

Grumpy Old Men's Club update

Thursday 4th May saw a very small, but select, group of "Grumpies" heading up the M1 towards Milton Keynes – their destination? Bletchley Park, home of the World War Two codebreaking operations and the birthplace of modern computing for a fascinating and enjoyable visit. Following the obligatory arrival cup of coffee (in the company of a much larger U3A group) we joined an introductory guided tour given by a very knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteer.

Many historians have estimated that the codebreakers efforts helped to shorten the war by up to two years, saving countless lives. At its peak, around ten thousand people worked at Bletchley Park and its associated outstations. The exact number is not known, even today. They tackled the complex task of interception, deciphering, analysing and distributing the intelligence derived from enemy radio signals, while their work remained shrouded in the highest levels of security.

The British Government acquired the site in 1938 and once the first wooden huts were built and communication channels established, it became the home for the secret efforts of the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) in August 1939. In its early days, around one hundred people worked there. As war progressed the numbers increased very rapidly requiring the construction of many new buildings to house all the secret work.

After the war, GC&CS became the Government Communications Head Quarters (GCHQ) and it left Bletchley Park in 1946. The site had various uses over the following decades but gradually fell into disrepair. In 1992, a group of local historians saved the site from the developer's bulldozers and the Bletchley Park Trust was formed to preserve the site for the nation.

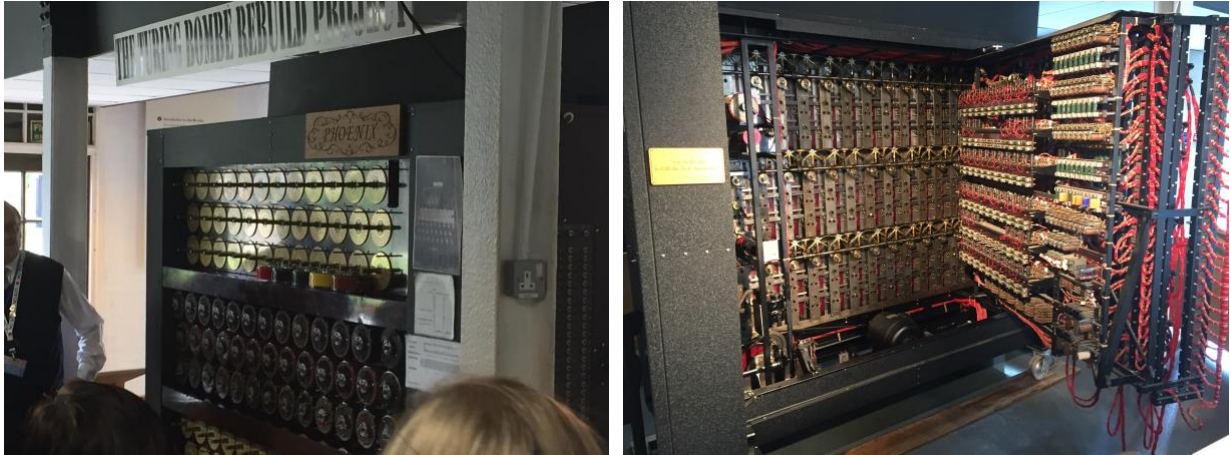
2014 was a landmark year for Bletchley Park. Following 22 years of hard work by the Bletchley Park Trust it saw the completion of the first phase of the restoration to the World War Two landscape and the iconic codebreaking huts. The conversion of "Block C" into a new Visitor Centre completed the transformation. The next phase of the project will restore the remaining historic buildings currently derelict or not fit for use and there will be further development of the educational programmes and exhibitions. It is expected to cost £20 million and take ten years to complete.



Most people are aware of Bletchley Park, the breaking of the Enigma machine and its impact on the Battle of the Atlantic. This is the usual subject of the various Hollywood films such as "Enigma" and "The Imitation Game" but the reality is that Bletchley Park contributed so much more, for example: -

- Providing early warning of German air attacks on British cities,
- Production of intelligence to support the Mediterranean and North African campaigns,
- Contribution to the success of Operation Overlord,
- Breaking Japanese codes and producing intelligence that helped secure the successful outcome of the war in the Pacific.

Central to the success of breaking Enigma was the Bombe machine developed by Alan Turing and Gordon Welchman. The machine helped speed up the breaking of Enigma so that messages were still operationally relevant. By the end of the war there were over two hundred of these machines across the UK and around one hundred in the USA. Today at Bletchley Park you can see one of these incredible machines which has been rebuilt and is fully functional. The view inside this machine is truly mind-blowing.



One visit is not enough to take in everything there is to see but fortunately your £15.75 concession entry fee gives you a ticket which is valid for twelve months allowing for as many return visits as you like.