

Nanette Wise, née Gregg

*Bletchley Park 1944 – 1945. Civilian in Block D(6), Registration Room 1.
Interviewed July 2013.*

My mother was headmistress of the village school and was determined that I had a good education. I went to the best school in Manchester, the High School for Girls. The school had the most amazing attitude, it really believed in women and that they could be experts in anything. I did drama, elocution and music, and I was broken hearted when I left. The headmistress thought it was good for me, as I was a flibbertigibbet according to her; she said to me 'You have the opportunity to be different'.

When my father got a job in Birmingham I went to the best school there, King Edward VI High School for Girls. The school moved to Cheltenham for a year at the beginning of the war, then returned to Birmingham.

I was expected to go to Oxford University but I didn't want to go there as Oxford didn't believe in women in those days. The headmistress was furious and said I had better go to Birmingham. She could have suggested London University, but it never occurred to her.

I eventually went to Birmingham University. My mother, her sisters and my father's sisters were all teachers so I decided I was not going to be a teacher! I started at the university at 18 and stayed for two years. During the war boys could stay for one year and left when they were 19, unless they were unfit due to ill health. There were a couple of well-known people there, Norman Painting for one, who stayed on, and always amused me because he became Phil in the Archers for ever and ever and ever! I met him once with my husband and I said 'Hi Norman how are you, did you know we have a couple of babies?' 'Oh, so do I', he said and I said 'I never knew you got married', and he said 'Oh, I meant Phil has'!

At university I studied English and two subsidiaries: German and Philosophy, both of which undid me. In 1944, when I was 20, I was told that I could stay on to be a teacher or go into the war. I said I wanted to go into the war and I got a letter from the Foreign Office. I went down to London with another girl, a History undergraduate. She was accepted into the War Office and I went to the Foreign Office.

I remember what a beautiful place the Foreign Office was. I had been told that I had to look really smart and wear a hat and gloves, which I had to borrow. I remember, very clearly, sitting in a waiting room and then being told I could go in but before I did they said 'Take your hat off', of course I had

already removed my gloves. I had a long walk from the door right down the room to a semi-circular table. Who was there I have absolutely no idea. I was in a state of fright, but as I knew I wanted to be an actress, not a teacher, this was a situation where I could relax and try to be an actress of some kind. I sat there and answered the questions, I don't remember what they were, and tried to make the best of it, whatever 'it' was. When asked about my German, I explained that I was pretty good at reading it but not very good at translation and I was sent somewhere to be tested on German. I gave the hat back to my friend and thanked her, although I hadn't needed to use it.

They decided that I was the right sort of person for wherever they wanted to put me. They wrote to me, not telling me where I was going, it was just a case of be at this station at this time, go to that station and someone will meet you, that kind of thing.

What intrigued me most was my parents' attitude, I was an only child, my father had not been in the First World War because he was a miner at the time, at a pit in Lancashire, He was not a conscientious objector then, but he was very strongly anti-war. My mother was also from a very anti-war family, they did not set themselves up as pacifists but they worked with the Quakers, yet they let me go and didn't in any way try to stop me. My father didn't want me to go into the armed forces, he didn't want me to go into anything with a uniform; I accepted that, although he was perfectly happy for me to work for the war. To me it was very important, there was a war on and I needed to do it.

I was never asked during my interview about my parents, my father did a great deal later during the war, he set up organisations that helped with bringing over German anti-Nazis.

I cannot recall doing any training before I went to Bletchley Park and I hadn't been told that I would be doing intelligence work. I was billeted in Bedford, which was about the furthest out because by that time all the villages surrounding Bletchley were full. I had to catch a train to and from Bletchley, or take a bus home when it was night shift, if the trains were not running. Buses picked up and dropped off in the centre of town, I loved Bedford but I never got to know it well, because of the shifts. Shifts were 8 am – 4 pm, 4 pm – midnight and midnight - 8am.

I shared my billet at Mrs Lee's in Elstow Road, Bedford with a colleague called Jean. I have lost touch with her since, but I think she went to college somewhere in London. John Bunyan was from Elstow and we went out to see the chapel and the ruins of the abbey there.

