

Annual Conference of the Association of Business Historians

Pluralistic perspectives of business history: gender, class, ethnicity, religion

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Keynote address: The Business of Signals Intelligence

During World War I, a number of countries including Britain, were able to intercept and read the secret communications (signals) of their enemies. This gathering and dissemination of signals intelligence was done in a rudimentary and ad hoc fashion. The end of the war saw the creation of the Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS) in Britain.

The word School was apt as GC&CS initially operated very much as the research department of British Sigint. However, over the next two decades, it was probably the most effective cryptanalytic bureau the world had ever seen. Very few cipher systems of important target countries were not read and for the first time, business principles were introduced into the intelligence field.

By 1938, new blood was introduced into GC&CS from universities across the UK. So-called "men of the professor type" who had the mindset and the skills for the work of GC&CS, agreed to join GC&CS rather than the armed forces, at the outbreak of war. In the early days of World War Two, these men began work at Bletchley Park. There were minimal management constraints and in many cases they worked in an unconventional way. However, it was not long before industrial scale production processes were put in place. By the end of the war, British Sigint was being run like a large corporation with many modern business practices commonplace.

About the speaker



Joel is an author and historian. He received his PhD in Numerical Mathematics from the University of Manchester (UMIST) in 1973. He worked for the Open University for over 33 years, and held a number of senior management positions at Director level.

He has written the authorised biographies of two key figures in the story of signals intelligence, Gordon Welchman and Alastair Denniston. The Welchman book, *Gordon Welchman, Bletchley Park's Architect of Ultra Intelligence*, is the basis of a joint BBC/Smithsonian Network 2015 documentary about Welchman – *The Forgotten Genius of Bletchley Park*.

The Denniston book, *Alastair Denniston, Code-breaking from Room 40 to Berkeley Street and the Birth of GCHQ*, is both a biography and an account of signals intelligence from its early development to the birth of GCHQ. Denniston was the first Head of GCHQ and the book was launched at its headquarters on 7 September 2017 in honour of him.