

At your service

In our 90th anniversary issue focusing on women and work, **Andréa Childs** looks back at the women who have served British interests overseas – as diplomats and spies

When, in 2017, Karen Pierce was appointed UK Ambassador to the United Nations it marked a landmark for women in the Foreign Office (FO). Despite a record of service that dates back to World War I and the heroic actions of nurse-turned-secret-agent Edith Cavell – who worked with the recently formed MI6 and hid wounded Allied soldiers in her hospital in occupied Belgium – women had to battle for their place in the worlds of diplomacy and security. For years, their work was overlooked or carried out on the sidelines – such as that of Gertrude Bell, whose knowledge of the Middle East saw her appointed as an unofficial Government adviser in World War I, guiding soldiers through the desert.

Even today, despite female Special Operations Executive (SOE) members, such as Odette Sansom, operating behind enemy lines during World War II, the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), which works covertly overseas to protect Britain's safety, has never been headed by a woman. And there have been only two female director generals (of 17) of the domestic Security Service (MI5) – Dame Stella Rimington and Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller.

The entry of females to the FO as diplomats, rather than typists or tea ladies, was first mooted in 1914. But it wasn't until 1946 that the diplomatic service was opened to women, allowing them to represent the interests of the country.

There were the usual arguments against women playing their part. Foreign powers weren't ready for such a radical move. Women would be seduced. They would damage Britain's prestige. They couldn't conduct business in gentleman's clubs. And it would be embarrassing for their husbands, who would have to trail around the world in the wake of their wives. To prevent such indignities, a marriage bar was imposed, meaning females in the FO had to retire once they had walked down the aisle. The bar was enforced until 1973.

Thankfully – although full equality is still some way off – the situation is different today. Now, 45% of all Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff are female, and women hold 33% of senior roles.

