

The Bletchley Girls

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The Bletchley Girls

*War, secrecy, love and loss: the women
of Bletchley Park tell their story*

Tessa Dunlop


HODDER

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

First published in paperback in 2015

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 444 79574 5

Typeset in Monotype Sabon by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

For the Bletchley Girls

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Introduction

‘No, the women have to be alive, otherwise it’ll be like all the other Bletchley books.’

The publisher was adamant: this was to be a journey through the lives of the girls who worked for Britain’s phenomenal code-breaking organisation; it is their story, they must be here to tell it. He was right; to really understand the human response to these extraordinary experiences we need to hear the women speak for themselves. Boasting an average age of ninety, the fifteen veterans featured in this book are not just Bletchley Girls – they are also the children of the Armistice, the schoolgirls of the thirties, the housewives of the fifties and the grandmothers of the digital age. Born just after the First World War, into a class-bound, cap-doffing era still swathed in imperial pink, their trajectory through a maelstrom of international violence and out the other side into nascent modernity is eye-watering time travel. Before I had even found my first Bletchley girl I felt sure not only of her great age but also of her astonishing resilience. How else could she survive so much change, so many mixed messages?

In keeping with the man’s world in which it operated, until recently Bletchley Park’s narrative has been predominantly a male one. Moth-ridden, bespectacled boffins enjoying flashes of ingenious inspiration have hogged the Park’s unlikely limelight; eccentric Alan Turing, a key code-breaker who is widely regarded as a father of the modern computer, posthumously led the way. This focus on code-breaking’s male hierarchy has obscured the reality of Park life. By 1944 women outnumbered men at Bletchley three to one, yet it is only now, at the end of their long lives, that the

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final few females are enjoying a last hurrah. Having outlived almost all their older male counterparts, the Bletchley narrative is finally their's to own. These are the girls who helped outsmart the enemy within the confines of a Buckinghamshire estate. But for all the celebration of their collective achievements, most female survivors who pop up in the press do just that: they pop up, only to retreat back into their own private realms. All we get is a quick peek at their wartime work, minus the context of the rest of their lives. The indomitable Baroness Trumpington, fuelled by her political and media stature, is a rare exception. A nonagenarian national treasure, she has been able to share her extraordinary life story on a wider stage. But what of the others? Who are these women? Where did they come from? And what did Bletchley really mean to them?

Leading Ladies

Had I seen her on the street I would have recognised Ruth Bourne (née Henry). With pretty lemon-tinted hair and distinctive brown eyes, she is one of Bletchley Park's hardest-working veterans. Her anecdotes pepper many code-breaking books, Wren Henry's sunny face smiles out from the glossy pages of *The Lost World of Bletchley Park* and I have listened to her lucid wartime descriptions on both the Internet and the radio. Perhaps it was Ruth's status that intimidated me as I dialled her number, or maybe just first-time nerves. I had not spoken to a 'Bletchley Girl' before, and I wasn't entirely sure when I had last spoken to someone the same age as our Queen.

'Ha! I am a bit of show-off,' Ruth assured me, 'so it'll be no problem to talk to you.'

I felt a rush of relief. We arranged to meet in her north London home on Valentine's day.

I'd done my homework; I knew Ruth operated one of Bletchley's iconic Bombe machines and I had a mental image of her as a young girl carefully tending its rows of rotating drums, battling to

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decipher Germany's Enigma encryptions. But I confess to worrying that her Bletchley story was already well known. What more was there for me to discover? The answer came just a few minutes into our chat, when Ruth mentioned her beloved father, Isaac.

'Oh, are you Jewish?'

'Yes,' she smiled, 'I'm a British Jew.'

After that I didn't worry any more. I realised no veteran's war can be fully understood without their background story.

It was Bletchley Park Trust that, after much cajoling, gave me Ruth's contact details. ('The veterans are one of our most precious assets, we do not give out their numbers.') Her active contribution to the Park's heritage centre made her an obvious first choice. Women in their late eighties and nineties can be hard to track down. 'Oh that blankety blank email!' laughs Ruth. She is one of six from the fifteen women featured in this book who braves electronic communication. It is a mistake to presume that operating the world's most cutting-edge technology seventy years ago guarantees lifelong technical savvy. Indeed when it comes to the Bletchley Girls (at least the ones I met), most generalisations are unwise.

Over the last year I have learnt to rebuff numerous assumptions:

'Are all Bletchley ladies really posh?'

'I expect you are speaking to fiercely intelligent women?'

'It must have been really exciting working at Bletchley Park.'

In fact, they are not all posh, nor are they all 'fiercely intelligent' and by no means all of them relished Park life. But they all have stories that demand to be heard.

Years of working in television and radio has taught me the power of the personal story; I was excited about the prospect of talking to women who were players in a past now remembered primarily through a series of big names (Churchill, Hitler, Eisenhower) and iconic events (Dunkirk, the Blitz, the D-Day landings). Our victory in the Second World War has defined Britain's recent

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national identity; the veterans for whom I searched are now part of a generation celebrated en masse for their selflessness, stoicism and – in the case of Bletchley Park – secrecy. Generalisation threatens to overshadow reality. Only the women could tell me how it really was. But first I had to find them. Ruth could not stand alone.

My search began as a haphazard affair; I fired off letters, contacted museums, gleaned tips and clues from forewords in Bletchley books and memoirs and scanned the papers for relevant articles.

It wasn't long before I struck gold.

I first read about Rozanne Colchester (née Medhurst) in the *Guardian*. The headline was eye-catching: 'Women spies in the Second World War; "It was horrible and wonderful like a love affair."' Rozanne is convinced she didn't say that. 'It sounds so stupid. I would never say a thing like that. A love affair? What does that mean?' And then she laughs; after all, it's in the past now. There is a bell-like quality to her voice as she reminisces about her extraordinary life. Although born in Yorkshire, by the late 1930s Rozanne and her family had moved to Rome. 'Heavens it was exciting but I think you always feel things so much more intensely when you're young. And I loved my time at Bletchley Park, I made such good friends there.'

