

## The war years

### Speakers:

- **Sandra Howes**, Schools Liaison Officer, Midlands, UK, HSBC
- **Sara Kinsey**, Global History Manager, HSBC
- **Jason Wordie**, Independent Historian, HK
- **Reverend Will Newman**, Priest of St Stephen's Chapel, HK
- **Mr Cheng Po-hung**, Commonwealth Stamp & Coin Co. Shop. HK
- **Schoolchildren**

**[Sandra Howes]** With all that history, that 150 years, there's lots of periods that are really interesting, but for me, the part that I would be interested in is World War II. That generation definitely shouldn't be forgotten.

**[Talking to children in a classroom]** Good morning, everybody. How are we?

**[Schoolchildren]** Fine.

**[Sandra Howes]** Good. Now, today is our...

**[Voiceover]** My name is Sandra Howes. I work for HSBC Bank, have done for 37 years, and I've got a brilliant job. My title is a Schools Liaison Officer. My role is to teach children the value of money.

**[Talking to children in a classroom]** GBP10, that's lovely.

**[Voiceover]** My dad served in World War II. I'm only one generation away, but for those youngsters, it's two generations away. It would be great for them to understand what their bank did during that Second World War, because it is their bank. It's not my bank. It's their bank as well.

When war broke out in 1939, life changed dramatically for everyone. But I'd like to know how it affected the daily lives of HSBC staff, so I've arranged to meet HSBC Global History Manager, Sara Kinsey, in London, to find out more.

So Sara, you've brought me to a pub.

**[Sara Kinsey]** Yes.

**[Sandra Howes]** Could you just explain to me why we're here.

**[Sara Kinsey]** Well, it wasn't always a pub, Sandra, so I don't want you to think I hang out here all the time. This was the London office of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. I've got some photos.

**[Sandra Howes]** Oh, that would be great.

**[Sara Kinsey]** This is what it would have looked like inside. So if you came in here at the beginning of the Second World War, it would have been a hive of activity. Probably about 200 people, I think, working in here. Staff would have changed their duties. As well as doing banking duties, they would have had to become air raid wardens and first aid wardens.

**[Sandra Howes]** What happens if an air raid was sounded?

**[Sara Kinsey]** You went down to the basement, which was over there, and you were

expected to carry on work during an air raid.

**[Sandra Howes]** So you had to take your work with you.

**[Sara Kinsey]** Yes.

**[Sandra Howes]** And carry on downstairs.

**[Sara Kinsey]** That's right. It was a very, very important office. It was the real centre of HSBC's operations in Europe. So, you know, things were very difficult for the bank, and what you need obviously is someone who can take charge, who can cope with all these difficulties. Luckily, HSBC had just such a person.

**[Sandra Howes]** We had a man.

**[Sara Kinsey]** Yes, we did. So this is Sir Vandeleur Grayburn. He was the Chief Manager of the entire bank, and he was based in Hong Kong.

**[Sandra Howes]** Oh, he's very distinguished.

**[Sara Kinsey]** Yes. Yes, he was a really big, inspiring figure as Chief Manager. This is his wife, Lady Grayburn. She's on her 90th birthday here. This is the only photo we have of her. So the Grayburns stayed in Hong Kong with the rest of the staff.

**[Sandra Howes]** What was happening in Hong Kong at that particular time? Do we know?

**[Sara Kinsey]** We've got the correspondence that was coming out as the situation on the ground is deteriorating in Hong Kong, and they're increasingly under threat. British battle ships had been sunk by the Japanese air force, and they knew that no one was going to come and save them.

**[Sandra Howes]** Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong in December 1941. I've come here, to the region's cenotaph, to meet Jason Wordie, a local historian, to find out how HSBC staff coped.

**[Jason Wordie]** Are you Sandra?

**[Sandra Howes]** Are you Jason?

**[Jason Wordie]** Nice to meet you.

**[Sandra Howes]** Pleased to meet you, Jason.

**[Jason Wordie]** The central area where we are was extensively shelled, but there wasn't actually fighting here, and there's a document we'll quote from. It says, "With the aid of pressure lamps, we continue to pay out cash, receive instructions regarding remittances and we're despatching telegrams until a few hours before the colony surrendered."