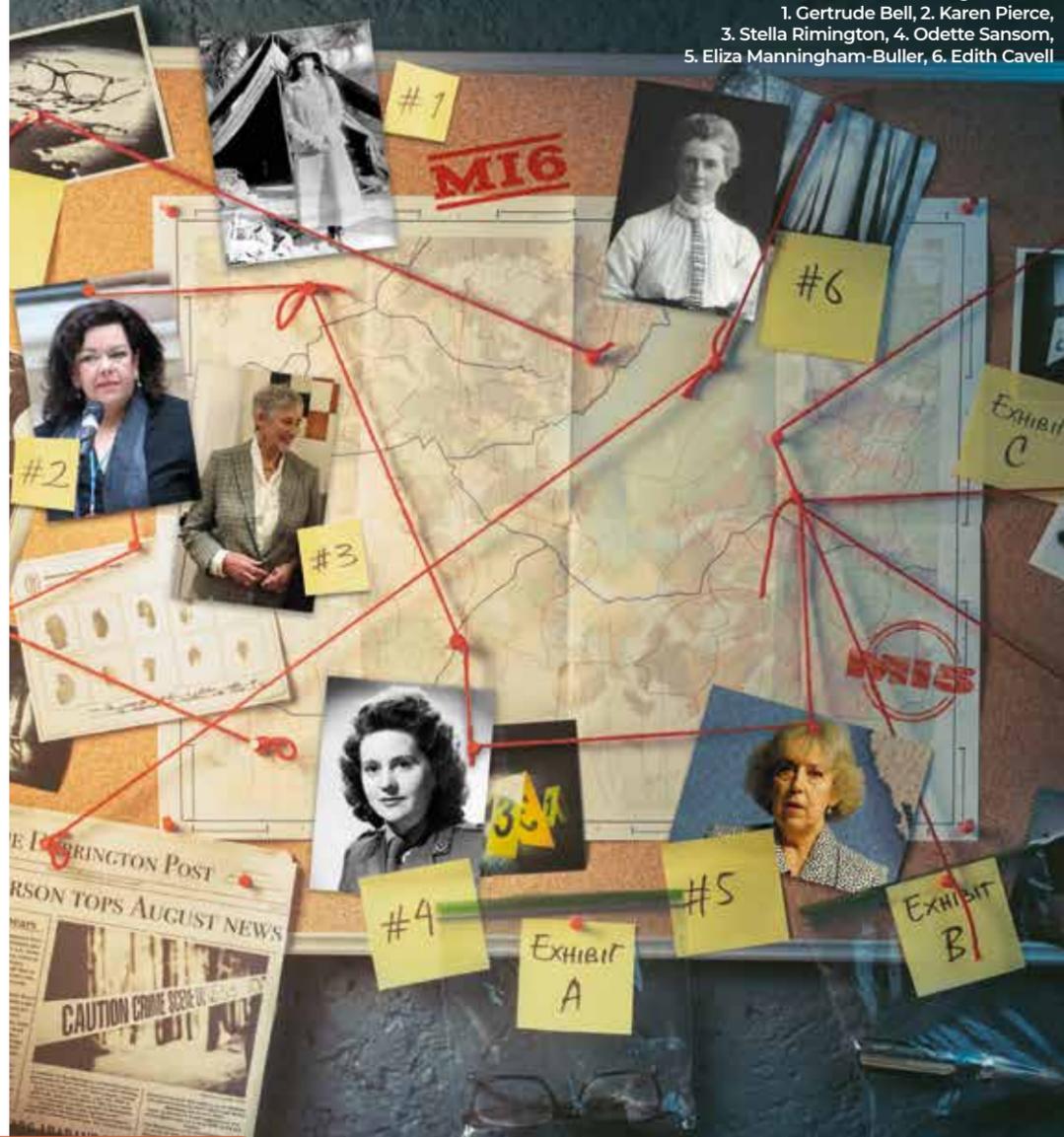
FAMOUS FEMALE SPIES AND DIPLOMATS

Cicely Mayhew was the first British female diplomat, joining the Foreign Office in 1947 after wartime service at Bletchley Park (where she had been paid less than male codebreakers). Her nickname was 'Our new lamb'.

Daphne Park, known as the Queen of Spies, worked for the Special Operations Executive before being recruited by MI6 after the war. Some of her covert work was conducted behind diplomatic cover – while working as a consul and high commissioner in various posts, she

became senior controller for MI6 in Hanoi, Moscow and the Congo. **Pearl Cornioley** joined the SOE in 1943 and was reputedly the best shot ever to have come through training. She became an expert in guerrilla warfare and, after the war, was awarded the Légion d'Honneur and a civil MBE, as military versions weren't then offered to women. She turned it down, saying, 'There was nothing remotely "civil" about what I did. I didn't sit behind a desk all day.' She later accepted a military MBE.

Women in the Foreign Service:
1. Gertrude Bell, 2. Karen Pierce,
3. Stella Rimington, 4. Odette Sansom,
5. Eliza Manningham-Buller, 6. Edith Cavell



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MEET A DIPLOMATIC TRAILBLAZER

Dame Veronica Sutherland joined the Foreign Office in 1965, working on the East German desk. Her 34-year career covered postings to India and the Ivory Coast, and she was ambassador to Dublin during the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. That same year, she was made Dame of the British Empire. 'There were quite a number of women in the Foreign Office when I joined, but they acted as examples, rather than mentors. I was simply treated the same way as my male colleagues and expected to get on with the job. I don't think men and women bring different approaches to diplomacy; it's about personality, rather than gender. You need an incisive mind, a resilient character and a determination to get things done. I'm also a good listener, which was very important leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. My role was to ensure the people in London understood the thinking of those in Ireland. I had to be very careful not to slip up, as I knew that, for historical reasons, the Irish might sometimes view the British ambassador with suspicion. That posting was head and shoulders the highlight of my career.'

'I was often the only woman in a room full of men and, in the early days, I could see them thinking, "She's too young; she's the wrong sex". But I knew my stuff, so it didn't take long to be accepted. And being a woman could make my job easier, as I would be remembered. It could be a lonely life, particularly before I got married, but that's true for anyone moving frequently

for work overseas. It's a secretive world, too. I was on the inside of so many situations in my 34 years and there are some things I can't even tell former colleagues. There were times when I became angry or frustrated, but I found the best way to make a change in that situation is to let the other person think it was all their idea. Diplomacy really is about finding the best way to achieve your task.'

'I met my husband, Alex, in Delhi, when we both worked for the High Commission, and we married in 1981. You need a very tolerant husband to put up with it all – the protocol and the politics. I was ambassador to Abidjan in 1987 and Alex was executive director of the African Development Bank – really, a much more crucial role than mine. No one could work out where to place us at dinner, so they would seat me as "most important woman" and Alex was put at the end of the table with the mistress of the US ambassador. After they were married, Alex had to make do with the daughter of the Swedish ambassador.'

'I take my hat off to the women diplomats today, who juggle work and family so successfully. For them, it's no longer a world where they feel different or out of place. I had to retire when I was 60; there was an absolute age bar. I'm not

the sort of person who looks back and wishes I was still there but I do have the fondest recollections of the people and places, and of making a difference.'

