

If Hitler had succeeded in invading Britain, he was assured of a hot reception

SECRET ARMY W

AT the ripe old age of 89, Jack Archer still works in a family-run garden nursery selling potted plants and shrubs.

But few of those who meet him today realise that he has a secret past.

For 55 years ago Mr Archer was a key member in a local cell of the undercover Auxiliary Units.

In the event of a wartime Nazi invasion, it would have been the role of these units to mount a guerrilla campaign to disrupt the enemy in every way possible.

Stationed in Highworth, three miles from Coleshill, Lieut Archer was in command of five other members.

Born and bred in Highworth, he was an ideal recruit to the secret army. His knowledge of the surrounding countryside was extensive, and he was young and fit enough to live rough.

Jack Archer first became involved with the units when he tried to join the Wiltshire Regiment of the regular army.

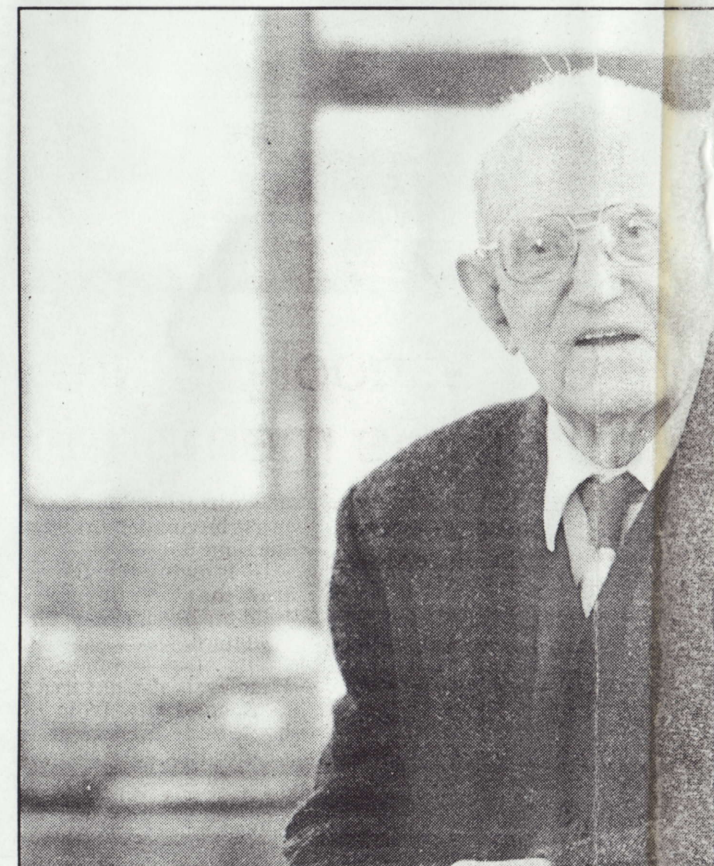
"I went to ask the advice of Major Jennings, who was in charge of the Highworth Home Guard, and told him I was thinking of volunteering for the Wiltshires," he said.

"The next morning I received a message from the major saying I was wanted up at Westrop House in Highworth."

When he arrived, Mr Archer recalls being introduced to a brigadier.

"He told me that he wanted to have a

Undercover soldier breaks silence that lasted for 55 years



very secret chat with me," he said.

"He said he understood I was thinking of joining the Wiltshires, but that I had been selected for a different kind of job.

"He told me that Auxiliary Units were being formed consisting of fully trained men who could stand up to parachute landings.

"I was told I had been selected as an officer and should help to form a cell."

Before he left the room, the importance of keeping the units' existence secret was heavily stressed.

"I wasn't even allowed to tell my wife," Mr Archer said. "It was very, very secret.

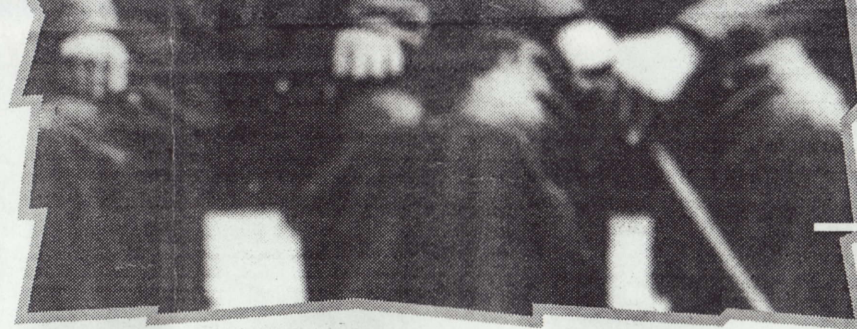
"The brigadier said that when I went out of the door I was never to answer any questions about the subject, except to my commanding officer."

