

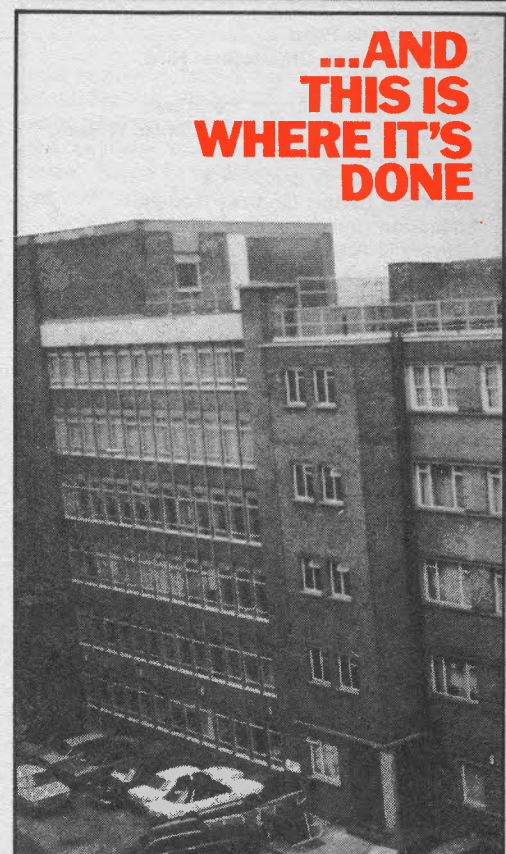
NEW STATESMAN

Rob Rohrer
'Investigative Reporter
of the Year'
Kelly case updated



**THIS IS
THE MAN
WHO TAPS
THE PHONES**

**...AND
THIS IS
WHERE IT'S
DONE**



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The deathbed confessions of Goronwy Rees
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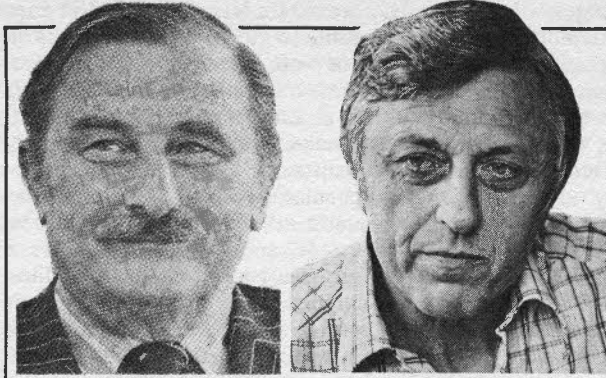
This week's cover portrays the man who runs a highly-secretive Post Office installation in Chelsea. Evidence assembled from several sources suggests that this is the government's phone-tapping centre – and that the scope of its operations is much larger than Parliament has ever been told. DUNCAN CAMPBELL opens an inquiry into the proliferating structure of Britain's security state. Additional research by NICK ANNING.

BRITAIN'S NATIONAL telephone-tapping service appears to operate from a building concealed behind the Industrial Tribunals Central Office at 93 Ebury Bridge Road, SW1, just opposite Chelsea Barracks. This is the organisation which is known in police lore as 'Tinkerbell'. Here thousands of telephone lines up and down the country are monitored every year, and the results supplied to the spy 'customers' – chiefly MI5, Scotland Yard's Special Branch, and the C11 squad.

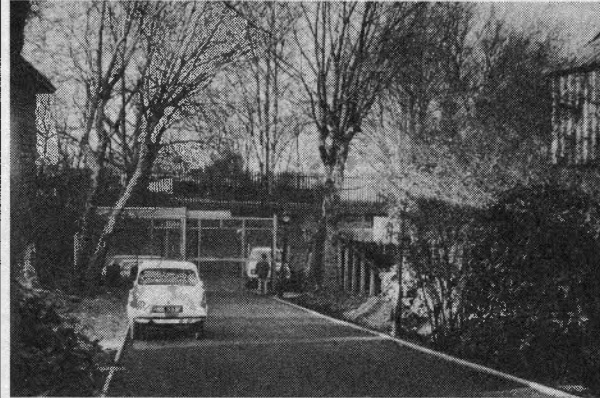
'Tinkerbell' can be identified in the first place simply because this large facility appears only in ghostly form in the Post Office's official records and directories. Most Post Office activities, naturally, are publicly listed in some detail, together with accounts of their work and the responsibilities of their staff. But 'Tinkerbell' appears only as the Equipment Development Division of the PO Operational Programming Department, OP5. Its address is given as Telecommunications Headquarters, in the City, but there are no facilities there except a dropping-point for mail. It also has a City phone number, 432 4132. Operations, however, clearly centre on the building at Ebury Bridge Road, which is sealed-off through a mews: there is a small plaque bearing the letters 'PO/THQ/OPD/EDD'.

