

Margaret Melvin, née Robertson

Bletchley Park, civilian in Air Section

I was not very long at Bletchley Park – just over a year. I went to Aberdeen University to read History, but at the end of my second year I was called up, and was given the choice of joining the ATS or going to the Foreign Office. I was not asked about qualifications, had no idea what the Foreign Office would entail, and was given no information, but I did not like the ATS uniform, and thus I arrived at Bletchley Park in June 1944, as a civilian and without the slightest idea of what I was going to be doing there. Two other girls came with me from Aberdeen – [Margaret Myron](#) and [Charlotte Gauld](#). Interestingly, another girl in my year, who opted to join the ATS, ended up at Bletchley also – but in uniform.

When we arrived at Bletchley, the three of us were all assigned to the Japanese (Air Force) section. I do not remember the number of the block we worked in, but I was at the furthest end of the park, and the main corridor was called Burma Road. Again, I forgot why, but it had something to do with Men Ten, one of the toilet blocks along its length – presumably it had some connotation in either Burmese or Japanese. My husband and I were in the neighbourhood sometimes in the 1980's, when the park was occupied by BT as a training school. We went in and looked around, and saw all my old haunts – but when I next visited, (in 2000, I think), that particular block had apparently been demolished.

When we reported for work on our first day, Margaret and Charlotte were assigned to work on the index, and I was told I was to be a melder, which didn't mean a great deal to me. But I was assigned to work with an Air Force Officer called [Margaret Pellow](#), who had the job of explaining it all to me. Having been always keen on jigsaws, crosswords and that sort of thing, I quite enjoyed the work, once I got accustomed to all the strange words – Kokogun, Hikoshidan, etc. The only snag was that we were working on old, out of date signals, and there was nothing really very interesting about it any of it. It was purely building up a background. I remember the chap in charge of our section was called [Bill Elson](#) – also an Air Force Officer – who had previously been in the shoe trade in Northampton. They were both a good bit older than me, so if they are still alive, they are doing very well! They are the only ones I can call to mind – it is so long ago.

The three of us worked on shifts, alternating between 8am – 4pm and 4pm – midnight, but were not always on the same shift. There was another shift from midnight – 8am but I don't remember that we ever had to work that. Probably what we were doing was not so urgent as to require it! We were billeted in the Swan Hotel, Woburn Sands, five of us in a room originally meant

for two. There were several other rooms on the floor, and only one bathroom, so you had to be quick off your mark in the morning – and not mind sharing! We liked Woburn Sands and enjoyed our time there- in spite of the fact that spiders in the Woburn woods were enormous and sometimes found their way to the hotel. I remember coming off the midnight shift one night with Charlotte, who was first into the bedroom and let out a curdling scream, which wakened everyone on our floor and brought them all out to see what was wrong. No one was at all keen to deal with the absolutely gigantic spider on our wall, but eventually someone (not me) wrapped her hairbrush in a towel and squashed it, leaving a horrid mark on our bedroom wall.

In due course the Swan Hotel was derequisitioned and we all had to move, which was a great disappointment, particularly as I was then separated from the other two. I went to Great Brickhill – an ugly name for a rather pretty village – to stay with Mrs. Cave. This was not a happy billet, as she went to bed at 9pm every night, and expected me to do the same. The electricity meter was in the bedroom, and I could not even read my book in bed, because she could hear the meter ticking and made me put out the light. It became my practise, if I had nothing to do of an evening, to take my book with me and spend the evening in the mansion, going home on the midnight transport. However, after some months of that I moved again, to stay with a young couple in New Bradwell. They were very hard up indeed and their living conditions spartan, but they were so kind, and so anxious to make me comfortable that I was very happy there.

When not working, we spent our time exploring the area, visiting Leighton Buzzard, Aspley Guise, Woburn – or further afield to Bedford, Aylesbury, Northampton and so on, with occasional visits to London, which was a bit creepy because of the buzz-bombs. I remember I spent my 21st birthday in Northampton! Or perhaps we just socialised with friends over a cup of hot chocolate in the station canteen!

In May 1945, of course, came VE Day, and Bletchley Park began to wind down its operations. Immediately after VJ Day, in September, we were told that we could leave, and by October I was back in University.