

## **Mrs Marigold Freeman-Attwood, née Philips**

*WRNS, Bletchley Park August 1943 - May 1945. Newmanry. Interviewed March 2012.*

I was at Bletchley Park from about August 1943 until the end of hostilities in Europe in 1945. Recruitment and training was all very strange, I had only been in the Wrens a few weeks and I had been working in censorship and I thought 'Ha hah, with my degree, I ought to be doing something a bit more important'. So I said 'Look, can you find me a job where my degree might come in useful and I could use my brains?'

This was the biggest possible mistake because I became a tiny cog in an enormously important wheel! I was told 'We will send you to this particular place, are you any good at maths?', and I said 'Hopeless'. The powers that be didn't seem to mind, but I realised subsequently that they didn't give a damn about what your qualifications were, if you were a nice young girl from a decent family, you were not likely to rat on them. So I felt inveigled into the thing. My skills were foreign languages, typing, crosswords and I had done a degree in English Literature at Somerville College Oxford.

I started my training at Eastcote, just outside London. It wasn't really training; we were just thrown in the deep end. You just had to be conditioned mentally for the kind of work that was expected and the burden of responsibility. They couldn't teach you to do the idiotically simple things we had to do. We were told what it was all about. We were told that we were working for the Government Code and Cypher School, but no more at that time, but they obviously could not train us to do anything else until they gave us the whole story. My unit was called Pembroke 5 and I was billeted at Woburn Abbey. It was rather grand but icy cold there, a wonderful place to be if you are sensitive to your ambience. Some of us slept in the house, but I slept in a little hut, they were called cabins because we had to speak Navy talk all the time. So we had cabins, and a forecastle, and we ate in the galley. It was all idiotic but you went along with it. We were bussed backwards and forwards about five miles to Bletchley Park.

As a Wren I got paid about, 17/6d a week, which you can work out if you are old enough<sup>1</sup>. But many of us had been brought up to not have any money. You asked Mummy if there was anything you wanted. We did not pay rent, there were no deductions, everything was found for us. You ate at both places, Woburn and, if you were on watch, Bletchley Park, and the food was

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<sup>1</sup> 87½ pence, worth about £32 in 2011.

plentiful and perfectly adequate. There was rationing, but when you are young you don't fuss as long as there is enough, and there was. At Bletchley Park there was a restaurant inside the fence, you walked past the Mansion leaving it on your right, and it was somewhere beyond that, inside the precincts.

I remember some of my colleagues and supervisors. I was in the Newmanny, whose head was [Max Newman](#), a Cambridge academic, and there were various other Cambridge eggheads at Bletchley Park, including [Shaun Wylie](#) and [Gordon Welchman](#). In the Newmanny there was a blond Adonis called [Donald Michie](#) who I think had just left Oxford, he was very young. They were all pre-war Oxford and Cambridge academics or recent graduates. They were always very nice to us, polite and very friendly, a pleasure to work for.

I do remember a wonderfully beautiful girl called [Maxine Birley](#) who was reputed to wear green face powder because it accentuated her pallor. She was the daughter of Oswald Birley who was a portrait painter of the time. [Roy Jenkins](#) was in the Newmanny for a time and, for some reason, I dimly recognised him. I think [Alan Turing](#) had left Bletchley Park before I got there because I don't remember him featuring. But there were various intellectual looking men strolling about, some of whom I was really much more interested in than others. But it cut no ice because as a Wren you were often rather invisible. But anyway we had a lot of fun.

For our free time we weren't able to take much part in activities at Bletchley Park because we depended on the transport to and from our billets, but I did play hockey there a few times. We could not join things like the Bletchley Park drama clubs, which I would have loved. We had to do things ourselves at Woburn because we were first and foremost Wrens, and they rubbed that in all the time, so we were subject to their discipline. We had to go back and forth on the transport as soon as you had finished your shift, unless you had said you were going to London, which we were allowed to do, but of course you had to be back that night. We were never allowed to stay away overnight and only went to live it up with our boyfriends or girlfriends.

