

# Alan Turing and Oxford

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## Introduction

Did [Alan Turing](#) OBE FRS (23 June 1912 – 7 June 1954), the celebrated mathematician, codebreaker, and pioneer computer scientist, ever visit [Oxford](#)? He is well-known for his connections with the [University of Cambridge](#), [Bletchley Park](#), the [National Physical Laboratory](#), and the [University of Manchester](#), but there is no known written archival record of him ever visiting Oxford, despite it being the location of the [University of Oxford](#), traditionally a rival of Cambridge. However, surely he must have done so.

As a computer scientist, I first became fully aware of Alan Turing's achievements during the mid-1980s on reading [Andrew Hodges'](#) magnificent 1983 biography ([Alan Turing: The Enigma](#)), later reissued for the Turing centenary in 2012 (Hodges, 1983/2012). Hodges is an Oxford-based mathematician who has also run a website on Turing since the early 1990s ([www.turing.org.uk](http://www.turing.org.uk)). I myself established the [Virtual Museum of Computing](#) online around the same time while working at the Oxford University Computing Laboratory. We collaborated and even published together on these efforts (Bowen et al., 2005). We have since maintained contact periodically and Andrew Hodges has told me that he knows of no *record* of Turing having visited Oxford.

However, Hodges' biography does include mention of some visits. In summer 1924, the Turing family stayed in Oxford, when Alan Turing would have been 12. This was probably a nostalgic visit for his father, Julius Mathison Turing (1873–1947), who was a scholar at [Corpus Christi College, Oxford](#), and received his BA degree in 1894. One might expect Alan Turing's father to have been keen for him to go to Oxford, but Turing's close school friend [Christopher Morcom](#) (1911–1930) won a scholarship at [Trinity College, Cambridge](#). Very sadly, Morcom died of tuberculosis before he could attend university, but this no doubt influenced Turing to apply for a scholarship at Trinity College too. In the event, Trinity did not award Turing a scholarship, but his second choice of college, [King's College, Cambridge](#), did. With hindsight, Trinity College may well regret this decision! On the other hand, without the influence of Morcom, Turing may have followed his father to Oxford. Later in 1941, during [World War II](#), Hodges notes a weekend visit to Oxford with [Joan Clarke](#) (1917–1996), who worked at Bletchley Park and was briefly engaged to Turing, to see Clarke's brother, Martin Clarke, previously a Fellow at King's College.

While most of the [Government Code and Cypher School](#) (GC&CS) activities during World War II was based at Bletchley Park, aka [Ultra](#) from 1941, the security section was located at [Mansfield College, Oxford](#), preparing codebook and re-enciphering tables, largely printed by the nearby [Oxford University Press](#) (UK Government, 2006). One of the reasons for locating operations at Bletchley Park was that it was conveniently positioned about halfway between Oxford and Cambridge on the "[Varsity Line](#)", a railway line that ran between the two. [Bletchley railway station](#) was very close to Bletchley Park, making visits to Oxford and Cambridge easy. One could imagine the possibility of Turing visiting and helping with the operation at Mansfield College in Oxford during the War (Hodges, 2020).



**Figure 1:** Mansfield College, Oxford, location of the GC&CS security section during World War II

After the War, Turing also periodically visited [David Champernowne](#) (1912–2000), a former mathematics scholar with Turing at King’s College, who was later a fellow of [Nuffield College, Oxford](#), Director of the Oxford Institute of Statistics from 1945 to 1948 (Gittins, 2017), and Professor of Statistical Economics at the [University of Oxford](#) during 1948–1959, before he returned to Cambridge. It is likely that at least one of these meetings was in Oxford (Hodges, 2020). In 1948, they collaborated on an early chess-playing program, [Turochamp](#).

In 2012, I co-organised a celebration of Turing’s centenary at the [Oxford University Department for Continuing Education](#), in parallel with events in Cambridge, Bletchley Park, Manchester, and elsewhere. Why should Oxford not celebrate such an esteemed scientist even if there was no reliably recorded connection with Oxford? Since then I have collaborated on a major book on Turing’s work ([The Turing Guide](#)), initially based on chapters by presenters at the Oxford, Cambridge, and Bletchley Park centenary meetings. This finally appeared in early 2017, published by Oxford University Press (Copeland et al., 2017), with three of the four main authors (the philosopher [Jack Copeland](#), the mathematician [Robin Wilson](#), and [me](#) as a computer scientist) being Oxford graduates.



