

ST. ERMIN'S HOTEL: THE LONDON HOTEL FAVORITED BY SPIES

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ST. ERMIN IN LONDON, UK. A FAMOUS SPY HOTEL WITH A STORIED HISTORY

In Hollywood films, spy James Bond would meet his boss 'M' mostly in and around central London. However, if you want to track down where the real spies met go no further than St. Ermin's Hotel, just a short walk from the Houses of Parliament. This publicly accessible building in London is closely associated with much of the history of British espionage.

Back in the 1930s the hotel and the building next door were used by officers of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or later MI6) who were located nearby at 54 Broadway.

Documents suggest that starting in March 1938 it became the gathering place of spies from the headquarters of SIS's Section D, headed by the Australian George Taylor. Later it became home to the Special Operations Executive (SOE) which was called the 'Statistical Research Department to maintain its cover.'

People like 'Bond' author Ian Fleming, Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Laurence Grand, H. Montgomery Hyde, and Eric Maschwitz were among the famous to have worked from offices in the building.\

The hotel is surrounded by other secret organizations including the London branch of Government Communications Headquarters (on Palmer Street); MI9 on Caxton Street; the SIS Chief's office at 21 Queen Anne's Gate; the SIS offices in Artillery Mansions on Victoria Street the MI8 listening post on the roof of the Passport Office in Petty France.



The Artillery Mansions today

The hotel's Caxton Bar was used regularly by SIS, MI5, and Naval Intelligence Division case officers to meet their agents. In the book 'SNOW' by Madoc Roberts, he told of meetings in the bar. SIS also interviewed prospective employees, usually done by the organization's recruiter, Marjorie Maxse. Russian spy Kim Philby in his autobiography, 'My Silent War' told of meetings within the hotel.



The Caxton Grill today

At the start of the war, the hotel was also the venue for guerilla war classes. This was run partly by MI6. Even the likes of Noel Coward worked there. And, also who later became an art expert to the Queen, Anthony Blunt, a notorious member of the Cambridge Five spy ring.

In 1940 Sir Winston Churchill who enjoyed champagne at the hotel asked a group of very special individuals to meet at the St Ermin's Hotel to "set Europe ablaze." And it was that group that became SOE (Special Operations Executive). Its purpose was to covertly set about behind-the-lines operations all over Europe during World War II. They initially took over an entire floor of this historic Westminster hotel.

Some key press conferences held by Churchill were done next door at Caxton Hall. What better place for a relaxing drink after such speeches than the hotel?

During the 1950's and 60's St Ermin's was again at the heart of an undercover operation this time for the Russians during the Cold War. Double agent, diplomat, and eventual defector Guy Burgess often met his Russian handler at the hotel to hand over top-secret government files in the Caxton Bar.

The hotel has also been used as an MI5 safe house.

An intelligence expert, author, and former MP Rupert Allason named his publishing house after the hotel; St. Ermin's Press.

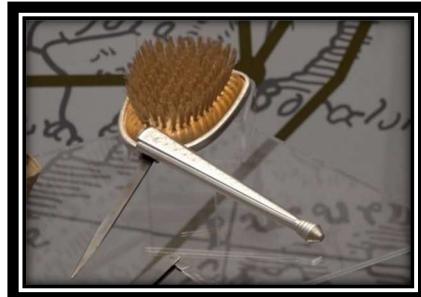
The hotel's exceptional location from the seat of government and Whitehall was only a few hundred meters north of Parliament Square. With the new headquarters of the British secret service MI6.



An entrance to MI6 located near Erwin's Hotel

Also rumored are a set of tunnels called the Q-Whitehall network; these are a set of underground communication passages in and around the area of Whitehall. Some were built during World War II and also for the Cold War period. There is thought to be one linking into them and direct to the hotel itself.

On display in the hotel lobby is a collection of items used by spies during World War II. The exhibition is hosted by the London Clandestine Warfare Collection. If you ever have a chance to visit this real-life spy hotel, be sure to ask the hotel staff for directions to the hotel's exhibit.



A dagger is hidden inside a comb on display at St Ermin's (Picture © Geoff Moore /

Being close to Parliament a voting or Division Bell is still located in the hotel that was once used to tell MPs to return to vote and get back across Parliament Square. They had 8 minutes to accomplish their walk to Parliament but after a few drinks, I am not sure they many would have always made it in time!

Is St Ermin's still visited by spies today?

To quote Tim Fordham-Moss the PR Director **"We would expect so. But to be honest, if they were any good, we would not know!"**

As well as tracking down spies in the hotel. It is certainly well located for tracking down the major tourist sites in the capital.

If you want to learn more about the St. Ermin's spy Hotel there is an excellent book about the hotel's link to the world of spies written by Peter Matthews called "House of Spies: St Ermin's Hotel, the London Base of British Espionage."



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