

CODEBREAKERS' SECRET WORLD

The untold story of Bletchley Park's cryptanalysts is the key to Bremont's latest limited pieces. By **Craig McLean**. Photographs by **Brian Sweeney**

At Bletchley Park, former top-secret HQ for the Allies' Second World War codebreakers and now home to a not-so-secret visitor attraction, they like to tell a story of an unheralded man. He's not Gordon Welchman, the Cambridge professor of algebraic geometry, who was as crucial to the war effort as the more celebrated Alan Turing. He's not one of the 9,000 personnel who worked at this top-secret facility 55 miles north of London, decoding secret German military ciphers on an industrialised scale. He's not even British.

"One day at the height of the war, Bletchley intercepted a short message," recounts Dr Joel Greenberg, Bletchley historian and Welchman's biographer. "Lt Kellner to report immediately to Foggia, which is a town in southern Italy on the Mediterranean. Now, what possible use can that be from an intelligence point of view?"

"Well, Bletchley have a record of this guy in their card index. They even have his full name: Lieutenant Gottfried Kellner. He'd first appeared in a decrypted message six months earlier, when he had been sent to Saint-Omer in the north of France." According to Dr Greenberg, Kellner had also appeared in several other secret German military communications, encrypted on the famous Enigma machine but decrypted by the Bletchley boffins with the help of a mechanical device, the Bombe.

"It was clear from those messages," continues Greenberg, "that his job was approving airfields for use. So if he's now being moved to the Mediterranean, the analysis is that the Germans are moving fighter aircraft into the North African theatre..."

The Bletchley codebreakers joined the dots and provided the Allied forces in the field with this crucial information: a combination of lateral thinking, precision intelligence, engineering excellence and good old British ingenuity. Small wonder, then, Henley-on-Thames watchmaker Bremont felt that the heritage of Bletchley Park was the perfect fit for its latest limited-edition piece, the Codebreaker.

The timepiece is not only inspired by classic 1940s officers' watches. In its very construction it is a homage to the war-winning work done by the mathematicians, scientists, linguists and other not-so-ordinary men and women billeted in these unprepossessing wooden huts in Buckinghamshire.

"We've incorporated relics from Bletchley into the 240 stainless-steel and 50 rose-gold watches," says Nick English, the flying enthusiast who,

alongside his brother Giles, founded Bremont in 2002. "But we weren't here to destroy any historical artefacts. It sounds corny, but we're here to preserve them. And we had to do that in a non-gimmicky way."

In the tradition of the company's 2012 Victory watch – made using original copper and oak from Nelson's flagship – the Codebreaker's crown features pine from Hut 6 (the wartime base for decrypting Wehrmacht Enigma ciphers). Five punchcards, a rare remnant of Bletchley's index database, have been carefully divided and used to display each piece's serial number on the barrel. And an original wheel from an Enigma machine, bought from a private collector, has been melted down to create the timepieces' rotors.



Timing was crucial – codebreakers had to calculate the latest Enigma settings daily

"What we specifically liked about Bletchley Park is that it's a bit of an untold story," says Nick, as we tour the 55-acre site. The clatter of building work accompanies us en route; Bletchley is undergoing an £8m restoration. A percentage of the sale price of each Codebreaker, plus proceeds of the auction of two timepieces, will go directly to the museum.

"You look at these old huts," continues Nick, "and the hairs on the back of your neck stick up. You just think, 'people were walking around here 70 years ago, doing this remarkable stuff, and more people should know about that.'"

It's often claimed that Bletchley's groundbreaking work shortened the war by two years. Given this linchpin role in the Allied victory, the trustees at

Bletchley Park acknowledge their curatorial responsibility as a key part of Britain's Second World War heritage. They couldn't simply give away the family silver, as it were, to a brand seeking a marketing ploy.

"When Bremont first approached me, I did a check and made sure this was a legitimate venture," admits Iain Standen, CEO of Bletchley Park Trust. "And it did seem to be a very sensible way of doing business. The HMS Victory museum in Portsmouth was positive about their partnership in that it provided income and publicity. You put out a special watch and you're talking to a completely different audience."

Beyond that, the congruence between the craftsmanship of a high-end British watchmaker and the painstaking work done at Bletchley proved irresistible. "Time was everything here," says Standen – day in, day out, codebreakers had to calculate the latest Enigma settings on more than 150 German communications networks, each reset at midnight. "It was all about finding those settings on a daily basis so you could decrypt and then analyse that day's traffic. So timing was crucial for everything they did." Indeed, Bremont's maxim might have been applied to the round-the-clock task undertaken by the largely female workforce at Bletchley: Tested Beyond Endurance.

Bletchley's current phase of building work will be completed in time for the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings, the success of which was dependent on the work done in this remarkable facility. Next year also sees the release of *The Imitation Game*, a biopic starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Turing. Add the publicity generated by the launch of the Codebreaker and all concerned are hopeful that it will generate more curious visitors, wanting to discover about the work done at Bletchley.

Meanwhile, as befits an ambitious young British watchmaking company with global markets eager for its latest innovation in horology, Bremont is already drawing up plans for their next military-minded venture. "We do have a couple of interesting ideas lined up. I could tell you what they are," says Nick English, "but I'd have to kill you."

Spoken like a true spook. The hush-hush heroes of Bletchley Park would surely approve.

Bletchley Park is open to the public 9.30am-4pm daily. For full details, call 01908 640404; bletchleypark.org.uk

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