

The secret listeners

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Before Bletchley Park could break the German war machine's codes, the enemy's radio traffic and communications were monitored around the clock by the Listening Service – a team of young men and women based in every theatre of war who intercepted and transcribed with a speed few have ever managed since, so that code breakers could turn the course of the war.

This organisation – known as the 'Y' (for 'Wireless') Service – was just as secret as Bletchley Park during the war but nowadays is little-known or recognised. The Service went wherever the war went, with listeners posted to Cairo to listen in to Rommel's Eighth Army, Casablanca in Morocco, Karachi for the Burma campaign, or in one case even the idyllic Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean to monitor Japan. **Sinclair McKay** chronicles the history and achievements of this remarkable organisation and the people who worked for it.

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Transcription

I want to talk today about both Bletchley Park and the Y Service – 'The Secret Listeners', and about the impact that this vast code-breaking operation had not just on the course of the war, but on the thousands of young women and men who were recruited, and who found the courses of their lives profoundly changed.

Also throughout the course of this, I'll be touching on the quite extraordinary range and scope of material here in The National Archives – material drawn from this worldwide code-breaking operation... That the entire subject of Bletchley Park, the story of how the German enigma codes were smashed by pure ingenuity, determination – and eccentricity, too – seems to exert a greater fascination as each year goes by.

There's clearly something in the story of Bletchley which is finding an answering echo in today's age. There's something about the scruffy, distracted, improvisational genius of people like Alan Turing, Dilly Knox [and] Josh Cooper. Something about the idea of young students being drawn straight from universities and spending long days – and longer nights – poring over apparently random jumbles of letters generated by machines that had millions upon millions of potential combinations. There is something about these people learning to discern orderly patterns in chaos, and there's also something about the image of young WRNs operating huge, code-smashing Bombe machines; hyper-focused work that led to some nervous breakdown[s].

It's a story that also stretches out from Buckinghamshire to the wilder corners of the earth because where do the Bletchley code-breakers get their raw material from? There were Bletchley

outposts everywhere: from Hong Kong to Cairo; Murmansk to Ceylon. I even interviewed one chap who – as a teenager – got himself sent to the tiny Cocos Islands, right in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and 2,000 miles from the nearest mainland. He and thousands of other young men and women were intercepting secret German messages day and night. In Cairo, a decryption unit set up in an old museum was so incredibly fast at breaking the German codes, that the British knew about the state of Rommel's supply lines before Rommel did. Meanwhile, over in Colombo, young women like Jean Valentine were tracking incredibly complex Japanese codes while also living a life of colour and beauty that they could never have found back home.

If you visit Bletchley Park now – and by the way if you haven't, you really must, because they have done the most amazing job in restoring it, and it's a brilliant museum, and everything... Anyway, the first thing is that you're immediately struck by how nondescript the estate is. The house itself is a little on the ugly side. The 'Victorian Monstrosity', as the Honourable Sarah Baring called it.

Now, if you go there today you'll see that there are still the specially built concrete blocks and the specially built wooden huts in the grounds all round. It's a surprisingly mundane backdrop to what George Steiner called 'one of the greatest achievements of the twentieth century'. And this of course makes it just all the more fascinating, because if you look at those old wooden huts now, just imagine the huge leaps of ingenuity that were made within them.

Within those plain spartan structures, the most brilliant lateral thinkers of their generation got to the point where they were able to read encoded messages from Hitler himself. And there was also something beguiling about the idea of Alan Turing, conjuring up the dawn of the computer age in such an overheated little hut. It's almost as if he was changing the course of history in a garden shed. And in one sense this is why I was drawn to the story of Bletchley, and why I wanted to find out about this other side to it – because it's not just about brilliant mathematicians and eccentric classicists, and mind-fangling feats of logic. Much has been written about how the codes were broken, but I also wanted to know what day-to-day life was like.

In Bletchley, and then for the 'Secret Listeners' in those exotic locations around the world, I wanted to know what life was like – not just for the code-breakers, working those exhausting round the clock shifts, but also for those thousands of other young recruits: the high spirited WRNs, the super-posh debutantes, with their pearls and their grand relatives. How did they place work? How did all these young people deal with the pressure? Where did they live? What were their social lives like? How did they relax? Was it all grand-master chess, or did they let their hair down in different ways?

