

1 The many faces of Wilton Park

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This chapter explores the role of Wilton Park in the fabric of British foreign policy from the origins of the institution in the context of British post-war planning to the present day. It traces Wilton Park's story from its early days as a prisoner of war (PoW) camp to an institution for the democratisation of post-National Socialist Germany to a networking and conference site for Western countries during the Cold War, and from there to an international policy forum part funded by the British government as an executive agency of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) today.

Most of the few senior diplomats interviewed for the British Diplomatic Oral History Project at Churchill College Cambridge who mention Wilton Park at all did so in the context of the assessment exercises for promotion that the Foreign Office (FO) conducted at Wiston House in Steyning, West Sussex.¹ It is true that “we would now have a most useful and revealing archive of the evolution of, and changes in Western public opinion since the end of the war”, if all sessions at Wilton Park had been recorded.²

This chapter highlights an alternative explanation and focuses on the ways in which Wilton Park managed to adapt to a changing domestic and international environment by redefining its purpose, while retaining some of the original ideas that drove its foundation. This was not necessarily a success story, as it could also lead to a certain complacency about the value of an organisation that might not have been available to outsiders. Max Beloff, for example, as chair of Wilton Park's academic advisory council, defended Wilton Park against potential cuts by portraying it as a key site for “the cultivation of opinion through contacts”, but he did not say how this was achieved and why other organisations were unable to achieve the same aims.³ This meant that the way in which Wilton Park achieved its impact was not explored in depth, both by historians and by policymakers. It was simply assumed.

Moreover, it was never entirely clear what function Wilton Park was supposed to fulfil: was it an instrument of projecting British ideas about democracy, an institution of projecting British power, an instrument of British propaganda and information policy, a way of spreading “the gospel of freedom and democracy among intelligent and well-placed Germans”⁴, a clearing house for knowledge and the exchange of ideas, or even, as Dexter Keezer has

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Figure 1.1 The approach to Wiston House, Wilton Park's home (Wilton Park Archives)

called it in his history of Wilton Park, “a unique contribution to international relations”?⁵ Wilton Park's history can be told as the story of how these different elements of its roles shifted over time – and while the flexibility of its mission probably accounts for its survival, it makes judging its impact and role for British foreign policy quite difficult.

Origins

Wilton Park near Beaconsfield in Berkshire, originally also known as Camp 300 and now a site for a major building development by Bewley Homes, was supposed to provide the prisoners with education about German and British history as well as core elements of a civil and civilian way of life. Acting out conflicts in Punch and Judy shows (*Kasperletheater* in German) was one key component of this education, as was the camp's choir, the theatre group and the orchestra. A camp newspaper reported on the performances and also provided the prisoners with spaces to reflect on what they had learnt. Once released, the Wilton Park 'alumni' were supposed to help educate PoWs in other camps, or help with the rebuilding of democratic government in Germany.

Over the course of its history, Wilton Park has been many things to many people. To the neighbours at the original Wilton Park camp, it was a site for the training of spies, an interpretation taken up by the East German dictatorship when it prosecuted former inmates as 'foreign agents': the German Democratic Republic (GDR) government's propaganda regularly portrayed Wilton Park

as a ‘training school for imperialists, saboteurs, and agents’ from the late 1940s well into the 1950s.⁶ Yet others from across the political spectrum in the UK and critical of the rapid rapprochement with West Germany argued well into the 1950s that it was a holiday camp for Germans, who did not deserve that privilege and should rather be collectively prosecuted for war crimes.

But most public and private comments pointed to the importance of Wilton Park for the coherence of ‘the West’ during the Cold War or for facilitating European economic integration. Frank Roberts, a senior British diplomat, observed he “was continually finding those who had been at Wilton Park in key government posts, particularly at the regional and local level” in West Germany.⁷ Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, at the conference celebrating Wilton Park’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1971, appraised it as a “centre of exchanges with friends from many countries of Europe, and even beyond”.⁸ At the same event, Helmut Schmidt, then the West German Secretary of Defence and later West German Chancellor, praised the fact that “the rural seclusion of the South Downs gave birth to many ideas”⁹ and noted its importance in fostering international understanding came at less an “annual cost to the taxpayer than one single modern tank”.¹⁰ The British Consul General in Sydney observed in September 1981, when the future of Wilton Park was unsure, that the institution was an ‘unorthodox educational environment’ where people from “widely diverse backgrounds and often conflicting political opinions could come together”.¹¹ The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) itself concluded in October 1982 that Wilton Park was “a British contribution to the creation of an informed international public opinion” that “help(ed) promote a mutual understanding of British and overseas institutions and attitudes” through its “unique and successful information activity”.¹²

