

Operation Portland

The Autobiography of a Spy by Harry Houghton

Rupert Hart-Davis, London

Harry Houghton was born in Lincoln in 1905, and joined the Royal Navy at the age of sixteen. He rose to the rank of Master-at-Arms and served on convoys to Malta and Russia in WWII. In 1951 he was posted to Warsaw as a Naval Attache's clerk, and on his return to England worked at the Underwater Detection Establishment at Portland. In January 1961 he was arrested for spying for Russia, and sentenced to fifteen years' jail. On his release in 1970 he married Ethel Gee, who had also been imprisoned for her part in the Portland Spy Ring and they continued to live in Dorset.

'The incompetence that happened in our counter espionage and security agencies, really does not seem to have been matched before.' This was George Brown speaking in Parliament in 1961, a week after Harry Houghton had been sentenced (along with the Krogcrs, Gordon Lonsdale and Ethel Gee) to fifteen years' jail for his part in the notorious Portland Spy Ring. Released from prison, Houghton revealed the whole fantastic story of Operation Portland – the story that never came out at the trial.

What were the motives that impelled Houghton to spy for Russia? How did he get away with it for so long? Was Gordon Lonsdale really the master-spy, and what part did Ethel Gee play in the ring? Most sensational of all, Houghton reveals how the diver Buster Crabb met his death. Operation Portland is an enthralling and controversial story; and a fascinating glimpse into the mind of a spy.

The above was on the fly leaf of the book and below are two extracts that refer to Alresford's part in the Portland Spy Ring. There is a 'commemorative plaque' on the wall of the toilets In Station Road.

Extract 1

I've just described myself as an amateur. It's inconceivable that all these people were in England solely to deal with the scraps of information I might be able to supply. The GRU and KGB wouldn't have wasted all that manpower for something so speculative. After all, when they approached me they couldn't be sure I was going to be of any value to them. They would hardly have built up such a complex network on the off-chance. And when I did begin to work for them, showing up on average once a month and rarely supplying more than a few items at a time...no, it was too expensive an investment for what they got out of me or could ever hope to get out of me. Roman was obviously supervising a lot of other people, engaged on a lot of other things.

I have had two Renault cars, the first being one of the old 750-cc rear-engine jobs, which I traded in for a new Renault Dauphine. I was given instructions that any time I received literature through the post about Renault cars, such as a brochure about new models, I was to hold it up to the light and examine it thoroughly. If there was a pin-hole through the centre I was to go into the gents' lavatory at Alresford on my next trip to London at 2-pm precisely.

There were two WCs inside this public convenience. Going in at 2-pm on the dot, I was to enter the one on my left, take out a package which I would find behind the door, put it in my pocket and proceed to London. This package, never much larger than a flat 2-oz. tobacco tin, was always sealed with sellotape and I was never able to satisfy my curiosity about it.

Whoever selected this pick-up point did so with total disregard for my nerves: the lavatory was in a cul-de-sac slap-bang opposite Alresford Police Station.

Anyone knowing the time of my arrival could deposit the package, taking his cue from the sound of the Renault coming up the 200-yard approach, and leave by a footpath which led off I don't know where, without my seeing him. On one corner was a hotel, its gardens and stables behind a wall on one side of the street. On the other corner was a cycle shop, and next to it a cinema where a kids' programme had usually started by the time I passed.

What bewildered me, and still does, is why a sleepy little place like Alresford should have been chosen and what there was in the vicinity which could have interested the Russians. Of course Portsmouth, Southampton and Salisbury Plain are within easy motoring distance, which made it as good a spot as any.

Having obtained the package, it was my routine to proceed to a rendezvous near London and meet whoever might show up there, to get any instructions on other matters before I went on into Kensington. Once or twice I mentioned that I had a package from Alresford with me, and each time got a dour brush-off on the lines of, 'So, you know your instructions what to do with it.'

What I had to do with it was go to the Bunch of Grapes public house in Brompton Road at a given time and stand by a door at the rear of the bar leading into the gents' toilet. (They seem to have had a fixation on lavatories for this part of the operation!) I was to hold a newspaper in my left hand. I probably had a drink in the other, A man would approach and say:

'Is that the evening paper you've got there?'

'No, I'm afraid it's a daily.'

'I wanted the racing results.'

I've often wondered what would have happened if some genuine enquirer had really wanted the racing results.

