

## **Local History Talk about the Y service at Beaumanor and Garats Hay - October 2022**

Although our local history group met frequently (using zoom throughout the pandemic, October was our first face-to-face meeting for almost three years. I presented a talk to a large gathering at the Methodist Church on the Y-service at Beaumanor Hall during the Second World War.

In 1939 the war office requisitioned the hall as well as Garats Hay opposite St. Mary's Church. Initially the buildings provided a base for members of the anti-aircraft searchlight detachment but in 1941 several other groups were also onsite; including members of the Royal Signals Regiment. It was soon after this that the estate was placed under the control of M.I.8 as part of a covert operation instigated by Winston Churchill and given the code name 'Project Ultra.'

The job of those employed in wireless interception stations was to monitor enemy channels of wireless traffic & communications. Y station activities were as top secret as those at Bletchley Park – the X station/decoding HQ in Buckinghamshire whose task was to decipher all those intercepted coded enemy messages. Beaumanor was chosen for its rural location, away from the coast, concealing (radio) receivers in specially built huts camouflaged to blend into the landscape.

On 10th Oct 1941 seven busloads of operators moved up to Charnwood Forest. At this stage civilian recruitment was already proving difficult with most able-bodied men having been called up for the armed services, so they looked instead to the newly formed Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) for recruitment. Consequently the majority of Y station listeners/ interceptors were uniformed ATS girls- many of them as young as seventeen. Their skills soon proved equal (and in many cases superior) to their male colleagues.

Most ATS trainees were drawn from other War Office locations at Chatham Barracks, Trowbridge & the Isle of Man. They were given basic military training alongside intense courses in morse, teleprinter & other communication skills. Only one out of every hundred recruits were finally selected as 'meeting the grade' for operational posts. Their job was to operate short-wave radios: tracking intercepting and recording German or Italian morse coded messages. A knowledge of German (though helpful) was not required, nor the ability to transmit messages. Messages were usually enciphered using military coding machines like *Enigma*.

All messages were written by hand to be transmitted as quickly as possible by teleprinter over Post office lines to Bletchley. Simultaneously duplicate paper records were sent by despatch/motorcycle courier.

The nature of the work at Bletchley remained secret until the 1970s whilst the work of most Y stations was

not revealed until the 1990s. Although difficult to prove some historians have suggested the interception and deciphering work at Bletchley (and by inference in the work of the Y stations) may have shortened the war by around two years.

Uniquely at Beaumanor instead of converting Hall rooms, the decision was made to construct operational set-huts equipped with short-wave radio sets in a 20 acre field north of hall. These were served by an aerial farm nearby. The tracking huts were spaced apart to avoid collateral damage should a bombing raid occur. Several were brick-built with 14" blast-proof walls, 8ft high. Hut teams worked relatively independent of one another and teams were billeted together under three distinct HQs based at Quorn, Garats Hay and Brand hill (Woodhouse Eaves). Each listening hut had 4 watches operating round the clock and each watch group comprised 36 girls. Quorn operated I hut, Garats Hay watches operated J hut, and Brand hill- K hut. The girls only rarely met girls from other watches in the canteen hut where all talk about their work was banned.

The operational huts were under the charge of Commanding Officer Marshall John Ellingworth – a WW1, Royal Navy veteran, who employed a local architect (name unknown) to design the set rooms, disguised to fit unobtrusively into their country house surroundings.

Hut A was camouflaged as cricket pavilion. It accommodated teleprinter operators co-ordinating handwritten transcriptions and packaging paper copies for transportation by courier to Bletchley. Hut G was disguised as a greenhouse housing the NAAFI. Other listening huts were disguised as estate worker cottages, a cart shed, stables and a Dutch barn. A suite of four wooden admin./archive huts were strung along a perimeter road under the trees where listening was not the priority.

To avoid enemy aircraft tracking the set huts were not heated except by the radios themselves. ATS operators were allowed to smoke to keep warm and stay alert through the six-hourly shifts. Only when the station chief backed their request was an application for battledress to combat the cold granted.

Staff were constantly reminded that they were subject to the Official Secrets Act and because of the covert nature of the work few period photos of the station site survive. Luckily a few have come to light during my researches but I would appreciate any others if anyone has access to any.

GCCS certificates, recognising the vital services performed during the war by the girls of the ATS, only started appearing after May 2010 when Prime-minister David Cameron took office. However, through the efforts of some surviving members of the service back in

1998 a Y services memorial had been established at the National Memorial Arboretum in Shropshire.

Locally, at St. Mary's Church in Old Woodhouse, a memorial service, supported by the local community, is regularly organised by the British Legion when tribute is paid to all those who served with the Y services both here and abroad. This legacy has been bolstered since 2019 by the Loughborough Library Local Studies Volunteers who collated an exhibition of Y service memorabilia which is still on display within Beaumanor Hall.

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