

'Howtown: a hotbed of communist activity?' a talk to U3A by Rob David

Dr Rob David is a gifted speaker and was recently chair of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society. He is currently researching significant Cumbrians of the past and came across an intriguing series of documents relating to the work of the MI5 in Cumbria during the 1930s and 1940s. This evidence led to a fascinating trail on the lines of a local crime story.

Rob unfolded the mystery by introducing two ladies who moved from their London base to Cumbria. They had been dismissed from their jobs in London with the Czech Refugees Trust Fund in June 1940 as suspected communists, and thereby potentially dangerous. Yvonne Capp, from a London Jewish family, was born in 1903 and Margaret Mynatt (also known as Bianca Minotti) with an English father and an Austrian mother, was four years



younger. Arriving at Penrith by train and staying a night in the Agricultural Hotel on June 14, the very day France surrendered, they next moved by bus and 'toy steamer' to Howtown. Their reason for choosing this unlikely venue remains a puzzle. We do know, from registration forms, where they stayed in Howtown and Capp's autobiography describes their enjoyment of life there, walking on the fells and visiting Penrith each week to shop at Grahams. A series of letters they received from Catherine Marshall who had by this stage turned her home at Hawse End by Derwentwater into a base for Czech refugees offers another glimpse into the lives of Yvonne and Margaret.

The authorities' focus on the two ladies diminished in the second half of 1940 as the threat from Nazis was deemed the more serious one until in November a letter was sent to Lord Swinton advising him that 'Cumberland, at the moment, is a hotbed of Communism'. As a consequence Constable Southwell from Shap was told to find out what Capp and Mynatt were doing in Howtown. Were they spies? Were they infiltrators? Southwell uncovered only a few details of where in Howtown they had been staying, that they were writing a book and were loners, also one had a 'foreign accent' and a communist badge had been found in one of their rooms. Only in 1992 was their book on British policy on refugees between 1933 and 1941 published as a similar one had already been circulating. If Yvonne and Margaret's critical account had come out earlier they would certainly have been a more significant cause of concern.

In conclusion, Rob suggested that the 'Howtown ladies' with their communist views had the potential for being a concern to the British authorities in the build up to and early stages of the second world war but once Russia sided with Britain, and also as the Czech refugees were much more likely to support Britain than Germany, the threat of Capp and Mynatt faded. The danger was averted but the issue yielded a most interesting piece of research which the audience greatly appreciated.