My ears prick at her mention of Pamela Rose, one of the Park's sophisticated thespian set about whom I had read a couple of heady extracts in Michael Smith's bestselling *Station X*. Surely she wasn't still alive?

'Indeed she is! She's ninety-six. Yes, of course I can forward on a letter, with pleasure.'

Waiting for the post to arrive had never been so fraught with anticipation. How long does a ninety-one-year-old need to deliver a letter? How long does a ninety-six-year-old take to reply to that letter? Suspended in a curious limbo, I began devouring first-person war memoirs. A couple stood out. Gwen Watkins (née Davies) is a skilful writer with an authorial tone that remains

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delightfully crisp; her latest book, written at ninety, is a memoir about Park life entitled *Cracking the Luftwaffe Codes*. ‘Attention is always given to the Enigma machine,’ she explains, ‘but I and lots of other people had nothing to do with Enigma codes so I decided to set the record straight.’

I find Gwen looking out to sea in front of her pebbledash terrace house in Mumbles, Wales, a faded cotton sunhat perched on her head. She greets me with open arms. ‘Now, we could record the interview in the sitting-room, but because of the traffic most journalists prefer to come through the house.’

Gwen, it turns out, is something of a media darling. One of the last people left alive who had a meaningful relationship with Wales’ most famous poet, Dylan Thomas, she is quick to attribute her impressive literary connections to Bletchley Park. ‘That changed everything, I would not have missed it for all the world.’ Before the war Gwen was a mere schoolgirl (albeit a ‘fiercely intelligent’ one) in Bournemouth. Meeting her confirmed what I had long suspected; my quest was much more than an analysis of code-breaking’s component parts. Tucked away in Buckinghamshire, the Bletchley Girls shared a common experience that for some had lifelong repercussions.

At ninety-one, Charlotte Webb (née Vine-Stevens) is almost exactly Gwen’s contemporary but unlike Gwen she wasn’t a writer. However the depth and breadth of her life’s experiences recently compelled Charlotte to put pen to paper.

‘Well I started making a few jottings for family, I suppose, that’s how it began . . . It’s extraordinary how things have taken off.’ She looks both surprised and humbled by the attention her memoir *Secret Postings* has attracted.

Invited to spend the night in Charlotte’s Worcestershire bungalow, together we are sharing a delicious breakfast of fresh croissants, small pats of butter and sweet marmalade. The jug of milk is carefully covered with a lace doily. Between mouthfuls Charlotte repeats the sentiment in the foreword of her memoir. ‘I have been

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alive for nearly a century, it is extraordinary how things have changed. I am very fortunate to have lived through such interesting times.’ In front of me is an astute woman who worked in both Bletchley Park and America’s state-of-the-art Pentagon during the Second World War – Charlotte is not the only one feeling fortunate.

To write a Bletchley memoir at the age of ninety is no mean feat, and underlines the special status the Park and war have been accorded in both Gwen and Charlotte’s memories. Their books made them easy to find, their tales are ripe for the retelling. However, once again I was aware that I was relying on the testimonies of those who remembered Bletchley Park fondly. No wonder this wartime code-breaking organisation enjoys such a hallowed place in our nation’s history – after all, where is the incentive to revisit memory lane if it was no pleasure to walk down in the first place?

Bletchley Park Trust eventually agreed to help me on my quest to find veterans but I didn’t want to be over-dependent on a partial source. Numerous personal testimonies in the last forty years have helped bolster the glamorous Bletchley ‘brand’, which now boasts not only a vast museum, but also several television series and films and countless books. Was there anyone left to counter the prevailing opinion?



Lady Jean Fforde (née Lady Jean Graham) does not mince her words : ‘I had no idea how boring it was going to be. It was excessively boring!’

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Tucked away on page 199 of her meaty 383-page memoir, Lady Jean briefly describes how she resented her time at Bletchley Park, before returning to more exciting episodes in her majestic life. Still presiding over the Isle of Arran on the West Coast of Scotland, this ninety-three-year-old Lady was a must-have Bletchley Girl. I immediately penned an enthusiastic missive

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requesting an interview, citing my Scottish credentials and desire to write a balanced book. My request was politely rebutted.

‘I really feel I was not there long enough to make it worth you coming up here.’ The letter was a blow. I needed the other side of the story. How could I turn Arran’s Lady?

The same day I received Lady Jean’s rejection, Rozanne’s Park friend, Pamela Rose (née Gibson), left me a telephone message. My letter had arrived. Pamela’s voice took me by surprise; it had an authoritative oaky texture and the distinct edge of a trained actress. I returned the call with some trepidation, intuitively understanding that Pamela was important. She was the oldest woman I’d come across; surely the perfect person with whom to begin *The Bletchley Girls*?

We meet in the elegant four-storey London home where she has lived since 1946.

‘So you’ve come to talk about Bletchley?’ Her look is almost conspiratorial. ‘The mansion was a pretty hideous building. I do think it has been rather overblown; compared with elsewhere it was a cushy berth.’

That was all that was said on the subject of Bletchley during our first meeting. Pamela has lived an extraordinary life – after two full hours of talking we haven’t even arrived at 1939, but we’ve already visited Germany three times.

