

# Derek Taunt

12:01AM BST 23 Jul 2004

Derek Taunt, who died on July 15 aged 86, pursued an academic career at Cambridge, becoming Bursar of Jesus College, after wartime work as a codebreaker at Bletchley Park.

A mathematician, Taunt was recruited in August 1941, shortly after the German invasion of Russia, and assigned to Hut 6, whose main purpose was to provide the translators and analysts in Hut 3 with intelligence, in the form of decrypts of Enigma ciphers.

For the first year he worked in Control section, maintaining contact between Hut 6 and the stations around Britain which intercepted Enigma traffic. He then transferred to the more glamorous environment of The Watch, the heart of the Hut 6 codebreaking operation, then led by Stuart Milner-Barry. This consisted of classicists, mathematicians, chess players, historians, modern linguists and actresses - as well as service personnel.

The role of The Watch was to find, by linguistic and mathematical probability analysis of Enigma messages, the "crib" used by the German Enigma machine operators to decode encrypted messages. This was changed each day and Taunt recalled that the Germans constantly sought ways of introducing complications, such as including nonsense words at the beginning of messages or changing the Enigma machine wheel orders during the day.

Later Taunt moved to Qwatch (a pun on Quatsch, the German for "rubbish"), a close-knit group of three codebreakers, the others being Bob Roseveare and Ione Jay, to cope with less urgent but nonetheless important problems. These included deciphering the code used by "some rather sinister scientists at Peenemunde on the Baltic coast whose interest in heavy water and rocketry emphasised the need for the Allies to get their retaliation in first for the V3 weapon".

ADVERTISING

Taunt recalled his time at Bletchley Park chiefly for the sense of camaraderie, the excitement of a shared intellectual challenge and for close friendships which lasted after the war ended. "To have been a non-passenger in a team of such calibre and with such victories to its credit," he wrote later, "seems to me to justify some modest satisfaction. Our happy band may not have been with King Harry on St Crispin's Day, but we had certainly not been abed and have no reason to think ourselves accurs't for having been where we were."

Derek Taunt was born on November 16 1917 and educated at Enfield Grammar, then City of London School, and at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he read Mathematics. He was accepted by Professor G H Hardy, whose lectures on analysis he had enjoyed, as a research student, but the project was postponed by the outbreak of war.

He was sent to work in the Ordnance Board at Kemnal Manor, Chislehurst, analysing trial firings of new guns and ammunition, before moving to Bletchley Park in 1941. After V E Day Hut 6 disbanded and Taunt spent the months until V J Day at the Admiralty Research Laboratory at Teddington, working on supersonic aerodynamics.

By the time he returned to Cambridge as a research student, Hardy had retired, so he abandoned mathematical analysis for abstract algebra and was accepted as a research student by Philip Hall. A Fellow of Jesus, Taunt became director of studies in Mathematics, tutor, then Bursar of Jesus from 1964 to 1979. He was President of Jesus from 1979 to 1982 and Cayley Lecturer in Mathematics from 1954 to 1982.

Taunt's time as bursar coincided with significant redevelopments of parts of Cambridge, including the controversial Grafton Centre development in the "Kite", a picturesque, though run-down, area of small terraced houses north of Parker's Piece, where Jesus had sizeable landholdings. He was instrumental in stopping plans to build the centre on New Square and also successfully opposed a scheme to build an inner relief road across Jesus Green and Jesus Close.

Taunt was a man who embodied the old-fashioned qualities of duty and public service. He was closely involved in many aspects of Cambridge town life, serving as honorary secretary, founder member and later honorary treasurer of the King Street Housing Association. When the Arts Council cut its grant

to the Kettle's Yard museum and gallery in 1984, he and his wife founded the Friends of Kettle's Yard.

In his spare time, Taunt enjoyed cricket, walking, music, travel and architecture.

He married, in 1949, Angela Verren Chick, an artist, with whom he had two sons and a daughter.



How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2015