The centre has been in use for almost ten years, and according to local planning records it is a 'computer centre'. Ordinary PO staff are not allowed into the centre, which has permanently-locked doors. Its windows, overlooked by a block of Peabody Trust flats, are covered by opaque white curtains, never parted. Observation shows that it is staffed 24 hours a day: local residents are accustomed to the lights burning all night, and to frequent security alarms. Shifts of workers – a good many of whom appear to be female telephone supervisors – come and go during the small hours.

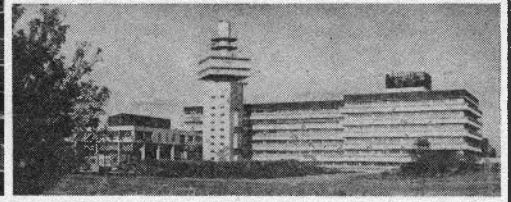
The PO of course has facilities in many parts of the country, which are employed in developing new equipment of various kinds. They are for the most part publicly identified, and do not work around the clock. (Elsewhere, of course, the PO also has substantial and well-known computer centres.) 'Tinkerbell' appears to act as headquarters for the teams of selected PO engineers who visit telephone exchanges to instal taps. These men frequently travel in standard PO vans, which are said by other engineers to be something of a 'giveaway' since they are just labelled 'Post Office Telephones', and do not have the usual words saying which Telephone Manager is responsible for them. Union officials have seen PO summaries which suggest that at least



Above left: Brinley Jones, Controller of the Post Office Investigation Division, which opens mail; centre: Phil Harris, Head of the PO Equipment Development Division, which taps phones; right: the distinctively curtained 16th floor of Euston Tower marks the MI5 floor



out from those used by the DHSS, above and below; left: the sturdy barrier which protects the entrance of the bugging HQ concealed in Camberwell, a south London suburb; below, left: the national phone tapping centre at 93, Ebury Bridge Rd, SW1; below: Post Office Research Centre, Martlesham Heath – R12 division, which makes bugs, has top floor offices.



125 staff in the highly-paid Executive Engineering grades (equivalent to fairly senior-level administrative officers in the Civil Service) are employed in OP5.

The secretive nature of OP5 is confirmed by the sparseness of its entry in the PO central staff directory – which normally runs to quite elaborate accounts of each official's function. Its Director – and by implication the chief phone-tapper – is Mr Philip R. F. Harris, who lives in St Albans. His predecessor, Mr A. E. Harvey of Chislehurst, retired a few months ago, having recently been made a CBE.

When we approached Mr Harris at his home, he would only confirm that he is employed by the Post Office. When it was put to him that he was in charge of phone-tapping, he refused to make any comment.

IN ADDITION to what can be deduced from PO records, from observation and from background knowledge about the 'state of the art' in telecommunications surveillance, there is some information available from employees and ex-employees of the Post Office (although none of them is likely to identify himself short of a full-scale public inquiry). This helps to chart the rise of the

phone-tapping business from something of a cottage industry in the fifties – when the last attempt was made at systematic scrutiny through the Birkett report – to the extensive, high-technology system which exists today.

An employee who has worked in the phone-tapping operation says that the Ebury Road system was planned during the late sixties. Facilities then being proposed would have the capacity to tap 1,000 lines simultaneously. We put this to ex-Inspector Dick Lee, who headed the Operation Julie drugs investigation, and used phone-tapping extensively in the work. He said the estimate 'doesn't surprise me – with the technology that's available'. He confirmed that all telephone tapping was centralised at a facility in London, which he has visited, although he would not discuss its location.

Interviews with ex-PO employees, cross-checked with accounts of police investigations, suggest that less than 100 of Tinkerbell's lines are available for police inquiries into serious crime, with the remainder being devoted to the secret services. To judge by Dick Lee's recollections, the facilities available to the police remain fairly cumbersome. Long hours of listening to tapes, and sorting



Report

of the Committee of Privy Councillors
appointed to inquire into the interception
of communications

Almost a quarter of a century ago the Birkett Report was published – the first and only public discussion of telephone tapping – yet Home Office ministers persistently reassure Parliament, quite wrongly, that nothing has changed.

