

## Alastair Denniston

1881 - 1961

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

**During World War 1 Alastair Denniston became de-facto head of the codebreakers in Room 40 in the Admiralty. He went on to be the head of GCCS from its creation in 1919 until February 1942. He then left Bletchley Park to return to London, leading the Diplomatic Section very successfully for the rest of the war.**

Alexander Guthrie Denniston, known as Alastair, was born in Greenock on 1 December 1881. His father died while Alastair was still at junior school. The family moved to Cheshire where he attended Bowdon College. He studied modern languages at the Universities of Bonn and Paris. In 1906, he started to teach languages at Merchiston Castle School, moving to the Royal Naval College, Osborne, in 1909. He represented Scotland at hockey in the 1908 Olympics.

Denniston, aged 33, became a member of the codebreaking team established in the Admiralty early in World War 1. The Room 40 team soon became masters of the German naval codes. Successes led to a build-up in the team, reaching some 100 staff, producing some 15,000 decrypts during the war. They played a significant part in the naval war. In the autumn of 1916, Alastair Denniston became the de-facto head of the naval cryptography team in Room 40, playing a major part both in the cryptographic work and in organising the team. After the war it was reduced to 15 and was merged with the War Office team to form the Government Code and Cypher School in October 1919. Alastair Denniston was formally named as head of GCCS to continue the work of breaking codes and ciphers, from April 1922 under the Foreign Office.

Between the wars GCCS grew only gradually from the initial 55, until it started to expand fast in the late 1930s. In the early years it concentrated on diplomatic ciphers, in particular the Soviet traffic. Denniston was appalled when in 1923 and 1927 the Government made some of the Soviet decrypted material public. Service sections were introduced in 1930, increasing work on Japanese ciphers and then leading to a concentration on Italian and German ciphers,

Perhaps the greatest contributions of Alastair Denniston to the great success at Bletchley Park during World War 2 was his recruitment from the universities in 1938-39, and his encouragement of leadership from the most able, irrespective of age, allegiance or seniority. When World War 2 broke out the new recruits proved just the material that the dawning machine age required. All the seeds of the breakthroughs at Bletchley Park had been sown in the first few years of the war.

The 'Little Man' was a quiet and reserved man who believed in delegation. Unfortunately, in 1939 Denniston did not get on well with his boss in Whitehall, the new head of the SIS: 'C', [Stewart Menzies](#). Those who got to know Alastair were very fond of him, but his lack of influence in Whitehall led to increasing dissatisfaction with his management style, which was ill-suited to the needs of the fast growing staff. This became apparent when the 'Turing letter' reached Churchill's desk in October 1941.

This led to Denniston being posted back to London in February 1942 with his diplomatic and commercial staff, about 250 in all; their remarkable success has never been fully recognised, but it is said that they broke the ciphers of almost all the countries that they tackled.

Denniston resigned on 1 May 1945; he had been unwell during the last year of the war. In retirement he taught in Leatherhead. He was appointed CBE in 1933, CMG in 1941. Alastair Denniston had married his secretary, Dorothy Gilliat in 1917, and they had a son and a daughter. He died at Milford-on-Sea on 1 January 1961, aged 79. The country was very lucky to have such an able man at the helm of GCCS in its formative years.