Similarly, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher praised, under the title ‘The role of Great Britain in the Contemporary World’, the ‘open, questioning approach to common problems’ in a Commemorative Booklet for the Tenth Anniversary of the Swiss Association of the Friends of Wilton Park. This, she said, was based on the “confidence in proven values combined with readiness to challenge doubtful assumptions; the courage to voice unpopular views but tolerance of reasoned dissent”.¹³ In 1985, the British and West German governments launched ‘Young Wilton’ to foster contacts between British and West German young leaders and to discuss challenges common to the two countries.¹⁴ In 2004, Klaus Burckhardt, a German diplomat, called Wilton Park a ‘model for the cultivation of international relations’, and praised its ‘culture of debate’: “Europe means a shared idea of human existence and coexistence”.¹⁵ Wilton Park here served as a site on which perceptions about the nature of national identity and the foundation of international affairs were projected.

In spite of this high praise about Wilton Park’s significance, the institution was, from its very beginning, regularly under threat of closure: during the transition from catering primarily for PoWs to one that was supposed to foster Anglo-German relations more generally, from the situation that arose when the Federal Republic of Germany joined North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO) in 1955 and the nature of British occupation changed to the broadening of its remit to Europe and the transatlantic, and during the transformation of British government under Prime Minister Thatcher from the early 1980s into the early 1990s.¹⁶ In the early 1980s, one civil servant observed it was “difficult to argue that the avoidance of (the German partners’) sadness was worth a quarter of a million pounds per annum”.¹⁷

Yet Wilton Park continued, although it is unclear from the appraisals why exactly it did. One explanation used by historians and political scientists to explain such persistence is path dependency.¹⁸ However, in the case of Wilton Park, such an explanation lacks some plausibility as the kind of financial incentives to close the organisation down did not prevent closures in other areas of government. None of the contemporary interventions tells us quite how that reputation was achieved and where that significance and importance of the institution lay. This is partly because none of these interpretations on its own suffices to make sense of what Wilton Park did and how it did it. What happened at Wilton Park occurred in the broader context of British foreign policymaking and international relations, and it occurred as part of almost constantly changing expectations of what Wilton Park’s impact was and how it could be measured.

The creation of Wilton Park as a PoW camp worthy of engagement goes back to the British efforts of post-war planning as well as British propaganda and psychological warfare. From around 1943 onwards, the British government shifted its focus towards planning for peace and what that should entail. Rather than merely pursuing a policy of Germany’s unconditional surrender, there was a slow emergence of efforts from government, accompanied by and often linked to interventions from British civil society, to focus on how the UK might help build a democratic Germany after the war had ended. This policy is often summarised under the term ‘re-education’. More specific planning for what to do about German PoWs started in 1944: there were hardly any PoWs in the UK until the Normandy invasion – most were held where they had been captured, mostly in northern Africa and the Middle East. With Germany’s defeat becoming increasingly likely, the UK started planning for housing and re-educating PoWs in Britain.

The creation of Wilton Park as a result of this planning was not only a British story; it was also equally an international one, and it involved West German Social Democrats in exile in the UK in particular. One strand of the origins of Wilton Park leads us to the ways in which British planners and German Social Democrats in exile thought about the future of Europe overlooking the ruins of Carthage in 1943.¹⁹

In February 1943, the Labour politician Richard Crossman started work as head of the British Political Warfare Executive (PWE) at the Allied Forces Headquarters in Algiers. A bit later, Waldemar von Knoeringen, a German Social Democrat in exile in the UK, arrived in Algiers. Subsequently, Crossman asked his party friend von Knoeringen to help with two tasks of value for British intelligence: the analysis of the correspondence of German consulates

in North Africa that had been left behind as the German forces under Erwin Rommel retreated and ultimately surrendered; the second task was to move around PoW camps in what is now Algeria and Tunisia to identify anti-or non-National Socialist inmates and debrief them. From spring 1944, von Knoeringen was also responsible for radio broadcasts for PoWs, increasingly a part of UK war propaganda and intended to change PoWs' minds about the regime.²⁰

It was these experiences that led von Knoeringen to float ideas for the creation of 'a kind of PoW University when he had moved back to the UK'.²¹ This proposal fit in with the new priorities of the British government since September 1944, when it decided to adopt 're-education' as an official policy. The idea was to counter the emergence of a 'stab in the back myth' early on (in contrast to what had happened after the First World War) and to fight 'German revanchism'.²² Von Knoeringen had worked in this area on his return to the UK, in particular at Camp Ascot, a PoW camp focused on re-educating prisoners. Similar camps, such as Fort Kearney, also existed in the US.

