

Reunion at Bletchley Park, 19 October 1991

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The reunion was organized by the Bletchley Archaeological and Historical Society (BAHS), who have mounted a campaign to preserve the Bletchley Park site and establish a museum there commemorating the war-time work of the UK Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS), the precursor of the present-day Government Communications Head Quarters (GCHQ). The morning reception and the lunch were primarily intended for the former war-time staff of GC&CS, together with a small number of guests. The afternoon session - consisting of a tour of the grounds and a session of reminiscences, followed by tea - was also attended by other local people who had worked at the Park during the War, further members of BAHS, and representatives of the local authorities. Because of the continuing security restrictions concerning the war-time code breaking work, the day was planned as a private occasion, without the media or any prior publicity. However it was aimed to get considerable publicity for the event after its occurrence, in furtherance of the campaign to save the site.

Bletchley, about forty miles from London on the railway line from Euston to Northampton is now part of the post war "new town" of Milton Keynes. Bletchley Park contains a fine Victorian mansion, together with a number of the wooden huts and low brick buildings that were added to it during the World War II as GC&CS expanded rapidly. The war time role of Bletchley park remained unknown to the general public for many years after the war until the book "The Ultra Secret" was published [Winterbotham 1974]. As far

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as I am aware even now the only explicit reminder at Bletchley Park of these war time exploits is a plaque in the entrance hall of the mansion. This bears the following words:

Bletchley Park was occupied by the HQ of Britain's cryptanalytic and signals intelligence organisation, the Government Code and Cypher School, between August 1939 and March 1946. Here some of the best brains of Britain were pitted against the enemy's enciphered communications during the Second world War. Their success forged for Britain a decisively powerful intelligence weapon which saved countless lives and helped significantly to shorten the war.

*'The King hath note of all that they intend
by interception which they dream not of.'*

Henry V Act II Scene II

The mansion currently is used by British Telecom, and the brick building where the reunion was held (the war time teleprinter section) houses a Civil Aviation Authority training school. The remaining wooden huts (including Hut 6 - the hut for the main Enigma work [Welchman 1982] - and Hut 8 - the Naval Enigma hut) are no longer in use and are very dilapidated, but amazingly little changed since the war. Now however the whole site is due to be vacated and sold for redevelopment, with only the mansion being under the protection of an official preservation order, because of its architectural merit. A recent attempt to get more of site protected had been strongly backed by English Heritage (the organization which is responsible for many historic buildings and sites in England and Wales that are in public hands). However the application had been turned down by the Department of the Environment on the very true, but surely irrelevant, grounds that the huts and buildings were of no architectural merit!

The BAHS (described to us as being just fifty strong, with an annual subscription that has recently increased to £3!) in collaboration with the National Science Museum, and with much support from various local organizations, organized the whole day and the splendid lunch superbly. Their efforts at locating war-time GC&CS staff had been far more successful than they had expected. Approximately a hundred former GC&CS staff attended the reunion, many with their spouses. It was held on a lovely, albeit cold, day which showed off the mansion and its landscaping, and also the peeling paint of the huts, at their best.

Amongst the ex-GC&CS staff attending were Professor Sir Harry Hinsley (senior author of the multi-volume official history of Bletchley Park's work and its impact on the war), Sir Stuart Milner-Barry (successor to Gordon Welchman as head of the department which continued to be known as Hut 6, though it had by this time had expanded well beyond the confines of the original hut), Dr Joseph Eachus (the sole representative at the reunion of the American war-time contingent at GC&CS), and from the team responsible for the Colossus machines, Mr Harry Sensom and Mr Don Horwood.

The National Science Museum, in the person of Mr Tony Hale, Manager of the Computer Conservation Society, had made extensive preparations to record the occasion. About twenty recording teams, each armed with either a video or a tape recorder, mingled with guests during the reception and as they explored the grounds and the old huts. Printed forms were used to record such basic details of the war-time staff as the period they were at Bletchley Park, where they worked, who they worked with, and the general nature of their work.

By prior agreement with the authorities, war-time staff were encouraged to reminisce for the record, though reminded to try to avoid breaching any of the continuing security restrictions that apply to their work. All the records taken are to be placed in the care of the Science Museum, and to be used only for archival purposes. However the authorities had cooperated even further by providing a small display of photographs, many of which had never been previously made public. These included thirteen pictures of a Colossus, three pictures of a Turing Bombe, six showing staff at work in Hut 6 in November 1944, and four of a punched card installation labelled "Freeborn, C-Block". The new photographs of Colossus were mainly of the various plugboards and keyboards used to control it. All the photographs of the bombe were new to me, since the only photograph of a bombe that I had seen previously was one released in the States some years ago showing one of the American-built and re-designed bombes. And in one of the Hut 6 photographs one could see a Typex machine modified to emulate the Enigma, and used to decode messages once the cryptographic key had been found. (I do not yet know of any plans to make these photographs generally available, but hope that this will soon be arranged.)

A number of other items were also on display. These included a three-rotor Enigma machine, an extremely detailed 1943 plan of the entire set of buildings, a set of photographs of the mansion covering the period 1908-1938, and various items of memorabilia such as the printed programmes of several musical revues put on by GC&CS staff during the war, with titles such as "Behind the Gates" and "Hark, Hark, the Park".