Throughout the course of writing both books, I was extremely privileged to meet some extraordinary people. There were Keith and Mavis Batey. Keith Batey had been a maths undergraduate at Cambridge when he received the summons (in 1940) to work in Hut 6. Unusually, he had a faint notion – before he got there – of what he was about to be drawn into. There had been rumours in his college about Gordon Welchman, a senior mathematics lecturer, who had been spirited off before the war started, and about how Mr Welchman was now gathering his brightest charges.

Elsewhere, Mavis Lever was at the University of London, when she was recruited to work alongside the senior code-breaker Dilly Knox. Now, the work of Bletchley was very strictly compartmentalised, but there was one day when Mavis had to go into Hut 6. And that's when she and Keith met; their eyes met across an Enigma machine! The point is that authorities knew romance was developing between them – indeed, in the canteen there were always a couple of adjacent places saved for them. But, as Mr and Mrs Batey pointed out to me, they were just one couple of a great many. And a great many of those couples went on to marry, and stayed married.

Mr and Mrs Batey were the first code-breakers I met throughout the course of research. And during the course of a wonderful day spent with them on the south coast, they attempted to teach me the most basic rudiments of their code-breaking work – the decryption work that could be done by hand involving a process called 'rodding', which had been invented by Dilly Knox. Mr and Mrs Batey were very good teachers – they were the souls of patience! I was not an apt pupil. And I shudder to think now of the amount of times I had to ask them to 'take me through it, just one last time?' and then – even then – on the train and after that, having to ring Mrs Batey and say, 'Look, it's gone again – could you just take me through it one more time?' That was the most basic level of the work they were doing.

I very quickly found as I started to meet veterans that life at Bletchley Park was much more intense, and yet sometimes much, much more rewarding than I'd first imagined.

As well as Keith and Mavis Batey, there were also code-breakers Oliver and Sheila Lawn. Now, like the Bateys, they had met and fallen in love at the Park, and then married afterwards. The extraordinary thing was that they had to keep the details of their work secret from one another even long after the war, and even from their own children.

I got to meet brilliant WRNs, such as Jean Valentine and Ruth Bourne, both of whom now volunteer as expert speakers at the Bletchley Park Museum. [For] other recruits who pitched up at Bletchley having no idea what they'd been selected for, the work came as a surprise – but for WRN Ruth Bourne, [who] she said she had read enough spy thrillers in her youth to recognise instantly that she was being drafted into code work.

Meanwhile, no sooner had Jean Valentine got to Bletchley, when her name went up on a board. She'd been selected, with a handful of others, to be sent right the way across the world to Ceylon, to break the Japanese codes. Now Jean Valentine at that time was 18 years old. I saw Jean not that long ago, and we were talking about this again, because it's no exaggeration to say – I think – that Bletchley changed the entire course of her life. She had been brought up in the Scottish town of Perth. She volunteered for the WRNs, took an intelligence test, and was drafted down to Bletchley. Then, as I say, she found herself on-board a ship with other WRNs setting sail across U-boat infested waters, to a destination she had to keep secret from her own parents. Six weeks later – six weeks of terrible food and little to do except speculate – they arrived in Sri Lanka (which was then Ceylon).

Having never before left Scotland, teenager Jean was now working on cracking Japanese codes, working all night in a building fretted with palms, having to fight off huge tropical insects,

opening a filing cabinet one day to find a snake sleeping within it. Working long, arduous hours, but also soaking up the intensity and colour of a life so far removed from her old world. She and her friends went dining out, dancing, swimming... three activities that would have been regarded as scandalously frivolous back in Perth.

It was while out east that Jean met her husband-to-be, a pilot. When the war ended they married, came back to England, and then found this grey, grim, austere, cold country. Having seen and tasted all that splendour, they just couldn't adjust back to ordinary life, and so at the first opportunity, they moved to Burma to work. Now, that's a singular example of how war sometimes had the unexpected side effect of showing young people lives and cultures that they perhaps wouldn't otherwise ever have seen.

