

[Ailsa Maxwell née Macdonald](#)

*Bletchley Park autumn 1943 – May 1945. Civilian in Hut 6 (in Block D). Machine Room, compiled Bombe menus from cribs and checked output from Bombe.*

I served in the Machine Room of Hut 6, always known just as the 'MR'. Before that I had started an Economics degree at Edinburgh University. I was going to join the Wrens but I received a letter or phone call, some time in the summer of 1943, after the end of term, asking me to come to the Foreign Office for an interview about a possible job. I went and was told they couldn't tell me what the job was or where it would be, but that it was important and that they thought I might be suitable for it. I accepted the offer. They asked for references and I gave my next door neighbour, and he asked my father 'What in the world is Ailsa doing, because they are being very punctilious about it?' So it took some time to start at Bletchley Park. Presumably they had got my name from the University in the first place.

I was told to take the train to Bletchley and that someone would meet me on the platform. It was only a short distance to Bletchley Park. We had two weeks training which I don't remember much about, but I don't think the people going into the Machine Room were trained separately. Our main job was, when a stop from the Bombes satisfied the way it had been set up, we then set this up on the Enigma machines to see whether it was right. We didn't know German but it was quite obvious whether what came out was nonsense or made sense.

The Hut 6 Watch gave us the programmes to run and we contacted the Wrens who put them on the Bombe and then phoned us back if there was a satisfactory stop. I enjoyed it when we made up programmes, it was fun and something unusual to do. We had six or eight machines that they must have made for us, they were heavy clonking things. We put three wheels in, I think chosen from a total of six, with the settings from the Wrens and then began typing. We went on with the message and if it looked like German then it had been broken, but often this did not happen.

We were told we were breaking codes; people on the Watch were very happy when something was broken but we never got told the result or what was happening. Once we had worked out what was needed to decode messages we passed it on to the Decoding Room.

For billeting, I was originally sent with two others to a house in Wolverton, where a lot of people stayed, and we shared a very small bedroom. Our

hosts were not particularly helpful, there was a bathroom but we were not allowed to use it! So after a short time we were moved; I was very lucky, I was sent to a modern house in a new estate a few miles away in the country, probably built to house people from Wolverton. The family had one small child and I was very happy there. I was lucky because a lot of people had billets where the sanitary facilities were not very good.

Bletchley Park sent buses to Wolverton but as we were a bit further out we were picked up by a brake, which went round the countryside. We had our main meal at Bletchley.

As my family was split between Scotland and London I used to save up my days off to go to see my father who was working in London, so I wasn't at the billet all that often other than to sleep.

It was difficult to get involved with the social activities at Bletchley Park, living so far out, and going to see my father in my spare time, or saving up more time off to go to Scotland for the rest of the family.

The three shifts worked quite well and you could change shift to get more time off; it was very efficiently run by [Mary Wilson](#). As long as there was a certain amount of people on duty you could move your shifts around, which was very helpful. Every now and then there would be a bit of trouble because someone had taken their name off a shift and not left enough people on, but on the whole it worked very well.

There were times when they knew the enemy was changing their codes; about every six months there was a flurry because of this. My impression was that it wasn't as busy at night as in the day but there were always more people about on the day shift.

We all knew [Asa Briggs](#) well; he was much the most friendly person from the Watch, when they came in to see what was going on. Otherwise I can't remember meeting any of the well-known names.

I would go to London for one or two nights. I was fortunate that my father worked for the LMS, and I had free travel, so it was easy for me to go see him. Quite often I got home to Scotland to see the rest of the family. They just accepted that they would not be told what I was doing for a job; everyone had secrets!

I finished in Hut 6 almost immediately after VE Day and went to Scotland to help with the general election there. I wanted to go; I went back to finish my degree and so was quite happy to leave.

When the story came out in 1974 it didn't have much impact on me as it seemed to come out gradually. It took a bit longer for me to talk about it – I had my friend [Ann Mitchell](#) to talk to about it as we had been together a long time.

After the war I finished my degree and had a short period in the Civil Service in Edinburgh, I married and had a family, and then had a very happy seven years in the Economic History Department at Edinburgh University as a research associate. My husband was a museum keeper and later on I helped him with his research.

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