

## Book Review

*Chicksands: A Millenium of History.* By William C. Grayson. Original illustrations by John Thomas and Eric Wright. (1994, Shefford Press, P.O. Box 4053, Crofton MD, 21114) \$12

This is a most unusual volume; it is, to my knowledge, the only complete book, and certainly the only unclassified book, dedicated solely to the history of a single SIGINT field site. William C. Grayson traces the history of Chicksands from the late eleventh century to the present. The author claims that no other U.S. Air Force base or facility can claim such a long and distinguished past. And Grayson is, in many ways, an ideal candidate to commit that history to paper: a retired captain in the U.S. Air Force Security Service (USAFSS), Grayson served two tours at RAF Chicksands, from 1959 to 1962 and from 1973 to 1976, as well as nine years at NSA working in the fields of communications security (COMSEC) and operations security (OPSEC). Grayson is also a founding member of the Friends of Chicksands Priory, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and restoration of the priory.

The priory is, of course, at the center of Chicksands' long and varied history. Grayson represents that history as having four distinct phases – the monastic period, lasting from the priory's founding in the mid-twelfth to the early sixteenth century; the Osborne (later Osborn) ownership, from the English reformation to the 1930s; World War II and the British Y Service presence; and finally, the USAFSS' tenancy since 1950 – and provides fascinating information on each.

The first half of *Chicksands* covers the history of the priory and estate up to World War II. Beginning with its founding by St. Gilbert of Sempringham in 1147, through to its dissolution and confiscation by Henry VIII in 1536, Grayson offers readers a wealth of information concerning Chicksands' medieval history and the Gilbertine order. Grayson also provides a likely basis for the priory's most enduring fascination to the general public: the legend of Rosata, a nun who, upon being found to be with child, was supposedly walled up alive inside the priory. (In one of the more gothic versions of the legend, the poor nun's cell was bricked up only to neck level, and she was forced to watch the beheading of her canon-lover before being sealed in the rest of the way.) Rosata reportedly haunts the priory to this day.

Following a discussion of Chicksands' dissolution, Grayson retells the priory's history as one of the great homes of the English aristocracy – in this case, the home of the Osborn (nee Osborne) family. Most notable of the Osborns was Dorothy Osborne, famous for her letters to Sir William Temple during the English Commonwealth. Osborne and Temple were forced to communicate only through letters for almost two years because of opposition to their marrying from both their families. Today, Dorothy Osborne's letters to Temple,

the vast majority of which were written at Chicksands, are considered masterpieces of English literature and a priceless documentary record of the Commonwealth period. The Osborn family continued in residence at Chicksands until 1936, when they sold the estate to the Royal Air Force. The RAF and the Royal Navy moved in beginning in 1939, and Chicksands' modern history began.

The second half of Grayson's book will be of greatest interest to the SIGINT professional. It begins with the history of RAF and RN intercept activities at the site during World War II, including the role Chicksands played in the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck*. Along with its role as a Y Service intercept site, Chicksands also served as the primary transmitting site for BBC broadcasts to the continent during the war, and, as such, transmitted the coded messages which informed the French resistance forces that the Allied invasion of France was imminent. Much of Grayson's material for this section of *Chicksands* is based on original research, particularly interviews with Y Service veterans. Therefore, much of this section takes on a personal (and sometimes prosaic) perspective often missing from most SIGINT histories of the war. Not telling a tale of eccentric mathematics dons developing prototype computers to break enemy cryptosystems, Grayson instead presents the story of the men and women with the much less glamorous, but still vital, jobs of listening to a seemingly endless stream of dits and dahs and, through traffic or signals analysis or direction finding, recognizing which messages demanded the immediate attention of the cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park.

The final section of Grayson's book looks at Chicksands as a USAFSS site, from 1950 to the present.

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he provides some interesting, though mostly anecdotal, information on the USAFSS COMSEC and OPSEC activities conducted at the base. In this regard, however,

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Grayson has performed a valuable service, as neither COMSEC nor OPSEC has a high profile in the general literature on cryptology. Also, as with his chapters on the Y Service at Chicksands during the war, Grayson relies heavily on the personal reminiscences of individuals stationed at Chicksands for his review of the U.S. presence at the base.

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In summary, *Chicksands: A Millenium of History* would seem to have three primary audiences. First, for the general student of English history, Grayson has written a thorough and entertaining record of one of the most unusual, and least well known, landmarks in the British Isles.

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underrepresented in the general literature. Finally, for those who have ever served at Chicksands or (such as this reviewer) have lived at the base as a dependent, Grayson's volume is a perfect souvenir of the base and its fascinating history, and of a tour there. All in all, then, each potential reader of *Chicksands: A Millenium of History* should find Grayson's volume a valuable addition to his or her library.

NOTE: To my knowledge, *Chicksands: A Millenium of History* is available only by mail from the publisher. The \$12 cost includes shipping and handling. Furthermore, as the volume was apparently a labor of love on the author's part, Grayson has indicated that a portion of the proceeds from the book's sales will go to support the RAF Benevolent Fund, the USAF Aid Society, and the Friends of Chicksands Priory. Finally, Grayson has indicated his plan to revise *Chicksands* in the future, and has expressed a willingness to correspond with any personnel formerly stationed at the base who may have personal reminiscences or records relating to their tours. He may be contacted through his publisher.

  
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