Team Work

Slotting the stories of my first few Bletchley veterans into the broader history of the Park was incredibly satisfying. Two-dimensional academic descriptions took on a whole new lease of life. During the war each girl was allotted her own highly confidential role within the code-breaking nexus. By 1941 many of the component parts of this intricate process were established. Every stage had its own specific location and the scale of the operation meant the girls were not always working within

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the confines of the Park itself. Of course this book cannot represent every role involved. In some cases all the players are dead; the late Mavis Batey (née Lever) was the last of Dilly's Fillies – Alfred Dillwyn Knox's hand-picked team of female code-breakers who worked in Bletchley's research section, located in the Cottage. Other key code-breaking and intelligence roles were generally occupied by better educated, older men. A few older women were present at the Park; Rhoda Welsford, Phoebe Senyard and Claire Harding enjoyed positions of responsibility but they are no longer alive.

The Bletchley Girls featured here were just that, girls. Very young, with simple classroom skills (diligence, obedience and occasionally a language), these female recruits made up the backbone of Bletchley's code-breaking organisation from 1941 onwards. It was young girls who operated the unwieldy machinery, made sense of wireless sound waves, and sorted the decoded messages that would eventually help lead the Allies to victory and the world into the information age. With five and a half Bletchley women on board (I hadn't given up on Lady Jean) I drew a large code-breaking chart circling the jobs already covered – Bombe operator (Ruth); decoders, both German (Gwen) and Italian (Rozanne); registrar (Charlotte); and indexer (Pamela). From Lady Jean's brief description it wasn't immediately clear what role she initially performed, but so far she was the only woman I'd found who worked in Alan Turing's Naval Hut 8. Now I wasn't just looking for any Bletchley Girl who was prepared to talk. I had a specific wish list in mind: at the very least I needed a Colossus operator, a Y-station listener and a brain-box from Bletchley's Enigma-focused heart – Hut 6.



Joanna Chorley (née Stradling) sounds slightly perplexed on the telephone.

'All this hoo-ha because of a photograph. It's a bit silly really.

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One paper even said I took the picture, but how could that possibly be? I was in it!

And so she is: standing near the edge of the frame, her waved hair springing generously from either side of her naval beret. Seventy years on, Joanna's discovery of a sepia photograph featuring thirty-eight Wrens tasked with operating the Bletchley's Colossus machines caused a mini media storm.

'Pictured for the first time: Bletchley Park's women code-breakers who operated the world's first electronic computer during the Second World War' announced the *Daily Mail*, while the *Telegraph* promised: 'WW2 code-breakers – the final secret'. In both cases a contemporary picture of Joanna alongside a revamped Colossus machine in the National Museum of Computing is a reminder of how quickly our world has changed. There were no computers before the Second World War – Joanna has not just lived through an era of unprecedented change, she was part of that change.

Coincidentally she has returned to Buckinghamshire in old age to be near her daughter. The replica Colossus – 'Not entirely the same,' insists Joanna – is only eight miles away in Bletchley. Stony Stratford, the town where she now lives, was once a popular accommodation option for those working at the Park. However, Joanna is unsure about all the media attention. It is a keen sense of duty that compels her to make the occasional appearance for the National Museum of Computing and it takes a while before she is able to talk to me freely about her past. Having kept a secret of national importance for thirty years, Joanna's initial reticence is unsurprising. As she puts it, 'I was born in a time when girls didn't blab about everything.'

In recent years some have found it easier to talk than others. It was historian Asa Briggs' chatty memoir about his time at Bletchley Park, *Secret Days*, that led me to my next veteran. '[Never] had I . . . seen so many machines, or women working them, as I did in the adjacent Machine Room . . . The Machine

Room was the elite room.’ Young Briggs was struck not only by the number of women in Hut 6 (the centre for the decryption of Enigma messages from the German Army and Air Force) but also by their intelligence: the hatch and door between him and them did not prevent Asa striking up friendships (and enjoying flirtations) with his female colleagues.

Ann Mitchell (née Williamson) was one such girl. Having studied mathematics at Oxford during the war, Ann was a rare breed. The archivist at Oxford’s Lady Margaret Hall sent me her Curriculum Vitae: in an era when women often didn’t work it made for intimidating reading. Although now partially sighted, Ann is one of the six women in this book on email. During our lively exchange, I discovered that my Edinburgh-based aunt was her close friend.

‘Gosh darling,’ boomed Aunt Sally down the phone, ‘only the other day I was reading aloud *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park* to Ann. I think that quite enough has already been written on the subject.’

Piqued, I rallied back, ‘No Sally! This book will be different,’ and duly bought my train ticket north.

Like the other decoding centres in the Park, Hut 6 was dependent on radio interceptions: Asa Briggs remembered: ‘it was the basis of all that we could do.’ Scattered across Britain with international outposts as remote as New Delhi and Colombia, Y-stations, big and small, improvised and requisitioned, were the nerve centres of an extraordinary eavesdropping operation, intercepting the gobbledygook messages to pass on to Bletchley Park. The RAF, Royal Navy, Army and civilian services all had their own stations, where thousands of invisible listeners hunched night and day over radio sets, their ears straining for enemy output. They were the first vital link in the code-breaking chain and yet history has given Y-station listeners short shrift. Their numbers are not included in the estimated 8,500–10,000 people who worked at Bletchley. Y-stations remained very separate from Station X (the

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Park's code name), but veteran listener Betty Gilbert (née Quincey) is in no doubt: 'they couldn't have done it without us. That's what I say.'

She is exceptionally proud of her part in the war and was only too delighted when Bletchley Park put me in contact with her. Over milky tea and a platter of sausage rolls she shows me a large cardboard box full of her wartime memorabilia. We are sitting in her living-room in Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire.

I've lived 'ere nearly all my life. See we got given this house by the government in 1948. It was one of those new houses they promised. I remember there was no path, nor nothing. Cement floors and couple of chairs and wringer that's all I 'ad.