Contact made, my questioner would disappear into the gents', and after a brief interval I would follow and hand him the package. He then vanished from the scene. We met several times like this, and each time observed the same ritual although we had come to know each other by sight. He was a shabby, nondescript individual, a little taller than myself, very thin and looking as though a good meal would do him good. Usually he seemed in need of a shave, and wore a shiny navy blue suit and, on the last occasion we met, a tight-fitting navy blue overcoat obviously not made for him.

Not all these assignments were made in London. First Nikki and then others would come to see me at Weymouth; a procedure with some snags, and some advantages.

While all this had been going on I was still trying to sort out the turmoil of my private life. The fresh starts which Peggy and I had attempted from time to time never lasted more than a couple of days. She spent more and more time in Portsmouth, and at last I told her I wasn't prepared to go on like this. Rather than take action on my own, on the grounds that our marriage had never been valid in the first place, I agreed not to defend a divorce action which she brought on grounds of cruelty. While this was going through - it took quite a time - I allowed Peggy to have the house when she needed it, and I moved out.

I bought myself a caravan.

This proved most useful. I found a pleasant site in the country some miles outside Weymouth and lived alone there for many months.

Extract 2

When in cross-examination yesterday I said that on 5th November I kept observation in the Waterloo area that was a mistake.

I did say I was keeping observation on 5th November and I was keeping observation but at Puddletown Dorset not in Waterloo area.

Puddletown is 120 miles from Waterloo. By such witnesses as this were convictions obtained.

On that Saturday 5th November another agent, identified in Court as F, waited at the junction of the B3390 and the ASS at Puddletown until I passed, and followed me to Ringwood, where I stopped for a drink. This man was obsessed by the mysterious cardboard box on the back seat of my Renault—which was my shopping box. He trailed me into London and witnessed a meeting between Gordon and myself outside the Maypole public house in Surbiton. We drove around and then parked in a dark street while we completed our business, then went back to the Maypole for a drink. This shadow's testimony was accurate on the whole, but he went off the rails a bit while fretting over the fact that when we left the pub Gordon was carrying a black document case of I believe the type that zips round the top and not of the type of brief case which he'd had when he arrived. I hadn't seen what had happened to that brief case.

It sounds suitably blood-and-thunderish, put like that. In fact Gordon had had the same case with him the whole time.

Witness D, having sorted out just where he was on that date, hastened to trot out more or less the same story as his pal's:

On Saturday, 5th November, 1960 I was on duty in an official car at Puddletown, near Weymouth. At 12.10 pm having received certain information, I was in the car with a colleague at the junction of the A35 and the B3390 and saw Houghton driving his Renault Dauphine car, Index No. XOW 513 towards London. He was alone. At 1 pm. he stopped at St. Leonard's, Ringwood, and entered the St. Leonards Public House. At 1.30 pm. he left the Public House and entered his car. He then continued driving towards London, stopping at a toilet, Filling Station and Cafe en route...

Luck was with me that day. Besides having material in my possession for Gordon to photograph, I had one of the packages I periodically collected from the Alresford public lavatory. Mr D had seen me go in and out, and both he and Mr F saw me meet Gordon. At no stage did they intervene to stop the material on its way out of the country. The package was in my pocket from 2 pm until 8.30pm, when I handed it over to the man in the Bunch of Grapes. I was observed at Alresford; I was observed as far as the door of the Bunch of Grapes. Yet I wasn't followed in, either into the lavatory or the pub. What chances of promotion tossed away!

Not that I'm complaining: I did have another couple of months' freedom because of it.

That same day and the following day, and regularly from then on, various agents reported the appearance of Gordon's Studebaker parked near the Krogers' house. Although it is not part of my personal story, I think one extract from a report by Witness I is of interest, showing as it does how the various bits tie in:

On Sunday 6th November I commenced observation in Cranley Drive at 2-40 pm. At 4 pm I saw defendant Mrs Kroger drive up to 45 Cranley Drive in a Consul 998 LME. She put the car in the garage and entered the front door of the house with a key.

At 4-3 pm I saw Lonsdale appear on foot from the lane which connects Willow Gardens with Cranley Drive. He walked to gate of 45, Cranley Drive and as he did so he was behaving furtively, i.e. he was looking back from whence he came. His entry through the front door was very quick and he did not appear to use a key.

Harking back to that meeting on the first Saturday in October at Euston, so blithely ignored by our pursuers, I found myself chewing over one or two problems. Gordon had mentioned that there would be a car, and as there might have been some congestion if I also turned up in a car, I decided to drive from Weymouth to Salisbury and continue to London by train