**Figure 2:** The author with the bust of Alan Turing at Southwest University in Chongqing, China

## Turing and Eisenhower in Oxford

During this time, I periodically asked during talks on Turing whether the audience knew of any evidence of Turing ever having visited Oxford, never really expecting to get a response. However, on one occasion I did. After a talk (Bowen, 2017) at Southwest University in Chongqing, China (where a

bust of Turing can be found outside the computer science department), a former [Oxford University Computing Laboratory](#) colleague of mine, [Jim Woodcock](#), now Professor of Software Engineering at the [University of York](#), answered positively. He told me of a social event he attended at [University College, Oxford](#), my own college as an undergraduate. There he met Herbert Hart (aka [H. L. A. Hart](#), 1907–1992), who worked at Bletchley Park during World War II and was later [Professor of Jurisprudence](#) at Oxford during 1952–68, following on in the post from [Arthur Goodhart](#) (1891–1978), who was later Master of University College. He recounted a visit to University College, for a lunch during the War by General [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) (1890–1969). There was an entourage including people working at Bletchley Park, with Hart himself and, he recalled, Alan Turing, among their number. Using British inuendo, he noted that Turing (as a gay man) made an “inappropriate remark” about one of Eisenhower’s aides, which seems to make the story ring true.

Subsequently I contacted the University College archivist, [Robin Darwall-Smith](#), to see if there was any record of such a lunch at the College. Sadly, he could not find any written record in the archives, but he noted that this was not unusual during the War and that the story sounded very plausible to him. Arthur Goodhart, an Anglophile American, and Sir [William Beveridge](#) (1879–1963), Master of University College, who would probably have loved to meet Eisenhower according to Robin Darwall-Smith, would both have been at the College at the time.

Perhaps, I thought, the Eisenhower archives and diaries, available in the USA, could reveal more of his wartime movements while in England. Certainly, he stayed in the village of [Sonning](#), on the River Thames not far from Oxford during the period before the [Normandy landings](#) (D-Day) on 6 June 1944, where I was also a resident for a while. So I contacted the archives about any known visits by Eisenhower during the War and very quickly received a helpful reply. There are records of him visiting Oxford on two occasions to see ill military colleagues in hospital. Valoise Armstrong, archivist at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, Kansas, wrote:

*I have conducted a search of the chronology of General Eisenhower's activities during the war for any visit he made to Oxford. I found only two instances, both were visits he paid to colleagues who were ill. On October 1, 1942 he visited General [Walter Bedell Smith](#) in the hospital in Oxford. On April 16, 1944 he paid a visit to the hospital to see Col. [James Gault](#). I did not find any record of a more formal or official visit or any mention of a trip to University College. It is possible that he had lunch somewhere in Oxford on these afternoons, but we do not have records of his meals on those occasions.*

General Walter Bedell Smith (1895–1961) was a senior officer of the US Army who served as Eisenhower's chief of staff at the Allied Forces Headquarters during the Tunisia campaign of November 1942 to May 1943 and the Allied invasion of Italy in 1943. Brigadier Sir James Frederick Gault KCMG (1902–1977) was a British military assistant to Eisenhower. For both dates when Eisenhower is known to have visited Oxford, it would have been possible for Alan Turing to be in Oxford as well. Turing visited the US during November 1942 to March 1943 (as well as studying at [Princeton University](#) for his PhD in the 1930s), so he certainly had American connections (Zitarelli, 2015).

