

ALL QUIET IN THE CHICKEN RUN

by Mary Pache

A reader's letter in the Daily Express sometime after the Second World War:

I was one of those hundreds of Wrens who operated the decoding machines at Bletchley, and who were sworn to secrecy so great that not even my family knew what I was doing. Churchill once sent us a message saying he was 'pleased to hear the hens were laying without clucking'.

This is the story told by another of those 'hundreds', **Cicely Pickering**:

As an ex-Pembroke V Wren I found Susan Toms' account of Enigma and the Eastcote connection in Journal 2005 very interesting with facts and figures I hadn't known, such as how many Bombes were there and how many Wrens to a watch.

I was a late entrant, joining in 1944 and only staying at Eastcote for a few months. Susan writes of wooden accommodation cabins but I was in a cold, draughty and hard-to-clean Nissen hut, so that when the chance came to transfer to Stanmore with its comfortable brick-built living quarters, I took it. Saying goodbye to Eastcote also meant saying goodbye to that horrid footpath, so scary in the dark that I always found someone to cross with.

Eastcote had its compensations however and I can remember sunny mornings after Night Watch when I and my friend, Anne, would walk the back way along Eastcote Road into Ruislip for the tea shop at that end of the High Street. Another memory is of a 'Retreat' nearby and being invited to visit the lovely, peaceful garden.

Oddly, my only memory of going up to London is when a small party of us were taken to the Hungaria restaurant to celebrate a birthday.

Anne and I always worked together, taking it in turn to spend the Watch either setting up the Bombe or being in the back room checking any result of the runs. If the 'stop' was the result of a 'wrong setting', and not of breaking the code, it was a black mark against the operator (unless the RAF technician could be persuaded it was due to a 'slipped setting' and mark it accordingly!)

Anne and I moved to Stanmore together and then, shortly after VE Day Wrens from Stanmore were transferred to Bletchley Park. We were quartered in Woburn Abbey (up in what I imagine had been the servants quarters) and ferried into Bletchley each day. For me that didn't last long as I married just after moving there, and married Wrens were able to obtain their discharge very quickly.

It was all a great experience - though it wasn't until years later that Enigma was written about and I was able to tell my husband that I had been one of 'the hens laying without clucking' as Churchill apparently said. Previously the most we had been allowed to say was that we were in a branch of British Intelligence - which people took with a pinch of salt!

Actually, we had so many pep talks, drumming into us how essential it was that we didn't 'cluck' that I found it difficult to recall many details. A visit to Bletchley Park a few years ago did bring back some memories, as did Susan's article.