

The mansion where RAF wartime chiefs prayed and plotted is joining civvie street. By *Max Davidson*

A farewell to the non-flying fortress

Particularly suitable for the security-conscious purchaser... The words have a splendid ring, do they not? One imagines 15ft walls topped with barbed wire, batteries of closed-circuit TV cameras and at least a dozen Dobermans prowling the grounds. Colditz comes to the Home Counties.

On the particulars of Springfields, a £175 million pile in Buckinghamshire, the words seem comically inappropriate. The property is set amid rolling fields on the edge of a village. It looks more like Camelot than Colditz. There is no 15ft wall, no CCTV and no Dobermans. A child could scramble over the low barbed-wire fence, sneak through the grounds and bang a brick through the drawing-room window.

Turn the clock back a bit and it was a very different story. Springfields was, for more than half a century, the official residence of the head of RAF Strike Command at High Wycombe, which is just a few miles away. Ignore the green fields. From the Second World War to Kosovo, this place was a hive of activity, as the top brass agonised over high-risk missions or shared a glass of Champagne after a job well done.

Its most famous resident, from 1942 to 1946, was Air Chief



Safe house: Springfields, bomb-proof home to Bomber Harris, below; his statue, below left, in London



Marshal Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who headed Bomber Command, the precursor of Strike Command, during the Second World War. He was a controversial figure and, to this day, his name provokes fierce debate.

Just try typing "Bomber Harris" while searching the internet and you will find yourself under bombardment from all sides, as German pacifists argue the toss with old RAF hands. To some, Harris was a war hero, shabbily treated by his country; to others, a war criminal, responsible for the murder of thousands of German civilians. The statue of him in London, outside St Clement

Danes church, is routinely defaced by anti-war protesters.

You get little immediate sense of him at Springfields. Other Air Marshals have come and gone since and the house is currently unoccupied. It has the feel of a

"The bathroom is accessible only through reinforced steel doors"

building which has been evacuated in a hurry, with peeling wallpaper, scuffed carpets and abandoned telephone directories. Musty walk-in cupboards line the corridors. Moss gathers on the tennis court at the bottom of the garden. Whoever buys the house will have to spend serious money licking it into shape.

It is a huge, rambling property, built at the start of the last century, but extended several times since. There are six bedrooms, unteemed reception rooms and separate accommodation for staff. The running costs must have been

prohibitive — hence, no doubt, its demise as an official residence. One glance at its pompous white exterior and the word "elephant" comes to mind. No wonder the MoD saw fit to include the property in the latest tranche of married quarters it is selling.

But Springfields was no white elephant while Harris was here. "It played a key role during the war," says Henry Probert, whose official biography of Harris comes out this autumn. "Harris did not just use it as his private residence, but for entertaining influential figures in the conduct of the war. Journalists, MPs, American generals... He wanted to convince them that his bombing strategy was right."

One can imagine the great and the good arguing late into the night, walled on hand and foot by sparsely dressed butlers. While the reception rooms look a bit dingy today, the scullery is laid out with military efficiency; one shelf marked "large forks", the

next marked "small forks", one drawer marked "daily napkins", the next marked "function napkins". Thus the upstairs-downstairs life of a great country house is vividly evoked.

On the ground floor, the high-security features promised in the brochure are conspicuous by their absence — unless you count the panic button in the study and large, fenced-off area for dogs. But there is a surprise in store in the master bedroom.

The room itself is quite unremarkable: generously sized and overlooking the lawn. But the en-suite bathroom and dressing-room are something else. Both are accessible only through heavy-duty reinforced steel doors; and both have been fitted with high-security glass windows, two inches thick. The Luftwaffe could have dropped its entire load in the garden while Bomber Harris was having his bath and the great man would have escaped unharmed.

It is one of the oddest features I have ever seen in a property. Why is there no high-security glass in the bedroom? Did Harris feel safe in his pyjamas, but unsafe when he was naked? That would have a psychiatrist rubbing his hands in glee. Was it just a bolt-hole for use in emergencies? And if so, why not use the cellar instead?

There is a fair chance, of course, given the history of the property, that the security features were installed by one of his successors, perhaps at a time of high IRA activity. But it is hard not to link them with Harris, if only because they constitute such a delicious irony — the fanatical bomber terrified of bombs.

Who would want to live in such a house today, with the bathroom doubling as a bunker? Estate agent Roger Platt thinks Springfields is more likely to go a private individual than a developer. "Someone a bit eccentric: like the Bomber. Maybe a footballer. I just hope it is not some idiot who fills the house with stuff from Ikea. This place has character."

He is right about that. The history of the RAF was shaped in this secluded corner of Buckinghamshire. Just drive out of Springfields, turn left and you will find yourself on Cockpit Road. It is a spooky experience.

- Springfields is for sale through Roger Platt (01494 484433).
- *Bomber Harris: His Life and Times* by Henry Probert is published by Greenhill Books on September 12, available from Telegraph Books direct at reduced price of £25 plus 85p p&p (0870 155 7222)