Mr. Merlyn Rees :

Legislation is not required to legalise telephone interception. If it is required at all, it would be for the purpose of entrenching in statute the appropriate restrictions and safeguards under which interception is practised. The restrictions and safeguards applicable in this country were scrutinised and commended in 1957 by the Birkett Committee. Its report (Cmnd. 283) has ever since then provided the basis on which interception is carried out, and I can assure the House that it continues to do so today.

I recognise the importance of adequate and effective safeguards for the liberty of the subject.

out trivial from important traffic, can make the process very labour-intensive. In the past, the necessity of employing three people full-time to sort out the calls made, for example, to girl-friends from the calls made to the shop-stewards' committee has always been a restriction on the extent of phone-tapping.

Our inquiries suggest that some of the facilities available at Ebury Bridge Road – though not necessarily to the police – go far beyond this difficulty. Computerised retrieval systems enable particular connections to be automatically logged, so that a 'target' subscriber's calls need only be transcribed when he or she makes a call to some destination likely to be interesting. It is also suggested that advanced machine-transcription systems are becoming available, so that results of phone-taps can be made swiftly and easily available to 'customers'. In short, centralisation and technological rationalisation drastically lowers the marginal cost of phone-tapping. The equipment at Ebury Bridge Road was designed by GCHQ, the government's code-and-cypher centre at Cheltenham. This has access to the latest US know-how, including computerised voice recognition techniques. According to one tapping centre employee, voice-recognition operations have reached an advanced stage – given the availability of good-quality lines – and by 1978 speech on many lines could be transcribed automatically and printed-out almost 'on demand'. The centre apparently has direct links to GCHQ, to MI5 and to MI6 at Century House, over which recorded calls can be replayed on request.

THERE HAVE BEEN two major booms in phone-tapping in the last 20 years. The first came in the latter fifties, when operations were centralised in London instead of being done ad-hoc through local exchanges. The major London centre was close to Vauxhall Bridge Road, SW1, behind the present MI6 'London Station' at No. 60. That office had a capacity of 300 lines by the mid-sixties. Since there were three or four other centres in use, and the 1956 level was stated by the Birkett report of 1957 as no more than 159 taps in an entire year, a massive expansion had already taken place.

A training centre for tapping was established in an office in Petty France, SW1 (since demolished to make way for the new Home Office HQ). A small amount of police tapping was done there. By the late sixties, though, the obsolescence and incompatibility of some of the equipment produced a desire to bring new systems together under one roof: the result

was Ebury Bridge Road.

We have been told that a national network of tapping connections covers the entire country, with 12 lines at least usually connected to every 'group' exchange in major cities. To prevent ordinary Post Office engineers recognising this system and its purpose, the lines are included in the Defence Communications Network, which is installed for military communications. It runs through ordinary Post Office facilities, but details of its operations are secret.

The phone tappers are aware that they are not popular with the ordinary engineers. They normally attach their tape outside office hours, gaining access to exchanges with special keys. Sometimes their tapping connections – which usually are recognisable to any exchange engineer – have been removed by other staff. It is said that some years ago a tapper who was making an urgent connection to a union line during a strike found himself surrounded by exchange employees who regaled him with a chorus of *Land of Hope and Glory* (Mother of the Free!). There is no suggestion that warranted police taps, targeted against serious crime, have been interfered with.

ROUGHLY 90 PEOPLE come to work each morning at Ebury Bridge Road. They include technicians and representatives of 'customer' departments. Many of the shift workers who operate the tapping services are women, and appear to be recruited from staff in 'Service Observations' – a more legitimate if objectionable system of random tapping which is designed to monitor and measure the normal workings of the phone system.

Calls reaching the centre from tapped lines are passed via a computer to multi-channel tape recorders and storage discs: one recorder, can deal with 36 or more lines (perhaps up to 100), according to frequency of use. A central register of all telephone numbers in the country, together with the names and addresses, is available: together with computerised facilities for 'scanning' connections, a set-up of this kind can provide, cheaply and easily, surveillance-power on a scale Lord Birkett never dreamed of.

Military intelligence appears to be the only agency still running a separate centre (many Intelligence Corps personnel were trained in tapping techniques during the sixties, and operated on civilian telephones in Cyprus and in Germany). The Army now runs a listening post, comparable to the Chelsea installation, on the top floor of Churchill House, a Post Office building in Belfast: we have no specific

information about any possible Army tapping operations on the mainland.

One Post Office engineer last week described to us a recent case of political tapping. During the Grunwick strike, a tap was attached to the telephone used by the strike committee in the Brent Trades Council offices in Willesden Lane. This ran through Harlesden exchange: one local engineer tried to disconnect it, but engineers from the special team rapidly re-installed it. At the same time, Special Branch officers set up surveillance of the Trades Council offices from hired rooms in a nearby pub: long-range microphones were used in an attempt to monitor conversations through windows.