When writing 'The Secret Listeners', I talked to veteran Peter Budd. He was part of the Y Service – one of thousands of young recruits who worked with needle sharp accuracy to intercept German and Japanese codes. [Shows image] And what you see there is basically how they would have to write down at top speed – absolute, lightning-fast speed, and total accuracy – the coded messages that were coming in. Now, Peter Budd was sent out to Ceylon, but it was all just a little bit too tame for him. He asked for a transfer to somewhere a little more... unusual. His wish was granted. He lived for a couple of years in what he now describes as a kind of 'heaven on earth'.

Now, he and 18 other men were stationed on the incredibly remote Cocos Islands, a tiny little speck between India and Australia. He at the time was 18 years old. He was not allowed to tell anyone back home – parents, or anyone – where he was. Not even in what hemisphere. He worked days, he worked nights. You had to beware at night, he said, of the deadly insects. There were these caterpillars in particular that – if you knocked them off the wrong way – they would get their sting inside you and paralyse you completely, for life. And Peter Budd and his fellow listeners were multitasking. They were taking in Japanese codes while at the same time tracking Japanese submarines. So basically listening to codes in one ear, doing the direction finding with the other – I mean, it was just an extraordinary prospect really, to think about.

Off-duty though, the men sailed, they swam with mantarays, they listened to records on an old gramophone player on the beach. And all in one of the most beautiful places on earth. One of the most secret too: their islands were erased from official maps, for security reasons. To all intents and purpose, Mr Budd and his colleagues were living and working on an island that didn't exist.

Now, elsewhere, London lad Bob Hughes, who had become an expert in Morse with the Post Office, found himself being sent out to Alexandria, and then later on in the war, to Sardinia. As well as gathering material for Bletchley Park, he and his Y Service colleagues engaged in games of smoke and mirrors, sending out counterfeit messages to Germans and Italians, to garner responses that would then give away vital information. Mr Hughes went from shabby, bombed-out Islington, to the spectacle of Alexandria. With a sense of deep wonder, he went for his first ever swim in a hypnotically blue Mediterranean. It was a bad idea, because he couldn't swim, and indeed was almost carried away by a riptide – he got away with that one!

Later, he had a listening station high up in the hills of Sardinia. As well as the military dangers, there was also a more localised threat: Mr Hughes recalls how on one night shift he had brought

a snack to keep him going – it was a little piece of lamb, something like that – and foolishly, he had left the door of his little wooden hut ajar. Deep into the small hours, with headphones on, he turned from the receiver, and there in the doorway was a huge wild dog. It had obviously smelt the meat. Mr Hughes knew in that instant that he could be torn to pieces – and his gun was on the other side of the room. Instinct kicked in, he said – he just very suddenly jumped up, shouting at the top of his lungs and waving his arms frenetically, and miraculously, it worked – the dog was startled, and in a flash Mr Hughes was able to hurl himself against the door and lock it. But the point of the story is he would never have got that in Islington!

Back in Britain, there were many great triumphs of ingenuity at Bletchley Park. But I was very privileged to be able to interview the man who had... I think one of the more extraordinary leaps, John Herivel. In 1940 he was a 20 year old mathematics undergraduate, and he found a crucial way into the Enigma codes; a lightning flash of insight that came to him as he sat in his landlady's front parlour one dark, quiet evening, in front of the fire, smoking a pipe and watching the snow fall outside.

Now, it can't really do him justice to sum up what became known as the 'Herivel Tip' in just a couple of sentences, but, at its most basic level, it involved Herivel imagining the average German operator of the Enigma machine. He imagined how this average German operator would set the machine up, and perhaps even how this German would use a couple of shortcuts in the set-up. Doesn't sound much, but actually, it was a moment of colossal strategic significance, and as I say, he arrived at it in the most completely ordinary surroundings.

The John Herivel story – I think – has a tragic epilogue. The enforced silence after the war also meant that you couldn't tell your parents anything about it, even if they were dying, and that was the case with Mr Herivel. His father, knowing nothing of how his son had really spent his war years, accused him of having achieved nothing. And even though his father was on his deathbed, Mr Herivel could not bring himself to break the Official Secrets Act. So his father never knew how his son had actually played a pivotal role in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Now, I had a terrific time talking with the Park's youngest recruit, Mimi Gallilee. She was just 14 when she started there; she was a girl who had been evacuated from Islington – bombed-out Islington. She and her family went up to Bletchley. Her mother got a job as a waitress in Bletchley Park, because before they had a canteen they had a 'waitress-service' canteen, and aged 14 years old, Mimi...she just simply couldn't stand school anymore, she couldn't see the point, and her mother got her an interview at Bletchley Park so that she could become a messenger. So at 14 years old, she was up there signing the Official Secrets Act, and entering this extraordinary world, and seeing it from a young teenager's point of view.