Mrs Lee's husband had been a policeman and was called up though he did not go overseas as he used to turn up occasionally. He was a very tall, very nice man. Mrs Leigh was also very nice although a little bit cowed by life; she had a very small child and had to look after her on her own. Mrs Leigh asked Jean and me to look after this child one evening so she could go out with her husband. The little girl must have been about eighteen months old and started to cry as soon as they had gone, we had no idea of what to do, we were both useless. It turned out that all she wanted was to be put on the potty!

Our leader, who had been there for years and years, but was very young, told me that I was moving to a new room at work. When I asked her where to, she said 'Just to another room'. I asked if Jean could come and she replied 'Don't be silly, you are being promoted' I said 'Oh, I didn't realise that, but can Jean come?' and she said 'No she can't! And Mrs Lee cannot have two girls on different shifts so we'll find you another place to live.' I had no idea!

I was moved to one of those wonderful houses called prefabs, somewhere in Bedford, just before April 1945. The woman there was very pleasant and I had a room to myself with a big double bed. It was only for a month until the war ended. On the last in, first out basis they started letting people go, so they could thin down,

I didn't travel much but I went to Cambridge once. I must have been finding my feet because I decided to hitch hike, so I chose a big lorry and the driver spent the whole journey telling me how lucky I was that he was a nice man, I hardly knew what he was talking about! I met [Margaret Ambrose](#) at Bletchley Park, she invited me down to London, her father was a doctor in Islington and I saw her again after the war.

Our boss at Bletchley Park, her name may have been Eileen, was tall, with very dark hair and red cheeks, and the whisper was that she had high blood pressure. I'm not surprised, it must have been a very difficult job. We had a pair of identical twin Wrens who had fun as, because they had identical uniforms, you never which one had come into the room. We had some very posh, sophisticated girls who knew some Americans in Bletchley Park. Once one of the girls had been given some nylon stockings by one of the Americans and I asked if I could feel them. She was very worried in case any of us got our nails caught and laddered the stockings, I felt a bit foolish but I didn't ladder them.

I didn't know the Americans at Bletchley Park but met some at the dances in Bedford. These dances were delightful and we were given a card which allowed us in, in my case the officer's card.

We went to the dances by charabanc. I danced with ever such a sweet American man, he was delightful and asked me if I would like to go again. I said I would love to and was quite excited about going but he wasn't there, until towards the end of the dance I saw him. He was rather cross as he had been waiting outside to let me in, he didn't know that I had the card. I felt rather sad about that, not heartbroken just a bit sad. He was a Scottish American and at the dances I learned there were also German Americans and Russian Americans. Other than dancing, I had a very quiet life really.

I joined the drama society at Bletchley Park, as I was going to be an actress, but I just went once and couldn't go again because the shifts didn't work, and they weren't interested in people just dropping in. They wanted someone who would go every week. I never managed to see any of the productions either. There were people who had been there a long time and actually lived in Bletchley itself, but it was difficult for me as I lived miles out and had to take the bus or train depending on the shifts.

I was doing a week on nights, a week on days and a week on evening shift. There were 3000 people per shift and always 3000 on leave, so we were 12,000 people, that is the one number I remember.

My memories of the work I did at Bletchley Park are rather faint, although I remember sitting at a machine, called a Typex, setting the codes for the day and then typing, so I called myself a typist. I was given groups of letters to type and I knew from the first letters that came out where the messages were coming from. I knew that the three letters at the front of the message referred to the originating station, and I know from what I've read since that the originating station sometimes made mistakes when they thought they could do something again, this is where the bright brains reading them would get a feel of what it was about.

I didn't try to organise the letters into words. If the code had been broken then the message could be read. I remember 'Lion', and somebody coming into the room and saying 'Lion is broken', so I would get the folder into which I put all the Lion messages. I may have known what the keys were and a lot more but I have forgotten now.

I could not understand why they promoted and moved me out or how I had done well. What had I done to be moved? I went to a very different room

with maps on the wall and there was a man in charge, a major! But who he was and which room it was I can't remember. I was only there for a month and don't remember much about the work, other than that it was very different, without the machine. It was very exciting and I could have applied to stay on, but it never occurred to me, as I wanted to be an actress. It had been my war work and the war was now over. I can still see the major's face and the room around me with the maps on the wall, but I've never found out which room it was.