Mr Archer had already received basic training with the Local Defence Volunteers and went on to do more at Chiseldon and Bulford camps.

"I didn't go to Coleshill in case people who knew me there wondered what I was doing," he said.

"The training was very hard and went on for months. I had to know every field and hedgerow for miles around Highworth."

The Highworth cell consisted of six men - including two explosives experts



■ The early years . . . this pre-war picture shows Jack Archer, left, as an Army cadet. Next to him is his commanding officer, Major Barrett

who had been specially released from prison. Mr Archer recalls that they had previously been in the business of robbing banks.

"They were experts in high explosives and were both given pardons after the war," he said.

Despite being a member of the British resistance movement - the country's last-ditch line of defence in case of a German invasion - Mr Archer had to suffer taunts of not doing his bit for the war effort.

"I got stopped in the street by mothers who told me their sons were fighting and asking to know why I wasn't," he said.

"It was very difficult to keep secret. I used to get funny looks in the pub and it caused a lot of unrest among people close to me.

"But after the war, when Churchill released all the information about the units, a lot of people sent letters and came up to me to apologise."

Although he did not see any action, Mr Archer knows he and his colleagues would have had a hard time if the Germans had invaded.

"The men were all tough and well trained and would have caused endless trouble for the Germans," he said.

"But if we had been captured, we would have been tortured and killed."

The ex-postmistress's tale



■ Courageous . . . Mabel Stranks

ANOTHER member of the Highworth community involved in the units was the town's late postmistress, Mabel Stranks.

Mrs Stranks played an important role in vetting men before they were sent to Coleshill House.

She would check identity papers of those sent to her on route for training.

If satisfied they were genuine, she would make a call to a secret number and a car would appear to pick up the new recruits.

Mrs Stranks's son Ted, 77, lives between Ashton Keynes and Cerney Wick.

"It was a dangerous job, but I knew nothing about her involvement until a book was written on the subject in 1964," he said.

"I served in the Air Force in the Middle East during the war. Thinking back to before I went, I suppose there were one or two strange incidents.

"I remember returning home one night and there were these Norwegian men dressed in khaki in the house.

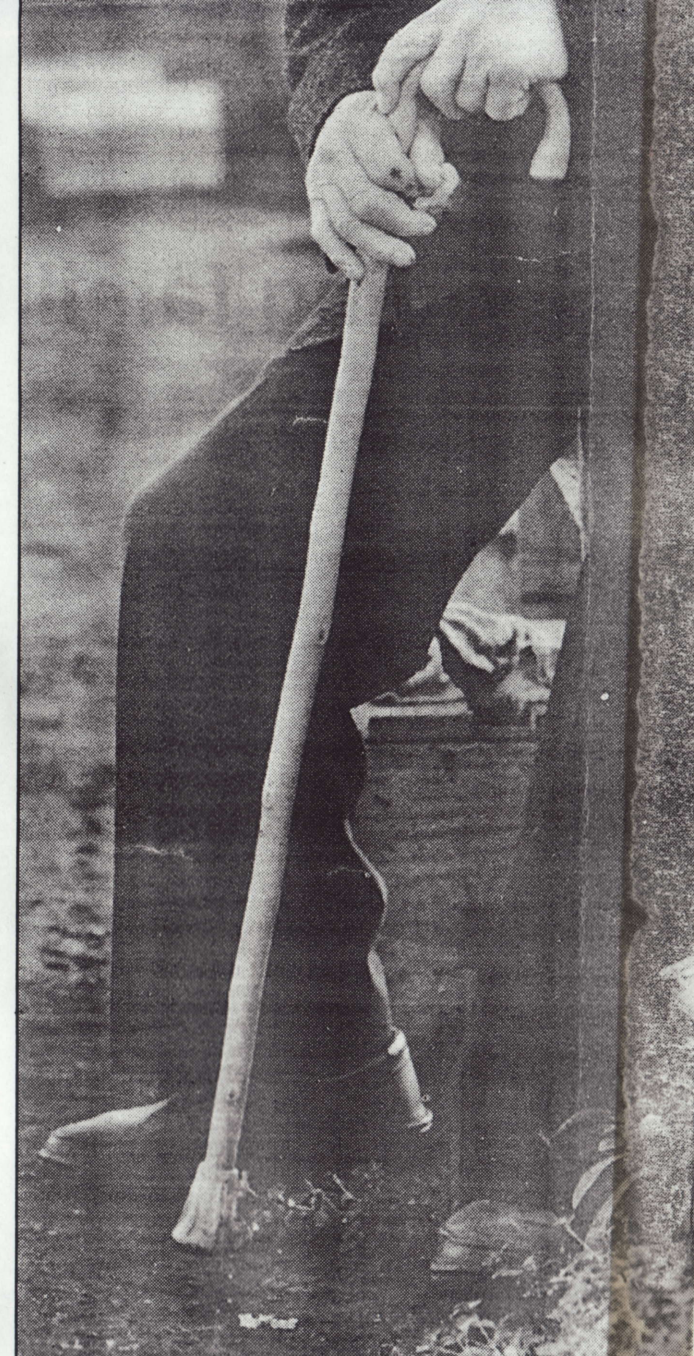
"In the morning they were gone and mum never mentioned it."

