

## **Visit by HP-UG to Bletchley Park on October 23, 2004**

On October 23, members of HP-UG and their guests visited Bletchley Park, also known as Station X, and home of the WW2 breakers of the Enigma codes.

The visit began with a presentation by the Director of the Trust in the famous library on the historical significance of Bletchley Park, and how they planned to preserve its heritage, and the progress so far. In addition, facilities are to be built for a learning centre and for a business centre to be occupied by both small businesses and by a museum relating to the history of Bletchley Park. Funding was initially obtained from commercial sponsors pending the availability of National Lottery and other funding. This commercial funding allowed the preservation and development to commence months sooner than would have been the case had they waited for the Lottery funding. As a result substantial progress has been made in the last eleven months.

The first area to be visited was that containing the rebuild of Colossus, arguably the world's first computer and the forerunner of today's IT industry. It is said that it shortened the war by two years and saved thousands of lives. Comprising a set of thermionic valves (some 2500) and electro-mechanical switches, it was used to decode the German's Enigma-encoded radio messages. The rebuild had been particularly challenging as Churchill had ordered that all documentation be destroyed at the end of the war. The reconstruction was based on a few photographs and some material made available from the US. We were privileged both to meet Tony Sale, leader of the reconstruction, and to see this machine at close quarters, rather than through the viewing windows provided for the general public.

The second part of the visit was to a newly-refurbished building, providing both starter units for young companies, and also a learning/museum area. In the latter we found a mock-up of a German field radio station, complete with Enigma encoding machine, and in the learning area various vintages of personal computers, representing some well-known but long-gone British designs.

The last part of the visit was to an area housing a range of computers made by DEC, HP, Marconi and Elliott Automation. These machines covered a wide time span of small computers, and it was interesting to observe just how much development had taken place over the years. We were especially fortunate to be able to see this collection and the Colossus area, as within a week of our visit these areas had to be cleared to make way for commercial redevelopment, with the equipment destined for storage.

In summary, a fascinating insight into both the challenges of the code-breakers and the history of the development of commercial computing, while providing many of us with a reminder of perhaps long-forgotten parts of our professional careers.

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