

Branscombe Project helps Bletchley Park

When we held our WW2 Exhibition in October 2011, part of the display in the Village Hall was dedicated to items left behind in a house in the village – Whitcot – when the house was put up for sale in 1992. These things left behind had a time warp quality – 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s. It seemed nothing was thrown away. It was felt that displaying these things might give a sense of being around in the wartime.



(Photo by Rose Ferraby – used with permission)

Amongst the collection, sat on a shelf, were four old valves. They were unused and still in original packing. Ben Joslin came along to the exhibition and asked if we might donate them to Bletchley Park. As everything in this display belonged to Barbara Farquharson, who later sold it all to support the work of Amnesty International, we asked her and she was delighted to help. What exactly would the valves be used for and what was Bletchley Park? Read on!

Bletchley Park, a country estate with mansion in Buckinghamshire, was a centre of code-breaking during WW2. Little was known about this until, in 1975, a book came out by a man named Winterbottom, a former Bletchley Park worker, which let the world in on the secret of what had been going on there. Although not always factually correct, this book set the ball rolling and gradually more information came out of government files.

Many people have heard of Enigma, a code, but Colossus is perhaps not so well known. This machine, developed to break the Lorenz code, is known as one of the first computers, and, involved a huge amount of invention, but is laughably simple. Colossus was built to intercept messages from the High Command of the German Army. Its use is considered to have shortened the war considerably, as the British knew what the enemy were planning and, on the basis of this intelligence, they could feed them false information.

At the end of WW2 Churchill ordered all machines and paperwork concerning Colossus be destroyed. As is often the way with these things, not everything was destroyed, as not everything was on the site. The GPO had records, and drawings had been taken home by individuals. There had been six machines by the end of the war and one was at GCHQ Cheltenham, and they survived into the 1960s. GCHQ used their machine for decoding Russian high grade cipher work. They were under the impression that the Colossus was secure but the spy Kim Philby worked at Bletchley Park, so the Russians were up to date with the machine.

There were plans to demolish the house in the 1990s, but the actual code-breakers from those war years wanted to save the site. Individual GPO engineers knew how the machine worked and several of them, particularly Tommy Flowers, electronics engineer, who built the machine, came forward and gradually they put together bits they could get hold of. Appeals were put out to amateur radio hams for parts they couldn't buy. Phillips, valve makers of the Netherlands helped hugely in the assembly.

Enough minds and resources worked together over fourteen years until finally the machine was running. The Colossus Project intends to show this gradual revelation.

Why has it taken so long? The Official Secrets Act meant it was many years before anyone was able to speak of their work at Bletchley Park. The work was very compartmentalised and deliberately very few people knew the bigger picture. Gradually the story is being pieced together.

Two years ago Lottery Funding was secured to rescue the building which is open as a museum. There is an excellent website of the Bletchley Park Trust which gives more details:

<http://www.bletchleypark.org.uk/>

The BBC has a page about Bletchley Park as well:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/threecounties/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_8319000/8319158.stm