Home and office numbers of union leaders and others involved in major industrial disputes are frequently, even routinely, tapped: MI5 appear to take the view that ministers have no 'need to know' about the details of surveillance operations. According to the tapping-centre employee who gave us some of the most detailed information, there was no MP's telephone being tapped during the Sixties. Thus, the assurances given by Harold Wilson in 1964 appear to have been honoured.

BUT IT IS HARD to feel real confidence in any of the informal 'safeguards' which are supposed to exist. Only the police, we were told, stick to the procedure of obtaining a warrant before placing a tap: the secret agencies have 'carte blanche'. Their activities may be covered by a general warrant, which counts only as 'one' in accounts given to ministers, even though hundreds of lines may be involved. (Certainly, GCHQ has a single general warrant allowing all overseas telegrams and cables to be intercepted at will.) Warrants, when they are obtained, are handled by the Police Department of the Home Office; the Home Secretary's signature is obtained with little difficulty and little explanation. Even though ex-Inspector Lee made extensive and highly successful use of phone-taps in Operation Julie, he deplored the risks of abuse in the present arrangements. 'It's an executive decision – there's absolutely no accountability', he said to us.

IF TAPPING was once kept within bounds, this probably had more to do with problems of technology and manpower than with any structure of legal control. But the technological changes which upset that balance are only just beginning.

A new generation of British telephone exchanges, known as 'System X', is about to come into service. This, if not regulated, can

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be turned into a tool of mass-surveillance far more readily than our present cumbersome electro-mechanical exchanges – and there is another shrouded department of the Post Office which appears to be working on just that project.

In today's exchanges, large cables enter from the street, spray out onto distribution frames and are connected to long racks of switching equipment. Everything is highly visible, and comprehensible even to uninstructed eyes.

Every aspect of System X's operation will be concealed inside miniature electronic devices. Its overall operations will be controlled by inaccessible computers, themselves subordinate to regional control centres. Complex facilities for channelling calls through exchanges will anyway be required, and adding a few programmes to monitor 'target' lines will be simple. No dangerously visible extra wires will be required to be attached during semi-clandestine visits: there will be no warning lights, and rather fewer people around each exchange to notice what may be going on.

Analysis of the Post Office Telecommunications HQ Directory – which revealed the 'Equipment Development Division' – points to another odd outfit: OP7, the 'Equipment Strategy Division'. This, recently re-labelled as the 'Operational Strategy Co-ordination Division', is a self-contained section of the much larger team working on System X at 6 Lambeth Road SE1. Once again, separate lines of control and meaningless directory entries are pointers to a purpose which cannot be acknowledged.

Several Post Office engineers have told us they believe extensive surveillance capacity is being built into System X. And indeed, little effort can be involved. System X's computers will automatically generate records of who calls whom, when and for how long, as part of their means of operation. Such records, supplied wholesale for secret analysis, could provide means of supervision as exclusive as any state might desire.

THE POST OFFICE also opens mail and manufactures bugging equipment. Mail-opening is based on the 290-strong Investigation Division, located in the 25th and 26th floors of the Euston Tower building. The main job of the ID is to detect crimes against the Post Office, but much mail-opening has nothing to do with such aims. Ingenious equipment, including extremely long, thin pliers which enable letters to be rolled-up and removed from envelopes via the corners, are among the devices ID employs. There are also special sprays – one is made by the US firm Du Pont – which turn an envelope temporarily translucent, and special solvents used to unglue flaps.

Still more advanced equipment is already in service, according to two Post Office employees, allowing some mail to be read unopened. This is done by electronic scanning which can detect the carbon used in most kinds of ink. But the underlying mechanics of mail interception remain simple: letters sorted for a particular postman's 'walk' are removed selectively by a postal supervisor or ID Investigation Officer who had a list of 'target' addresses. The mail is then taken by messenger to the main local Post Office, where it is opened by ID officials, read, copied if interesting, and returned to the sorting office.

London's main letter-opening centre is at Union House in St Martin's-le-Grand, close to St Paul's. A 'Special Section' of the ID is based there: intercepted mail is addressed to the Officer on Duty, Room 202.

The man in charge of this special section is Mr R. F. G. Roberts, aged 58, an Assistant Controller in the ID. This results from a process of elimination: although Mr Roberts' name appears in official lists of senior Post Office staff, it does not appear in the ID's entry in the PO's internal telephone directory. All other ID staff of similar rank appear, and have clearly-described, legitimate functions. Callers who ask for Mr Roberts at the ID's Euston Tower HQ are referred to a City number, 432 4209.