I think possibly as well, [that] her memories, not just of the colourful Bletchley community, and its more eccentric characters, but also the town and the shops are also especially vivid. Some of the locals who lived in the, frankly, rather dowdy town of Bletchley, assumed during the war years that the Park was some kind of special lunatic asylum – and perhaps they had good reason to, because in 1938 when the Park was bought by MI6 in the expectation of the coming war, these 'lunatics' started appearing. There were irascible Classics dons from Oxford and Cambridge, these serious young mathematics undergraduates, these fantastically smart young

debutantes who had been sought out on the social grapevine. The better one's family – it was felt then – the more trustworthy with secrets one would be. Happy days! On top of all this, there were engineers and drivers, canteen staff, young messengers, like Mimi. Bletchley Park, though not sealed off at all, was still a self-contained community in its own right.

The 10,000 or so people who worked there throughout those war years were housed in and around the town and villages, and they brought a vivacious and sometimes, disconcerting new life to the area. They ended up in billets with some very bewildered landlords. Long before the days of Milton Keynes (which I think is about four miles away from Bletchley), Bletchley itself was a small railway town, where they also made bricks. So accommodation for the most part, was modest. A great many of the houses didn't have baths, for instance.

One thing I found interesting was the way that these 'posher' recruits – all these aristocratic, titled young women – responded to these conditions. Ah, it was the war – they got on with it! Jean Campbell-Harris, now better known as Baroness Trumpington, was billeted to a house that did have a bathroom. The only catch was there was no lock on the door. 'Oh, that was all alright!' the lady of the house assured her – her husband worked nights on the railways, so no one would barge in and surprise her. So Miss Campbell-Harris ran a bath on that first night, got in...and the husband marched straight into the bathroom [to] have a gander. She made alternative living arrangements after that.

Here in The National Archives, you find documents and memos that range from the unthinkable, profoundly important, to the almost absurd. In among the material to do with the Battle of the Atlantic, the North Africa campaign, the deadly secret preparations for D-Day, there are also Bletchley Park internal memos to do with tea and tennis balls. The tea memos are particularly good, I think, I'm very fond of them. Two of the famous images of Bletchley Park these days are those of Alan Turing chaining his tea mug to a radiator, to the bafflement of all his colleagues. And, senior code-breaker Josh Cooper walking around the lake with his coffee cup – deep in thought – and absent-mindedly looking at his coffee cup, not knowing what to do with it, and just throwing it into the water.

Well there are internal memos in the files here, dating from 1941, to do with excessive tea consumption, and broken crockery. 'More broken crockery than you would get on a man-of-war', said one directorate memo. Now the point is, there might have been a war on, but in all matters to do with tea...that was important too. And the American code-breakers who worked at Bletchley – there was a small contingent who came over from 1941 onwards – absolutely loved this aspect of life there, and reminisced fondly about it for years afterwards.

In off-duty hours, Bletchley Park acquired this amazingly vibrant life. Remember that the majority of recruits were very, very young – some straight from sixth form, and they were all incredibly inventive and energetic. There was Highland Dancing in the house's ballroom, and it was through that particular craze that code-breakers Oliver Lawn and Sheila Mackenzie first met, and became an item. Their romance developed, and on days off when they weren't Highland Dancing, they would get onto their bicycles and head off into the gentle green country all round. Both Mr and Mrs Lawn told me that in some ways 18 year olds were younger than than 18 year

olds now. I'm not sure I agree, actually – I think they grew up very, very, very quickly, at a pace that today's generation I don't think could really comprehend.

Incidentally, the other thing – the Highland Dancing itself was very, very popular; it was one of Bletchley's real crazes. Best at it was a senior code-breaker called Hugh Foss. Those who watched him dance so elegantly had no idea of just how vital and important his work was. All they saw was a man who'd found the perfect way to shake off the stress of his position.