**[Sandra Howes]** So they were working right up until the very end.

**[Jason Wordie]** Yes. People like the Chief Manager. That's ours here, Grayburn, and the intention was to get these people out. He refused to go. Lady Grayburn describes some of the motivations for not going. Her quote of his is, "I must stay by the bank. I mustn't desert it."

**[Sandra Howes]** Very brave of them both.

**[Jason Wordie]** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

**[Sandra Howes]** To say, they could have gone home, if they'd chosen to.

**[Jason Wordie]** The European bank staff were actually kept in fairly basic and unpleasant old hotels further along the western waterfront, to sign what were known as duress bank notes, and the duress bank notes were currency blanks which were signed by bank staff with

a signing authority, and then they went out as legal tender.

This corner is where the Sun Wah Hotel was. This is where the bankers were kept in internment. And this photograph in here actually is them marching down to the bank, going under guard. So this is just directly in front of where we are here.

The hotel was fairly rudimentary, and Lady Grayburn describes the rooms as being just wooden cubicles. "My husband and I slept on one board, the both of us." So, by describing that, you get an idea that it was actually pretty confined, and then, there's another document. This was written by Grayburn. "Do impress on the people at home some of the vileness perpetrated out here." So clearly, things are not going terribly well.

**[Sandra Howes]** Civilians, including HSBC staff, were then transferred to Stanley Internment Camp, on the south side of the island. I've come to the site, now St Stephen's College, to meet Reverend Will Newman. So, Reverend, what were the conditions like here in the camp at that time?

**[Reverend Will Newman]** They were pretty tough. Rations were very low, food was scarce, medicines were very scarce. If it had gone on for many more months, then a lot of the prisoners would have died of starvation.

I brought you here because I wanted to show you a couple of things connected with the war. This is a stained glass window that shows the internees and the condition that they were reduced to, the kind of bones showing through their skin. There was a group of them found to be secretly keeping and listening to a radio and picking up Allied radio broadcasts, and so they were sentenced to death by the Japanese.

One of the names there is Hyde, which is Charles Frederick Hyde, known as Ginger, who was one of the HSBC staff. "To the memory of all who suffered, and those who died at Stanley, 1941 to 1945. Their spirit, hope, faith and love will, as the flower's living cycle, remain to refresh us always."

**[Sandra Howes]** I have a smuggled letter here. Very, very tiny writing, by Grayburn, and it's telling us about how the bank staff and the bank is operating at the current time. "For Fielden, Bompas, Matthews, Wylie, killed in action. Advise Morse, my opinion is losses will be heavy, therefore suggest withhold any dividends until peace. Are now compelled under threats to sign uncovered notes. Please reply."

Sir Vandeleur Grayburn died at the Gendarmerie Prison at Stanley in 1943. He hasn't gone home. He stayed, which is lovely. He obviously loved Hong Kong, because he could have gone home, if he'd wanted to, but he didn't. He stayed. So it's an appropriate place for him to be.

As the war was coming to an end, I'd like to know what happened to all those duress notes signed by HSBC staff. I've arranged to meet Mr Cheng, a local currency expert and historian, to find out.

**[Mr Cheng Po-hung]** After the war there was chaos in Hong Kong because the forcibly issued notes carried the usual letters and serial numbers but the people simply couldn't distinguish between them and the notes genuinely issued.

**[Sandra Howes]** What did the bank do?

**[Mr Cheng Po-hung]** So, in 1946, six months after the war ended, HSBC announced the astounding news to honour all these notes to relieve the people of Hong Kong.

**[Sandra Howes]** So a very brave decision by HSBC.

**[Mr Cheng Po-hung]** Yes.

**[Sandra Howes]** And if you wanted to buy one at today's rate, how much would it cost to buy a note like this one?

**[Mr Cheng Po-hung]** Each is worth HKD5000.

**[Sandra Howes]** I'd better look after them very carefully.

A lot of the children don't realise exactly what happened during World War II. They should all be very proud of the people that were here at that time. If they hadn't looked after HSBC, signed those duress notes, been able to work with London, HSBC wouldn't be here now, and none of us would be working for them. So I definitely think that the courageous integrity of every single body that was there during that time is something that we can all learn from, and use every single day that we're at work, looking after our customers.