

## Hester Leggatt and Operation Mincemeat



Figure 1: Believed to be Hester Leggatt.

You may be familiar with the story of Operation Mincemeat, the naval deception that took place during the Second World War, in which the body of a homeless man was deposited off the coast of Spain, disguised as a Royal Marine and carrying fake intelligence documents. Carried out in 1943, this plot was to trick Hitler into diverting his troops from Sicily to make way for the Allied invasion and has been widely credited with saving many lives as well as changing the course of the war.

One of the key elements to this plot was to make the Nazis believe that the deceased homeless man was Major William 'Bill' Martin, and so a backstory was created. This included a fictional fiancée, named Pam, from whom love letters were placed in the jacket of the body to eventually be found by the Nazis. It would be these letters that helped the Nazis believe the ruse but until recently, the author of the letters had remained a mystery, although it was clear that an MI5 secretary had played the role of 'Pam'. Not until a book published in 2010 (*Operation Mincemeat* by Ben Macintyre) was the name Hester Leggatt mentioned, although it was spelt Leggett, meaning a connection was not immediately made. This book inspired a film and subsequently a musical, through which the

creators asked fans to find out more about Hester, as nothing more than her name was known. Through this amateur sleuthing, and by changing the spelling of Leggett to Leggatt, one fan found out that Hester had attended Wycombe Abbey.

Born in India in 1905, Hester and her family moved back to the UK before the First World War. She attended Tormead School in Guildford before coming to Wycombe Abbey, then under the Headship of Miss Whitelaw, on 5 May 1920, where she was in Barry House until July 1924 when she became a Senior. Information in the archives from Hester's time at School is sparse, but issues of the School magazine, the *Gazette*, from 1920 to 1924, have brought up her name; one item confirmed her arrival in May 1920. In 1922, Hester gained her School Certificate and became a Barry House editor. On 10 March 1923, as part of an entertainment piece for the *Gazette*, Hester read AA Milne's *Primrose Farm* whilst fellow pupils acted around her. By June 1923, Hester had passed the London General School Examination, with exemption from London Matriculation.

We have yet to formally identify Hester from two photos of Barry House that were taken during her time at Wycombe Abbey. However, the fans of *Operation Mincemeat* researching Hester

compared our photo to that of Hester's brothers and, due to a strong family resemblance, believe she is the girl in the photo shown above. Sadly, Hester's family descendants have not been able to locate a photo that can confirm her identity.

Upon leaving Wycombe Abbey, Hester signed the Seniors' Roll book, which shows that she was 'House Monitor, House Editor, on the Library Committee and qualified for plain needlework' in addition to her examination. She went on to complete Secretarial Training at St James' Secretarial College, London, which is confirmed by a war record found in the Wycombe Abbey archives. The record also shows that Hester was living in London and was employed at the War Office. This fact is also confirmed by a letter from MI5 to one of the researchers, which states Hester worked as a 'Grade 2 administrative assistant' in section B1a, the division responsible for running MI5's Double Cross agents during the war.

Ben Macintyre's book recalls memories from those who worked alongside Hester, describing her as a 'sharp-tongued dragon... who demanded absolute obedience and perfect efficiency among her girls'. Others called her 'The Spin', short for 'spinster', whilst another said she was 'fierce and demanding... she devoted herself utterly to the job of marshalling a huge quantity of secret paperwork'. A complete contrast to the persona that is evident in the love letters from 'Pam' to 'Darling Bill'. However, some have speculated that Hester may have felt like she was writing to her own brother, whom she also called 'Bill' and who was fighting in the War.

So why did it take so long for Hester's name to be associated with these letters? According to the book *The Man Who Never Was* by Ewen Montagu, the intelligence officer in charge of Operation Mincemeat, 'asked a girl working in one of the offices whether she could get some girl to do it. She took on the job, but never would tell us the name of the girl who produced the two magnificent letters.' It is also likely that Hester would not have felt comfortable showing her emotions so openly on paper and, therefore, did not tell her superiors that she had written the letters.

After the war, Hester, who never married, worked at the British Council before retiring to Chilton in Buckinghamshire. She later moved into a nursing home, where she sadly passed away in 1995 at the age of 89. Thanks to the unveiling of Hester's role in a significant historical event, a plaque has been erected in her honour at the Fortune Theatre, London where the *Operation Mincemeat* musical was performed. There will, of course, be many others like Hester who quietly did their bit for the War, but we are grateful that the amazing story of this Senior has come to light and can be celebrated.