We very rarely got leave because we had 'stand-downs' in-between shifts. We did eight hour shifts covering twenty-four hours a day, and after you had done three weeks of shifts, there was a forty-eight hour stand-down, and if you were very tired you just slept. I don't think we were allowed to go away for the night in stand-downs. Stand-down must have been a naval term and you had to conform to these absurd naval expressions, including 'adrift'. If you did not get back in time you were 'adrift' and you were hauled before

the beak Wren officer. I was longing to be asked 'where were you when you were adrift' so that I could say "Clinging to a buoy ma'am." It would have been so wonderful, but I never got the chance unfortunately. Every now and then you did miss the train and you weren't back on time, and you got quite severely told off. So we operated in this very strict regime and, having a certain amount of completely free time, you could do your own thing which I think kept us sane, probably.

Of course we did have to devise a means of changing from uniform to glad-rags if we were going to London and that was quite a problem. I remember, though not the full details, a system whereby there were two trains, a stopping train and a fast train which stopped at a little village called Swanbourne, not far from Bletchley, and adjacent to the station was a cowshed. I clearly remember getting out at Swanbourne in my Wren uniform with a little bag, going into the cowshed, changing my clothes and putting my uniform in the manger, then catching the next train up to London in my glad rags.

When we got back to the station we could change back into our uniform, roll up the evening dress and stuff it in something and arrive back at work as a Wren. By some miracle it worked, but heaven knows what we would have done if things had gone wrong.

We got up to London about once a month, apart from anything else we were so badly paid that you often could not afford your fare and, coming from the background we did, you were not expected to need money. So we weren't given any, I had never earned any. We were very innocent; we'd go in twos and threes to a theatre or to have dinner with some brother or boyfriend, which was the height of glamour. We were so innocent, so well brought up, also as beady as hell at getting round authority.

For leave I always went home to my parents in Derbyshire, near Ashbourne, in the Peak District. I did not get back very often, I should think three or four times a year at the very most. But later on, I was allowed to go home for a fortnight. This was when most of my hair fell out, due to some funny sort of psychosomatic physical complaint, the sort of thing that affected quite a lot of us. It was no big deal as my hair grew again. But I was allowed to go home during that time and was given a ticket home.

There was absolutely no way you were allowed to tell your parents what you did. They might have asked questions so you just said it was a bit hush-hush and what you were doing was very boring. So they might ask 'What sort of thing?' I would say 'Mostly writing', and that sounded so boring that they

were turned off. There wasn't great curiosity because, of course, everybody was busy. My mother ran a hospital, my father was dead, everybody was doing their own thing anyway, so they did not have time to be very curious.

You must take a huge pinch of salt with everything I say about our actual activities in the Newmanry, but I seem to remember that we received tickertape out of machines. You switched it on and the tape gushed forth, and I think we had to read it and turn it into letters, which were represented by dots and spacing on the tickertape. So you ended up with a lot of gibberish and then, later on when Colossus came into our lives, we took it directly through to Colossus where it was fed in and presumably came out, if not in clear, in one stage nearer to clear in the coding system.

It was very hot by the machines but you could roll up the sleeves of your white uniform shirt, and there are stories of Wrens drying their clothes by the machines. Every now and then we had conversations with the receiving station, which was in Knockholt in Kent. We spoke with the people who took the messages at Knockholt, who, over time, became our friends as we got to know them. Every now and then you would get a direct message sent via telephone from Knockholt. I was involved with the punched tape and I think I had a tiny part to play in a tributary of Colossus in that you had to feed stuff in, which I remember being very hot and very smelly. It smelt of oil, so I must have been on fairly intimate terms with it to remember that so clearly. There was a thing called the Tunny machine that could turn the tapes back into plain language, but we didn't use that, although I recall that everything had fish names.

We just read the tapes and turned them into gibberish text, and presumably Colossus did the rest. But none of us ever saw any actual German writing from these dopey chaps on the other side, who sometimes made mistakes so that we could get their messages almost in clear.

It is important to record that Max Newman took the view, quite rightly I think, that we must be kept in the picture. We were told exactly what we were doing and, about once a fortnight, he got everybody together and told them what was clearly a selective, but true and detailed, account of what use our information had been to the Navy.

We were certainly told by Max Newman about Bletchley Park's part when at Christmas 1943, HMS Duke of York located, through an intercepted message, the German cruiser Scharnhorst and sank it. I'll always remember being told about our part in this. Also, from time to time afterwards, about the sinking of German U-boats. It was the time when the U-boats were doing maximum

damage, but we were also getting quite a lot of them. So we were given quite specific information, but I don't think there was any thought that we would disclose it, because I think psychologically it was very wise, every now and then, to give us a reason for keeping schtum, which we did amazingly for the whole war.

