

## **Jane Fawcett, née Hughes**

*Bletchley Park, 1940 -1945. FO Civilian, Hut 6, and Block D, deciphering German messages. Berkeley Street, May 1945 – end 1945. Interviewed November 2014*

I left school to go to what is now the Royal Ballet, to be a ballet dancer, which had been my great aim and dream. I was at Sadler's Wells as a ballet student for about a year, after which I became too tall because the corps de ballet had to be no taller than 5ft 4 inches. As all my plans had revolved around ballet, I had to think what to do next. My parents said, 'Why don't you go to Switzerland, you can't go to Germany, and learn German?' Their thinking being that we were obviously going to have a German war and it might be useful to me. I went to Zurich for around three months and immersed myself in German. The people I was living with were under contract to speak what was called 'echt Deutsch' (proper German) for so many hours per day. The rest of the time they spoke 'Switzerdeutsch' (Swiss German), which is very different and of course had no market value. So I came back from that as a passable German speaker with a certain knowledge of German grammar. My parents then shot me into doing the London debutante season, which I hated, as I wanted to do something proper with my life and not just mess around going to dances. But I did that, and then the war came and I did a secretarial course, while I thought about what I could do, and some more German work at the Monkey Club. The Club wasn't intended to be for debutantes, but that's what it ended up being, with an age range starting at around 15. It was very much a day in school, not for serious scholarship. I learnt piano there too.

I was 18 years old when I was recruited to Hut 6 as a civilian. I received a letter one day from a friend, [Elizabeth Smith](#), who was at Bletchley Park, saying that were desperately overworked and needed more people and would I be interested in joining? I decided to go along and see for myself what it was like and found a number of my friends there, who had been recruited in the same way. In the early days, as Bletchley Park could not openly advertise for recruits, existing employees were asked to make contact with suitable friends and relations.

Elizabeth showed me around and then I met Milner-Barry, who was Head of Hut 6. I don't think he'd done an interview before, as he didn't have much idea of what he should be finding out about me! We had a short chat and I tried to find out from him what they were doing, but of course they were all committed to secrecy and couldn't really tell me anything. I had an idea there was something rather secret going on – I'd heard the words codes and secrecy mentioned and I knew it was in Bletchley because that was good for communications, but that was as far as it went.

He took me to see the boss, who I think was Commander Denniston, who also didn't seem to know how to interview! He didn't really ask me anything - perhaps they thought I looked suitable, so they didn't bother. I remember a sketchy interview, with no tests. They knew I'd completed a secretarial course and had learnt German. Those two things added up to what they were looking for. They also knew I had several friends there and would therefore blend in.

I was told I was working for the Foreign Office, but I don't remember having a particular rank. Commander Denniston told me very early on in the interview, that I would have to sign the Official Secrets Act, which I'd never heard of. This was duly brought out and I signed it. Nobody said that I was signing this for life, or what the implications were, which were very serious indeed. If you happened to be indiscreet, the penalties were very high.

I remember the mansion, as I was interested in architecture even then, and thought it was a really quite frightful building and wondered why they had chosen it! I also remember thinking how Hut 6 was even more frightful, very squalid indeed. It had no central heating, just one broken down stove in the middle of the room, which I think was fed with anthracite. There was no insulation at all and it was bitterly cold in the winter, when we used to work with mittens, and very hot in the summer. We had no light either, as we were blacked out. We just had one bulb hanging on a wire and if there was any question of an air raid, we were left in the darkness. So the accommodation really was incredibly inadequate. We had a dirty old trestle table, on which we put our Enigma machine and some cheap, pine folding chairs, that were rather wobbly. There were about six people in my room.

When I returned to Bletchley recently, I thought the restored Hut looks a lot neater than I remember, but it was very difficult to identify with the room I worked in. It didn't really fulfil what I remember about our work - as it didn't have the passage as I remembered it, connecting with Hut 3, where we had the translators and the people despatching the material. I wasn't aware that they have a replica chute. The floorboards were cleaner too! I think they did a very good job and the funny thing was the architect in charge of the restoration work was one of the students on my building conservation course, Janie Price, one of my best students actually. She saw me when the Duchess of Cambridge visited and called out 'Jane!'.

