



Orchard Court – Portman Square

Orchard Court was designed by the architectural firm of Messrs Joseph and was completed in 1930. Orchard Court also played a vital role in one of the silent organisations of World War II. It was in this luxurious apartment building that flats were used as a base for the French section of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). “The time the agents spent at Orchard Court was a brief period of luxury before their gruelling, dangerous stints in the field.”

The Special Operations Executive at Orchard Court

The SOE was a secret service created to assist resistance organisations in occupied Europe in “launching sabotage, subterfuge and guerrilla warfare operations”. The SOE head office was at 64 Baker Street and a number of nearby buildings, including Orchard Court were used in organising their secret operations. The SOE was also notable for their acceptance of employing women, as it was “argued that women were less conspicuous than men” and in some cases more adept in fulfilling some of the tasks of their “secret employment”. However sending women behind enemy lines and training them in espionage, including silent killing was still highly irregular.

Vera Atkins – Miss Money Penny

The French Section (or ‘F’ Section) was commanded by Maurice Buckmaster, who was assisted by Vera Atkins. Vera Atkins was the subject of a book *A Life in Secrets* by Sarah Helm (2006) detailing her experiences in the SOE. Atkins was responsible for meeting new recruits at Orchard Court before they set off for training. Agents would again stay at Orchard Court after completing their training and before they were sent into occupied France. Vera Atkins sent 470 agents into France including 39 women, 118 of whom were never to return.

Vera Atkins was said to have been the inspiration for Ian Fleming’s Miss Money Penny and Maurice Buckmaster his ‘M’ in the James Bond novels.

Orchard Court

The name Orchard originates from Orchard Portman, a former country estate belonging to the Portman family, near Taunton in Somerset. The apartments first appear advertised in *The Times* in 1930 and the first residents appear in the London Directory and Electoral Register in 1930-1. Today, Orchard Court is located within the Portman Conservation area and is registered as an “unlisted building of merit”.