I think this was a very imaginative thing to do, but to balance the picture you have to realise, and I am not being snobby, that we were so called well brought up little girls from privileged homes who were expected to have high morals; but were in fact very well versed in duplicity because we were humans as well as being little ladies, and we had been deceiving our parents from the moment we started feeling sexy. So we were very good at this.

Bletchley Park started off with lots of wooden huts and then there were lots of brick buildings. I was in a hut with ordinary steel framed windows. I think the floors were cement, but I am not sure about that. It was far to the right of the Mansion.

I would be very interested to know what people with much better brains than me make of the fact that nobody ever blabbed, because I have a distinct impression of going to American dances and GI's trying to fill us up with drink to find out what we were up to. But I don't think anybody ever did spill the beans, or if they did they would be very, very quickly locked up. The people in Bletchley must have asked questions because sometimes you were given an hour off and could go out into the town, but it was one of those amazing things that the secret did not get out.

When the war in Europe was over we were surplus to requirements at Bletchley Park and I was sent to Cornwall to join something called EVT - Educational and Vocational Training, and there I found myself in the surreal position of teaching Shakespeare to ratings. It was tremendous fun and they quite enjoyed my legs, I had to stand on a platform, and they spent a lot of time looking at my black stocking-clad legs. But actually, because I love people, and they responded to me, I think quite a lot of it kind of went home in some way. I think they quite enjoyed it, because Shakespeare, of all people, has got a message for everybody if you can just get it across, and I really enjoyed it. After the war I did what most of us did, as we all wanted husband, a child, a car, a dog and a house.

We didn't want anything else, most of us, even though I was a bit of a one off because I had had a university education, but that counted for nothing. We wanted, not a boffin from Bletchley, but a uniformed hero. The first one we saw that we thought would be any good we snapped up. Sadly, those

wartime marriages were not always a great success. So I didn't have a career, because I married a regular soldier and I taught in army schools where I could, and did a bit of writing for a living. Much later on, when I was practically in my dotage, I wrote two quite successful books, so that has been a bit of fun. One was a history of an Irish castle, and the other is a semi-satirical novel about the absurd class ridden world in which I was bought up. Not an unkind one, but a satirical novel which has had quite a success.

I don't think the secret of Bletchley Park leaked until the moment when Winterbotham published *The Ultra Secret*. I think it must have been OK'd by somebody, but I assume that the great panjandrum had decided that now was the time it could be made public. It was horrible, we hated it. We did not like the secret coming out. It was like having a bit of skin peeled off that had grown over something. I have never wanted to talk about it until this day, but it did engender a particular kind of relationship with the people you worked with. Because it was a kind of implied intimacy you had with them, and it led, I think, to rather special friendships because of this secret you shared. A great many of us have kept some of our Wren friends to this day.

I have an impression of the buildings at Bletchley Park, and the general look of the place, as being green and cream, and the furniture was utility of the most anonymous sort you could imagine. The hut I was in had a red hot iron stove in the middle. It was a bit of a curate's egg, as it just heated the space around itself. So when you were very cold you could go and stand by it. On the night shift it could be very cold because you had to walk across, facing the Mansion, from the extreme right to the extreme left in order to eat.

Something that I think is socially quite interesting is that if you were in a service you didn't usually talk to the other people, the civilians. Whether that was intentional or whether they thought we Wrens were all little airheads, I don't know. When I think of all the interesting people who were there, I would love to have known them better. We weren't encouraged to talk and mix and of course we did not have a chance to do any of the social things because we had to catch these blooming transports back.

I never went into any of the other huts and I don't remember ever going into the Mansion the whole time I was there. We were very much segregated. I can't remember anything about blast walls being built round the huts, but when I shut my eyes, and I don't know whether I am imagining it or not, I don't think that they were there. I am interested because I would have thought the walls would have given an indication to somebody, some bricklayer or other that what we were doing was rather important. As it was

extremely important actually that it was all very low key and, considering we were bang next door to the railway, it is astonishing that no spy ever thought, 'Ah-ha, what's going on there?' .

I first went back on a trip two or three years ago, I went with a friend and somebody was actually rebuilding Colossus and I went and talked to him about at the time and of course it revived my memories. He asked me "What did you use the little alcove for?" And I think I said it was where we kept our makeup.

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