

Short History of the Holmes and its link to D-Day



The year 2019 marks not only the 75th anniversary of D-Day, but also the 140th anniversary of the building of the Holmes, now the only out-house attached to Churchill Hall. How do these two facts connect together?

To understand this we need to know some of the history of the Holmes which, as the date over the door shows, was built in 1869. It was erected on land that had been part of the Stoke House estate, (Stoke House is now the main part of Trinity Theological College) by William Edward George. He and then his executors owned the house until 1921, leasing it to a number of tenants, three of whom had links to the University College of Bristol. One of these was Alfred Capper Pass in whose memory the Alfred Capper Pass Chair of Chemistry at the University was endowed. Before and after him it was let to members of the Baker family, first in 1882 to W. Mills Baker, the father of Hiatt C. Baker, a future Pro-Chancellor of the University and after whom Hiatt Baker Hall is named. Later his son Herbert Middleton Baker who purchased the freehold in 1921 and lived there until his death in 1943 when the Holmes was sold to the University.

It was during the Herbert Middleton Baker tenancy and ownership that the gardens with the croquet lawns were laid out, which will be remembered by generations of Churchillians (most of this Garden was reconfigured when the University Botanic Gardens took over the grounds in 2005). With the Holmes the University acquired the services of its butler Mr. Henry Caine, (who was awarded the Military Medal for service during WW1). He was to become a legend, serving as Churchill Hall's Steward until his retirement in 1982, four days short of his 85th birthday.

Although the University purchased the house in 1943, they did not get to use the building at first, as it became the official residence of a number of senior American army commanders, including Generals Collins, Hodge, Dever, Patton and most notably General Omar Bradley. It was here that Gen Bradley, commander of the US 1st Army, and later 12th Army Group, planned the D-Day assault on Normandy. In his autobiography "A Soldier's Story" he refers to the Holmes twice: Firstly "*V Corps had requisitioned a residence for me beyond the Bristol Downs, a billet spacious enough to house my key staff officers and aides.*"

Secondly *"It was 7.15 when I went down to breakfast at my quarters in Bristol on the morning of June 3rd. We had loitered late over dinner the night before, our last evening together in England. Today we were to board Admiral Kite's flagship for the invasion. D-Day had been set for June 5th*, and the warm summer sun that poured through the leaded glass windows of the Holmes cheered us ..."* (*D-Day was postponed to 6th June due to the weather.)

To mark these events, an act of remembrance was held in the Holmes in June 1948, when the then American Military Attaché, unveiled a framed statement from General (later President) Eisenhower which read *"It was here General Bradley spent the months during which he organized the First United States Army for the momentous assault against the Normandy beaches."* This can still be seen in the Main Hall of the Holmes (see the left hand image below). In this way the stories of the Holmes and D-Day came together.

To continue the story of the Holmes, it became part of Wills Hall, opening as "O" House in the autumn of 1946, with 32 students as residents. It was then transferred to Churchill Hall on its opening in the autumn of 1956. The next major changes came in 1979 when as a result of then new legislation, a new fire alarm system, fire escapes, fire doors and the metal spiral staircase through the middle of the upper floors were installed.

Fortunately the Holmes escaped sale by the University, unlike the other two outhouses Claverton and Waltham, in 1984. The next significant event was the University Botanic Gardens taking over the grounds and a number of the ground floor rooms in 2005 (see the right hand image below). Finally the Holmes, together with the rest of Churchill Hall, benefited from an extensive refurbishment programme over a number of summer vacations up to and including 2016.



A fuller history of the Holmes will soon be available on the Churchill Hall Association website <https://www.churchillhallassociation.co.uk/>.

David Ewart, Churchill Hall, 1974-77