



THE DENNIS YEATS WHEATLEY THE WOOLVERSTONE CONNECTION



Dennis Yeats Wheatley, prolific and successful author, was born in Brixton on 8th January 1897.

His father owned a wine business, "Wheatley and Son" in South Audley Street, Mayfair. During WW1, he served with the Royal Field Artillery, City of London Brigade.

During his training he developed pneumonia on Salisbury Plain, suffered severe bouts of bronchitis, which were later worsened by the effects of Chlorine gas. After serving in Flanders and France, he was invalided home in May 1918. Between May 1915 and August 1916, he was stationed in Ipswich.

After the war, Wheatley took over the management of his father's wine business. He married his first wife, Nancy Robinson, in June 1922. Sadly, after the birth of their son in 1923, with few interests in common, they drifted apart with and began to lead separate lives.

In March 1929, a captivating young woman, Joan Pelham Burn, came into the office to order champagne for a ball.

Joan was the sister of "Bino" Johnstone - full name Robin Talbot Vanden-Bempd -Johnstone whom Wheatley had taken in an attempt to find more rich and aristocratic customers. Bino was a great charmer, very well connected and extraordinarily lazy. His father, the Hon. Louis Vanden-Bempd -Johnstone, was Land Agent for Charles Hugh Berners of Woolverstone Hall. His mother, Gwendoline Mary Elizabeth, was great granddaughter of Captain Hugh Berners RN. There is a brass memorial to her grandfather H.C. Talbot in St Michael's church. For many years she lived at "Woolverstone House" but not the Woolverstone House we know, which wasn't built until 1902. It seems likely that the Johnstone family lived at The Homestead from their marriage in 1891.



In 1915, Joan married her first husband, Sir William Younger. They had four children before divorce in 1923. She secondly married Capt. Hubert Pelham Burn by who she had a son. Hubert was killed in a car accident in 1927.

Joan and Dennis' relationship developed slowly while he was still married. Joan persuaded Dennis to leave Nancy in the February 1930 and they were divorced in July. The couple married in St Ethelburga's, Bishopsgate on 8th August 1930. Dennis and Joan often spent weekends at Woolverstone with Gwendoline, the Hon. Louis Johnstone having died in 1922.

Joan persuaded Dennis to take up writing after the failure and sale of the wine business in 1931, following the Depression years. He excelled. By 1936 Dennis was giving talks at local literary festival in Felixstowe where his work was described as futuristic. Writing rescued them from a difficult financial situation. Then WW2 intervened.

In May 1940, Sir Lawrence Darvall KCB MC gave Dennis a mission to find all the different defence systems Great Britain should have if an invasion was to come from Hitler. The results were impressive and he thought of many things that had not occurred to the top brass.

A year later, Dennis found himself part of a team called the "London Controlling Section", led by a brilliant military strategist, Colonel John Bevan. He was promoted to the rank of Wing Commander, non-active. The team worked directly under Winston Churchill who is reputed to have said:

"Our intentions must be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies."

Dennis Wheatley now worked on the deception plans for the invasion of Europe, Operation Overlord. He was part of the team that planned Operation Mincemeat, where a body with false papers was placed in the sea off the Spanish coast.

In the War Cabinet Rooms there is a portrait of Dennis with the inscription underneath reading: "His work included a plan, code named "Bodyguard" to deceive the Germans about the place and date of the Allied D-Day invasion of Europe."

Planning started in 1943. The purpose was to lead the Germans to believe the invasion of Europe would target, in particular, the Pay de Calais in France. The main features were the creation of a fake army in Kent led by Gen George Patton, 1st US Army Group (FUSAG); hundreds of fake landing craft on the East Coast showing a powerful army mustering, use of double agents, radio traffic providing misinformation, a fake Montgomery appearing in Gibraltar.

The Germans believed the Pay de Calais was the most likely place for invasion and so was heavily fortified. The deception had to be maintained so the Normandy landings were considered a feint. Success for even a few days would allow reinforcements. In fact, the deceit lasted for three weeks. The fake landing craft, Bigbobs, moored along the rivers Orwell and Deben, were part of the deception plans that persuaded the Germans that the main invasion was still to come.

Dennis Wheatley's imagination helped maintain the deception.