Following his proposal for a 'PoW University', von Knoeringen worked on a programme of teaching and learning as well as relevant educational material. Von Knoeringen also engaged with the sociologist Karl Mannheim and his friend, the historian Henry (Heinrich) W. Ehrmann, who was working in a similar capacity in the US. The idea behind what von Knoeringen and his collaborators proposed was less 're-education' *en masse* but a strictly individualist approach, with learning about the British way of life at the centre of teaching and learning.²³ Wilton Park was created in November 1945 as 'Camp 300' by the FO's Prisoner of War Division of the Political Information Division – it was officially not a PoW camp, though, but a training centre, so it soon came to be known as Wilton Park, because of its site near Beaconsfield.

Von Knoeringen went back to Germany before Wilton Park opened its doors in early 1946. The person who was most influential in shaping Wilton Park in practice was, therefore, another Anglo-German: the academic Heinz Koeppler, who is now the person most associated with the idea and institution of Wilton Park. It is not clear when Koeppler and von Knoeringen met, though meet they did – Koeppler wrote a warm reference for Knoeringen, praising his contribution to setting up the institution.²⁴ Koeppler had developed a very similar understanding of what was required for the democratisation of Germany, but he arrived there by a different route. The advent of the Labour government in 1945 allowed these two roots of Wilton Park's early history to merge. Labour in particular was keen on using German Social Democrats in exile for the rebuilding of Germany. Moreover, Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, placed an increased emphasis on public diplomacy and propaganda to compensate for the loss of British power.²⁵

Koeppler was born on 30 June 1912 in Wollstein/Wolsztyn as the son of a landowner in Prussia and the daughter of a Jewish banker. They moved to Berlin when the area came to Poland as part of the settlement that followed the First World War.²⁶ Koeppler started studying law but then switched to history. He won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he began to focus

on medieval history and especially on the history of European universities in the context of aristocratic power politics.²⁷ In 1937, he was naturalised as a British citizen, and he also gained a permanent position as a lecturer at Magdalen. At Oxford, he became friends with Gilbert Murray, a leading ancient historian, but also one of a group of public intellectuals of a broadly liberal persuasion who thought about how to prevent war through international institutions, law and education.²⁸ In 1940, with the onset of war, Koeppler was recruited to the FO's Political Intelligence Department (PID), probably because of his language skills. From 1941 to 1943, he served as the liaison officer between the BBC and the PID.²⁹

From the beginning of the Second World War, Koeppler had thought about its deeper origins and stressed the importance of the Anglo-German, Anglo-French as well as German-French relationship to achieve 'a lasting peace' in Europe, a point that remained a feature of Wilton Park's activities well into the 1950s.³⁰ When British planning shifted its focus to re-education, a term he always thought inappropriate, he wrote a memorandum on how to address the question of the democratisation of Germany. More than von Knoeringer's, Koeppler's thinking focused on a distinction between the ruling elite in the Nazi dictatorship and the general population, and thus offered a strong critique of ideas in the circle around Sir Robert Vansittart, who argued that 'the German character' was naturally disposed to war and could not be reformed but only constrained.³¹ He instead focused on creating an experience that focused on a liberal exchange of ideas and education in a setting that should resemble the British residential colleges.³²

Nonetheless, Koeppler himself observed that it was the lack of such an atmosphere at Oxford in the 1930s that had led him to propose something like what became Wilton Park – he felt that there had been almost no discussion of the important issues of the time at Oxford and almost no attempt to use history to foster international understanding rather than as a source of nationalism and competition.³³ Given the discussions around the Peace Ballot, appeasement in 1930s Oxford and the importance of liberal and socialist internationalism for Oxford student and academic politics during that period, Koeppler's assessment perhaps reflects the state of affairs less than his own intellectual milieu at the time.³⁴

Wilton Park started life as a mixture of prison and educational institution. It had all the other characteristics of a PoW camp, but its daily routine contained a programme of education and learning. Education and learning activities focused on German history since unification in 1871; by offering a critical interpretation of that history from Bismarck to Hitler it sought to counter the predominant German interpretation of German history at the time, mainly one that highlighted a 'special path' to be proud of rather than to be condemned. Moreover, the roughly 300 participants per six-week course participated in lectures and discussions on British democracy and 'civility'. In addition to a rich programme of cultural events noted above, PoWs also learned about German war crimes, in particular the concentration and death camps. The

underlying idea was not indoctrination but the assumption that the inmates would draw their own conclusions from being exposed to the material.³⁵ It was about, as an American observer suggested, teaching PoWs ‘how to think’.³⁶