Although both were involved in the units, Jack Archer says he only ever spoke to Mabel about it once.

"She used to come to the nursery for her fruit and vegetables," he recalled.

"One day, when we were alone, she looked at me and said: 'I was very much afraid that if the Germans got here you and me would have been in for a very hard time'.

"She was a very brave woman."



■ Jack Archer today . . . "our operation was so secret I wasn't ever

DAVID PEARCE hears one man's story of a battle that never happened

TRAINED FOR NAZIS

Guerrillas
trained to
fight right
to the end

DRIVING through the sleepy village of Coleshill, near Highworth, it is hard to believe it was a wartime base for a secret army.

But between 1940 and 1944, more than 3,500 crack troops were trained there in guerrilla warfare.

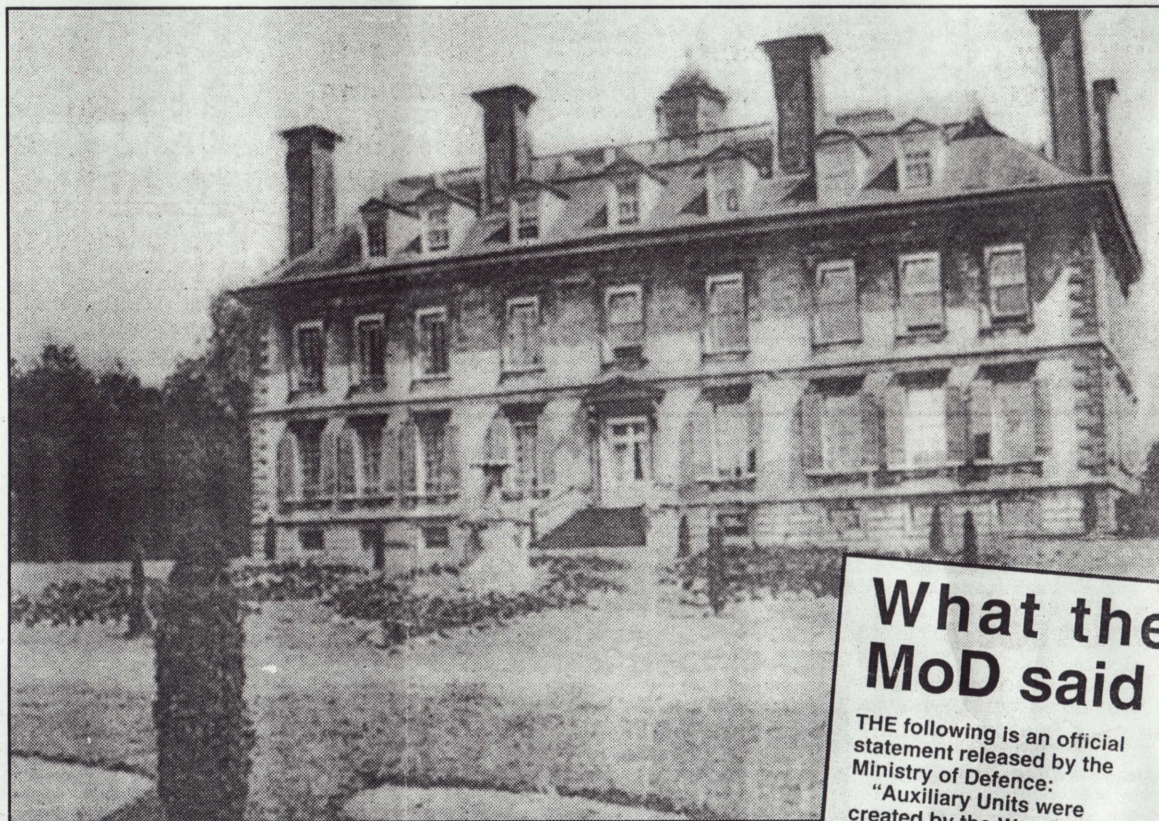
They were all members of Britain's secret World War Two army the Auxiliary Units.