Betty grins. 'No, I don't own it, no need to.' Then she kneels down with an agility that belies her ninety years and starts to sift through the photographs in the box.

'Ah yes, 'ere it is, me and the rest of the ATS girls.' She pauses before adding, 'You know, up there on that Yorkshire moor, that was the best time of my life.'

Betty's war was very different from that of the other Bletchley Girls, but her role was a vital one; without listeners there would have been no codes to crack. I quickly realised that to rely on her story alone was not enough.

Pat Davies (née Owtram) lives in a charming house in Chiswick, West London. With a clock chiming in the hall she welcomes me into her classy sitting-room. Like Betty, Pat has a box of memorabilia and she too believes that the Y-station story is overlooked.

'The Park do a very good job but for a long time all they gave us was one small display in their museum.'

As far as Pat is concerned, a couple of wireless sets complete with Bakelite headphones was not sufficient. What she then goes on to describe in her commanding voice is a wartime adventure so fluid and full of surprises, I wonder if any museum could capture its essence.

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Neither Pat nor Betty ever worked at Bletchley Park, Betty didn't even know of its existence, but they, like all the other women in this book, were integral to Britain's code-breaking phenomenon. They too are Bletchley Girls.

Essential Extras

Bletchley Park has become synonymous with ingenuity, eccentricity and shared endeavour. But Cora Jarman (née Pounds) aspired to be neither eccentric nor ingenious; like most other seventeen-year-old girls she simply wanted to fit in. I found her short testimony on the website of The Second World War Experience Centre:

I would have been compulsorily 'called up' into one of the Services when I was eighteen, so I volunteered to join the WRNS¹ because the uniform had no buttons to clean and was the nicest to my way of thinking.

Sure enough, accompanying the text is a headshot of the young rating, blonde hair immaculately curled under a dark cap complete with naval insignia.

Now comfortably retired in Hampshire, Cora is still a very elegant woman (with an equally dashing nonagenarian husband) and she has never fully understood exactly what it was she did at the Park. With a coquettish giggle she concedes, 'Well, I was very young.'

She was not, however, as young as Muriel. Muriel Dindol (née Bogush) is sitting waiting for me in Starbucks. She has been waiting for some time, thanks to London's notoriously unreliable Northern Line. When I finally arrive I don't recognise her. I am looking for someone very old – silver haired and perhaps a little unsure in such a noisy place. But the woman with her eye on the

1. Women's Royal Naval Service.

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door is alert and confident; she has cropped speckled hair and brightly coloured glasses with nails to match.

‘Muriel?’

She looks up and smiles and then we hug.

Before I even met her, I knew that Muriel was a find. It was Ruth’s Jewish heritage that alerted me to a circle within a Bletchley circle. Historian Martin Sugarman believes there were at least two hundred Jews at the Park, possibly more. He interviewed Muriel years ago and wasn’t sure I would get much more out of her. When I mention this, Muriel laughs.

‘I can tell you lots of things. I loved Bletchley. But I didn’t start work in the actual Park until I was fourteen.’

‘Fourteen?’

‘Yep, that’s when I left school. It was different in those days.’

At a spritely eighty-six, Muriel is the youngest Bletchley Girl.



Now I had eleven women: Ruth, Rozanne, Gwen, Charlotte, Pamela, Joanna, Ann, Betty, Pat, Cora and Muriel (I still hadn’t heard from Lady Jean). I might have left it there but something caught my eye in Rozanne’s typed reminiscences. ‘About two months after arriving in the Park I met a WAAF called Kathleen Godfrey . . . [She is] frequently contacted by the Park because her father’s P.A. was Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond books.’ According to her daughter Margy, Kathleen Kinmonth Warren (née Godfrey) often handles questions about her father, Admiral John Godfrey, and his working relationship with Ian Fleming. By all accounts M was modelled on Kathleen’s intimidating father. Both Godfrey and Fleming were associated with Park life through their roles in Naval Intelligence.

Margy shrugs. ‘But it is a bit of a side show. It isn’t about my mother.’

Kathleen smiles, and her pale blue eyes light up. Now ninety-one years old it was a long time ago, but wartime Britain still stands tall among her memories. Margy slides a scarlet book

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across the table. ‘Here, borrow this. My mother wrote it ten years ago.’

Shared Lives is a rich personal account of Kathleen’s long life; it is her story written in her own voice. Ian Fleming merits just one mention. By writing it all down, Kathleen has made sure she is now the one who is unforgettable.

Having started my search afraid that I wouldn’t find sufficient women to sustain a book, I was suddenly in the unexpected position of worrying that I had too many. *No more*, I thought, and then rang one last number.

Doris Moss (née Moller) is an unlikely Bletchley Girl and therein lies her appeal. She began the war in Belgium with a poor grasp of the English language. Today, nurturing a demanding bridge habit and working tirelessly for a local charity aged ninety-two, Doris cuts an energetic figure in her home town of Northampton. In a strong French accent she recalls her epic wartime journey to Britain.

She is my thirteenth veteran but there is no time for superstition. ‘Yes! Georgette is still with us! She lives in Texas, I will give you her number. She remembers better than me. Really!’

It just so happens that Doris has an older sister, they worked together at the Park and, aged ninety-four, Georgette McGarrah (née Moller) still loves to talk on the telephone. I had found my fourteenth Bletchley Girl and was ready to write.



It is April 2014 and I should really have started the book. I want it to be finished while all the ‘Bletchley Girls’ are still alive. Three months into the project and we’re in regular communication, they are my newest (and oldest!) friends and I’m keen for them to enjoy the final product. ‘I’ll try and hold on that long,’ says Muriel, staring at the 2015 publication date before giving me a reassuring wink. The seventieth anniversary of the end of

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the Second World War in 2015 is an additional impetus. But I am not at my desk and I have not started writing. It's Easter week and I'm on a ferry heading for the Isle of Arran clutching a microphone and a homemade cottage pie. If I look to my right across the water I can see Brodick Castle looming above the trees; it was Lady Jean's favourite childhood home. After considerable feudal networking, she has finally granted me an audience. The beginning of the book will have to wait.

