

# CODEBREAKERS AT EASTCOTE

by Susan Toms

In last year's journal article *Enigma and the Eastcote Connection* I wrote about the highly secret work, as an outstation of Bletchley Park, which was carried out at the Ministry of Defence site between Eastcote Road and Lime Grove during World War II. At the end of the war the machines were dismantled and the operation closed down. However the site retained its connections with government intelligence when it was decided to move the Government Code and Cipher School GC&CS from Bletchley Park to Eastcote, partly to utilise the technical expertise of the Post Office based at nearby Dollis Hill.

This involved the transfer of many staff from Bletchley and other locations in London. The move was scheduled to commence in November 1945 and be completed by January 1946. In fact it did not start until 30 March 1946 and was completed in record time by 7 April 1946. Some staff were recruited from the many skilled radio operators and traffic analysts who had been demobbed and returned to civilian life in the Home Counties.

As in war time the true nature of the work was to be kept secret with staff being forbidden to use the expression 'signal intelligence'. Instead they were to say they were civil servants working at Government Communications Headquarters. This was reiterated in a Foreign Office memo concerning the financial arrangements for the organization which stated that the new bank account to be opened at Barclays Bank in Field End Road was to be in the name of 'Government Communications Headquarters'.

An idea of the complexity of the work can be gained from a breakdown of the projected staff numbers for the site:

- Cryptographic 475

• Intelligence	83
• Traffic Analysis	180
• Technical	93
• Cipher Security	150
• Administration	<u>36</u>
• Total	1017

These figures exclude service personnel and domestic staff. This staff establishment was obviously less than the numbers employed during the war but it was felt to be important to retain sufficient expertise and technical know how to cope with future post war problems.

With such numbers it was necessary to appoint a billeting officer to help staff find accommodation in the area and many were dispersed throughout Eastcote, Ruislip, Pinner and Rayner's Lane. A document dealing with the personnel implications of moving to Eastcote mentioned that owing to unavoidable difficulties, a hostel at Stanmore would not be available. However while efforts were being made to obtain a hostel nearer to Eastcote, a hostel in Porchester Terrace near Paddington would be used. The charges per week for this hostel were to be as follows:

4 or more sharing a room	27s 6d
3 sharing a room	32s 6d
2 sharing a room	37s 6d
Single room	44s 6d

Further information was also supplied in this document on the journey times to Eastcote from all stations on the Piccadilly and Metropolitan lines and local bus routes.

On a local note Russell Barnes (see Figs. 1 & 2), who has kindly supplied his reminiscences of being stationed at Eastcote from July 1948 to May 1952 remembers lodging with Maud Smart of 151 Linden Avenue. She was 'an endearing and kindly person' who 'really did try within financial constrictions to make life as pleasant as possible.' Her brother George ran the

Eastcote Garage in Field End Road.

Another important consideration with such numbers on the site was the provision of

PASS INTELLIGENCE CORPS		ARMY FORM B.206	
REGT. 1	No. 2200639	Rank SGT	Unit telephone
Name BARNES	R. M.		
has permission to be absent from his unit			
from 19.03.52 to 29.04.52			
(Sgd.) <i>R. Barnes</i>			
1. Name of M. Ireland Destination Valid only with A.B.64			
2. Ration Card Issued YES		4. Reporting Centre No. 4 Int. Coy. M.I.8. WAR OFFICE	
3.		5. Nearest Hospital or Medical Unit VICTORIA AND WEST HANTS HOSP.	
		6. Force of C.M.P. BOURNEMOUTH	
		7.	

**Fig. 1**  
**Leave Pass issued to Russell Barnes in 1952**

catering facilities. A document detailed the proposed costs of establishing a canteen to provide lunches for a thousand staff six days a week. It even mentioned the appointment of Miss E.M. Burt of 14 Pavilion Way Eastcote as cook on the princely pay of 1s 4d per hour. There were also further mentions of the hostel it was hoped to open. However there was an expressed worry that 'lower grade staff would go out for a bun and coffee' which was discouraged otherwise the catering would not pay for itself. A suggestion was made that the canteen should sell cigarettes to increase its profits and encourage staff to stay on site. As to the quality of the food I will quote from Russell Barnes.....'The canteen manager, despite rationing, was quite adventurous and placed jugged hare on the lunch menu. We plebeians thought it worth a gamble but a hysterical colleague demanded his money be returned because he was sure it had gone off'.