There were also world-class concerts: classical artistes such as Myra Hess, Peter Pears – they came to the Park to perform. These artistes would actually have had no idea to whom they were performing for. On top of this, the code-breakers staged plays and comic reviews – again, in the Archives here I've found hand-made concert programmes, and also, admiring reviews of their productions in local newspapers. There were a lot of actors, amateur and professional, among the code-breakers. One very senior figure, Frank Birch, total cryptography genius, had also played a much-admired Widow Twanky at the London Palladium.

Now, as mentioned, Alan Turing and his colleagues were also at this time basically bringing about the dawn of the Computer Age. The engineering genius who helped bring Turing's idea to fruition was Dr Tommy Flowers. He was a GPO engineer who hailed from East Ham, and it is in part thanks to him that we have the modern computer today. Not that he ever seems to get much of the credit.

Turing and Flowers, and also particularly Professor Max Newman (in whose department this was happening – the Numinary, it was called) between them devised the Colossus. This was a machine that could check through countless code combinations at an incredible speed – in essence it was a proto-computer, the first in the world. In terms of engineering and technological genius, we were way ahead of everyone. Even the Americans.

Now, Tommy Flowers was known to some as 'the Crafty Cockney' and there is this suspicion that he actually faced quite a bit of snobbery. There are memos, that I found again here in The National Archives, where some people... very high-handed, unpleasantly high-handed about him.

But the fact is that Dr Flowers not only built Colossus, he also paid for it, largely out of his own pocket. His achievement was breath-taking, but again, there was the secrecy, so after the war, most of the Colossus machines were destroyed. A couple survived, and they were taken onto GCHQ, and a few years later, even these were smashed up – for Tommy Flowers, and this was a personal tragedy that he felt very keenly. It also allowed the Americans to later claim that they had led the way with computing. Dr Flowers could have told them differently.

There were some documents in The National Archives [that] told vivid stories by what they didn't say. I found, for instance, some correspondence between a local Bletchley doctor, and one of the Park's senior commanders. Now the doctor was writing to say that his patient, a young woman who worked at the Park, was suffering a debilitating nervous complaint, but she would not divulge any details about her work to him. The commander in the directorate replied stiffly

that her conduct was perfectly proper, and that he knew of no reason why the work that she did could have any bearing on her condition.

But the work was too much for some. Angus Wilson, the novelist to-be...Hemlock and After...the wonderful writer, as he became after the war, was renowned at Bletchley Park for his stretched-out nerves. On one occasion he threatened to throw himself into the lake. Some people laughed, but he meant it. And indeed, the authorities offered him a place in a special clinic for a short stay while he recovered. Wilson – perhaps wisely – turned that offer down. Perhaps he thought: ‘Better the madhouse you know’.

Other people got ground down too: the Y Service personnel handling German coded messages at nearby Beaumanor Hall, for instance...for Y Service personnel the working conditions were considered so poor that they actually got the unions involved. It’s odd now to think of unions having any kind of traction in a secretive establishment during wartime, but they did.

Other documents in the Archives tell of an enlightened approach to the incredible stress of the work. At RAF Chicksands, which was feeding material to Bletchley Park, one young Women’s Air Force volunteer became so frazzled by the work that she punched her superior officer out cold. The authorities were startlingly sympathetic, as the internal memos show; because they knew that at whatever stage of the operation, whether they be linguists, mathematicians or Morse operators under strictest instructions over accuracy, the work took a toll.

In the case of the Y Services, for instance, many of the young women working away, hunting down elusive German frequencies deep into the night, had never before even been away from home. And here they were, thrown into alien surroundings, and in a job that required 100% mental effort.

Bletchley Park had ‘Y’ stations dotted all around the coast of Britain too. In 1940, before radar properly came in, it was reckoned that the lightning fast intelligence that these stations provided was the equivalent. But the young women listening in on German pilots, taking down their messages, also got to know them in a curious kind of way. The pilots knew that they were being eavesdropped by WRNs, and they would often not bother with code. Sometimes they would address affectionate greetings to their invisible listeners. And some WRNs recalled how when these pilots were eventually shot out of the sky, how disturbing it was to hear their final, terrified words.

There was also tension in the small decrypting department in Cairo. There are memos, now, here that document furious internal rows about hierarchies, and about who was allowed to know what. This was not to detract from the brilliance of the work that they did – swiftly unlocking Enigma messages, and helping immeasurably to push Rommel and his forces back.

