

[Ann Mitchell, née Williamson](#)

Bletchley Park September 1943 – May 1945. Hut 6 (in Block D), Machine Room. Interviewed November 2013.

I worked in what was known as Hut 6, which in February 1943 had moved to Block D. The name Hut 6 went with the people and the work, not the building. Before the war I was an Oxford undergraduate reading Maths. When I graduated I went to the Oxford University appointments board for information and advice on what to do next. I didn't want to go into the uniformed services so they sent me to a place called Bletchley, which I had never heard of, even though my home was very near, in Oxford. I had an interview at which they couldn't tell me what work I might be doing, and after several weeks I had a letter offering me a job as a Temporary Assistant in the Foreign Office. Again, they couldn't tell me what I would be doing, but I was very glad to be offered a job.

Towards the end of September 1943 I was sent to Bletchley to this unknown job. We had two weeks of "school" in Hut 6 and we told what the work was. I have a diary from then, probably illegally, and I wrote in it: "Gosh, the secrets this place holds!". So I knew from the beginning it was secret but I didn't know what sort of secrets, where they went to or where they came from. I thoroughly enjoyed the two weeks in the school, learning about the Enigma machine, how it worked and also about what secrets it might be throwing up.

After the two weeks training I stayed in Hut 6, in the Machine Room, for the whole of my time until VE Day. We were trained to make menus - a sort of program - on the machines. I don't suppose we had ever heard the word "computer"; in fact it probably had not been invented then. You asked if I knew if our work was connected with intelligence; intelligence to me then just meant a clever person, nothing to do with anything military! I knew it was to do with German codes, words anyhow. We knew we were trying to break into codes that, if read correctly, were in German.

We had to go through the Watch to get into the Machine Room - and just by the door connecting the two was a table with pieces of paper laid out, on which the people in the Watch had written some of the jumbled nonsense that came through the airwaves, and underneath they had written what they thought it might be saying in German. So we had to pick up these pieces of paper and make a menu, connecting the letters received to the letters that it was thought they represented. I loved making menus; it was very like crosswords, joining links and chains of letters.

That was the main job we did, and most people in the Machine Room were making these menus. There was a connecting door and hatch from the Machine Room to the Watch, with two people side by side on the Machine Room side of the hatch in direct contact with the Watch. We made these menus from what came in and we telephoned them to Eastcote, Wavendon, Stanmore, Gayhurst – I can't remember how we telephoned, as we didn't have a secure telephone. I think we may have used a tube for less urgent tasks.

When the Wrens on the Bombes got a Stop when three letters were accurate they would telephone us with the result and we would quickly set up the machine on our desk and see if the letters connected up A to B, C to Z or whatever. We would press a letter on our machine, another letter would light up so we would write it down – the most important code for us was Red, so called because it was in red pencil; all German codes were changed at midnight every night so that was our busiest time. It sounds more complicated than we found at the time - it was fascinating, with nonsense going in and German coming out, one letter at a time. You needed two people; one to type in and the other to write down what came out. Our machines looked like a big typewriter in a wooden box – but it couldn't type anything as it was one letter at a time. It was very slow.

There was a Head of Shift – I did that job later on. The Head would pass the message through the hatch to the Watch. I loved it, I was one of the people sent to Bletchley Park because I had read Maths – I wasn't brilliant at it, not like the men who had been taught it properly at school. When I went to Oxford in 1940 there were only five women in my year at the university reading Maths. We were not as good as the men, and I am not being modest. When I was at school I wanted to specialise in Maths but my headmistress thought it was not a ladylike subject! She taught Chemistry and to my mind this might not be ladylike, so I don't know what was wrong with Maths! Anyway my parents overruled her so I was allowed to get a college entrance in Maths.

One other girl of the five from Oxford went to Bletchley with me. Another got a fourth class degree, which does not exist now, so obviously her Maths was not up to standard. I lived in Oxford before University so I knew people who came from there and were my contemporaries at the University or lived there. I knew [Hilary Brett-Smith](#), who married [Harry Hinsley](#), and I met [Bill Bundy](#), one of the first Americans who worked at Bletchley. We found out somehow that Bill was a cousin to one of the families that my brother had been evacuated to in America, and Bill came to my home sometimes.

Oxford was easy to get to for a day off, just 13 short stops on the train. I got the impression that most of my contemporaries were graduates in Law or Economics or Maths. It didn't matter what you had done before, you just arrived and knuckled down. Most of us were graduates apart from a few who had been there from the very start, before the war.