As there were fewer and fewer German PoWs, there was, from 1947, talk of closing Wilton Park down. But the decline and ultimate demise of the working relationship between the erstwhile Allies US, UK and France on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other as part of the onset of the Cold War meant that the Anglo-German setting could be revived under new auspices. Germany – and its status within the emerging eastern and western blocs – lay at the core of the Cold War in Europe, and there were early fears of growing Communist influence in Germany, in particular because this could be observed elsewhere, in France, Italy as well as Greece, from where the UK had had to withdraw in 1946/7 due to the poor health of the UK economy and the government’s financial position. At a meeting on 10 February 1948, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin chaired a discussion about the “establishment of a ‘Wilton Park’ (...) to help fight against Communism”³⁷, to afford “fellow Europeans from the Continent the opportunity for studying the British contribution to Western civilisation at first hand”.³⁸

From June 1948, Wilton Park ceased to be a ‘Training Centre’ for PoWs and management passed from an arrangement that involved both Foreign and War Offices to one that solely involved the FO’s German Section, of which Wilton Park became a ‘detached unit’.³⁹ From then on, Wilton Park focused on bringing Germans from the British occupation zone in north-west Germany to learn about German and British history and institutions. This process of transformation had already started in 1947, when women were allowed to join for the first time as well⁴⁰, so this organisational shift of focus was one that had already been anticipated by developments on the ground. In 1951, Camp 300 in Beaconsfield was closed, and Wilton Park as an organisation moved to its current site in West Sussex.

Wilton Park’s impact on the prisoners and participants during this early phase is, despite an abundance of documentation, hard to assess.⁴¹ Early evaluations already pointed to the ‘complementary and cumulative’ character of the impact that Wilton Park would have.⁴² The vetting process meant that only those took part who were already favourably disposed towards democratic norms.⁴³ Many inmates reported that they found the lectures and discussions stilted and boring – most just wanted to go home. Nonetheless, as Helmut Schmidt pointed out in 1971, the list of those who attended Wilton Park as PoWs or as civilian attendees in its early days read like a *Who Is Who* of West German politics and public affairs. Among those who participated were the publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler, Ralf Dahrendorf (later director of the London School of Economics and Political Science), the political theorist Wolfgang Abendroth, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) politician Rainer Barzel and the grand dame of post-war West German political liberalism, Hildegard Hamm-Brücher.

The networks around Wilton Park – or the ‘strength of weak ties’ as the sociologist Mark Granovetter has called it – was probably the most



Figure 1.2 Tutor Werner Lauermann with German participants in a 1950s discussion group (Wilton Park Archives)

important impact Wilton Park had.⁴⁴ It convened groups of people who did not know each other, who would not necessarily have met each other but who stayed in touch. Contemporary observers noticed this, too. Wilton Park, the *Manchester Guardian* found in 1954, was an ‘outstanding success’, not because it created a better West German understanding of how Britain worked but because of the networks in which former participants met outside the direct Wilton Park context.⁴⁵

Renewed purpose

From the early 1950s, however, the need for such an institution was less keenly felt. West Germany had quickly moved from an enemy of the UK to being an ally – why fund ‘a damned university’ under these circumstances, a civil servant wondered.⁴⁶ Wilton Park appeared an easy target for savings, given its cost of almost 40,000 pounds. Wilton Park’s Academic Council, chaired by Sir Robert Birley, appointed in 1947 Educational Advisor to the Control Commission for the British zone in Germany, mounted a formidable campaign that persuaded the FO to continue with Wilton Park, which began to attract a broader geographic remit to include all Western European countries and, to some extent, the US and Canada as well.⁴⁷ The Social Democratic group in the West German

parliament, via Fritz Heine (a colleague of Knoeringen's in North Africa during the Second World War), joined this campaign.⁴⁸

Switzerland played a remarkable role in keeping Wilton Park in existence during this time. The Swiss government had taken an early interest in it due to its activities with PoWs across Europe through a fund instituted by the Swiss parliament that provided money towards economic and civic reconstruction. During the debates about the future of Wilton Park, the Swiss then proposed to widen its focus away from the Anglo-German relationship towards Western Europe as a whole, encompassing all countries within the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC, later OECD), an organisation that can be traced back to the US' programme for European reconstruction (commonly known as the Marshall Plan) announced in 1947. Although a small country that was officially neutral, Switzerland still saw itself as part of 'the West' and was keen on fostering social links that fostered such a common understanding through discussion. Swiss diplomats as well as Koeppler also stressed the natural affinity between Swiss liberalism and the kind of approach of open discussion Koeppler sought to foster at Wilton Park.⁴⁹ Subsequently, other neutral countries, especially Finland and Sweden, also took a keen interest in Wilton Park's activities. During the 1980s and early 1990s in particular, the institution regularly discussed the defence of NATO's northern flank when two of the four directly affected countries, Finland and Sweden, were at the time not members of NATO.⁵⁰

