

## The Digitiser

That was nearly it, one more batch of documents, just one month's worth, and this particular job would be completed. It had taken much longer than they first planned, but at last, the task of digitising 109-years of records would be done. One more, just this one last batch of 2,486, and they would reach 3,132,360 pages.

What then though, the work wouldn't just stop would it, he thought. What about next month, and the one after that? Someone would have to do it at some stage.

Anyway, that wasn't his worry, he just had to finish th.... Shit, bugger, damn he exclaimed as the folder of papers he had just lifted from the trolley spilled its contents all over the floor. Fortunately, most of them were stapled, or held together with paperclips, but of course, some of them were single pages and floated away as the larger clipped ones hit the floor and wafted the lighter pages in the air and they slid under the camera table.

'Shit, bugger, damn' was the worst of his profanities, although he was aware of much worse ones. He knelt on the floor to retrieve the loose pages, then had to repeat the swear words as he saw one rogue sheet was half on the floor and half up the wall, right at the back of the table. It was no good though, he couldn't reach it from his kneeling position, he'd have to lie down and stretch his arm under.

It was as he moved from a kneeling to a lying position that it happened. He suddenly felt dizzy, and something was squeezing his chest. His left arm was tingling, and it gave way as he tried to move, and he fell onto his back. The chest pain became sharper, then just stopped. He was tired and as he closed his eyes, his head rolled to one side. William Pennyman died where he had worked for the past 12-years, in the basement of a Victorian office building in Chancery Lane.

The building had once been a branch of Coutts Bank, and the basement had been the vault, before it was fitted out with the cameras and the paraphernalia necessary to digitise large amounts of paper records. Mainly because it had been a bank and deemed to be secure, the company who owned the building had advertised the fact they would digitise other companies' records once they had completed their own. They had one or two enquiries in the first week or so, but they came to nothing, probably because of the exorbitant fee the owners were asking. A month or so later, the company was visited by a pair of gentlemen 'from the Ministry' and after a

prolonged examination of the premises and facilities, a contract was drawn up. The Ministry would pay the exorbitant fee for exclusive use of the facilities for ten-years, with an option to extend said contract for a further period to be discussed. The company would be required to sign a confidentiality agreement with regard to the documents being digitised, and the persons operating the equipment would have to be Positively Vetted and would be required to sign the Official Secrets Act. The contract was duly signed by both the company's directors, and The Minister himself when he visited the building for just that purpose.

William Pennyman and his colleague Allan Mackeson, both ex-Servicemen, were Positively Vetted and subsequently accepted as the two operators. They gazed in awe at some of the early documents they had to deal with, although within a week, they had stopped commenting on the contents. There was after all, only so much to be made of one-hundred-year-old Military Intelligence records. Even as they got to the more recent records, the interest had waned to boredom. A page was a page, was a page.

After taking the previous day off for a hospital appointment, Allan Mackeson was distraught when he came into work the following day and learnt that his colleague Bill had died from a heart attack. However, as the only other authorised and PV'ed operator in the company, he was asked to ensure the documents his co-worker had been working with were all accounted for. That he did, it only being necessary to verify and catalogue the number of folders, not the individual pages in each folder. He worried for a while that the pages from the spilled file would probably not be in the correct order, but he nevertheless made sure they were at least in date order. Allan boxed the final month's folders up and placed them in the secure cabinet, putting the previous day's work, now digitised, in the separate 'for destruction' cabinet. Once done, he was allowed to take the day off, on the understanding he would finish the last batch off tomorrow.

Neither Allan Mackeson, the management or security staff who had been in the basement, nor the paramedics who had attended to William Pennyman, noticed the single piece of paper under the camera table.