

Sir Stuart Milner-Barry

1906 - 1995

A brief biography, formerly displayed in the 'Hall of Fame' in Bletchley Park mansion.

Stuart Milner-Barry had achieved fame as a champion chess player when he came to Bletchley Park early in 1940. He led the 'cribsters' team in Hut 6 from its opening in January 1940, becoming head of the Hut in March 1944. The work of Milner-Barry and his team lay at the heart of the triumph over the German Luftwaffe & Army Enigma codes. After the war he had an outstanding career in the civil service.

Philip Stuart Milner-Barry was born on 20 September 1906 in London; He went to Cheltenham College and on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he achieved a first in both the classical and moral sciences triposes. He became a not-notably enthusiastic stock broker, though it was chess that filled his life. He had been boy chess champion of England in 1923, playing for England before and after the war. He was chess correspondent of the Times from 1938 and throughout the war. It was Gordon Welchman, a friend from their days at Trinity together, who persuading Milner-Barry to join Bletchley Park.

He arrived in January 1940 joining the newly created Hut 6, and was encouraged by Welchman to study the decrypts that were beginning to emerge from the Zygalski sheets being operated by John Jeffreys. Welchman wanted Milner-Barry to develop an intimate knowledge of the German cipher clerks and radio operators. When the Germans dropped the use of the repeated indicator, as they did on 1 May 1940, Hut 6 would have to rely on its knowledge of the traffic to find suitable cribs to enable the Bombes to operate, and in the meanwhile to make use of the careless procedural habits of some of the German operators.

Milner-Barry had noted that the cipher clerks tended to use addresses and signatures that were both long and stereotyped, providing a fruitful source for cribs. A crib had to be a phrase of about 13 characters long that was very likely to be found in certain easily identified messages, but also had to have linguistic features that provided good 'closed loops' for the bombe menus. The use of 'kisses', cribs derived from suitable decrypted messages from other keys, often provided the first break into a new key. Milner-Barry organised a team of wizards, as Welchman called his cribsters, who eventually were able to provide good keys for Hut 6 to be able to break into most of the Luftwaffe keys and then some of the Army keys. Milner-Barry became recognised as Gordon Welchman's deputy, and when Welchman left in March 1943, to become responsible for mechanisation projects, it was Milner-Barry who became Head of Hut 6.

Milner-Barry signed the Turing letter in October 1941 and it was he who took the letter directly to Downing Street. It drew Churchill's attention the extreme shortage of support personnel in the Enigma huts. His powers of smooth administration now became clear as Hut 6 grew, reaching over 550 in total, one of the largest teams in Bletchley Park. Milner-Barry was a quiet, undemonstrative, highly effective leader who believed in delegation and was always to be seen sporting a very large pipe. His reports show that he was totally unflappable, in the midst of the problems for Hut 6 created by the tightening of German cipher security in 1944, which they largely overcame.

Stuart Milner-Barry was recruited to Whitehall in June 1945. He rose rapidly, becoming the ceremonial officer in the Civil Service Department. He received an OBE in 1946, a CB in 1962, and a knighthood in 1975. He married Thelma Wells in 1947 and they had three children. He died in Lewisham on 25 March 1995. He had repeated his visit to Downing Street in October 1991, with a letter signed by 10,000, asking for Bletchley Park to be preserved as a monument to the great war-time work.