There were about ten or so people working in the Machine Room at a time so we got to know them all well. We had far more freedom than the Wrens and WAAFs as we could swap our days around. , thanks to [Mary Wilson](#), who was a wonderful Head of the Machine Room. In the 1970s Mary was asked to give a talk at Bletchley Park about our work but she was ill and asked me to go instead and I felt that was a mark of someone who appreciated what you did.

We were astonished when the Robert Harris book came out about Enigma and we were allowed to talk about it. People were used to not talking about secret things in the war so it took a while to be able to discuss it. No-one could get in touch with thousands of us to say it was now alright to talk, especially with the women, as they would not know what their names were now, if they had married. So it gradually just dawned on us that all these secrets were no longer secret. Strangely my family did not ask me about my work – I used to say just that I was working in the Foreign Office, doing office or secretarial work – people just accepted that and didn't ask questions.

I was billeted at Wolverton, about 10 miles from Bletchley, at first with Mr and Mrs Clark. He worked for the railways. It was fun, not at all the kind of life that I had lived before – one cold tap, the loo was an Elsan in a hut down the garden path, and a bath with no taps! I asked Mrs Clark if I could use it and she said yes, but that the hot water was in the boiler by the kitchen and I had to carry it upstairs. I decided that in future it would be easier to have baths at work. It was all new so it was fun.

The only place I could sit was in the kitchen with Mr and Mrs Clark, and after a while that got a bit boring and I asked to change and found an advert in a newspaper for somewhere to let, with a Mrs Smart, a dressmaker. She welcomed me and I had a big room to myself, no other people from Bletchley, just the couple and their young family. But later I realised my precious rations in my cupboard in the kitchen were being stolen – by Mrs Smart! So I took my food up to my bedroom and locked it in the wardrobe. When I came in the next day the wardrobe lock had been removed, as had my rations.

I went out to look for more digs on a pouring wet day, found a notice in a newsagent's window offering two rooms to let in a village called Haversham. The wonderful Mr and Mrs Smith took me in, they had no children and welcomed me like a daughter, had a sitting room and bedroom to myself and the use of a bath, with a black line five inches from the bottom to show how much water you could use. They were so kind; Mr Smith gloved growing vegetables, but didn't like any of them to eat, so I ate them. I did very well there and was very happy and could have friends round in my big sitting room.

There was a club in Wolverton, which I used a lot, where you could buy coffee, tea, cakes and snacks, and I met a lot of my Oxford friends there and other Bletchley Park people living in the area.

Old fashioned single decker buses picked us up for work at fixed places near our digs. I once got lost in the pitch black, no street lights, but luckily a local person walked me to my bus stop. In Haversham a brake called at the house to pick us up and if it was midnight and I didn't want to wake our landlady we stood outside our front door until we saw the lights, but this must have been a very faint pinprick of light.

We worked three shifts – 9 am – 4 pm, 4pm - midnight, midnight - 9am. Our shifts varied, not all eight hour shifts like the Wrens and WAAFs. I never had my own car but some people did and gave lifts to colleagues between their billets and the Park. I sang in a choir at Bletchley Park but I can't remember how we worked this round our shifts; choir practice must have been at a fixed time of day and we went along on days we were not working. There was a hall near the gate where we performed. It was difficult to get involved socially at the Park.

I had my meals at Bletchley at the cafe just inside the gates. I had no complaints about the meals, they were very satisfactory. I had a main meal at work and then another main meal from my landlady, as well as a subsidiary meal, and my mother sent me eggs from home.

I also did a lot of puzzles. One job I haven't mentioned yet was working on duds – messages which didn't decode. They were thought to be in Red code, but when you typed nonsense came out. Possibly the German operator had set his machine up or copied something down wrongly, and I helped a colleague who was a former Maths teacher on these. We had fun sorting out the duds and also doing mathematical puzzles for recreation, brushing up my skills. I didn't play any games as some people did.

I was very lucky living close to home so could get there often. I could easily get home after a day shift, on the train. In my diary I wrote down the times of the trains, they were never on time, much worse than now. I cycled to work sometimes.

Previously the Bletchley Park Roll of Honour had described people at my grade of Temporary Assistant as non-graduates, secretaries, messengers and "form fillers" until I pointed out that many of us had been recruited as graduates. Before February 1943 graduates were recruited as Temporary Junior Administrative Officers and although the job title was changed the work was the same. I thought it was bit demeaning to all be described as "form-fillers" (whatever that means) so I am glad the details on the Roll of Honour, which is now absolutely wonderful, have been changed. I got £150 a year to start with and when I was 21 I went up to £200 – the men got paid more of course in those days!

© Bletchley Park Trust 2015