Cherrie Ballantine, recruited to Bletchley Park as a 20 year old, found herself being sent out to Cairo, and being dazzled and hypnotised; first by the work, but also by this backdrop of the souk of incredibly luxurious hotels of louche aristocratic ex-pats. She told me – and I thought this was slightly curious – that she felt rather guilty about her time in Cairo, because even though the work was hard, the off-duty hours were filled with pursuits such as dancing. No reason for any

guilt, there was just as much dancing in the ballroom of Bletchley Park – it was just a shade less glamorous, that's all!

But Cherrie Ballantine, and Eileen Clayton, and many, many others, were also in a way pioneers, because this was the first time that so many women had been so close to the centre of the conflict. Indeed in Y Service terms, some officers were appalled to see some women wireless operators shipped out to the desert, near the front line. The officers thought it completely unacceptable, but this was a fast-changing world.

Bletchley and the Y Services were also, for a handful of lucky lads, a boy's dream come true. Now young Geoffrey Pigeon's father was recruited to work at Whaddon Hall, where much of the top-secret communication work was handled. And soon enough, Geoffrey Pigeon himself was allowed to leave school, aged 14, to go and work there too. He said it was like getting a job in Q's laboratory (in the Bond films, he said) because here they made all the secret radio equipment used by agents in the field to transmit encoded messages back to Bletchley.

There was also Bletchley's invisible army – the 'VIs' or Voluntary Interceptors. 16 year old Ray Faultley was one such VI; a young lad with a huge interest in this new technology, radio. He worked for Marconi, and at this stage, he was living at home with his parents in South London. One evening in 1941, he got a house call from 'the man from the ministry'. Would he be willing to undertake top-secret code work? Would he ever?!

He was required to install a large receiver in his parents' front parlour, hidden within a bureau. His parents would not be allowed to know of its purpose – that's how secure the work was – and every evening, when he got home from work, Ray would do two hours of interception. He was tuning into German Abwehr frequencies. He would instantly translate the Morse on specially provided stationery, then post the results off to a simple address: PO Box 25, Barnet.

But the secrecy did prove very awkward for him. Ray's girlfriend, Barbara, was miffed that she never got to see him during the week. There was one evening where she decided simply to crash in on him. She went round to his house – parents let her in – and she barged into the front parlour, only to see Ray there, hunched with his earphones, hunched over this extraordinary-looking equipment. Now Barbara – no idea what she was doing – she reached the only conclusion that she could: that he was a spy.

So, she turned tail, she ran out of the house, and she ran up the street to look for a policeman. Ray, having spotted this, then had to go chasing after her, in order to stop her, because apart from anything else, the work that he was doing was so secret, that he wouldn't have even been able to explain to a policeman what he was doing, and you can just imagine the farce that would have ensued after that.

Story had a happy ending – Ray and Barbara got married, and I think it was probably about four or five decades later that he was finally able to completely tell her exactly what he'd been up to in his front parlour, all those years back.

Anyway, the point is that the work he did – and the work that about 1,500 other Voluntary Interceptors did – the Enigma messages that they picked up would then be analysed by a special unit at Arkley Villa, presided over by Hugh Trevor-Roper, who was later to become Lord Dacre, of Hitler Diaries fame.

Young Mr Faultley and all the other volunteers based around the country did such brilliant work that they received letters of thanks from Lord Sandhurst – obviously without being too specific about what they were being thanked for.

Now, incidentally, Hugh Trevor-Roper (as I say, later Lord Dacre) was also notable because he succeeded in breaking the Abwehr Enigma code by hand – and I think he was pretty much the first to do so. And surprisingly, this caused a huge row, because he didn't have permission to do so. Trevor-Roper was with the Radio Security Service, which was another branch of the entire Y/MI8 operation, and Bletchley authorities felt that they had the monopoly on code breaking. They regarded Trevor-Roper as an upstart. He in turn was extremely venomous about them. But it's always amusing and heartening to see that both sides found the time and the energy to launch these venomous missiles at each other while the war was going on.