Children of the Armistice

Pamela was the product of her mother's direct line to God. Dolly had asked for her young husband to be wounded in the left leg during the Great War and her prayers were answered. Thornely returned to England with an injured thigh that, as Dolly had anticipated, removed him from front-line service. The angel of death wreaked havoc among Europe's young men for another two years but Thornely had been saved. Baby Pamela arrived a year later in 1917 – living proof of her father's full recovery.

Despite her protests to the contrary, it is not hard to imagine the striking young woman Pamela once was. At ninety-six she retains an ethereal beauty: startling blue eyes, sculpted features and elegant poise, all wrapped in soft wools and silk. Meeting her for the first time in the 1950s, Pamela's little nephew Adam thought she had fallen off the front of a chocolate box. She jokes that her parents sent their rotund teenage daughter off to Europe one summer in the hope she would return slim and pretty; they can't have been disappointed.

Born into the English Establishment before women were granted a vote, looks mattered for girls like Pamela. But nothing could compete with being a boy. She admits with a chuckle, 'I always knew my brother was the favourite.' The painful hole left by the 722,785 young men who, unlike Pamela's 'blessed' father, never returned from the Great War ensured that in the 1920s a little boy's stock had rarely been higher.

Pamela's parents were not a conventional upper-class Edwardian couple. In the Gibson household music was the governing force. When her father Thornely thought of Germany it was opera that sprung to mind, not Prussian might. He duly abandoned his

studies at Oxford to cut his teeth as a professional singer in Berne where his wife-to-be fell in love with his easy-going manner and baritone voice. They married in 1913. Dolly was the quintessential English woman who, as befitted her class, enjoyed artistic pursuits on the Continent. The fact that her father had been a German Jew was rarely mentioned. Since 1890 all restrictions for positions within the British Empire had been removed for Jews,¹ but the whiff of anti-Semitism among the British upper classes would take much longer to disperse. Dolly was simply trying to fit in. And she succeeded. Thornely used his German to translate for Prime Minister Lloyd George at Versailles before he got a sensible job back in England as a stockbroker, ensuring there was time and money for husband and wife to pursue their passion for opera. Pamela remembers musical evenings every Wednesday; a heady mix of professionals and amateurs in front of whom she and her brother, Patrick, occasionally had to perform. It was a privileged, artistic start to life and, just as her mother wished, she grew up every bit a little English girl – albeit with a sprinkling of German.

As an adult, Pamela once danced with the writer and broadcaster J. B. Priestley, ‘both being rather small we nearly fell over!’ The voice of a generation, he openly coveted the title ‘little Englander’, noting ‘that little sounds the right note of affection. It is little England that I love.’

Pamela sheds light on an expression that has subsequently been associated with bigoted parochialism. ‘You see, just after the war people wanted to get back to the safe and familiar, to what they knew and a land they had dreamed of.’ Reeling from the protracted horrors of 1914–18, beset with a series of recurrent economic crises and an exhausted, over-stretched empire, Britain’s imperial diet of militaristic heroism and tub-thumping had gone right out of fashion. National sentiment changed; there was no place for Victorian bombast in 1920s England.

1. Except that of Monarch.

Unlike the other women featured in this book, Pamela was not a child of the Armistice – she was born during the First World War. But like them, she grew up in a country that struggled to articulate its grief; instead shell-shocked Britain resorted to an annual silence that stopped the empire. Telephone operators, traffic, department stores – everything came to a halt for two minutes once a year on 11 November. Only the children, tight buds of hope, were unable to remember the horror that could never be allowed to happen again. World war must be avoided at all costs.

It was fitting that avuncular pipe-smoking Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister in 1924 and again in 1926. He helped ensure the nation's swingeing military retrenchment was sugar-coated with a more private, domestic vision of Englishness. In 1926 Baldwin appealed to his St George's Day audience with a pastoral idyll. 'The tinkle of the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill.' Here was a country stripped of all pretension; the perfect place for little English girls to grow up in.

Country Girls

Baldwin's vision of a timeless England chimes perfectly with the picture Charlotte paints of her 1920s childhood. The centre of her universe was a three-acre grassy smallholding sandwiched between the undulating peaks of Herefordshire. In fine summer weather she would take her bed outside and gaze at the stars, dreaming of infinity and beyond. Visitors to the family home may have been startled by a small dark-haired girl hanging by her knees from a tree. The Vine-Stevens ('neither rich nor poor') expected Charlotte to pull her weight; she got up early to tend the pigs, goats and poultry. There was no electricity and no running water and Charlotte's father was away all day in Ludlow where he worked for Lloyds Bank.

In her ninety-second year, Charlotte is still in remarkably good health. A strong sturdy child, she suited the great outdoors, but

her little brother wasn't so lucky. Baby David was born disabled into a way of life that demanded robust physical health, miles from any medical help. He died when Charlotte was just four.

'That's my earliest memory – my grandmother coming down the path to meet me. "Where is David?" I asked. I was told to "ssshh!"'

The subject was never mentioned again. To this day Charlotte isn't entirely sure why her brother died. 'You didn't talk about those sorts of things and children didn't ask questions.'

The sentiment behind Charlotte's words is precisely echoed by Betty, born a year later, on George V's birthday.