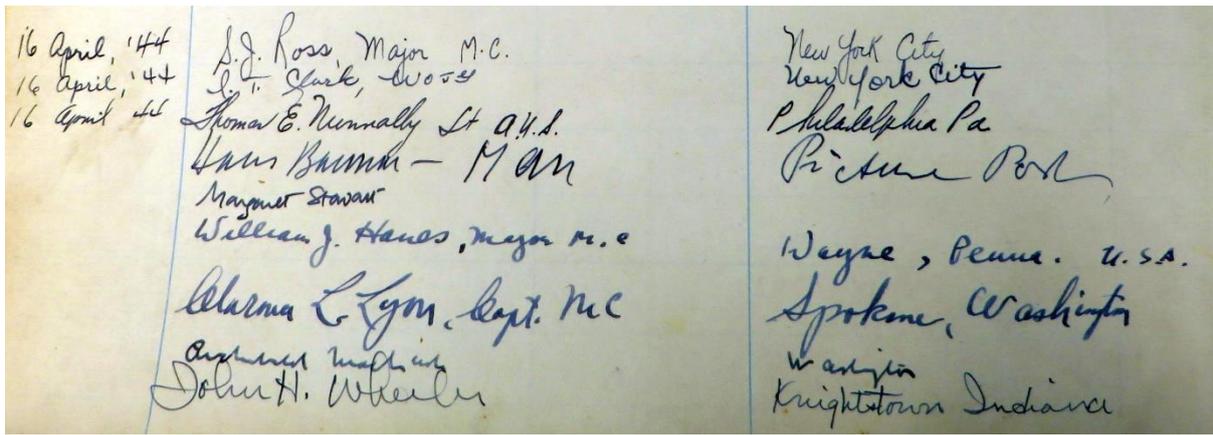
Of the dates when Eisenhower was in Oxford, 1944 is perhaps more likely as a rendezvous involving Turing. General Eisenhower certainly appreciated the work of Bletchley Park in the lead up to D-Day. Although he was not able to visit Bletchley Park afterwards, on 12 July 1945 he wrote a secret letter to Sir [Stewart Menzies](#) (1890–1968), the wartime chief of the British [Secret Intelligence Service](#) (aka MI6), giving thanks for the codebreaking work at Bletchley Park. Since 2016, this has been on display at the museum now located at Bletchley Park (BBC, 2016).

One of Eisenhower's aides, [Harry Butcher](#) (1901–1985), kept a diary of his wartime experiences with Eisenhower over three years, which was later published in book form (Butcher, 1946). 16 April 1944 was a Sunday and the diaries mainly cover weekdays, so unfortunately the book is silent about Eisenhower's activities on this date. Robin Darwall-Smith noted that nobody signed into lunch in Hall at University College on this date. Could there have been a secret lunch in the Master's Lodgings instead?



**Figure 3:** *The Master's Lodgings at University College, Oxford*

Robin Darwall-Smith also let me know that Beveridge's archives are held by the [London School of Economics](#) (LSE), where he was Director during 1919–1937. Thus, I registered for an LSE library card to view the archives there. In particular, I noticed that the archives included Beveridge's pocket diaries and the visitors' book at the Master's Lodgings. On viewing the contents of the archives, the pocket diaries were very disappointing with very few entries. However, the visitors' book was much more interesting. For the date of 16 April 1944, there was a list of names, including locations in the USA such as New York City, Philadelphia, Wayne (Pennsylvania), Spokane (Washington), and Knightstown (Indiana). But there were no names that linked with Eisenhower (as confirmed by Valoise Armstrong, the Eisenhower archivist) or Turing and Bletchley Park. However, two names were a particular puzzle, "Hans Baumann – Man", with a rather indistinct affiliation, and "Margaret Stewart" immediately below. After some time deciphering this, it turned out to be "[Picture Post](#)", the photojournalistic magazine that ran from 1938 to 1957. Hans Felix Sigismund Baumann (1893–1985), aka [Felix H. Man](#) to disguise his German heritage, was a pioneer photojournalist.



