

As a child I swam in the North Sea at Whitley Bay – it toughened me up, but I didn't know what I needed toughening up for.

I was supposed to go to Cambridge but war and my father put the kibosh on that, so I lived at home and studied at King's College Durham where I took Geography, Geology and Spanish. I already had French at A level and they let me have two modern languages instead of Latin. The men had all been called up, so we were a small group of girls studying Geography which I maintain is an all-encompassing subject; it can take you anywhere. You might become an explorer and writer like Freya Stark or a chef and traveller like Elizabeth David ...

I graduated in July 1942 with a lower second as my maths was appalling - I nearly failed surveying which was out in the field with logarithm books in my day. I never went to the ceremony as I was called down to London for an interview at the Foreign Office. They told me to wear a hat! Turned out to be a complete waste of money when the ladies were told to take off their hats for the formal interview.

One man put the fear of God in me about never telling a soul what I was doing - then they had me sign the Official Secrets Act. When I left Burlington House, someone in a raincoat and trilby followed me to a Lyons Corner House where I ordered a pot of tea - it must have been a test to see if I'd spill the beans. I made my excuses and turned on my heels.

Bletchley was a bit grim. Being billeted in families who don't want you and having to put up with substandard facilities was a trial. Wrens had a better time of it in their country houses where they held parties and dressed up to the nines looking for future husbands. I worked in Hut 7 on the Hollerith machines decoding messages from the Germans. Then I was moved to the Quiet Room, or QR as it was known, but it was far from quiet I can tell you! I've blanked out a lot of detail. If you didn't, you'd have gone berserk ...

I loved walking in the countryside around Bletchley and the Mansion's gardens. I especially loved a white climbing rose trained up the south-facing wall, and perhaps that became the seed of my lifelong passion for horticulture. I taught myself everything I know about plants and gardens, reading up about the subject and following women like Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville-West, Beth Chatto.

My professor managed to get me released from Bletchley to go into the new Town and Country Planning Department in Newcastle where I enjoyed using my skills - much more satisfying than code-breaking. I was involved with analysing aerial photos to find land to put up pre-fabs for people bombed out of their homes.

I met Gordon there – he had trained as an architect in Manchester before the war and the department tracked him down and fished him out of the army where he had been building roads to work in the mountains of Persia - and going to belly-dancing shows in Hamadan. I still have the programme! Of course once we married and I got pregnant it was the end of my professional life although I like to think I helped Gordon get to the top of his tree from our own living-room where we discussed everything to do with housing policy, planning and politics.

RHS turned out to be my sort of organisation and I was an avid Chelsea-goer when we lived in South London. I created my own garden in the time I had spare when I wasn't cooking and laundering and looking after my husband, his parents who came to live with us, and my two young daughters.

And if I were to choose a tree, it would have to be an Araucaria since that's the nickname of my favourite cryptic crossword setter. Cryptic crosswords were something else I taught myself how to do, in common with other Bletchley veterans.

**Jean Dearden (née Robson 1922 – 2017)**

**Liz Almond**