

## **Jean Parsons née Collum**

*Bletchley Park, WRNS Bombe operator. Extract from the funeral address given on 7 April 2016; published here with the kind permission of her son, Christopher Parsons.*

After taking her School Certificate Mum left for clerical work in central London and in 1943 joined the Women's Royal Navy Service – the Wrens.

The whole family, including our father Jim, were unaware of the details of Mum's war service until long after the War. In the late 1970s, reports began to emerge in the media about the astonishing role played by an elite band of codebreakers in winning the War. They were based in the house and grounds of an old manor house near Milton Keynes which is now known throughout the world – Bletchley Park. Those who worked there had been required to promise never to reveal what had gone on there, reinforced by signing the Official Secrets Act. With, I think, some reluctance, Mum revealed to us that this was where she had worked during the War!

As time went on it became clear that it was acceptable for Bletchley Park veterans to talk about their war service, so I'm hoping I don't get into trouble if I tell you that Mum served between September 1943 and May 1945, working in one of what is now one of the best known areas of the Park – the codebreaking machines known as the 'Bombes'. This was while she was still in her teens, so some of her memories of her time there were hazy, although she can certainly remember meeting perhaps the most famous veteran, Alan Turing. The Bombes were temperamental machines requiring constant maintenance and the most delicate handling. Shortly after the War in Europe ended, it was considered that it would be dangerous if the Bombes fell into enemy hands, so a team of wrens including Mum were deployed to Eastcote in west London to dismantle them. Mum relished the opportunity to get her own back on the machines that had given her so much grief in the previous 18 months, following the instructions that they should be smashed beyond all hope of repair with relish!

Demobilisation did not come immediately, instead Mum was posted to Devonport in the south west of England working on demobbing sailors. One of her tasks was to demob a young sailor who had mainly played rugby for King and Country, William James (Jim) Parsons. Jim and Jean married and moved to Cardiff.

We took mum to visit Bletchley Park around a decade ago; it brought back many memories for her, and also gave her the opportunity to actually see more of the site than she had ever seen before, as part of the secrecy at the Park was to stop any individual from gaining a full insight of everything that was going on there.