

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SUMMER OUTING 2013



by Len Holden

On 12th June Rosalind Willatts, our programme secretary, organised the annual Historical Society outing to The Carpet Baggers Museum in Harrington. The numbers were not as many as in previous years but there was an enthusiastic group of 16 members who attended. We were greeted at the entrance by Fred West who acted as our guide around the museum outlining its origins and purpose. Its chief function was to parachute agents and equipment into enemy occupied Europe and France in particular. The tour started with the showing of a contemporary American film explaining the work of the 801st/492nd American Bomb Group, based at USAAF Station 179 (the aerodrome's official title at the time) and their covert activities there and other bases close by.

Top secret missions were flown at night in black painted Lysander aircraft by American crews. The missions were kept secret until the last minute when crews were given their targets for the night. Specialist equipment was dropped to resistance groups including radios, weapons, ammunition and explosives. These were dropped from a height of 300 feet. OSS and SOE Agents were also parachuted into enemy occupied territory at night, but were allowed to descend from the plane at 600 feet. There was little room for error!

The agents were highly trained in all kinds of weapon use, radio transmission techniques and were proficient in languages. Their main job on landing was to contact groups like the French Maquis (resistance), and help them sabotage German railway trains and other resistance activities. Both men and women were involved including the famous woman agent Violette Szabo who like many of her comrades did not return from their missions having been captured, tortured and shot by the Gestapo.

The Museum houses much fascinating equipment including specially designed canisters which could carry a considerable amount of equipment and could survive a drop of several hundred feet at the end of a parachute.

After the guided tour through the museum members were left to browse the exhibits by themselves. Some of the group then attended the nearby Tollemache Arms for a pub dinner which rounded off a very interesting and enjoyable excursion.



FRED WEST DESCRIBING THE MISSIONS OF THE 'CARPET BAGGERS'