When we placed a call to this number we were told that it was indeed the 'Special Section', and that Mr Roberts was in charge, although not present. We said that we were making a press inquiry concerning mail opening: whereupon the official at the other end denied that the Section opened mail, declined to say what business the Section was engaged in, and terminated the conversation very abruptly.

The ID's mail-opening programme has come to light on a number of occasions, the most notable being the case of *Freedom*, the anarchist magazine, in 1972. Intercepted mail which was being returned to the Eastern District Sorting Office in London was delivered to *Freedom* complete with the cover-note from the Special Section to an ID official at the local office. Another well-documented case concerned the Socialist Labour League (now the Workers' Revolutionary Party) in 1967, when one of the messengers involved told them about Post Office mail interception and copying, taking place in a basement adjacent to Union House.

Political groups of many complexions are aware of interference with their mail, evidenced by the otherwise impossible mixing of mail from wholly-separate postal areas. The Communist Party, for instance, which has its HQ in King Street, Covent Garden has often received mail addressed to unlikely addresses such as the anarchist bookshop 'Rising Free', then near Kings Cross Station. Members of the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science have found mail for colleagues living miles away included in their own home deliveries. On some occasions, such as the opening of some of the National Council for Civil Liberties' mail during the Agee-Hosenball case, the work has been done so obviously as to leave little doubt that harassment was intended.

BUGGING IS PART of the work of the R12 'Special Investigations Division' of the Post Office, which is run by Mr M. F. Meads and is located in the extensive new Research Centre at Martlesham Heath near Ipswich. It is well-known in the electronics business that the division orders considerable quantities of ultra-miniature electronics parts, including microphones. Members of the division have demonstrated bugging devices to security organisations in Britain and overseas.

R12's entry in the official staff directory is as unrevealing as that of its shadowy London counterparts. It contains such meaningless task-descriptions as 'improvements in current practice A' or 'physical investigation B'. Normal job descriptions are highly detailed.

Much of the sixth (top) floor at Martlesham

Heath is devoted to R12. An electronic detector system guards it from entry by other PO researchers (who describe the people involved as 'Faceless'). The only entrance to the section is via a blank room with locked doors, and an intercom on the wall with which to ask for admission. Staff lists show that most of its 117 personnel are technicians, concerned with manufacture and assembly, rather than graduate scientists engaged in research.

Two-and-a-half years ago, R12 engineers secretly visited German security officials to swap information on bugs. At one meeting, they showed off an 'infinity' bug, which could be inserted in a phone and then called up from anywhere else to eavesdrop on conversations.

THIS WEEK, we put detailed questions to the Post Office concerning each of the divisions investigated here – specifically inviting them to confirm or deny that the role of the Chelsea establishment is telephone-tapping. They replied:

The Post Office has no comment to make. The policy on interception of communications is a matter for the Home Secretary and every case has to be personally approved by a Secretary of State. We refer you to the Home Office.

We then spoke to the Home Office Director of Information, Donald Grant. He said:

We wouldn't answer questions like that anyway – you know that very well. Successive answers in the House of Commons (make the situation clear). It is not in the public interest that the details be made public. The Birkett report might repay reading... it's carried out to the letter.

It is quite clear that the phone-tapping situation has entirely altered since Lord Birkett reported. The document, however, does repay reading in one sense: because even then there was a separate reservation by one of the committee, Mr Patrick Gordon Walker MP, who is and always has been some distance from a wild-eyed radical. He said then:

... I cannot wholly agree with my colleagues that present use of the power to intercept communications should continue unchanged. In my view the purposes for which warrants are issued should in future be judged by stricter standards...

Those sensible reservations clearly made no impact upon bureaucratic opinion. Two brief points may be worth making in conclusion. First, the proliferation of phone-tapping equipment may be justified by reference to the 'Irish troubles'. But it seems clear that much of the expansion was planned in the sixties – well before the IRA became a substantial threat. And in any case, much of the extra load thus caused is carried directly by military intelligence facilities.

Second, it may be justified by something resembling a new Cold War hysteria. But that is a reason for stricter, not laxer, legislative supervision. One of the essential discoveries that the Americans made during the seventies was that the burgeoning activities of the 'intelligence community' – wire-tapping, mail-opening and the like – were targeted, in reality, not against the external enemies of the United States, but against the American public itself. That is a painful discovery we are beginning to make in this country. But whether we have the same legal and constitutional means for investigating it is perhaps another question.

Next week: Big Brother's many mansions