Germany also agreed to contribute some funding, not least perhaps because of the pressure put on the FO by the Anglo-German networks around the Königswinter Conferences, which were themselves a product of dealing with the failure of liberal internationalism during the interwar period and the legacy of war for the Anglo-German relationship.⁵¹ From the early 1960s, the Rockefeller Foundation provided significant financial support for the Wilton Park conferences with a transatlantic focus, so that Wilton Park became also linked into the networks that provided the social and cultural foundation for American hegemony in Europe during the Cold War.⁵²

So, by the early 1960s, what had started as an idea on the ruins of Carthage and within the propaganda machinery of the British government in Whitehall had now become a feature that was closely tied to discussing common European problems in the context of the Cold War among policymakers, diplomats, businessmen and academics. In the early 1970s, Wilton Park, through the creation of a European Discussion Centre, became more closely tied to a specific British government policy and an initiative by the British Prime Minister Edward Heath and the French President Valérie Giscard d'Estaing: it was to accompany and facilitate the UK's accession to the then European Economic Community (EEC) by offering a clearing house of ideas that would provide knowledge, analysis and mutual understanding during and after the official negotiation.⁵³

From the early 1980s, however, that arrangement again appeared to have outlived its usefulness – attendance at events was poor and interest low: the UK had become a fully fledged member of the EEC and was now able to use the

multilateral channels in Brussels effectively to pursue its policy. A clearing house of ideas and training centre seemed no longer necessary. As Prime Minister Thatcher embarked on a reorganisation of British government and the economy, Wilton Park again became a candidate for savings. The FCO felt that it could protect itself against cuts by proposing to wind down, if not close completely, the Steyning institution. This led to another sustained campaign by Wilton Park's Academic Council that sought to mobilise MPs, the House of Lords and public opinion more generally in favour of keeping the institution alive.⁵⁴

The FCO had conducted a review of operations in the middle of the 1970s. When approached by the FCO about how useful the institution was for them, many if not most embassies were at best lukewarm about the institution's value – they pointed to time constraints of making staff available for the one-week or two-week conferences, or they mentioned that other fora were more useful. The British embassy in Washington, DC, reported on the mixed feelings about its value for their work. The Hague cabled that it had 'limited value'. By contrast, Oslo argued it was an important 'informal tool'. Only the embassy in Helsinki gave a ringing endorsement by writing that Wilton Park was 'second in value only to our Category I visitor programme'. The fact that Bonn submitted an especially scathing response to the questionnaire was perhaps indicative of a wider malaise: the embassy pointed out that it was 'not at all satisfied' with the value of Wilton Park, mentioning especially the 'pedestrian choice' of participants.⁵⁵ In the context of the debates about the merger of the European Discussion Centre and Wilton Park, the Permanent Representation of the United Kingdom to the European Communities in Brussels highlighted the large time commitment that attendance of events entailed – this had to be balanced against a lower number of available staff and the overall usefulness of the topics covered.⁵⁶

It might be tempting for historians to follow contemporary assessments that even pondering Wilton Park's closure was an act of vandalism. But that would at best be half of the story. Part of the problem was that, until the late 1970s, Wilton Park had been completely centred around the contacts, ideas and preferences of its warden Heinz Koeppler. Shortly after his retirement, Wilton Park was somewhat adrift. Personal rule does not work well in the context of bureaucratic government. Moreover, the context had changed: although Wilton Park's set-up might still have been unique, there were now many other competing forums at which British policymakers, academics, politicians and diplomats could meet their counterparts from other countries. Several diplomats approached by the FCO during the discussions in the early 1980s, including some who had served in Germany, therefore responded unenthusiastically or were downright negative – the organisation had outlived its purpose.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, it was decided Wilton Park should continue, though with a redefined purpose and without the European Discussion Centre. The length of seminars was shortened, and the scope of topics under discussion broadened further, and intentionally so. Nicholas Barrington, head of FCO's Guidance and Information Policy Department, had already argued in his

paper 'A New Look for Wilton Park' in the 1970s that the institution's 'generalist approach' was too 'superficial' and that a more 'specialised approach' was required.⁵⁸ Wilton Park itself pointed out in 1977 that the current focus on OECD had become too narrow and advocated a broader engagement with 'developing and underdeveloped countries'.⁵⁹

In the early 1990s, the FCO used Wilton Park as a way to deflect attention from the instruction of broader organisational reform by the Treasury and 10 Downing Street. When it was asked to designate a part of the department for trialling the 'Next Steps' initiative to remodel the civil service through creation of 'Executive Agencies', the FCO nominated Wilton Park.⁶⁰ The institution has retained that status ever since, as an arm's length body, albeit still linked to its parent department. A review of that role came to a relatively positive conclusion. A 1995 review, conducted by Dr C P Burdess of the FCO, concluded Wilton Park was seen as "useful though not absolutely essential to core FCO activities".⁶¹ It discarded all alternative options, such as privatisation, merger with other organisations such as the Ditchley Foundation, and incorporation into the FCO. It did so not because it regarded those options as fundamentally not available, but because those options were more costly and less efficient. It pointed out, though, that occasions when protagonists with 'different viewpoints' could meet and 'advance mutual understanding on contentious issues' had been rather marginal.⁶² The main use of Wilton Park was as an opportunity to "cross check their ideas with academics and other experts".⁶³ The main proposal was to make Wilton Park sustainable by asking it to run more conferences with external partners.