**Figure 4:** Signatures in the Master's Lodgings visitors' book, 16 April 1944

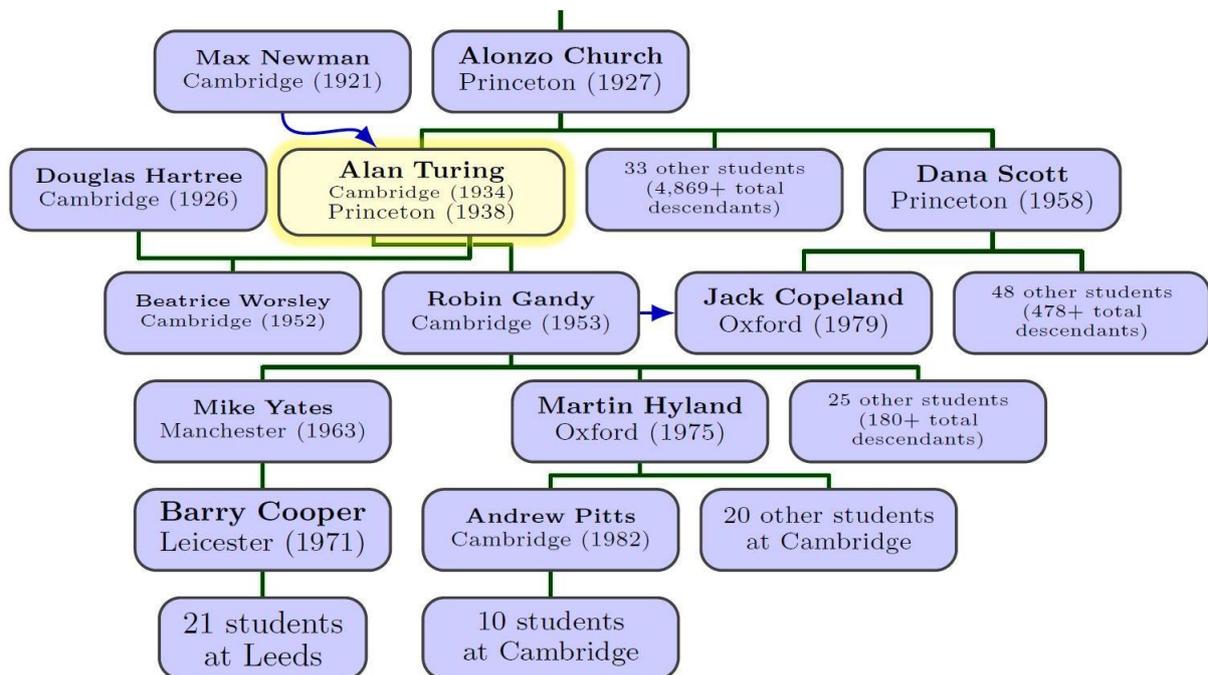
So, I thought, was there an article in *Picture Post* after this event? *Picture Post* is accessible online but at a fee. Fortunately, I have a long-time friend – [Andrew Robinson](#), editor of the book [The Scientists](#), on 43 leading scientists of all time, including Alan Turing (Bowen, 2012) – who subscribes to the [London Library](#), which provides access to copies of *Picture Post*. He kindly found the article on this event, including names of people involved matching the signatures in the visitors' book, with text by Margaret Stewart and photographs by Felix Man (Stewart & Man, 1944). It covered Sunday tea with Sir William and Lady Beveridge for American officers billeted in Oxford before D-Day, noting that they held such tea parties on Sundays when at the Master's Lodgings in Oxford.

The tea party on Sunday 16 April 1944 at the University College Master's Lodgings and reported in *Picture Post* did not involve Eisenhower or Turing. However, it demonstrates that Beveridge was in Oxford on that date. We also know that Eisenhower was in Oxford on that date. We have no record of their lunch arrangements. We have a verbal report that Eisenhower had a lunch at University College with members of Bletchley Park, including Alan Turing. There is no record of anyone signing in for lunch in Hall at University College on 16 April 1944, so a "secret" lunch at the Master's Lodgings is entirely possible. Thus, there is significant circumstantial evidence that Turing may have visited Oxford with Bletchley Park colleagues and a lunch at University College with Eisenhower arranged for them, since it is known that Eisenhower appreciated the work of Bletchley Park very much. But it would be nice to have some written evidence for this, a silver bullet of proof, perhaps in a letter somewhere recalling the event.

