

## **Professor Frederick “Bimbo” Norman**

*Bletchley Park 1939 – 1945. FO Civilian in Hut 3, Watch and later Research Section, provided scientific intelligence to R V Jones at Air Ministry. Interview with his daughter, Jean Loudon, June 2013.*

What my father did I can only know in retrospect, because he never said, I only knew where he worked, it was Hut 3 and I once saw the outside of the building. I knew more after he died in 1968, from a whole slew of books; I have quite a collection and have known some of the people.

Before the war my father was a professor of German, he had been in the Ruhleben internment camp in Berlin as a civilian prisoner of war throughout the First World War. He then studied German at University College London, and was a reader at both University College and King's College London. In 1937 he got the chair of German at King's and he was elected to the University Senate, the youngest to have been so at that time. He was doing some work for the BBC before the war, broadcasting, and also recruiting people to do this. These were German speakers, and I assume, refugees.

It is possible that he was recruited for Bletchley Park because of his BBC contacts. One of his greatest friends in Ruhleben was Jock Balfour, a diplomat who ended his career as ambassador in Madrid, and I think it is possible that Bimbo was known at the Foreign Office.

I do know that he wrote a letter to Jock in 1933, when he had been to Germany and was troubled by the atmosphere, the feeling of foreboding, the feeling he got that people were looking for a saviour that didn't exist. It was a long letter and Jock forwarded this to the Foreign Office with a covering note which made it quite clear that Jock knew everything about my father's background. Jock Balfour was my godfather, I am named after him as Jean, and he was of the greatest importance to Bimbo throughout his adult life.

I know that he was always extraordinarily concerned about Germany and about politics and about the actions of the British Government. He took me out for a walk in 1938 in France and scared me stiff, I was then 12, telling me all the terrible things that were going to happen, many of which actually did. I was so frightened that my mother got him to say that he didn't actually mean it, but we all knew that was a lie. He was very well aware of all the problems that were going to come for the Jewish people.

He was called to Bletchley Park as soon as war broke out, we were in France in August and we all came back on the 31st in a thunderstorm from Saint-Malo and then he disappeared, I think he went to Bletchley.

I can't remember seeing him from then until Christmas. I am sure I wrote to him at Room 47 at the Foreign Office and I haven't seen room 47 mentioned in the books.

I know that Bimbo recruited people to Bletchley. It's clear from *Codebreakers*<sup>1</sup> that he recruited [Edward Thomas](#). I think he probably recruited [Arthur Hatto](#) and [Do Leyland](#). He certainly could type with two fingers, as well as his foreign languages, and I think he did crosswords.

I have no idea what training he may have had. He was in Hut 3, 3(N), and he had what was described by [Peskest](#) in his book as a cubby hole all to himself, whereas everyone else was open plan.

He was head of a watch until, I think 1941, and was then diagnosed with a duodenal ulcer. He came off the shift system, he also gave up smoking, he said it made the wine taste better. His later work was related to R V Jones's work on rockets.

Bimbo used to go up to Broadway, in 1944 he was going backwards and forwards several times a week.

He told us absolutely nothing about what he did and his standard thing when he was asked a question was either 'I couldn't say' or 'I really couldn't say'.

One thing he told me, at the beginning, when they thought there was going to be an invasion, they tried burning papers to see if they could get rid of them that way as shredders didn't exist then, and you can't get rid of telephone directories. They started burning all sorts of things and there were papers flying around all over the place, and I think they decided that bonfires were a poor idea.

He was billeted with the Marlers at the Tower, a big house on the Bletchley side of Wavendon. L S Marler was a property developer, he used to buy it up and sell it to people like Woolworths, and then put his own little tobacco thing next door.

I don't think Bimbo was very happy there and I don't suspect Mrs Marler was either, because I have a feeling that they didn't have a lot in common. However, the Marlers also had a row of four cottages, and we got number 2.

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<sup>1</sup> *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, edited by F H Hinsley and Alan Stripp.

Number 1 was the [Douglases](#), he was Army at Bletchley Park, and had small children, and number 3 was Blake Button, who was passport control. That meant MI6.

My father was paid £600 per year and the University made up the difference, which was £1000. My father got to Bletchley Park in his car, a Morris 8, CMU 102.

I'm sure the food at the Marlers' house was excellent, but the food in the cottage was rather different because it had a back grate and an Argon, which also heated the water, but there wasn't a cooking stove so my mother cooked on two primus stoves. I think it was possible to get something else, but she actually quite enjoyed that. I lived there until summer 1940 and then I was evacuated to Canada, coming back in July 1944.

It's hard to know what he did in his free time; he didn't have much. He used to write to me regularly and at length, really interesting letters, politics, morality, nothing about his own work. I am sure he wrote to Jock Balfour; he may have written to other people. He used to listen to music on the radio, he always listened to the 9 o'clock news, and he read. He got the Telegraph, because you could only get the Times if you had had it prior to the War and they had run out of numbers so he was reduced to the Telegraph. He got the Economist, the New Statesman, Encounter and Penguin New Writing. He used to send these on to me in Canada, which kept me anchored to what was going on in Britain, because there wasn't anything like that where I was in Canada. He went to the pub, run, I think, by Mr Winter, ex-policeman, and he kept his car there.

I don't think he took part in social activities at the park, but he was a great party giver, my mother produced the food. He could get people moving and telling jokes and doing funny things and parties were fun. He could play chess and he played rounders at lunch time in the park.

I don't know how much leave he got. I remember we went to the Lake District in April 1945 because we were there when Roosevelt died. We were at the High Town Hotel, Ullswater and Bimbo was in Germany after that.

He wasn't in the Bletchley Park Home Guard, I think they must have taken one look at him and decided not to trust him with a gun, he was one these people who would break watches and sit on fountain pens.

The work that he was doing has probably been better described, in Christy Campbell's *Target London*. There is some new material in there from public records. I know that he did just once go to sea, I think this was about

November 1941. Goodness knows what it was for, there may be some clues from somebody else. Bimbo going to sea was certainly an unusual event and he did mention this in a letter.

After the war he went back to university, he was concerned about German universities and reconstruction and this meant that he spent a lot of time from 1945 to 1947 going backwards and forwards to Germany. He also went to Graz with the British Control Commission and I think that he was probably continuing to work for either GCHQ or for MI6 and also for the Department for Science and International Research.

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