Her mother Gracie was pregnant with Betty when her husband left. 'He went AWOL. Let's put it like that.' Betty thinks her father was called Albert. He was a policeman in London but she never met him and ninety years on she still doesn't know what happened. 'To say there was another woman would be speculation.' Albert's disappearance left Betty's mother in dire straits; pregnant and with four teenage children, no job, no home and no man she went back to live with her old father in rural Northamptonshire. Gracie took in washing and went out cleaning in the market town of Higham Ferrers where Betty still lives, to supplement the little bits of money her older children were able to earn. Minus their main breadwinner, the Quinceys were dirt poor. 'It was a tough life. Very tough.' But despite the hardship, Betty's father was never mentioned.

Nobody talked about him. 'Oh no, we didn't do that, not ever.' Little Betty grew up in a household with secrets and like Charlotte she knew better than to ask questions. Both girls were schooled in the art of discretion from a very early age.



Charlotte and Betty's families, like much of rural Britain, knew their place in the feudal pecking order. The Vine-Stevens were

positioned midway between the Lord of the Manor and the humble cottager. Charlotte remembers 'each class helped the rung below'. Her mother would provide hearty meals for local 'lads and lasses' who lent a hand. Meanwhile further down the social scale, Betty's mother relied on offers of piecemeal work and sustenance for her family's survival.

At the opposite end of society sat the aristocracy. Born in 1920, Lady Jean Graham's arrival was the cross-pollination of two mighty ducal houses – the Hamiltons and the Montroses. The family's lineage can be traced back to King James II² and their fiefdoms straddled two enormous Scottish estates, each with its own castle. Lady Jean remembers a lonely childhood; growing up, the only real playmates she had were her second cousins, the Prince of Monaco's children. Among other notable relatives was Germany's Margrave of Baden. So much for little England – this was glorious Scotland.

There was one castle for summer (Arran), and one for winter (Buchanan). Ninety-four years later, step off the ferry onto the Isle of Arran and any local will know her.

'Aye, Lady Jean. Take the short cut across the golf course. She's the born to rule sort, but ach she does a lot for us.'

As she herself explains, 'I was brought up to understand with privilege comes duty.'

A formidable presence in her exquisite drawing room, Arran's spring sunshine bouncing through the bay window, it is immediately clear that Lady Jean learnt much of her life philosophy from the Duchess of Montrose, her indomitable mother. During the First World War, Jean's severely deaf father was only permitted to command a minesweeper in the Clyde; however, the Duchess more than made up for her disabled husband. She threw herself into nursing, occasionally returning at weekends to oversee the staff who looked after her first three children and ran the castles. A hard worker, Jean's mother was soon promoted to

2. James II of England and Ireland and James VII of Scotland.

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theatre nurse in a mainland hospital before riding straddle-legged (very daring) on a motorcycle to and from Arran's rehabilitation centre. But afterwards, duty done, the war was rarely talked of. Perhaps 'it was just too ghastly,' suggests Lady Jean, born two years later. There was, however, one exception.

It nearly broke my mother's heart when the cavalry came at the beginning of the war and took away twenty-one of her heavy-weight hunters. All those lovely horses off to the front line never to be seen again. She did speak about that.

If few in Britain could boast a couple of ducal castles, Pat's family, the Owtrams, had made enough money from the cotton-spinning industry in the nineteenth century to fund a gentrified country existence in the north of England. 'My mother said we were squirarchy – one below aristocracy. I grew up in a big sandstone house near Lancaster; it had ten bedrooms including the attic and we had staff.'

Pat's early life was a far cry from her current existence in London's Chiswick. Just as Lady Jean was forced to hunt against her will on Arran, as a child Pat was obliged to beat during pheasant shoots and carry her father's dead game and rabbits. He was a good shot, as was her grandfather. Both men were military minded, but a broken hip ensured her grandfather never got further than the local militia. That did not stop him serving his country. In the First World War, Colonel Herbert Hawsworth Owtram's job was to find horses all over the North West and send them to the front.

Midway through her story, Pat's bright bird-like expression clouds briefly.

My sister and I thought this was very sad. Horses were killed so fast they always needed replacements. Grandfather contacted farms and country houses and got their poor horses sent off to war. He was awarded an OBE for his services.

Evidently the Duchess of Montrose's sacrifice was a common one.

Pat's father ran the family textile business so had to make do with the Territorial Army in his spare time. He took his military duties very seriously. The Westminster elite could preach peace and retrenchment all they liked but for some the residual hatred of the Hun remained a motivating force in interwar Britain. With a mischievous smile, Pat admits a favourite childhood game was called 'bombing the Germans'.

'My father and uncles played too! Above the house there was a quarry full of old wheelbarrows and metal contraptions. The aim was to throw stones down – a direct hit would send up a tremendous clang.' Only the arrival of her cousin with a German governess in tow put a stop to the 'bombing antics'. Keen military fervour served with a hearty dollop of German xenophobia was not just saved for men in the Owtram household.

In Empire's Wake

In the 1920s, the ink long dried on the Treaty of Versailles, Britain left crippled Germany to its own devices. After all, we had an empire to run.

Kathleen was surely not the only English girl who could claim to be a world traveller by the age of three. (Her earliest childhood memory is watching an enormous crocodile sunning itself as she steamed through the Panama canal.) Great Britain's empire had never been bigger – 1.8 million square miles and 13 million new subjects were added to our imperial reach by the early 1920s. Our depleted Royal Navy had to keep up appearances. Talented young First World War veterans like Kathleen's father, John Godfrey, rose quickly through the ranks. A commander at the age of thirty-two, his career went on to span the globe and by 1925 his wife and family were travelling with him. Little Kathleen would have been forgiven for thinking imperial Britain was unassailable.

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Born just days apart at opposite ends of the country, Rozanne was almost Kathleen's twin. While Kathleen's father climbed up the ranks of the Navy, Rozanne's father earned his stripes in the Air Force. The destiny of both families for the next thirty years would depend on their respective fathers' postings.

