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(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) Fifty Years of GCHQ in Cheltenham

[Our sincere thanks to Peter Freeman at GCHQ for contributing this article to our 50th anniversary collection]

(U) While 2002 marks NSA's Golden Jubilee, we in GCHQ are also celebrating -- and not just the 50th anniversary of the Queen's accession. For us 2002 marks, not the creation of our organisation (the Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS) was established in November 1919 and officially changed its name to Government Communications Headquarters in April 1946), but our move to Cheltenham, in Gloucestershire in the English West Country.

(U) Where were we before then? Everyone surely knows that in August 1939 we moved from offices in London to Bletchley Park (BP) and resided there throughout WWII; but how we got from there to Cheltenham is much less famous. As soon as the war was over, the requirement was to get away from Bletchley, which was generally considered to be the middle of nowhere. It was one thing to have 10,000 people (the wartime peak) there under wartime conditions: requisitioned billeting, no choice about employment (half the workforce in uniform anyway), officially provided buses 24x7 to get to (shift) work, little entertainment apart from what you could provide yourself, and rationed food in government canteens. It was quite another to run a civilian government organisation (albeit rather smaller) in peacetime in such a benighted spot. Anyway, government departments should be in London -- everyone knew that. In April 1946 the organisation took the first step to get "home" (i.e., to London), moving into a set of wartime government buildings at Eastcote in the northwest suburbs of London (which incidentally had been one of BP's "bombe" outstations housing the special-purpose machines which were used against Enigma). The change of name from GC&CS to GCHQ took place at the same time.

(U) The plan was that whether or not Eastcote was to be the permanent home (and many people thought it was only a temporary one, and eventually GCHQ would be much closer to the middle of London, like other departments), a different and more distant "wartime" location should also be found to which GCHQ should be evacuated when war threatened, just as it had in August 1939. But quite soon after the move to Eastcote, it was realised that this was a Bad Idea. In 1939 GC&CS had had fewer than a hundred people, equipped with paper and pencils; in 1946 it was known that a wartime GCHQ would number thousands and would rely upon any amount of temperamental machinery. Moreover, the organisation

had built up its own worldwide network of "special communications" to bring in the intercept and send out the product. A hasty move to a new location -- even if one could be found and equipped -- just when war was about to start did not seem wise. On top of all this, Eastcote was quickly recognised to be an unsuitable place; the buildings were in poor condition and the site was very cramped, with no scope for the expansion which (as the Cold War settled in) GCHQ dreamed about.

(U) So GCHQ started looking for a peacetime location which would also double for war -- i.e., one that provided the amenities (housing, entertainment, education, and, above all, local recruitment) of at least a large town, while being a safe distance from London. How far was a safe distance? BP was sixty miles from London, and the general view was that at least that far was required, although there was a minority opinion that modern communications had annihilated distance so we could go anywhere, while modern weaponry (nuclear-tipped V2s) meant that nowhere in the U.K. was safe and the organisation ought to move to Canada (there had been emergency plans to the same effect in 1940). The most critical requirement was access to a large network of landlines, though of course GCHQ was also looking for a set of free (i.e., government-owned) buildings.

(U) A number of places in the U.K. were examined, but the communications requirement ruled out most of them (even where there were plenty of lines there was always a danger that in time of war some other organisation, such as the military, might preempt them). Then late in 1947 a member of GCHQ on a private visit to Cheltenham heard that there were government offices near the town (for those who know GCHQ, these were the ones at Benhall) which were being used by the Ministry of Pensions but likely to become vacant in a year or two. He went to the gate, said he was a member of the Admiralty administration interested in pension payments, and was given a guided tour. He reported that the offices were indeed adequate, and Cheltenham looked like a nice place. Further enquiries showed that there were actually two sets of offices on opposite sides of the town (Oakley as well as Benhall), both of which were likely to become vacant (the other was also in temporary use, for training ex-Service personnel as teachers); quick estimates suggested GCHQ would not need all of both sites. Best of all, there was a large network of landlines: because the buildings, having originally been built in 1940 to evacuate some elements of the War Office, had been used 1942-1944 as the headquarters of the U.S. Army Services of Supply in the European Theater.