Set up on the express orders of Winston Churchill, the units were designed to cause havoc to an invading German force.

Members were trained in all aspects of warfare, from unarmed combat to setting boobytraps and using explosives.

Their aim was to disrupt an occupying power by fighting and destroying its supply and communication lines.

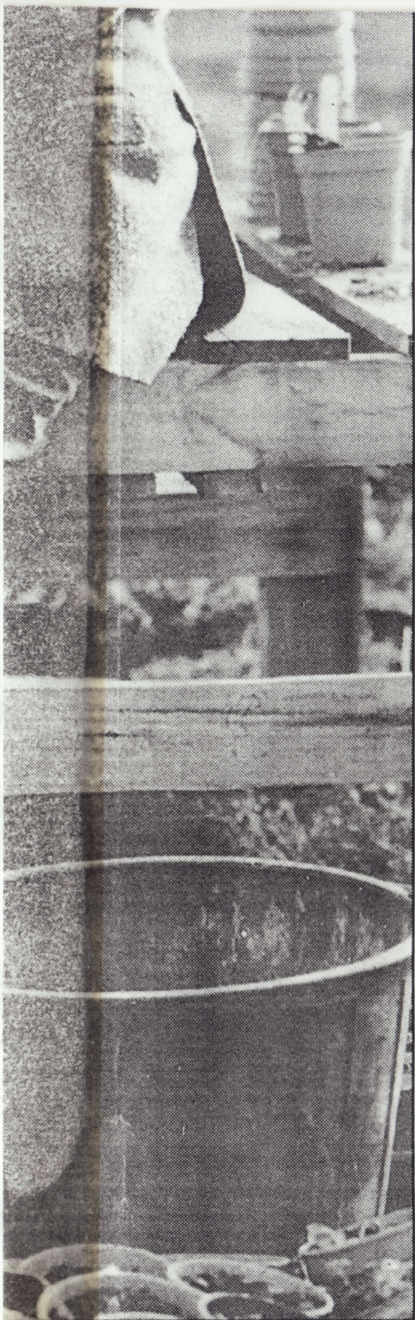
Split into small cells across the country, Auxiliary Unit members all had detailed local knowledge of



■ Coleshill House seen from the South West... a splendid example of 17th century architecture, it was designed by Sir Roger Pratt and built between 1650 and 1660. It was sadly destroyed by fire in 1953

What the MoD said

THE following is an official statement released by the Ministry of Defence:
"Auxiliary Units were created by the War Office in 1940 following the German invasion of the Low Countries and France, and the threat of invasion."



... tell my wife" Picture: MALCOLM ROUSE

the surrounding countryside.

Many were based in underground bunkers and all were sworn to absolute secrecy.

Local police forces were unaware of their existence and even relatives of the unit members had no idea what was going on.

All members of the Auxiliary Units were highly trained, and, after their initial time at Coleshill, continued rigorous training in their own areas.

They were issued with an array

of weapons including plastic explosives, mines, grenades, sniping rifles, anti-tank guns and daggers.

The units were considered so important they were issued with equipment before regular troops and the commandos.

The idea of a secret army to harass an invading force first came from a major in the Foreign Office.

Major Gubbins was an expert in guerrilla warfare and chose Coleshill House as his headquarters because its surrounding park-

lands and woods provided the ideal location.

The house no longer exists, having been destroyed by fire in 1953 - but the woodlands remain.

The units were set up in anticipation of a German invasion - but happily they never saw action.

They were disbanded in November 1944 once the threat of invasion was over. News of their existence only became public knowledge when Winston Churchill revealed their role after the war.

... invasion of the United Kingdom.
"They were created with the intention of using them as stay-behind parties and reconnaissance elements to harass and report on army activity in their areas.
"They were administered, controlled and recruited by GHQ Home Forces for service within the UK and were disbanded on November 30 1944."

The day memories were revived



■ Out of hiding . . . this rare photograph of officers serving with the Auxiliary Units was taken at Coleshill in January 1942. At this juncture it has been impossible to identify any individual present

MANY of the Auxiliary Units' secrets came out at a reunion of former members in 1994.

Sixty men who had been part of the secret army met at Coleshill House to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the standing down of the units.

Peter Wilcox, then 66 and one of the event organisers, told the Evening Advertiser on that day: "It's a unique anniversary, and a fitting tribute to remember friends who are no longer with us."

Jack Archer was one of those who attended the reunion. "It was a very special day," he said. "I was the only surviving member of the Highworth cell, but it was good."

"There were tough chaps there and some of them stopped over in Highworth that night and we had a good talk."