Relaxed in her 'pink elephant' (the affectionate family name for her large reclining armchair), Rozanne vividly remembers the few First World War stories her father Charles shared.

They had the most extraordinary aeroplanes with no parachutes. Father was shot down and broke his arm. He always said he was lucky not to have been a soldier. He flew in low over the trenches and saw people stuck on the wire. He knew they couldn't survive.

Charles Medhurst was right, he was lucky. As an airman you were far less likely to die in the First World War than you were as a soldier. Within twenty-five years those statistics would be dramatically reversed; however, in 1918 when the RAF was formed no one anticipated another world war, least of all young Charles. In 1919 he was promoted to captain, by which time he'd already married his childhood sweetheart. Christabel was vivacious, savvy and very beautiful – she longed to leave home and sample the high life; marriage to Charles ensured she could do just that. Rozanne recalls her mother 'had a riot' when they were posted to Baghdad (one of Britain's more expensive First World War acquisitions). As was typical for a woman of her class, Christabel employed nannies to help bring up her three children. This was fortunate as she was 'pretty hopeless with small babies' and in the 1920s there was little incentive to be otherwise. At that time being a good mother meant keeping your distance; received wisdom stated that nannies did a better job of raising the next generation than over-emotional mothers. The influential behaviourist J. B. Watson went further, discouraging all cuddling and even suggesting parents should shake hands with their children in the mornings. Small wonder that amid the ranks of upper-middle-class mothers

there was plenty of time for charitable works and frenetic social activities.



But if hands-off mothering was *de rigueur*, having no mother at all was a very different matter. Joanna Stradling's life was turned upside down before it had really begun. Her father was in the Middle East trying to persuade T. E. Lawrence to stay on after the war. It was a thankless task and Squadron Leader Dick Stradling, an archetypal Edwardian and adjutant to General Trenchard, had little success. 'Father loved a good story; later he told us that "Lawrence of Arabia" would keep bursting into tears.' Things went from bad to worse for Stradling when his wife and baby daughter joined him in Egypt. Joanna was just eighteen months old when her mother contracted typhoid fever and dysentery in Cairo and promptly died. Mad with grief, her father temporarily disappeared and Joanna was returned to England with whooping cough and no parents.

A warm, welcoming woman now in her ninetieth year, it is hard to imagine the trauma that accompanied Joanna's start to life. She was nursed back to health in Cirencester by her grandmother, who having lost a husband and daughter in the same year was determined to save her granddaughter.

Joanna was destined to be an only child, devoted to her nanny, her aunt and her grandmother. Dick Stradling remained out in the Middle East until 1930, returning just once in the interim to visit his small daughter. 'He put his head around my bedroom door and said "Cuckoo!" and I just screamed the house down.' Joanna's father would remain a distant but authoritarian figure in her life. He was a daunting prospect for one lone daughter to deal with.

Interwar Britain had witnessed political sea change. But a move away from 'high Toryism' and national glorification towards an idea of the British as a more private, inward-looking people did

not translate into an era of cosy, hands-on fathering. Kathleen probably speaks for many with the description of her high-powered naval father. His

old-fashioned upbringing certainly affected his views on children and their management. Being ‘seen and not heard’ was imposed on us all. Severe and strict, he insisted on a maze of rules of behaviour; a minefield would be a more accurate analogy, through which it was impossible to tread without incurring wrath and displeasure.

As head of the household, fathers were rarely crossed; respect and deference were expected. Little girls knew their place.

Members of the ruling class like John Godfrey and Charles Medhurst were dedicated professional servicemen who were expected to put duty before family. With a clear division of labour between the sexes, theirs was a public role outside the home. In John’s case, there was little energy left for fun with the children. ‘For my father, the Navy and his job came first . . . We were always meant to be quiet in the house in order “not to disturb Father”, and we never went into his study unless – woe betide – we were summoned.’

However, there were exceptions to the patriarchal norm. Ann’s father was not a military man; in 1921 Herbert Williamson retired from the Indian Civil Service and returned to work part-time at Oxford University with his new wife. Ann was born the following year. She remembers a gentle, forward-thinking man. There were Sunday tea parties and numerous visitors to the Williamsons’ statuesque Victorian home. Such was the international hue of the family’s frequent gatherings, the maid was required to practise the pronunciation of guests’ names prior to their arrival. Back in ‘little England’, Herbert Williamson and his wife Winifred had quickly found their own educated cosmopolitan milieu. Ann, their oldest child, grew up believing the world was her oyster.

Keeping Up Appearances

At ninety Gwen is a *tour de force*; whether sitting in the kitchen or perilously tending her cliff-side garden in Mumbles she is both frank and elusive.

Families were small in the 1920s. What happened was Marie Stopes and her clinics. There was the Dutch Cap that married women could get fitted for free. And the widespread sale of condoms; they were sold secretly in chemists but you could get them!

Marie Stopes' highly controversial clinics targeted the working masses; the upper and middle classes had been limiting the size of their families since the late nineteenth century, with sheaths and coitus interruptus being the most common methods of contraception. But Gwen was not from middle-class stock. 'My grandmother had eight children and a stillbirth of twins. There was no bathroom and no hot water. It was a life of absolute drudgery. That was how it was in our end of West Bromwich, the poor end.' It was Gwen's father Alfred who pulled himself out of this grinding poverty. He studied hard to become a qualified welfare officer and by limiting the size of their family Alfred and his wife Harriet kept costs down and standards up. Gwen remained an only child until she was nine, by which time the Davies' had moved from West Bromwich to the comfortable middle-class town of Bournemouth.

