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The Bletchley Girls

Written by Tessa Dunlop

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The Bletchley Girls

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

Tessa Dunlop

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For the Bletchley Girls

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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.

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 WRNS[1] 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.

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

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

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.

1

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. Thornly 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 Thornly 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 Thornly 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. Thornly 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 II[2] 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.

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 heavyweight 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 Hawksworth 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.