

## BIDDENHAM HISTORY SOCIETY

When we came to the meeting on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 to listen to a talk by Jonathan Byrne, the Oral History Officer at the Bletchley Park Trust, we knew that in Biddenham we were living near the scene of important code breaking work during the Second World War. We learnt more about this work from Jonathan and we found out that several people who came to the talk had connections with war time Bletchley.

By the early 1990s, Bletchley Park had fallen into disrepair and there was a threat that it would be turned into a housing estate. However, a new Trust Board was formed at the beginning of 2000 and since then 28 acres of the historic site have been acquired, there has been renovation of the wartime code breaking huts and the Trust's Oral History project, which Jonathan is in charge of, has provided a rich and vital archive of veterans' memories.

Jonathan described the difficulties in tracing the thousands of people who worked at Bletchley. There are over 12,000 people on the Roll of Honour and since 2009, they or their relatives can apply for a badge to commemorate their service. Three quarters of the people who worked at Bletchley were women, which because of marriage and name change can make checking and tracing personnel more difficult. The allocation of jobs in a stereotyped way has made matters easier, especially if only initials for someone who worked at Bletchley have been provided. Jonathan can then decide whether the initials can belong to a man or a woman by the nature of the job.

Since 2011, nearly 400 people who worked at Bletchley have been interviewed in locations all over the world, most in their own homes. Skype has been useful for interviewing veterans in Australia. To help him, Jonathan relies on a team of volunteers, one of whom lives in Biddenham and came to the talk. He sends the veteran who has agreed to be interviewed, usually as a result of a visit to Bletchley, a questionnaire to prompt memory. He said that the replies are usually very detailed and precise. They include information about selection for Bletchley, lodgings, the work undertaken and leisure activities (some of the young women would cycle a long way for a concert or the chance to sing or join in drama). Sometimes a family member sits in with the interviewee to prompt memory, though Jonathan finds that peoples' long term memory is usually very good. The main

problems he finds are modesty – veterans understate the value of the work they did – and sometimes sadness and emotion as friends and colleagues are remembered fondly, who have since died.

Some of the recordings of the interviews can be heard at Bletchley Park and they highlight the broad range of roles people were fulfilling from code breakers to machine operators and clerical staff. Jonathan would like more veterans who provided support services like meals for those working at Bletchley to come forward. Every interview recorded contributes essential and valuable information which is helping to build a complete account of what happened at Bletchley Park. To add to the picture, Jonathan now wants to interview people who lived in the Bletchley area during World War Two and whose family perhaps provided a billet for someone who worked at the park. If you know someone who would like to be interviewed, do get in touch with Jonathan at Bletchley Park 01908 – 272685 [jbyrne@bletchleypark.org.uk](mailto:jbyrne@bletchleypark.org.uk)

The next meeting of the History Society will be on Monday, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 at 8pm in the Church Barn. Bob Ricketts will talk about the Women's Suffrage Movement in Bedfordshire to mark the centenary of some women getting the vote in 1918. I hope you will be able to come. Programme cards for 2018 – 2019 will be available.

Kathy Fricker