The Kingsway Telephone Exchange is an intentionally misleading name to hide its true location under Chancery Lane tube station.

Together, the tunnels span an area of 8,000 sqm and stretch up to 10 meters in diameter, equal to the width of three London buses.

They are one of 10 planned bomb shelters that were commissioned following the start of the London Blitz when the UK Government decided to construct a system of deep-level shelters linked to existing tube stations (of which only eight were completed).

They were kept secret for nearly 70 years as part of the Government’s Official Secret Act, and only removed from the register in 2007.

Origin

The Kingsway Exchange Tunnels offer the ‘Inside Story’ of this corner of the capital’s contribution to London’s place in world history. They are without a doubt one of London’s best kept secrets and a forgotten icon of the 20th Century.

Provided in this booklet is a snapshot of its history – or at least what we know of it.
The history of the Kingsway Exchange Tunnels

The tunnels were dug as an emergency bunker for up to 8,000 people seeking refuge from the Blitz. London Transport was consulted and required to build the tunnels at public expense with the understanding that they would have the option to take them over for railway use after the war, although they were never used for either purpose.

In addition to its role as home to the Special Operations Executive, the tunnels also became home to over 400 tonnes of documents owned by the Public Record Office, including those related to the Domesday Book, which was nearly 900 years old by this point.

The tunnels became (publicly at least) home to the ‘London Civil Defence Regional and Ministry of Works’, and adapted to cover a range of uses from a place of work for the Port of London Authority, to operational staff working towards the war effort. This however was a cover for its real purpose as the research and development section of the Special Operations Executive, an offshoot of MI6, whose purpose was to help the resistance of Nazi-occupied regions across Europe. Over 1,000 people worked in the tunnels at the time – including one Ian Fleming, the author of the James Bond novels, who used the tunnels as inspiration for Q Branch.

Having recognised its vulnerabilities during the Second World War, the government decided to move key public telephone exchanges to locations underground. The Kingsway Exchange was one of the first national telephone exchanges to do so. It was not only underground, but also added to its resilience by being physically isolated from the rest of London, making it very difficult for enemy aircraft to bomb it.

Having taken over the tunnels from the Post Office, British Telecom have managed and maintained the tunnels, albeit they have been relatively closed off from anyone bar a handful of workers since the 1970s. That said, it has hosted a number of events and parties in recent years, including an emergency bunker known as ‘Pindar’, the primary site lying below the Ministry of Defense headquarters building in Whitehall.

1940

The tunnels were dug as an emergency bunker for up to 8,000 people seeking refuge from the Blitz. London Transport was consulted and required to build the tunnels at public expense with the understanding that they would have the option to take them over for railway use after the war, although they were never used for either purpose.

1944

The tunnels were dug as an emergency bunker for up to 8,000 people seeking refuge from the Blitz. London Transport was consulted and required to build the tunnels at public expense with the understanding that they would have the option to take them over for railway use after the war, although they were never used for either purpose.

1945

The tunnels became (publicly at least) home to the ‘London Civil Defence Regional and Ministry of Works’, and adapted to cover a range of uses from a place of work for the Port of London Authority, to operational staff working towards the war effort. This however was a cover for its real purpose as the research and development section of the Special Operations Executive, an offshoot of MI6, whose purpose was to help the resistance of Nazi-occupied regions across Europe. Over 1,000 people worked in the tunnels at the time – including one Ian Fleming, the author of the James Bond novels, who used the tunnels as inspiration for Q Branch.

1949–1980

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1980s–present day

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