



**Asa Briggs *Secret Days: How Bletchley Park Worked During the War* Frontline Books, 2011. 192pp, £19.99.**

All BCMH members will know of Lord Asa Briggs as one of the foremost British historians of the past sixty years, but some, at least, may not be aware that he worked in Hut Six at Bletchley Park during 1943-45. Now, in his ninetieth year, he has written his own account of 'the goose that laid the golden eggs'. The result is part autobiography, part history, and part historiography.

Lord Briggs himself was called up into the Royal Corps of Signals after graduating in Modern History at Cambridge. He trained in radio interception (Y Service), which, as he says, stood him in good stead at Bletchley Park. For reasons that he does not make clear, the author was then transferred to the Intelligence Corps and, after attending a course in cryptography at Bedford, was posted to Bletchley Park in early summer 1943 in the rank of RSM. He was put to work in Hut Six, which was responsible for code breaking and worked hand-in-glove with Hut Three, which translated the decrypted signals, assessed their intelligence value and disseminated them. The other Huts do not get much mention, mainly because Lord Briggs had little or no personal contact with them.

Given his earlier military background, it is not surprising that Lord Briggs pays due tribute to the Y Service, and rightly. For without the skill of its operators there would have been nothing for BP to decrypt. As to how the Enigma and other codes were broken, he explains very clearly that it was often a question of identifying particular habits in individual German radio operators – a tendency to begin routine messages in the same format or to use particular phrases – which provided the clue. Lord Briggs and his compatriots would play with these and provide a possible decrypt, which would then be fed into one of the bombes to see if it unlocked the message. Success would be signalled by the opening of the hatch separating the Machine Room, where girls operated the bombes, and the decryption room.

Much of the book is taken up with the personalities who worked at Bletchley Park. Lord Briggs' undoubted hero is Gordon Welchman, who established Hut Six, although Welchman went on to other things soon after RSM Briggs arrived. Alan Turing also receives just coverage, as well as many other not so well known BP-ites. Lord Briggs is also very interesting on the schisms in Hut 3 until Squadron leader Eric Jones arrived in 1942 and installed calm and harmony. He also pays just tribute to the many women who worked there. One particular aspect which fascinates him is how numerous 'old boy' networks were employed to recruit suitable staff, one being the Marlborough College – Sidney Sussex, Cambridge connection which was used by Welchman. The author clearly got on very well with the American detachment, much enjoying their good food and excellent drinks.

He also tells us something of life outside working hours. Both the Army and RAF established separate camps for their personnel, the latter disliked because of the strict discipline within it. The Royal Navy, on the other hand, relied on billeting, with many WRENs being put up in local country houses, although living conditions in these were often even more Spartan than in the Army and RAF camps. Lord Briggs also stresses that Bletchley was very much a railway town, being the centre of a web of lines. Local pubs and cinemas are also covered, but there is surprisingly little on the wide ranging entertainments available within BP itself. He himself comes across as a very social man,



*The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)*

Page 2 / 2

who built up a wide circle of friends, including the commandant of his camp who looked to him to obtain him an honorary Oxford degree after the war since he thought that the gown would look good over his uniform!

The historiographical aspects of the book, which include a most useful appendix reviewing the now copious literature on Bletchley Park, are also of much interest. He describes the frustrations with officialdom that the likes of Hugh Trevor-Roper and J. C. Masterman had when they wanted to publish aspects of the Secret War and charts the gradual revealing of what went on at BP, which began with the publication of Freddie Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret* in 1974.

A final chapter relates the trials and tribulations that the Bletchley Park estate went through after the last of its wartime inhabitants, Barbara Abernethy, locked its gates. A number of organisations, including the GPO and Ministry of Aviation, occupied some of its buildings for varying lengths of time – there was even a teachers training college for a period. Yet very few who were there post-1946 would have had any idea of what had gone on at BP, that is until the publication of Winterbotham's book. The buildings themselves steadily deteriorated and there was a real threat that they might all be demolished and replaced by a modern housing estate. It was only when the Bletchley Historical and Archaeological Society stepped in and established the Bletchley Park Trust that the rot was halted. Yet, as Lord Briggs points out, the Trust itself has had its difficult times.

While *Secret Days* certainly does ramble in places – the lengthy Introduction spills over into much of Chapter One, for example – there is no doubt that Lord Briggs has painted a fascinating and often very intimate portrait of Bletchley Park, including its out-stations. The book, too, is enhanced by some very interesting photographs and is certainly a valuable addition to what has already been written on the subject.

**Charles Messenger**