

The Spy Chief Who Became a Storyteller

How a solicitor from Devon ended up rewriting the law on British intelligence, and then writing thrillers about it

David Bickford arrived into the world on 28 July 1940, in the middle of a Luftwaffe air raid over Dorset. It was, in retrospect, a fitting entrance. His mother had raced Bentleys at Brooklands, the spiritual home of British motor racing, before the war put an end to that sort of thing. His father worked in intelligence for the RAF, handling the Ultra decrypts and helping crack the Japanese Naval 24 Code, the kind of work that, at the time, nobody was permitted to mention at the dinner table. Secrecy, it seems, was in the blood long before Bickford made a career of it.

Peace brought its own adventures. His father co-founded British South American Airways with Don Bennett, the wartime Pathfinder commander, and school holidays for young David meant two day flights to Brazil and Chile rather than the seaside. Later his father managed BOAC operations, the forerunner of British Airways, in India and East Africa, and the boy grew up treating continents the way other children treated the back garden.

He left Downside School at seventeen with a poor grasp of mathematics and a decent one of rugby and boxing, and set his sights on the law. The pull, he has said, came from an uncle who fought hard, and unsuccessfully, to save Ruth Ellis, the last woman hanged in Britain. Bickford trained at the College of Law in London and qualified as a solicitor, cutting his teeth as a defence lawyer in Okehampton, Devon, in front of magistrates who did not care much for young men from London telling them how to run their courtrooms. In 1965 he married Cary. They had three sons, and a marriage that has outlasted every government he went on to serve.

The Turks and Caicos years

Private practice bored him. The predictable climb from partner to consultant to retirement held no appeal, so Bickford took a government post as Legal Adviser to the Turks and Caicos Islands, then a sleepy British territory better known for sand than for finance. He helped draft the legislation that turned the islands into a tourist destination and an offshore financial centre, negotiated the closure of a treacherous sand airstrip with the American Defense Department in exchange for aviation access to the US air base, and arranged a mortgage scheme with Barclays that let islanders build homes of their own. A visit from the Audubon Society persuaded him to push through fisheries laws that protected the reefs which still draw divers today. His first book, a slim volume called *Land Dealings Simplified in the Turks and Caicos Islands*, was hand printed by the government presses and holds the modest distinction of being the first book ever published there.

Legal director of the secret state

By the late 1980s, Bickford's career had reached a fork in the road with three prongs. He was lined up to become the United Kingdom's Legal Adviser at the United Nations. He was offered the governorship of the Turks and Caicos Islands. And he was asked, almost in passing, whether he might like to become Legal Director of MI5 and MI6. He said yes to the last one.

It was not a quiet posting. The European Court of Human Rights was weighing the Leander case, a ruling that threatened the legal foundations on which Britain's intelligence agencies operated, since at the time they answered to nothing more solid than royal prerogative. Bickford helped steer through the Security Service Act 1989, the Official Secrets Act 1989 and the Intelligence Services

Act 1994, the trio of statutes that finally gave the agencies a legal footing. More significantly for the officers doing the actual work, he devised the procedures that allowed intelligence gathered in the field to be turned into evidence a jury could hear, without trampling a defendant's right to a fair trial. Officers were required to log their activities as they went, a discipline that underpinned a string of successful terrorism prosecutions and was later endorsed by Sir Richard Scott in his 1992 inquiry report. Bickford also wrote the rulebook for how agents were run and supervised.

Part of the job, unusually for the era, involved talking to journalists. Bickford became the agencies' liaison to the press, and remembers the questioning as tough but scrupulously fair. He also built a working relationship with the Legal Director of the civil liberties group Liberty, a young lawyer named Shami Chakrabarti, now a Labour peer, whose counsel he credits with helping him find the right balance between the state's need for secrecy and the public's right to know.

Professor, witness, provocateur

Retirement from the agencies did not mean retirement from the argument. Bickford took up a visiting professorship at Cleveland State University, teaching international human rights and counter terrorism to a cohort of mature students he describes, with evident affection, as lively enough to keep him on his toes. The experience convinced him the subject deserved a wider audience than a lecture hall, and he began giving evidence wherever anyone would have him: to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington, as an honorary member of the American Bar Association, and back home to a UK parliamentary select committee and the Committee of Privy Counsellors, where he argued for tighter oversight of the intelligence agencies, a public face for their directors, and wider powers to pursue organised crime. He recalls, with some amusement, spotting a fifteen year old Prince William in the audience at one such hearing, presumably hoping for rather more glamour than a discussion of oversight mechanisms could provide.

At the Cambridge Symposium on Economic Crime he became the first speaker to publicly criticise Britain's overseas territories for functioning as tax havens that made life easy for criminals, a broadside that helped push those territories towards greater transparency and cooperation with other states. He wrote extensively on the subject, in papers including *State Secrecy and Transparency*, *Law Enforcement and Intelligence in a New Era*, and an assessment of the Hutton Inquiry, and continued to make the case for judicial oversight of intrusive surveillance, later taking the argument to the European Parliament's LIBE committee, where he championed the French system of examining judges as a model for supervising intelligence work. The United Nations invited him to deliver a series of lectures, and he went on to advise the Cayman Islands, Mauritius and other offshore centres on tackling money laundering, an interest that led him to early software designed to flag suspicious financial transactions, based on a Dutch model. He remains convinced that artificial intelligence will eventually solve the reliability and paperwork problems that dog the banking industry's Know Your Customer checks.

Along the way he became something of a media fixture, giving what is believed to be the first interview by a British intelligence officer on BBC World News's *HARDtalk*, followed by profiles in the *Sunday Times* magazine and, rather more surprisingly, *Cosmopolitan*, cracking open a door that senior spies had traditionally kept firmly shut.

A second act in fiction

The pivot to novels happened, as these things sometimes do, thirty thousand feet over the Atlantic. Flying home to London from a speaking engagement in San Francisco, Bickford and Cary fell to talking about the places their working life had taken them, and realised the story sounded rather like a thriller already. The result was *The Face of Tomorrow*, which became a bestseller through Borders in Britain and is now regarded, not without justification, as a thriller that anticipated the Arab

Spring. Hollywood took out a film option. Two more scripts followed, one of them optioned by a London production company for the BBC, and Bickford has since written Katya, the first in a planned series of five.

It is a curious kind of career arc: a boy born under bombs who spent his working life drafting the laws that govern Britain's secrets, then spent his retirement writing the kind of stories those secrets are made of.

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