The food was pretty horrible, though on the better side of institutional food. It wasn't very hot and we had to queue for a long time to collect some bacon and sausage, which wasn't very efficient and we found it rather annoying as we were so busy with work.

We were defenceless at Bletchley Park – we had one or two people at the gate, but once outside, there was no protection. It was amazing the Germans never bombed us.

I don't remember any training for my work in Hut 6. I think probably my friends sat me down at a wonky table with this machine and briefed me on what to do. One of the code breakers must have come and told me how to interpret what was coming in. They didn't give me any indication about translation, I just got on with it if I could understand it.

We were told that we were working with an Enigma machine, however, it printed out a tape.

Our tasks came from several different places, sometimes from the decoders themselves, who'd just broken the new code for the day and came running in with it, sometimes from the motor bicycling department and also from smaller subdivisions, I can't remember all their names. There was something called the machine room

My work involved being given the five letter groupings and settings each day. We would then decode these five letter words into German. I ran my eye over them to make sure they were in German and then if there were any interesting words, such as 'Brest', which indicated Bismarck, I would translate those sentences and point them out to the people next door in Hut 3. They prioritised those codes. Many of those messages were active as they were happening, for example, when we got the message about the D-Day landing at Arromanches, it was actually happening. This made the work so extraordinary and pressurised. Of course we were aware that our high command did not receive these messages at the same time as the German High Command, so that put us under tremendous pressure to turn the work around quickly.

We didn't know how our work related to other sections because we weren't supposed to know what was going on elsewhere at Bletchley Park. The whole idea at Bletchley was that we should not know a single thing more than we had to. and we had this e marvellous record of never letting anything out, 8,000 people who never spoke about what they did and one of the ways they managed to achieve this was by not telling anybody anything. We never did speak, not even to our nearest and dearest.

We worked mainly on Army messages, but sometimes received messages from other forces, for example naval codes relating to the Bismarck, and we therefore had to know what was going on. I also read the Luftwaffe messages – we were able to read messages and provide information on the next target by the following midday. That was called the Baedeker bombing. I found that very hard work. Plymouth was more or less destroyed, as was Coventry and to some extent, London. As we now know some were

Churchill's choice, as he didn't want to reveal to the Germans that we knew where they were going to go next.

We never got any feedback on our work. I remember a bossy head of shift, who made sure we had the right number of girls. We were always in a hurry and under pressure. I don't think that on the whole people did arrive late.

It was very tough work, in a very small group of sex working three shifts, with a great deal expected of us. To have such important material in one's hands at the age of 18, with no training at all, was difficult. It was very exhausting work, I had a period when I was very weak indeed and was told by the doctor to take a month off, which of course I didn't do, because I didn't feel there was any space for me to do that. We did have a lot of responsibility. There was never a time when it wasn't busy. At certain times, like the Battle of Britain or the approach of D-Day, it was even more busy and the work became more urgent. I would say 80% of the time was like that.

Before going up to London I moved to work with Peter Twinn for a time on naval messages in Hut 8. I'm sure I didn't move into any of the brick Blocks.

After I left Bletchley Park in May 1945, I was at Berkeley Street until Autumn 1945, after the war with Japan ended. When I was demobbed at Berkeley Street by Commander Denniston, I was told that it was even more important to say nothing about our work, than when I joined. My husband returned in May 1946.

We had the well-known visit from Churchill, who said we were 'the geese that laid the golden egg but never cackled'.

I met Alan Turing, as he did a lot of work in Hut 6. There were no proper demarcations between the different sections in a Hut. Code breakers were always wandering into each other's rooms, and to us, to produce the latest message. I also met Milner-Barry, who was desperately shy, but not aloof; Gordon Welchman, Dennis Babbage, and Hinsley, who held a semi-managerial role. They were all well-educated, friendly, exceptional people. I also met Hugh Alexander and Edward Travis. On the whole they were good fun.

I worked with Elizabeth Smith and Jean Selwyn, whom I kept in touch with after the War, along with other close friends. I don't remember many others. Elizabeth Smith sadly passed away. I don't have a great collection of old Bletchley friends but I do recognise a number of faces when I go back there, though I can't remember all their names.