Back at Bletchley, veterans have fascinating memories of totemic figures such as Alan Turing and Josh Cooper. There were also some surprising recruits too: for instance, there was George Formby's glamorous film co-star, Dorothy Hyson – she was at Bletchley Park too – a very, very big star at that time, genuine West End royalty. She arrived for code-breaking duties at the Park with some much-envied chinchilla coats – and it was particularly Mimi Gallilee, the young messenger, who looked at this extraordinary being, looked at her fantastic clothes, and just yearned to have just a slice of that life.

Employing, as it did, so many thousands of women, Bletchley Park proved obviously formative for some. Mavis Batey, as mentioned, worked for senior code-breaker Dilly Knox, and it was she who cracked the codes that ensured that the British won the 1941 Battle of Cape Matapan – a brilliant achievement, and one that she wears very lightly today. Not that there was anything like proper equality between the sexes at Bletchley, but the many gifted and intelligent female recruits had a voice which they might not have had elsewhere.

For some who worked at the Park, Bletchley was to prove their university, giving them the chance to meet people they would never otherwise have met, because here pretty much all the social classes rubbed together, from factory workers to titled heiresses. The Honourable Sarah Baring, for instance, told me how if she had a rare day off she would race to get the express train to London, and then catch up with friends in Claridge's. I wondered – and I asked her – how all her colleagues at Bletchley might have viewed this, the idea of 'this posh gel' greeting the doorman at Claridge's, and the doorman telling her that Lord So-and-So was in the bar this evening. All this, at the height of the Blitz.

Personally, I thought it was rather brilliant – an amusing illustration of everyday defiance, a refusal to be cowed, either by Hitler's bombs, or by a sense of disapproval closer to home. Sarah Baring was wonderful: she said that although there was an awareness of all sorts of different classes rubbing together at Bletchley, she said it was never the source of tension.

On another occasion, poor Sarah was hugely embarrassed when her Godfather dropped into Bletchley, and specifically came to her section to say ‘hello’ to her. It was an outrageous breach of security! How did he know where to find her, in such a top-secret operation? Well, her Godfather happened to be Lord Mountbatten. But it didn’t matter how important he was – after his visit, the Bletchley authorities were very stern, and Sarah was called to see Commander Travis: how did Lord Mountbatten know that Sarah worked at Bletchley? Had she been blabbing to him? No, Sarah protested, she was perfectly innocent, he must have found out from someone else. But the story is a good illustration of how no one – no matter how high up, or brilliantly well-connected, was immune from the strictest standards of secrecy and security.

Other more middle-class veterans told me that in class terms, Bletchley was actually a source of amazement to them, for in their everyday lives they would never have met anyone like Sarah Baring. They would only have read about such creatures in the social pages of the newspapers. And so, all these young people were thrown together, and they formed a kind of mini-society in a way, because as the war went on, Britain itself was experiencing a social earthquake. And many young people from ordinary backgrounds at Bletchley – among them, Roy Jenkins, the future Labour Home Secretary, were to go onto become the defining voices of the coming age.

Now, even though they were not allowed to talk about it for decades after the war, veterans found themselves running across each other in the years that followed, in their various professional walks of life. Mimi Gallilee found this, when in the 1970s she worked for the BBC World Service – a couple of the senior figures there had also been through what they just simply called ‘BP’. Mrs Gallilee was adamant that she could not discuss the subject with them. The silence only really began to lift after the publication of a pioneering book by Captain Frederick Winterbottom.

So what was the reason, really, for that silence? Some of the code-cracking technology that Bletchley pioneered was still in use in the post-war years. And throughout the bitter years of the Cold War, it was imperative that the Soviets were kept as far in the dark as possible. The consequence of this, however, was that unlike Air Force and Army veterans, those who worked at Bletchley had no means of reliving and sharing their memories. They were denied the reunions, the bonding get-togethers. It’s a tragedy that it took so long for veterans to receive any sort of official recognition. But now, just as the profound impact of Alan Turing’s genius and work has finally been understood, so it is that the work of all of Bletchley’s young people is now being properly celebrated, and indeed the work of all of those thousands of Y Service operatives in the Bletchley outstations too.

The point is that the words ‘Bletchley Park’ are now synonymous with British genius, and perhaps we look back on it now with an extra degree of fascination and yearning, because we all wish we could see some of that ingenuity right now.

All those veterans, who kept the secret for so long, even from their loved ones, have good cause to be extremely proud.

Thank you very much!

Transcribed by Anna Guyatt as part of a volunteer project, March 2015