

A VISIT TO BLETCHLEY PARK

Ever since seeing the film “The Imitation Game” and learning about Alan Turing, I had wanted to go to Bletchley Park. I have studied World War II, read all Churchill’s books and researched many of the great battles. I was well aware of the key breaking of the German code Ultra which used the machine “Enigma” and the efforts to keep this breakthrough secret.

As a boy, I went through the blitz; my elder sister plotted incoming Luftwaffe aircraft at Stanmore; my younger sister developed air reconnaissance photographs at Kodak, whilst I made spitfires out of balsa wood! I watched the massed gliders go over my house on D Day.

In spite of this, I was not prepared for a wave of nostalgia on my visit. I suppose I had expected a very up to date multimedia approach to museum presentation but, rather cleverly, the whole atmosphere was very much geared to the 1940s and the slightly amateur feel which so typified the citizen army that faced the professional military approach of the Germans. (I hope this was intentional and not lack of funds!)



I was surprised by the huge number of wooden huts and to learn that over 10,000 people worked there at its peak. I had imagined a select few beavering away all night but, no, there was a huge contingent working in shifts.

I think it was these same wooden huts that really transported me back. There was a myriad of little rooms with their black, cast iron stoves glowing away and serving as a back drop to groups of people, some in uniform, some not. Most of these tableaux had a voice-over sound track and I noted that all the participants seemed to speak with BBC Standard English, a rarity these days. The daily life of this huge contingent, working on their own little section and not knowing what the next hut was doing in most cases, must have been intense. Keeping secrecy must have been difficult especially as many were billeted outside the grounds. They did have beautiful grounds in which to eat their sandwiches if the weather was good!



Nothing prepares you for the exhibition housing the world`s first digital computer and the rows of Bombe machines all clicking away. We are used to devices powered by tiny microchips, but these were big machines dedicated to breaking the daily settings for the Enigma machine. Something as mundane as a weather report for the German U boats could help the breakthrough as there were so many repetitive words used in the same format each day.

Did you know that Bletchley not only read the signals from Enigma but also broke into Hitler`s personal cipher machine Lorenz? Used by his high command, it was considered totally unreadable. It did take Bletchley until mid 1942 to crack it! It gave the allies the vital information that Hitler had bought

into the D Day deception plan that the main landings would be at Calais and that Normandy would be a diversion.

There were controversial elements to the programme. Sometimes the allies could not act on the information gained as that would have given away the source. Those acting on the intelligence had to invent a fictitious account of how they got the information to leak to the Germans. Sometimes this was not possible and we had to let the event happen without warning...the raid on Coventry was reputed to be one such occasion but this has been challenged by modern historians.

On the subject of secrecy, David Smith sent me this snippet: "There is an embroidery wall hanging in the entrance hall to the main house at Bletchley Mansion. It was worked by Jean and Faye Budd who lived as young girls with their parents on site.

The embroidery contains a decorative border which is actually Morse Code. Our guide told us that some of the words were actually code words giving access to the top secret areas on site. The inquisitive girls had picked them up by keeping their ears open!"

See the film about Alan Turing with Benedict Cumberbatch and then, if you have not been to Bletchley, add it to your bucket list.

I know I would like to go again. Shall we add it to the list if enough of you want to go too, maybe for 2021? It would mean a bus trip.....

Jeremy North, with proofing help from David and Maggie Smith.