Discussions about how specifically Wilton Park performed a valuable role by at least breaking even were remarkably absent from these assessments; however, while money was discussed, the specific value it was supposed to generate remained fuzzy. Assessments of Wilton Park's value often harked back to the very early period of its operation in the context of re-education, and they often replicated what Koeppler had stated as the key parameters of Wilton Park's method. These core elements included a 'generalist approach'⁶⁴ and the particular rules at Wilton Park, namely the fact that discussions are 'private, privileged and off the record', without any direct attribution of who said what, although the knowledge that had been gained could be used freely.⁶⁵

These rules resemble but go beyond the famous Chatham House rule, elaborated by the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), founded as a flagship of liberal internationalism in the 1920s.⁶⁶ However, Wilton Park wanted to do more than the RIIA, now Chatham House. It explicitly aimed to play a role in furthering British power through discussion, rather than act as a think tank. Its approach was one that consisted less in sharing clearly defined knowledge, but in 'prim(ing) the pump', without 'exhaust(ing) the well'.⁶⁷ Koeppler, inadvertently echoing Michel Foucault's theory of liberal governmentalism or Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, saw Britain as the "home of the 'self-denying ordinance' – the arrangement by which the piper decides not to call the tune".⁶⁸

None of these factors are sufficient, however, to explain why and how Wilton Park worked and managed to leave an impact. Wilton Park was effective because it operated on different levels. One of these was simply as an organisation that worked effectively as a trading house for ideas and information: what were the key approaches to a given problem available to policymakers, and what were its advantages and disadvantages?

Wilton Park also often served as an information space, for example when the British government hosted a meeting to brief law enforcement officials from 30 countries to make the fight against child internet pornography more effective.⁶⁹ Or Wilton Park was used to float ideas, for example, when a minister in the early 1980s aired ideas on plans for a new body for trade import controls along the lines of what the US had done to combat what the UK government perceived as an abuse of the international trade regime as codified in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).⁷⁰ The fact that this was discussed in the press at the time shows how the British government could use Wilton Park to test international opinion on national policy proposals. From the 1980s, for example, Wilton Park became the place where the British government convened discussions on conventional arms control.⁷¹

Such meetings give the convener a particular role in shaping the discussion and agenda and therefore fostering the UK's reputation in a given field. But these did not necessarily have a direct impact on policymakers, in particular because we know from research on the nature of evidence-based policymaking along the lines Wilton Park promoted that academics, civil servants and politicians interpret what constitutes useful 'evidence' and how that evidence is then deployed in different and often incommensurable ways.⁷²

This is not to downplay Wilton Park's role as a clearing house for ideas but rather to suggest that we need to look for impact elsewhere than purely the ideas themselves. We can find this impact in the institutional setting that Wilton Park has provided to its participants. It is often forgotten how important space is for organising social relationships. Wilton Park offered an ideal space for interactions, and it is there where its key asset, its convening power, has rested: as a secluded location from where participants could not simply escape, they had to engage with each other, and the buildings and grounds of Wiston House offered an especially congenial environment for this.

Two examples show this particularly well. First, Wilton Park played a significant role in addressing the Third World debt crisis in the 1980s. As the then Chief Executive reported, US Treasury officials were "willing to let their hair down in the conservatory or while walking in the garden", while they "thought that walking in the woods was safer than actually talking around the table" – they ultimately accepted they write off debts, although it had been anathema to them.⁷³

Second, a discussion was instrumental in framing a UK and subsequently European proposal for policing in South Africa. At a conference in 1990, chaired by the Minister for Africa Lynda Chalker, Robin Christopher, later head of the FCO's Southern African Department, came to develop ideas about an international police force for South Africa that later became UK policy. The

conference took place at a time when, due to Mandela's release from prison, "suddenly the game had changed and we were into a period of transition which emanated from South Africa and affected the whole region". Christopher recalls there was representation from almost every country in the region, the government of South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), Inkatha and other regional actors.⁷⁴ These were parties that would have never met and constructively discussed their differences outside a forum such as Wilton Park.

