

Lawrence Franklin Burgis CMG CVO, 1892 – 1971.



While walking along Southside one morning in the mid-1960s I stopped to chat to Mr Burgis. He told me that he had once worked with Winston Churchill and asked if I would like to come in and see the desk used by Mr Churchill when Prime Minister. I certainly would. We went down the steep steps of The Old Malt House and there it was, a sturdy piece of furniture that had been a gift of gratitude to Mr Burgis. I was reminded of this event last year when SAVA was invited to do a house survey on The Old Malt House. I decided some research would be interesting, and I was in for a revelation. With the help of his family I pieced together some of the story of Lawrence's life. Here is a brief account of the role he played in our history, which he could not divulge during his lifetime.

Lawrence Burgis was assistant to the Deputy Secretary to the War Cabinet between 1939 and 1945. This junior post involved taking notes at meetings, which were then drawn up for the cabinet minutes. Burgis sat in on crucial meetings with heads of state and heard Churchill's views on others. He wrote: *'To sit at the Cabinet table at No 10 with Churchill in the chair was something worth living for. Perhaps some would have paid a high price to occupy my seat, and I got paid for sitting in it!'* Burgis diligently recorded verbatim, but, contrary to the rules of the 1911 Official Secrets Act, instead of burning his notes in the grate of the War Cabinet offices in Whitehall, he concealed them. When Andrew Roberts was researching for his book 'Masters and Commanders' his discovery of the notes in a cupboard had a major impact on many views held by historians previously. Burgis organised what was to become the Cabinet War Rooms and was appointed Camp Commandant of that organisation.

Burgis also recorded many of Churchill's jokes and anecdotes. For example, Churchill said he would never parachute because he would break like an egg. Roberts describes the cramped conditions in the Cabinet War Rooms: *'The room was air-conditioned, although on one occasion, squeezing past the very fat Ernest Bevin, Burgis unwittingly switched the air-conditioning off'* and Burgis writes: *"with the PM's cigar, Attlee's pipe and Bevin's cigarettes, the atmosphere soon became unbearable"*.

Burgis told family and friends the story that, during the darkest time of WWII, Churchill insisted on a Cabinet Christmas lunch, to be held in the War Rooms and organised by Burgis. When the lighted pudding was carried in, Churchill's private physician Dr Charles Wilson, later Lord Moran, intimated that such food was not on Churchill's diet. Churchill replied, *"Dr. Wilson, anything that conveys brandy to the stomach is to be encouraged - I shall have some!"*

Edwina Kinch remembers Mr Burgis regularly walking his two dogs up Seven Springs Lane and stopping for a chat. Tony Cross and Mel Smith recall their fathers doing odd jobs for the Burgis family. Lawrence Burgis died in Steeple Aston in 1971. In 1973 his widow Lorna won a pound of sausages for naming the emerging village magazine "Steeple Aston Life."

Google the remarkable story of Lawrence Burgis or read about him in Andrew Roberts' book, a copy of which is in the Village Archive.

Diana Gardner