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The man who loved liberty

Last updated: 22 February 2008

The last chapter of an amazing story involving Cold War espionage, and the Olympic athlete who inspired *Chariots of Fire*, has ended with the sale of a printing firm.



Gwasg Eryri in Porthmadog was sold recently to Liz and Jim Mowatt by Gwyn Davies, who revealed when he retired that he'd bought the firm - then known as Snowdonia Press - from a man called Pat Pottle in the early 70s.

Very few of the people working around him in North Wales knew that Mr Pottle had an astonishing tale to tell.

He was one of the 'Lavender Hill Mob' who sprang convicted Soviet spy George Blake from Wormwood Scrubs in 1966.

He was a friend and helper to the great philosopher Bertrand Russell who also retired to North Wales.

And Mr Pottle was married to the daughter of the Jewish sprinter Harold Abrahams, who won a gold medal at the 1924 Paris Olympics and who inspired the multiple-Oscar winning film *Chariots of Fire*. Susan Pottle still lives in North Wales.

Mr Pottle, who died in 2000, was an ardent and articulate member of the pacifist and anti-nuclear movement which blossomed during the Cold War. He worked for the Committee of 100, a British anti-war group set up in 1960 by Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Russell, who wanted a more militant group than the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It used and advocated civil disobedience to achieve its aims.

Fervently committed to the cause of peace, Mr Pottle demonstrated against the Greek colonels, America's involvement in Vietnam, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The spy George Blake's escape from Wormwood Scrubs in 1966 has been described as the most embarrassing jailbreak in British history - initially the British security services tried to hush it up by blaming the KGB. Eventually Mr Pottle and Michael Randle were put on trial - a quarter of a century after the event.

Mr Pottle and Randle had met Blake at the Scrubs in 1961 while serving an 18-month sentence for breaking the Official Secrets Act with a sit-in at the US Airforce base in Essex.

They sympathised with the spy - not for betraying his country, but because of the 42-year sentence imposed upon



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him. This jail term, the longest ever specified in English legal history, was "vicious and pointless" said Mr Pottle.

Three years after their release Mr Pottle and Randle, together with an Irishman, Sean Bourke, threw a ladder made of rope and knitting needles over the Scrubs wall and 'sprang' the waiting Blake who was smuggled abroad in the back of a camper van.

Mr Pottle and Randle were publicly identified in 1987 and they wrote their own version of events in *The Blake Escape - How We Freed George Blake and Why*.

Brought to trial in 1991, Pottle conducted his own defence and in an eloquent and impassioned speech declared: "Yes, I helped George Blake escape. I did so for purely humanitarian reasons. I think we were right to do so. I would do it again. I have no apologies to make and no regrets."

He quoted his old friend Bertrand Russell: "Remember your humanity and forget the rest." The jury ignored the judge's instructions and acquitted both men.

Mr Pottle's widow Susan, who owns the Eisteddfa antiques shop in Harlech, is also a committed peace campaigner who joined the London march against the Iraq war. She met her husband in the immediate aftermath of the Wormwood Scrubs escape and they were married within a few months. She is still involved in the peace movement and with civil liberties, describing Blair's legacy as 'appalling'.

The Pottles' attachment to North Wales started many years ago - Mr Pottle was a frequent visitor to the Croesor artist Tom Kinsey - and they decided to retire to North Wales in 2000 after a spell in London. Unfortunately, Mr Pottle died shortly after his return.

Harold Abrahams, whose older brother Sidney was an Olympic long jumper, is commemorated with a blue plaque at his former home in Golders Green, London, which was unveiled by his daughter Susan and nephew Tony.

His athletics career ended when he broke a leg in 1925, but the sport dominated his life and he was a reporter at the infamous Nazi-dominated Berlin Olympics. He became secretary of the National Parks Commission, later the Countryside Commission.

By Lloyd Jones.

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