

Barbara Petherbridge, née Dyer

Bletchley Park, WAAF Morse slip reader in Communications Centre. Interviewed December 2013.

I served at Bletchley Park as an Aircraftwoman 1st Class, or ACW1, in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), from about early 1944.

Before joining the WAAF I had been working for the railways, and as I was in a reserved occupation I had to volunteer for the Air Force. I did my recruit training at Gloucester, followed by signals training at Compton Bassett and Ashbourne, and Morse slip reading training at Blackpool. I then served at airbases prior to going to Bletchley Park.

I did not go through any particular selection process before being sent to Bletchley Park; it was just a routine posting as far as I knew. I was told nothing about the purpose of what I was doing at Bletchley Park, but I had signed the Official Secrets Act and did as I was told!

Our work was using telegraphy equipment, sending and receiving messages to and from Colombo in Ceylon. I remember we looked out for messages with the call sign of 3MY.

I was on a watch of about a dozen people, each watch lasted four to six hours and we operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so I we could be working any time, day or night. Our tasks were allocated by the watch leader. We were not told what our work was contributing to and did not get any feedback on it.

We worked in huts and I did not even know that the mansion existed until it all became public knowledge! As far as I can recall, the huts we worked in were basic, wooden and concrete, cold, with blackout curtains and dimly lit.

I was billeted at Church Green, with my watch colleagues, about 20 to a hut. All female of course! Food, being rationed, was basic and mediocre. We marched to work!

In my spare time I would go into Bletchley for the shops, for short walks, or generally socialised, making full use of the NAAFI in the camp. When I had leave I would go home, to Watford. Leave was usually a 48 hour pass, and one or more weeks off was rare.

I told my family and friends that I was doing wireless operations. One just didn't talk about it.

I still have a souvenir Morse print slip relating to the end of the war in Europe which says "Germany Denmark Holland Frisian Island surrendered to Allies

today – you lucky people”

When the war ended I was billeted at Bentinck Close¹ and worked in London until I was de-mobbed. I recall going to the theatre a lot whilst based in London and visiting the Lyons Corner House. In total I served in the WAAF from 5 March 1943 to 12 December 1946 and my demob was administered from Kirkham Dispersal Centre, Lancashire. I still have the papers but never actually went there.

I returned to civilian life as an audit clerk for the LMS railway, based at the Grove Watford (now the well-known hotel). I married in 1949 and was a full-time housewife, raising three children, and was widowed in 2012.

I first heard about the real wartime story of Bletchley Park on the news. I was extremely interested and surprised, and it certainly did explain a lot. Now that the story is generally known, I feel comfortable talking about it, but it was all covered by the Official Secrets Act before.

Bletchley Park Oral History Project. © 2013 Bletchley Park Trust.

Permission must be obtained to reproduce or publish any content from this /write-up. Please contact: enquiries@bletchleypark.org.uk

¹ RAF Regent's Park, home of No 1 Aircrew Reception Centre