During that conference, and more specifically at the bar, Christopher chatted to an ANC representative, Joe Modise, the head of Umkhonto we Siswe, the ANC's armed unit. Christopher reported:

We discussed the fighting in the townships. He said that what was needed was international observers right there in the townships. I asked him what he wanted observers to do ... He said, 'We need police. Crimes are being committed and we want people who have experience of scenes of crime and know what to do'.⁷⁵

International policing was a particular challenge at the time because the sanctions against South Africa meant no official collaboration was possible – and yet there was significant concern about the South African government's policing methods.

Christopher then started working out how police "might report to and work within the multiparty internal South African structures which the de Klerk government and the ANC were beginning to set up". Christopher then used the UK's then chairing of the European Council to 'europeanise' this approach. Europeanisation helped keep Britain's own history with South African policy, especially in the context of the British South African Police Regiment of the early twentieth century, under wraps. But it also appealed to a key area of European political cooperation since 1977, which had drawn up a code of conduct with South Africa.⁷⁶ Christopher stayed in touch with Modisi, who later served as South Africa's minister for defence.⁷⁷

During regular meetings of the European Community's (EC) Africa Committee, Christopher and his European colleagues worked on a plan to get a team of European police, drawn from a number of countries, who would be clearly identifiable, wearing EU Police t-shirts and they would be inserted into the troubled townships to work alongside the South African police and report to the newly established South African judicial authorities.

After the UK government had received approval from de Klerk's government, the EC started to put the plan into practice. This was, according to Christopher, "a total novelty for the South African police who had been cut off from modern policing methods for a generation".⁷⁸ The proposal both relied upon and pushed a South African initiative to reform its heavily racist, militarised and hierarchical police forces in the early 1990s.⁷⁹

The FCO also sometimes saw Wilton Park as complicating British diplomacy, rather than enhancing it. During a discussion about whether the Secretary of State should speak at the forty-fifth anniversary of Wilton Park,

Alyson Bailes argued the time required to draft a speech on sensitive ‘German’ issues’ (specifically the question of reunification) for the conference was not worth it – and that the projected audience of around 50 people made it too large for an ‘informal’ setting, so that there was a significant risk of misperception and diplomatic complications as a result of an involvement.⁸⁰ In short, Wilton Park’s impact might have rested less on the exchange of ideas as such, but also on how these ideas could be discussed as well as the circumstances under which they could be implemented.

Overall, Wilton Park has been an organisation that provided a space for people who could bang their heads together to discuss their differences in a protected environment. People from different contexts could ‘disagree without being disagreeable’.⁸¹ As the UK government remained at arm’s length throughout Wilton Park’s history, the organisation could present itself as a neutral forum, although it still set the agenda, invited the participants and set the parameters for the discussion, often with direct input from the FCO and other branches of government. Although Wiston House was central in fostering these relationships, Wilton Park has always been more than a space; it was also an idea and a practice, as was already the case when Wilton Park moved from its original location in Berkshire.

The idea and practice of Wilton Park mattered just as much and perhaps more than its setting. The unofficial dialogue provided a corrective of group think that is common in all bureaucracies – and that also made it an especially valuable resource of information for smaller countries that did not have extensive research departments.⁸² One observer at a conference on Wilton Park’s role in British foreign policy noted its idea and practice could “spin webs and networks of relationships that are sufficiently healthy and robust to evolve and grow organically”. Taken together – the sharing of ideas and information and the creation of networks – also served as a means of risk reduction, namely to provide information on aspects of a problem that might not have been considered otherwise.⁸³

Wilton Park – today and tomorrow

In recent years, innovations in Wilton Park’s work continued to be made. Gisela Stuart, who had become Chair of Wilton Park in 2018, brought representatives from the Department of International Trade and the Ministry of Defence to Wilton Park’s Board and recruited new members to the Advisory Council with a particular focus on policy and commercial networks which supported the government’s key policy areas.

Governments and Foreign Secretaries came and went, but there wasn’t a coherent view of how they wanted Wilton Park to support their work or exercise soft power on their behalf. Provided the annual accounts came in within range, there was no need to do anything. Whilst not perfect, all seemed well until the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020.

Wilton Park is a revenue-generating organisation supported in part by a core grant from its sponsoring government department, FCDO. Conference partners are charged a fee of which a significant component covers accommodation and food for delegates. For years Wilton Park had been expected to come in with a 1% range of its annual budget for accounts to be signed off. In the recent past, the FCDO was content, as long as sufficient income was generated, but this required high occupancy levels of Wiston House. COVID made that impossible.