The whole day was delightfully informal - with fascinating snatches of conversation to be heard on all sides as old colleagues met up again, and as people tried to piece together their memories, and to recognize their earlier surroundings. (Topics I heard ranged from Alan Turing's mannerisms to the excitement of decoding the messages involved in the effort to locate and sink the German battlecruiser Scharnhorst.) There were only a few brief speeches, plus some hilarious anecdotes about the antics of the Bletchley Home Guard battalion, and a splendid near-impromptu musical performance by some of the war-time revue "artistes". The highlight of this was a song about "The Keepers of the Fiery Furnace" (the staff who collected classified waste paper each day for burning).

The most serious part of the day was devoted to brief talks outlining the plans for preserving the site and for establishing a National Museum of Computing and Cryptography. In particular we were told of the efforts being made to try to persuade the Government to put a preservation order on the war-time huts and buildings. To this end, an

open letter, signed by all the GC&CS staff at the reunion, is to be sent to Prime Minister John Major seeking his support, deliberately echoing the now famous letter that four of the GC&CS cryptanalysts (Turing, Welchman, Alexander and Milner-Barry) had the temerity to send to the Prime Minister on 21st October 1941 requesting additional resources. (This is reprinted in vol. 2 of [Hinsley, Thomas et al. 1979ff], as is Winston Churchill's memorandum to General Ismay, dated one day later: "ACTION THIS DAY. Make sure that they have all they want on extreme priority and report to me that this had been done.") The present letter is reprinted below.

It will be very interesting to see what sort of response this second letter, some fifty years later, gets from the present Prime Minister. Personally I feel that given the amazing good fortune which has resulted in the war time buildings at Bletchley Park being so well preserved, and the whole site now being about to be vacated, must surely be taken advantage of. The idea of recreating, for present day visitors, the interiors of some of the war time code breaking huts would surely produce an attraction every bit as interesting as the recently restored underground War Cabinet rooms in Whitehall, London, that were used by Churchill and his staff. And the idea of creating a National Computing and Cryptography Museum, which could inter alia house the growing number of early computers that the Computer Conservation Society have restored is one that I find equally attractive.

It was thus a delight and a privilege to be present as a guest for the reunion, and to see the efforts being made towards these ends. Indeed the day was only marred for me by the number of people who clearly thought I looked aged enough to have been on the war-time GC&CS staff, and asked me what hut I had worked in!

References

1. F.H. Hinsley, E.E. Thomas, C.F.G. Ransom and R.C. Knight. *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, History of the Second World War. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1979ff. (5 vols.)
2. G. Welchman. *The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma codes*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1982.
3. F.W. Winterbotham. *The Ultra Secret*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974.

APPENDIX

Open Letter to The Prime Minister, The Right Honorable John Major

FRIENDS of BLETCHLEY PARK

BLETCHLEY, MILTON KEYNES

The Rt. Hon. John Major P.C., M.P.

10, Downing Street,

London SW1.

Dear Prime Minister,

Bletchley Park

Fifty years ago we wrote to your predecessor, Mr Churchill. about Bletchley Park. We were engaged in deciphering the signals of the German and Japanese High Commands and in sending their messages to our own armed forces to help them in the prosecution of the war.

Mr Churchill believed our work to be so important that he ordered that all our needs should be met: the various authorities are agreed that our work contributed greatly to the successful outcome of the war.

Much of the work was - and still is - secret, so knowledge of the historic importance of Bletchley Park is perhaps not widely known. Navy, Army and Air Force museums are well known but a museum to commemorate the Intelligence Services which directed their aims has been sadly neglected.

Among the lasting effects of our work was the installation of the world's first electronic computer 'Colossus' in 1943: many of the computers now in use are descended from this original machine.

The name of Bletchley Park is of world-wide renown. The co-operation with our American allies was a model for subsequent collaboration.

A recommendation to list the original buildings as historic has been made by English Heritage and rejected by the Department of the Environment. We are at a loss to understand the refusal. Most of the site is as we left it in 1945 and we would therefore urge you to ensure that the place is preserved and put to a suitable use. The main loss has been the recent demolition, on the instructions of British Telecom, of the building which housed 'Colossus'. The buildings put up for listing are either in excellent order or can easily be restored.

We understand that there are well formed plans for a museum of cryptology and computer science to be established in Huts 3, 6 and 8, where we daily broke the key to the German 'Enigma' machine cypher. The mansion, lake and gardens, all well maintained, would make a first-class conference centre. There are many interested parties for these projects, if only the decision not to grant a preservation order is rescinded.

We would ask, Sir, for your help in securing our longer term aims as above and, initially, for any assistance you can give in securing a preservation order for the site.

We are, Sir,

Your obedient servants,

Photographs (all taken at Bletchley Park on 19 October 1991):

1. Hut 6, where work on the Enigma was originally centred.
2. Interior of Hut 6, as its last occupants have left it.
3. Mr and Mrs Tony Sale, standing in front of Hut 6, with Hut 8 (where Alan Turing led the work on the Naval Enigma cypher) in the background.
4. View overlooking some of the huts, from the office in the mansion at Bletchley Park used by the wartime head of GC&CS, Commander Sir Edward Travis.
5. One of the wartime staff of GC&CS being interviewed, with Bletchley Park mansion in the background.