I was initially billeted on a coach driver, working for the London Brick Company. He had a council house and lived with his wife and two little boys, quite close to Bletchley Park and I was in a cupboard type room with a tiny window. I found it very difficult because there was this ghastly smell of bricks

burning, very acrid. It was a very hard time, as I worked very long hours doing shifts and when I needed to sleep during the day the boys would come home from school and be very noisy with their football and things. And so my father met up with a local aristocrat, Reginald Bonsor, who was also a member of the court of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, of which my father was clerk.

When he heard about the conditions I was living in, he insisted that I go and stay with them in the staff wing of their house, with a group of about six of my friends; the staff wing was empty as everyone had been called up. It was an extreme contrast to what I had been used to, as it was still very much a stately home, with butlers and staff. The house was quite difficult to find, quite remote and we had to find our own way to the minibus to get taken to Bletchley Park. I found it quite precarious as everything was blacked out and one found oneself in total darkness, wandering down those rather deep country lanes, hoping not to run into a nest of thieves! It was difficult to find the coach as they weren't allowed to use lights either. It took about an hour each way to Bletchley Park and of course on top of an eight-hour shift, it was a long day or night. Otherwise it was a wonderful place to be, with beautiful gardens tended by gardeners - we had a lot of fun there. We prepared our own food at the billet.

I remember receiving a pay packet but I haven't the slightest idea what it was, other than it was a minimal amount and we had to go and collect it. I don't think Bletchley Park paid any rent to the house, which was called Soulbury Park, but would certainly have to the previous brick company family.

I loved walking in my spare time, as the surrounding countryside was so beautiful. I was a very keen member of the Scottish reel club, which people took seriously, the men came dressed up in their tartan socks and kilts. The man who ran it was a Scot, a very keen Scot, and we learnt a lot of interesting Scottish dances, which I didn't know, although I am half-Scottish. It was all very spirited and we did it on the lawn in front of the house. We also had the pantomimes, which were good fun but took up a lot of time. Everyone enjoyed performing and watching those; we all let our hair down a bit. My being trained as a dancer helped. There were countless language and literary classes. It was difficult to fit in everything with shift work and catching the bus back - I don't remember ever not working shifts. This meant you had different people each time because the shift pattern and the workload prevented a lot of people from coming.

During leave, I would meet my husband in London, which meant spending a lot of time hitch-hiking on Watling Street to London. He was very seldom in this

country as he was stationed on a destroyer, and very actively engaged. When he was in London, we would meet up at HMV on Oxford Street; they had lovely little two-seater capsules. We were both very musical and had a lovely time listening to those records, which took us out of the horrible wartime existence.

I would also visit my parents in Ugley, near Stansted and I bought a 'Famous James', a small two-stroke motorcycle. It was very unreliable and didn't go faster than 30 miles per hour – I would cycle through remote, beautiful countryside with the corn ripening and so on, through places like Buntingford to get to Stansted. I would have to leave early going back, to make sure I got to work on time. I enjoyed it a lot, a real adventure.

I didn't tell my family a single word about my work. All I said, was that I was at Bletchley, working for the Foreign Office. They even came up to Bletchley by train but never inside the Park. I didn't say anything to my husband until the 1970's, when the story was serialised in a newspaper. People are now falling over each other to give the story.

I knew the word was out about Bletchley Park, when I read the article in a Sunday paper. I think Churchill was behind maintaining secrecy post-war but I had always felt it was a very false position and very difficult to maintain. I felt it much better when we could speak and be frank about it. I don't think that people should have felt they should take secrets to the grave. I once gave a lecture to the SAS about Bletchley and had to get clearance from the Official Secrets Act - although the SAS told me that nothing I could say would be anything of any great interest or importance by that time!

I was awarded a Scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music in Autumn 1945, got married and had two children. I then received a scholarship to the Royal College of Music to learn opera and afterwards did a certain amount of professional singing until I was about 40. At this point I took on the Victorian Society, an environmental group, and went to Birkbeck College to read Architectural History, following which I then ran the course in Architectural Conservation at the Architectural Association and wrote books.