I couldn't link what I was doing to what was going on in the war, but we had to just do the work, put on blinkers, almost, and not think or talk it about it, not even within Bletchley Park, no way, certainly not with the next room or the next shift. Meal times were when people got together and you might sit with other people but you didn't talk about what you were doing.

The meals at Bletchley Park were terrible; they gave you dinner in the middle of the night and I hated it. It was fine in the middle of the day, but on night shift you didn't want dinner: potatoes, cabbage and pudding at 2 o'clock in the morning. But breakfast was wonderful. The food itself was fine; it was just not what you wanted at the time. I don't remember if my landlady Mrs Lee had to cook for us when we were working shifts at the park.

I do remember chatting to people about life, not about work. Once when I was very lonely and depressed I sat next to someone I didn't know, and we had a really interesting conversation but what it was about I have no idea. I got used to it, a bit like being a new girl at school again, except there were boys there and I had always been at a girls' school.

My parents didn't ask me about what I was doing, they were told that I was not allowed to say what I did, I was just at Bletchley Park and they accepted that; I never told anybody.

I left in May at the end of the war and got a letter, dated 24 May 1945, saying that I was a good and efficient worker, I wasn't even there a year. I was supposed to go back to university, but I manage to persuade a grateful government, that was prepared to send me back there, that I really wanted to go to drama school to study to be an actress, and they agreed to pay for this. I went home and I applied to go to drama school instead of finishing my degree and in fact I was told that I had a degree and I was called to receive my Bachelor of Arts unclassified degree which is splendid, I might have got a first but I would most probably have got a 2:1, I was bright and intelligent and lazy, basically.

During my second year at drama school my husband to be came out of the Air Force and joined the school, so I snaffled him! I never acted professionally only in an amateur way, I trained to be a teacher of speech and drama.

Arthur, my husband, joined the RAF at the age of 17 to train to be a fighter pilot and when the blitz started they couldn't train in Britain so he and his group were sent abroad. They were put into civilian clothes with battered suitcases, no kitbags, and took a meat boat to Halifax, Nova Scotia. They then took a train right down through Canada, into the USA, through the German areas of the mid-west with the blinds down, as the locals would not have liked it if they had cottoned on to what was happening. They continued right down to Sarasota in Florida, where Arthur finished his training as fighter pilot.

He had a wonderful time. There are pictures of him on the beach with a different girl each time, everyone treated them so well and they were very happy. This arrangement of course was private between Roosevelt and Churchill, then Pearl Harbour happened and the civilian clothes were thrown away and they were back in uniform.

My husband wrote a very good story of a fighter pilot in World War Two, but it never got published as he wrote it only about ten years after the war, when nobody was interested. I have the 900 page version and the 450 page version as well, because one of his agents told him it was too long, so we cut out more of the home life and left in the flying, but still no one wanted to know. I have not yet given copies to the RAF Museum or the Imperial War Museum, my son or daughter might get it privately published.

When Arthur and his brother inherited some money from their mother in the 1970s, he asked me whether I would like to see America, so we went to New York, to Philadelphia to see some friends, and then up to Canada to see more friends, it was wonderful.

Arthur was a published author, he got good reviews and people enjoyed his books, but he hadn't had a best seller, so he asked me if I would like to go and live in America as there was more chance of him making a proper living there. He was doing really well when we got there in about 1977 but he died in 1983. I have all his books as does the British Library. Somebody asked Arthur 'What do you write?' and he said 'Anything', 'Why do you write?' Arthur replied 'Why do you breathe?'

When my husband died, my children seemed to think I would come home to England, at the age of 59, but I couldn't get a job as a teacher. I was told

'Good lord you are nearly 60, time to retire!' So I stayed in America where I had a job and lived in New York for about 15 years, and came home, much to my family's dismay! They were glad to see me back really.

When I found out that I could talk about Bletchley Park thirty years later, I said that it was no opportunity as I had forgotten everything, but my husband couldn't believe it when I told him.

I was only at Bletchley Park for a very short time really but it was a wonderful experience, because I'd been very molly-coddled as a child. When I went to the first reunion I was amazed by how much people had remembered, then I realised that some of them were younger than me, they had gone in at the age of 18, or even 17 and had been there five years, no wonder they remembered it, with me it was just a year, but I did enjoy my time there.