(U) Cheltenham was at the time best known as a genteel 19th century spa and retirement town, with a number of expensive schools; it also had a certain amount of light industry (the first British jet aircraft was built in an engineering works in the middle of the town) and an agricultural market. The population had been between 40,000 and 50,000 for a century. It met all GCHQ's criteria.

(U) In 1948 GCHQ got the agreement of the rest of the government (Foreign Office, Chiefs of Staff, Treasury) to the idea of a combined peacetime-wartime location. In 1949,

after a hasty moment when other parts of the government involved in planning (Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Town and Country Planning, etc.) said that Cheltenham was not the right place, all was agreed, including extra money to finance the construction of extra (public) housing for GCHQ employees. In September 1949 the idea was finally mentioned to Cheltenham Town Council -- who were very glad to hear of it, since the clock on the Ministry of Pensions' use of the Benhall buildings was now running out, and sizeable local unemployment was looming. In fact, GCHQ sent an advance party (of code and cipher printers) to Cheltenham in January 1950 to take over several hundred former Pensions workers in their Benhall offices as their previous Ministry moved out (so in a sense, GCHQ should have celebrated its 50th year in Cheltenham two years ago).

(U) The next eighteen months were spent in arranging details, of which the main one was the construction of houses and apartments. An early plan to re-locate two intercept stations in the southeast of England (Barnet and Knockholt) to Cheltenham and put them alongside headquarters had to be abandoned when it emerged that what looked like empty fields (suitable for HF antenna arrays) besides the Benhall buildings were going to be built over by the Town Council. The next idea, to put a new intercept station at a new site within 15 miles of Cheltenham, was abandoned when it was discovered that civil aviation authorities had got in first and were putting up a transmit/receive pair of stations for communications with aircraft on North Atlantic routes (these were dismantled only in the late 1980s). In the end, the new station went to Culmhead (in Somerset, southwest England and a hundred miles away from Cheltenham).

(U) The biggest development was the decision to erect an additional very large new building, rather than relying solely on the twelve (six at each site) "temporary" office blocks which had been hastily erected in 1940. For its day, this building ("C Block" at Oakley) was one of the largest in the area, and, as visitors may know, it is still quite easy to get lost in it. Meanwhile, the pace was set by the rate at which domestic housing could be provided, and the contractors proceeded so well that their original plan, to hand over the first houses in mid-1952 and the last two years later, was telescoped and the work was completed by mid-1953; in the end it was the new office buildings which were last to be finished, in 1954.

(U) So GCHQ began the main move to Cheltenham in summer 1952, and a year later effectively everyone had arrived (though for another year their offices were a bit cramped). Since then GCHQ has been the largest local employer, and has made very significant contributions to the musical, cultural and sporting life of the area.

(U) Ironic notes keep cropping up in this story. The much-maligned Cinderella buildings at Eastcote are still standing (one of them now houses the U.S. Marines who guard the London embassy), and look likely to outlast their equally WWII but preferred contemporaries in Cheltenham. The spaces at Cheltenham were quoted as especially attractive because they allowed for the colocation of the two intercept stations, but in the

end GCHQ found it could live without this feature. The free offices at Benhall and Oakley in Cheltenham which looked so spacious at first glance turned out to require a new, and very expensive, building providing a 50 percent increase in floor space before GCHQ could move in, even after the plan to include two intercept stations as well as headquarters was abandoned.

(U) Nevertheless, by whatever route GCHQ arrived in Cheltenham, we are all extremely glad that it did: beautiful countryside, beautiful town -- and a hundred miles from London (which may disappoint NSAers but is a big selling point for many Brits).

(U) The anniversary of the start of the main move is being marked by a month-long exhibition being held jointly with Cheltenham's Museum & Art Gallery, and linked with a Science Festival. We hope in due course to have a permanent public exhibit.

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