

Mrs Stella Pitt, née Blackman

Bletchley Park 1940- 1945, Foreign Office Civilian, probably Block E, Communications Centre. Typex Operator. Interviewed December 2014.

Pre-war life

I was employed by the Foreign Office; I joined soon after the war began. Before that I had been working for a farmer's wife, Mrs Davis, skivvying. Mrs Davis and her husband lived in a big house about a mile and a half from my home in Gravesend. Mr Davis terrified me, carrying his gun crooked over his arm; they had no children and he would just look at me and say "hello", but Mrs Davis was lovely. I lived with my sister and my father, who had remarried after my mother's death: I was very protected.

An edict had come out that anyone who wasn't doing anything for the war effort had to go to the Labour Exchange. I had gone there with my sister, and had been told I would be hearing from some office or another. I don't know how or why I was selected. I was bright enough, I had passed the scholarship, but my father had refused to allow me to continue my education as he didn't have the money.

I got home from skivvying one day and my sister said, "I've opened the letter". That was normal then, she opened my post and I didn't mind that. She said "I have a letter from someone in the Foreign Office". It said I had to report in London, Whitehall somewhere, I don't recall where. I'd never been to London before and I didn't know where the Foreign Office was or Downing Street. We wrote back saying we could not afford the fare and didn't know our way around London, so the Foreign Office sent us a railway and taxi warrant so that my sister and I could go there.

Recruitment & training

I went to the top of the building, I realise now it was the old German Embassy, and my sister had to stay downstairs. I met a real gentleman, very severe looking. I must have been 18 or 19 years old and it was the first time I had ever spoken to a man on my own. I think the man was someone I saw later at Bletchley Park. I know I have met him somewhere since. I don't remember what he asked me in the interview but he said I would hear from him.

That's when my life began to change from the innocent little girl: I had been so protected before. Although I was terrified in London, the man didn't scare me.

Arrival at Bletchley Park

When I heard I was to report to Bletchley Park I was terrified. I had a railway warrant and my sister and I went to Euston Station, where I left her at the gates. I didn't have a ticket but I was let on the train. A man checked my name and I was told to stay with another girl. The girl was 'with-it', a London girl. She wore lipstick and was asking me quite personal questions, like if I used make-up or had had a perm, but was really nice. Other girls joined us and we travelled by train straight to Bletchley station, someone was waiting for us and went with us to Bletchley Park. There was an armed guard at the gates. When we got in front of the house a lady was standing at the steps to greet us, I cannot remember her name. I think we were some of the first to go into Bletchley Park.

I do remember at the beginning famous people from the London stage drove the shooting brakes around; they were only there for a couple of weeks.

We were segregated and sent to different places. I went off to a building which is not there anymore, where the Typex machines were, and was told I was to be trained. I think we had four weeks training and I was with other girls, secretaries, etc. There were four machines with a board to cover the keyboards and chairs for us to sit on. A gentleman came in and told us we were going to be trained. All the girls were well educated, spoke languages some of them, secretaries, except me, they were all made up and looked town-bred. I was a country person, very awkward, and was sure I wouldn't be able to learn well enough. I had never touched a typewriter! But the man reassured me, saying I would be better than all the others. It did worry me.

Work

At the end of those weeks training I was told I would be going into another hut. We were near Turing. Every afternoon we would see him pass us. He would smirk at us, I reckon it was because we were always happy and having fun. We never spoke or discussed anything.

We had the Typex machines on our desks and were sitting in threes. I worked on the Typex machines all through the war. I knew that what we were doing was providing information that would go out to the Western Desert and we were gathering it in.

We worked three shifts: a day shift, an evening shift and a night shift. When we finished at midnight, we'd get back to our billets about an hour or two later, depending on the coach schedule. We were

collected by Brown's Coaches, it would go round the villages picking people up and setting them down.

Social and domestic life

I lived with Mr and Mrs Richardson (Dicky and Alice) in Wolverton Road, Stony Stratford. The billet was paid for by the government. They were both lovely people, they made me so welcome. I was there all the time I was at Bletchley. They were like a second family to me. My friend Shirley and I would tap dance in their front room. There wasn't much socialising for us in Bletchley Park as we were Foreign Office. I know there were lots of events for the forces people in Bletchley Park though. Every Thursday we went country dancing in Stony Stratford with the soldiers from Hanslope Park.

I had four friends at Bletchley Park: Rose Fenn, Shirley Clifford, Joan Ison and Jean Smith. We went everywhere together. On days off we would sometimes go to Bedford and Jean Smith and I would go canoeing on the river.

We were in Bletchley Park right at the beginning, I think. There was barely anyone there, but then it started to get organised, and three years later there were thousands of people. The forces people kept themselves separate from us Foreign Office, although we ate in the same mess. I liked the food; it was quite good, though some people may not have liked it.

Once a week my sister wrote to me and I would write to her and my father. Occasionally I was able to go home but having signed the Official Secrets Act, I didn't say anything and my father and sister never asked me questions about what I was doing. They were more surprised about the change in me, coloured nails and lipstick, it was how I learned about life. Bletchley Park changed me and taught me about life.

Shirley Clifford was my good friend, though a bit snobby and she widened my horizons. She told me about classical music, make-up, hair perms etc. Joan Ison told me all about boys. The girls used to smoke outside; I had a try once and it made me choke, so I've never smoked again since!

Post-war

The instant the war ended there was just a few of us left in our hut, all the air force people went very quickly. We were asked if we would go to Bushy Park but I didn't want to go there. We were allowed to go home but after the weekend Shirley Clifford and I had to report to

Downing Street. Rose Fenn, Joan Ison, May Marr and Jean Smith were allowed to go home. It was the hardest I've ever worked in my life. I stayed at the Foreign Office until I was married. I had to leave then as I was marrying a man from the Air Force.

My son told me that the story of Bletchley Park had been on a television programme he had seen. He questioned me about what I had been doing at the Foreign Office and tried to encourage me to tell him more of what I had been doing. I had put Bletchley Park out of my mind by then. Looking back on it, I think it was at Bletchley Park that my life really started, as I had been so sheltered by my father and sister.