The Chief Executive Sharmila Nebhrajani, who previously had been Chair of the UK Human Tissue Authority, took up her new role as Chair of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in early 2020, leaving a vacancy. Meanwhile, the global COVID-19 pandemic was taking hold, and the government imposed a national lockdown in England. The following period proved most challenging and difficult. All non-essential businesses were closed. Everyone was ordered to stay in their home, and only venture out for essential reasons, such as buying food or seeking medical care. Similar measures were taken in other countries. International travel and in-person meetings were no longer possible, indeed for a period they were illegal. No one could predict how long it would take to develop a vaccine and when it might be possible to gather in confined spaces and hold face-to-face meetings again.

Despite the COVID lockdown, in the 2020/21 financial year, the Wilton Park team ran 128 events, all of them virtual. By their very nature they were shorter, involving 4,780 participants from 170 countries. Sustainable Development, Defence and Security and Global Health were the major themes discussed.

Later in 2020, it became clear Wilton Park had also been the target of a cyberattack and that cyber defences needed upgrading. This would require significant financial support from the FCDO in addition to underwriting the operating losses incurred by the pandemic.

Faced with these two major challenges, the FCDO had to decide if they still needed an organisation and a venue that could facilitate dialogue and contribute to the government's range of soft power tools. If Wilton Park's contribution was considered neither unique nor relevant, then this was the moment to close it down.

Notwithstanding the absence of external lobbying, they concluded that Wilton Park deserved support. Colin Smith, a civil servant, was seconded as interim Chief Executive, money needed to upgrade IT systems and cyber defences was found and the assurances required for Wilton Park's accounts to be signed off for its annual report as a 'going concern' were provided.

The FCDO had shown its commitment to an organisation that could bring together experts and policymakers in a safe and discreet environment. Wilton Park now had to demonstrate that whilst conference facilities at an iconic setting like Wiston House were important, its unique value was in the art of convening and facilitating dialogue. The ambience and location of Wiston House were a valuable asset, but Programme Directors were masters in the tradecraft

of facilitating, and they needed to be able to deliver this in a variety of settings, in the UK and elsewhere.

A new Chief Executive, Tom Cargill, took up his position in January 2021. He built on some of the changes which had started before the pandemic and pursued them with a sense of urgency. The future would be guaranteed by returning to the foundational principles. Wiston House's capacity would not dictate the number of events to be organised, and there had to be a more strategic alignment with the priorities of the government of the day. This was helped by the Policy Directorate in FCDO becoming the new sponsoring department. Contact with FCDO and other government departments became more regular and more structured.

Contrary to what might have been expected following the skilful adaptation of virtual events during the COVID lockdown, there was a clear resurgent desire to return to physical meetings. In-depth dialogues and developing rich networks at a time when deep-fakes, artificial intelligence (AI) and misinformation penetrate and corrupt human interaction mean there is no substitute for meeting face to face.

In the 2022/23 financial year, of the 76 events held, two-thirds were at Wiston House, seven were virtual and the rest took place outside the UK. Wilton Park welcomed 3,477 participants from 131 countries. Sustainable development and security and defence continued to dominate the annual calendar, and conflict prevention, resolution and state building to some extent displaced the global health programme. Recently, there has been increasing focus on multi-lateral institutions and the global economy.

Emerging from a global pandemic and against the backdrop of significant domestic turbulence, which saw in one year three Prime Ministers, and the death of Queen Elizabeth II leading to the coronation of King Charles III, Wilton Park reinforced its standing as a proven asset for global foreign policy development, providing a high impact and flexible way to advance thinking and policy on key issues.

By 2024, primary thematic areas were diplomacy and geopolitics, development and climate change, security, and the global economy and trade. A significant expansion of the FCDO's Policy Department included Programme Directors and Associate Programme Directors, who could be called upon at short notice for specific projects. Their backgrounds included academia, journalism, civil service, private sector as well as think-tanks.

There had always been a strong link with Germany. For 38 years the British German Forum brought together future leaders from both countries to build partnerships, but it did not take place in 2024. At the same time, the new Labour government tasked Cabinet Office ministers with negotiating a new post-Brexit European Union (EU) relationship. Bringing strategic leadership and co-ordination to bilateral institutions is a logical next step for Wilton Park.

Wilton Park has always provided a space for discreet dialogue. When communities have been traumatised, finding peaceful solutions is only possible if

those involved can find agreement between themselves, before negotiating with others.

Confidence in global governance is declining, multilateral institutions created in the past century have not adapted and conflicts, long thought to have been resolved, are flaring up again. At this very moment the foundational purposes of Wilton Park are becoming critical again, as a discreet space for honest engagement, disagreement and relationship building. Wilton Park's peculiar, and perhaps unique status, as a UK government entity, trusted globally for its objectivity, makes it a very modern informal hybrid organisation able to at least mitigate, and potentially help address, the decline of more formal multilateral spaces for dialogue.

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30 *The Policies and Power of Public Diplomacy*

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