As with the secrecy that was attached to breaking the German Enigma codes during the war, so one of the most successful operations carried out at Eastcote after the war was only revealed many years later. This was the breaking of the main Soviet military ciphers known as the Poets series.

It began with GC&CS breaking the first Poet system called Coleridge in 1946. Similarly as during the war there was a small contingent of American personnel based at Eastcote. They were also actively involved in the Poets series operation. Russell Barnes remembers the delights of tasting 'true percolated coffee' courtesy of the American service personnel which contrasted unfavourably with the fare of food rationed Britain.

The main workforce comprised civilian civil servants, many of whom had worked at Bletchley Park during the war. These included such famous code breakers as Josh Cooper and his brother, Hugh Denham, Dr. Aitken and Tommy Flowers who worked on Colossus, the first computer. At the end of the war all except two of the Colossus machines were destroyed and these were sent to Eastcote.

Russell Barnes worked in Number Four Intelligence School, which had moved on to the site in 1946 from a large private house in West London, where it had operated during the war. It was the only inclusive service unit on site and comprised sixty army personnel commanded by a Major V. Bone. However the wearing of uniform was forbidden so that they could be dispersed among the civilian staff. As an army conscript he should have only served two years but an emergency regulation evoked due to the Korean War meant that he spent four years at Eastcote. Some of the time he worked next to a man, who during the war had manipulated captured German spies and supervised their doctored transmissions to Germany.

Russell Barnes has many memories of the social life at Lime Grove. Because of the nature of the work, staff were cautioned about mixing too much with local people, so most socialising was done with work colleagues. 'The Black Horse' known as 'the back gate' because of its close proximity to the site, and 'The Case is Altered' were favourite haunts to avoid spending the evening in lodgings. There were walks in the

grounds of Eastcote House gardens and Haydon Hall, with cricket matches to watch at the weekends. Once a month amateur jazz musicians played at a nearby local school, possibly Field End Junior or Bourne Secondary. Among the visiting musicians were Cleo Lane and her future husband Johnny Dankworth. There was also a jazz band on site as well as the usual sports teams. Towards the end of the war a social hall was provided on site to the left of the entrance gates from Lime Grove. In Russell Barnes' time this was used as a coffee bar at lunchtimes and it also contained a television set and a black Steinway grand piano. This was the place where service personnel collected their pay and official meetings were held. At the rear there was a small hairdresser/barber salon which was open for a couple of days a week.

Another option for socializing was the nearby Swakeleys House which made its tennis courts, sports grounds and club rooms available. Like the Wrens during the war service personnel could take advantage of free West End theatre tickets and Russell Barnes remembers seeing many plays and musicals as a result of this offer.

By the early 1950s it was obvious that the Lime Grove site was no longer suitable for present or future demands especially with

the growth in electronic communications. Neither was it efficient to have staff scattered in accommodation over such a wide area. Hence in 1952 it was decided to leave Eastcote and move to Cheltenham with a change of name to GCHQ - Government Communications Headquarters. Afterwards other government offices moved on to the site. At the same time, Russell Barnes decided it was a parting of the ways as he left 'a job that was by its very nature repetitious and only occasionally electrifying'. He was glad to leave but it had been an experience he would 'not have missed for the world'.

#### **References:**

- National Archives HW 64/25*
- National Archives HW 64/45*
- National Archives HW 64/68*
- National Archives HW 14/164*
- National Archives FO 366/2221*
- Personal Reminiscences of Russell Barnes*



**Fig. 2 - Left to right, Sgts. Bunny Austin, Russell Barnes and John Ferguson  
outside Swakeleys House in autumn 1950**