Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society
NEWSLETTER – Autumn 2016

A VISIT TO BLETCHLEY PARK

The Mansion at Bletchley Park

There is no better place to visit on a fine day than Bletchley Park. It has to be admitted that he house itself is perhaps of interest to those who are fascinated by a more extravagant example of late Victorian domestic architecture, but that is not why most people will visit. This house set in extensive grounds on the edge of Milton Keynes had as significant a role in the history of this country during the second world war as the airfields from which RAF fighter pilots flew during the Battle of Britain, or the south coast ports that welcomed the soldiers rescued from Dunkirk, and which sent out the invading forces to Normandy beaches at D-Day. You will be able to wander around the various huts where encrypted messages from the enemy forces were decoded, analysed and sent to Britain's military intelligence. You can see where the brilliant minds of Alan Turing and others broke German military codes and dreamed up the world's first electronic computer, or take an hour long guided tour, visit the National Museum of C, visit the Imitation Game in the Mansion, and perhaps have a bite to eat in one of the cafes or picnic in the ground.

An Enigma Machine

The Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS) moved into Bletchley Park – or BP as it came to be known – in August 1939, just before war was declared. In the seven months of the "Phoney War" when nothing much happened in the fighting between

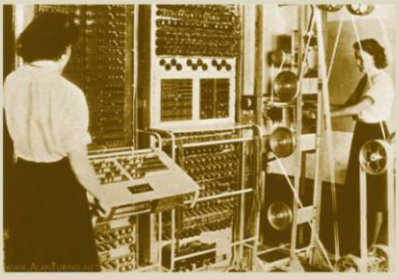
Germany and the Allies, BP had time to build up its expertise in trying to break the German codes that used the famous Enigma enciphering machine.

The Enigma itself was no secret: it had been in the 1920s for German banks to send coded messages between branches. However, it had gone through a series of developments so that by the outbreak of war, it was able to be set with 150,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 different combinations, making it for the Germans, seemingly unbreakable.

German enciphered military messages were first broken by Polish cryptologists, who also designed an electro mechanical device known as the "bombas", but by 1940, the Germans understood how to outwit them. The British, French, and Poles were unwilling to share their knowledge, but the British had learned that mathematics was the means to try and break Enigma. The head of GC&CS immediately recruited the mathematicians Alan Turing from Cambridge University and Peter Twain from Oxford. More mathematicians and linguists were recruited so that by 1943 over 9,000 were working around the clock in three shifts in a dozen huts and more permanent brick buildings. Code breaking began with intercepts made of Luftwaffe, and German naval and army messages at listening stations around southern England, and these were taken to BP for processing. If a message was successfully deciphered, it would be translated into English and its importance assessed. The most important messages were sent to Whitehall to the appropriate branch of the armed forces.

Enigma was not the only enciphering machine developed by the Germans. The more sophisticated Lorenz SZ40 was used to send messages between Berlin and senior commanders in the field. John Tiltman and Bill Tutte found how to break the codes in 1941, while Max Newman was convinced that a machine could be built to determine the settings of the LorenzSZ40, and so the world's first electronic digital computer was constructed by the Post Office engineer, Tommy Flowers.

Colossus became operational in February 1944, while a faster model was operational by June 1st, just in time for the Normandy landings on D-Day. This gave allied commanders access to messages between the German high command and Berlin throughout Europe. While you cannot rerun history, it is often said that the work of the code breakers at BP shortened the Second World War by two years; true or not, their work certainly saved the lives of thousands of allied troops.



Colossus and two operators from the Women's Royal Naval Service, Dorothy Du Boisson and Elsie Booker.

Bletchley Park is opposite Bletchley Railway Station on the Euston to the North West rail line. It is close to the junctions 13 and 14 on the M1 motorway. Full details of opening times and prices are to be found at www.bletchleypark.org.uk

Graham Parker