It was in Bournemouth that Cora's father also improved his family's lot. Cecil Pounds developed his father's fledgling business and by the 1930s Charlie's Cars was a reputable luxury motor coach and car hire company. Cecil's timing was perfect; it had never been so in vogue to explore 'little England's' quiet coves and sandy shores but few could afford an automobile. (Ann's mother kept meticulous accounts of her weekly expenditure – in 1939 the largest single item purchased was a Rover for £115.) Even wealthy

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families thought twice before they bought a set of wheels and Cecil Pounds offered them a cost-effective alternative. ‘We never saw father, only at breakfast. He worked every day except Christmas day.’ Cecil’s hard work paid off. The Pounds family moved into a comfortable two-storey town house with large bay windows, running water and a bathroom.

Between the wars two-thirds of families, including Cora’s, had electricity and all sorts of novel mod-cons were emerging on the market for those with money. The Pounds couldn’t afford a refrigerator, but by the mid-thirties, in keeping with the majority of British families, they did own a wireless. Across the classes it was the ‘must-have’ household accessory. Lady Jean’s nanny was infatuated with her crystal radio set, although it did complicate family moves between castles.

Each part had to be padded with cotton wool and tissue paper, then placed in an oversized box. Wherever I moved in the nursery there would be a shout, ‘Watch out, clumsy, watch out for my wireless!’

Wireless technology transformed the way Britain communicated in the first half of the twentieth century – at home, at work and at war. It was not as a means of military communication that the women of this book came across radio waves, but as a form of intimate mass entertainment. Up and down the country young imaginations were gripped.

Gwen vividly remembers her first encounter with the radio.

My uncle came with a huge pair of earphones and held them over my small ears and said, ‘Can you hear anything?’

‘What are they saying?’

‘Hello everybody! This is Carroll Gibbons from the Savoy Hotel in London.’

‘That man is talking hundreds of miles away!’

Children of the Armistice

Five-year-old Gwen was mesmerised. So was the rest of the nation. Across the country families gathered around their wireless sets in the previously sacred space of their living-rooms and ‘listened in’ to evenings of live entertainment. The newly founded British Broadcasting Corporation conducted the nation’s conversation – nothing was left to chance. Working closely with the Government, the BBC aimed to be a Great British unifying force. Cultural, educational and moral standards were set for the majority who could afford to listen to the radio.

Cora was only twelve in 1939. She was dusting her mother’s dining-room when she discovered Britain was at war – she didn’t need her parents to tell her, she had heard it on the wireless.

Multi-Cultural Britons

In 1919 a \$25,000 prize was offered for the first non-stop flight between New York and Paris. Eight years later, American Charles Lindbergh touched down at Le Bourget Aerodrome in front of a vast crowd. He became an overnight celebrity. The world was shrinking, the aviation industry was growing and for Englishmen like John Moller – an aeroplane insurance salesman – life was good.

John had a beautiful Belgian wife Marie-Elisabeth, and three young children including Georgette, who was born in England in 1921, and Doris, born in Paris in 1922.

In her delicious French accent, Doris explains, ‘My father was English but I grew up talking French.’ Her early memories of life in France centre around a small privileged world of maids, siblings and nannies. ‘We drained the glasses after our parents’ parties and always asked for presents when they came home.’ 1920s Paris sizzled: gaudy flappers, the bounce and jangle of the Charleston, art-deco clubs and casinos dripping with artistes, bohemians and writers, it had much to offer dashing young couples like John and Marie-Elisabeth Moller.

‘But we went back to Belgium when I was ten.’ Doris pauses. In

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her ninety-third year it is still difficult to explain. ‘Well, I will tell you. My father went bankrupt. He made some bad business decisions. It put a strain on the marriage, yes, I would say so.’ John Moller’s career in aviation insurance did not survive the Great Depression; in the 1930s he returned to England and took his son, Peter, with him. Doris and her sister Georgette went to Belgium with their mother. The family was split in two, but the girls maintained contact with their father and occasionally they visited him in England on their British passports.

There were no British passports when Ruth’s family arrived on Britain’s shores in the late nineteenth century. Her paternal grandparents were en route to America, but they didn’t get further than Dublin. Her mother’s family ended up in Liverpool. Both were part of the 2.7-million-strong Jewish exodus west in the wake of Russian pogroms and atrocities. Between 1881 and 1914 Britain’s small Jewish population grew to 250,000 and, propelled by the vitriol of a few publicists and politicians, immigration soon became a heated issue. In 1905 the ‘Alien Act’ set the precedent for a century of increased immigration controls; British passports were introduced in 1914.

Despite the hype, Britain’s new Jewish population integrated quickly. Ruth’s father Isaac Henry emerged from ‘a pile of children’ in Dublin to become a successful doctor in Birmingham and his daughter Ruth grew up feeling every bit a little British girl.

I felt terribly lucky my grandparents came here. I once asked my grandfather to teach me Russian and he said, ‘I won’t speak that language; horrible people, horrible people. I want to forget them.’

Unlike the vast majority of people in Britain, Ruth’s family understood what it meant to be persecuted.

Children of the Armistice

Muriel's father also arrived in Britain on a boat from Russia. 'He always spoke English with an accent. His brother gave him a box of handkerchiefs to sell; all he could say was "a penny each, a penny each".' Mr Bogush eventually married and settled among the large Jewish community in London's Stamford Hill.

Muriel was born in 1928. Recalling her childhood, she says, 'I don't remember much. Just the usual stuff: I had a whip and a top and I loved my doll and pram – I was really girlie.' As if to underline her point she glances down at her scarlet lacquered nails. 'Oh yes, and I was always annoying my big sister. That's about it, I think.' Muriel grins broadly before admitting that, for her, life really began in 1939, when the family moved to a small village in Buckinghamshire called Bletchley.