-bomber raids on these vital defences and, one such sortie was witnessed by The Boy and his mother on a later summer Tuesday morning during a delivery of goods by the local general stores.

A solitary black Dornier flitted between low cloud and scud on a north-west heading. RAF Trimingham Radar was probably the intended target, but it did not succeed. Mother and son and van driver Frank Dixon witnessed the rat a tat interception of the twin-tailed attacker by an RAF Coltishall Spitfire. Four bombs were jettisoned in open country before the plane was downed into the North Sea off Walcott.

Radar continued to be developed, played a major role in winning the war for the Allies and continues to monitor and control air space with remarkable efficiency to this very day.



Once arrested the Irish sounding enemy alien, had but two choices – either he could become a double agent for The Allies or face the time-honoured ultimate penalty for espionage. History suggests that the great majority of every enemy agent apprehended in the United Kingdom selected the first option.

As for the Boy Roy the incident was soon forgotten. The fact that the skies over the NWD Canal became almost constantly filled by Allied aircraft from Bomber Command “going out and coming home” failed to maintain as much interest for him and his school mates as those

spectacular specimen Bream, roach, tench, rudd and pike that featured in the dredged channel during the 1940’s and into the early post war years.

“We’ll never see those days again” became anglers’ local lament as pollution, excessive weed and bankside growth not to mention human neglect demanded a heavy damaging toll from Mother Nature. The critics were wrong!

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Happily, the endeavours of a devoted band of volunteers forming a hard working Trust have rescued and rejuvenated much of this ancient waterway to its former glory as an important nature reserve, a top fishery, a ramblers paradise and a small boaters joy.

Respecting the accepted rules of common decency to man, beast and the natural habitat should ensure this remarkable canal will continue to flourish over many more years for grandchildren and generations beyond, always providing the real threats from climate change are successfully challenged and resolved.