



LETCWORTH STRIKES BACK!

The IWA sometimes receives feedback from walkers about their impressions of the Icknield Way Path and unfavourable remarks have been made about the short stretch through the industrial area along Icknield Way East at Letchworth. Indeed, our walkers' guidebook refers to this stretch as one of the least attractive of the route!

So, in defence of Letchworth, it is hoped this article will explain the very significant contribution made by industry along Icknield Way East, in the world's first garden city, during World War II.

Irvin Air Chutes

In 1919, an American named Leslie Irving made the first free-fall parachute jump and later that year founded the Irvin Parachute Company in Massachusetts. The start was quite modest – in fact the typist preparing material for the original launch omitted the 'g' from Irving so the company name became Irvin by default.

The product was obviously going to be successful so in 1926, the company opened a factory in Britain at Icknield Way East in Letchworth to produce parachutes for the Royal Air Force. The demand was such that a second factory opened just before the commencement of World War II, its timing influenced no doubt by the increasingly serious international tensions at the time. The factory in Letchworth still exists (with the name above it at the time of writing) although it is no longer owned by Irvin.

A feature of this company in the early days was the creation of the Caterpillar Club, membership of which was restricted to people whose lives had been saved by escaping by parachute from a crippled aircraft. It was proposed that this should be marked by the award of a tiny golden caterpillar – reflecting the role of the silk moth in the production of the fabric of the original parachutes. In the very beginning, the club had only two members and Leslie Irvin paid \$3 dollars for each caterpillar to be made. Little did he realise that by 1960, membership would reach 80,000 with 23,000 of those in Europe! All applications required verification and many also included full accounts of the event that had precipitated the award.

In 1942, canopy production moved to the much larger Spirella factory which provided increased floor space. This factory also still exists not far from Letchworth railway station, but has been converted into a thriving business centre.

The Letchworth Bombe

Whilst Irvin Air Chutes was well-known and its products familiar to all in the aviation industry, there was another company at the other end of the same road that in wartime had a product that was shrouded in secrecy until about thirty years after the end of World War II.

This was the No. 1 factory of The British Tabulating Company (known locally as the 'Tab') who were makers of the Hollerith punch card system for processing data such as stock checking. It was one of the largest employers in the area - and listed on the stock exchange.

Most people will now know about the highly secret Bletchley Park and its code-breakers. Their story is well documented, the museum has received a huge grant to enable it to restore more of its facilities and the cracking of the German 'Enigma' coding system for transmitting messages has even been turned into a film.

One of the biggest problems of code-breaking was the enormous amount of time involved in attempting to do it manually but this was compounded by the imperative need to do it quickly enough to take action and achieve a military advantage. Each day, Bletchley Park received an average of 3000 Morse transmissions that needed to be processed.

The messages consisted of 'words' of four/five digits which were produced by the three-rotor German Enigma machine primed to a secret setting. Each rotor held 26 letters but to add further difficulty, the rotors were changed daily. A brilliant mathematician named Alan Turing conceived a system which could scan all the permutations of the Morse transmissions until a recognisable German word, or part of a word, was found. This often incomplete information could then be passed to cryptographers to interpret.

The machine that Turing developed to achieve this was quite large, measuring 6 feet high, 7 feet wide and 3 feet deep. Known as 'The Bombe', it consisted of over one hundred revolving drums or rotors each of which had 26 contacts on the rear. These revolving contacts were programmable and contained the Morse code readings. As they rotated, the readings were compared with each of the fixed contacts of the German alphabet and translated in to code that could be assembled in to meaningful messages.

And here we come to the Letchworth connection! The rotors were made in the basement of the Government Training Centre in Letchworth and they were wired at the Spirella factory close by. This employed several hundred people, mostly women, working day and night.

The Bombes were then assembled at the Tab No. 1 factory under conditions of extreme secrecy. The work was referred to by the very few people 'in the know' as the Cantab Contract and it is quite probable that none involved with it at Letchworth knew its true purpose. A total of 210 Bombes were delivered to Bletchley Park in plain unmarked lorries.

And so, lying behind the somewhat drear countenance of Icknield Way East lies the secret history of two products that saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives during World War II – and, in the case of the parachute, continues to save life.

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