## Turing connections in Oxford

Whether or not Turing visited Oxford in any significant way during his lifetime, his legacy certainly lives on at the University. Turing's PhD student at Cambridge and friend [Robin Gandy](#) (1919–1995) joined the [Mathematical Institute](#) at Oxford in 1969 as Reader in Mathematical Logic. He was also a Fellow at [Wolfson College, Oxford](#), and generously left his estate to the College, where there is now a residential block, the Robin Gandy Building, named after him (Isaacson, 2020). The College celebrated his centenary slightly late on 22 February 2020 with a one-day colloquium. [Dana Scott](#) studied for his PhD under the Princeton mathematician [Alonzo Church](#) (1903–1995), the same supervisor as Turing. Scott's research straddled mathematics and computer science at the Mathematical Institute and he received the [ACM Turing Award](#), the highest international award for computer science, in 1996. One of Scott's PhD students at Oxford, Jack Copeland, is now a leading Turing scholar. [Roger Penrose](#) OM FRS, Emeritus [Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics](#) at Oxford, has been influenced by Turing's ideas on artificial intelligence (specifically the [Turing test](#)) and computability (specifically the [Turing machine](#)) in his book [The Emperor's New Mind](#) (Penrose, 1989). His PhD student and subsequent research collaborator at Oxford, Andrew Hodges, is also Turing's definitive biographer (Hodges, 1983/2012). More recently, [Philip Maini](#) FRS, at Oxford's

Mathematical Institute, is a leading researcher in mathematical biology (Maini, 2020), a field that Turing arguably founded with his 1952 paper on [morphogenesis](#) and [Turing patterns](#), published not long before he died.



**Figure 5:** Alan Turing's academic supervisor tree (Bowen, 2019)

Oxford has also been a leading centre for [formal methods](#), originally at the [Programming Research Group](#). This was founded in 1965 under the leadership of [Christopher Strachey](#) (1916–1975), a colleague of Turing at Manchester, and then led by [Tony Hoare](#) FRS after Strachey's untimely death, applying mathematical approaches to reasoning about software (and hardware). This is a field that Turing pre-empted (Bowen, 2019), in particular with a short and lesser-known foundational paper in 1949 that has subsequently been examined in detail (Morris & Jones, 1984). [Samson Abramsky](#) FRS FRSE now holds the Christopher Strachey Professorship at the Oxford University [Department of Computer Science](#). He has made contributions to the foundations of computer science and has been influenced by Turing's legacy (Cooper & Abramsky, 2012). In recent years, data science researchers at Oxford have been highly involved with the [Alan Turing Institute](#) in London ([www.oxford-turing.ox.ac.uk](http://www.oxford-turing.ox.ac.uk)). So certainly overall, Turing's spirit and influence continues at Oxford in several fields.

Alan Turing has [blue plaques](#) celebrating locations with which he is associated, such as his place of birth in [Maida Vale](#), west London, and his place of death in [Wilmslow](#), Cheshire, at his home south of Manchester. There is no plaque for Turing in Oxford, for obvious reasons as shown in this article. However, his wartime fiancée and colleague Joan Clarke (later Joan Murray through marriage) moved to Oxford during her retirement and lived at 7 Lakesfield, [Headington Quarry](#), on the outskirts of Oxford, from 1991 until her death in 1996. On 27 July 2019, the [Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board](#) unveiled a plaque to record this connection (Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Scheme, 2019). So, there is at least now a transitive plaque for Alan Turing's presence in Oxford.



**Figure 6:** 7 Larksfild, Oxford, home of Joan Murray (née Clarke), commemorated with a blue plaque

## A Turing seminar in Oxford

In 2020 during the Covid pandemic, I gave an online talk based on my research to that point on evidence of Turing having visited Oxford to the Oxford History of Mathematics Forum, which normally meets at [The Queen’s College, Oxford](#). [Christopher Hollings](#), a leader of the Forum and a College Lecture at the College, noted a short piece he had read in *The Queen’s College Record* by the topologist Professor [Ioan James](#) FRS, who matriculated at Oxford in 1946, stating (James, 2017):

*Another Mathematics lecturer worth mentioning was Alan Turing, who told us about what became known as the Turing machine.*

James spent some time as a student in Cambridge due to illness as well as Oxford, so it was not completely clear whether his memory was on a lecture in Oxford or Cambridge. James as later an academic at [St John’s College, Oxford](#), but by now is retired of course. Christopher Hollings suggested writing to James, which I duly did with a draft of this article. I thought I would hand-post the letter since I live not far from St John’s in Oxford. However, on arriving at the College, it was completely barred to visitors during the pandemic, even to post a letter. So, I put a stamp on my envelope and entrusted it to the Post Office. I heard nothing for several months, but in February 2021, a hand-written letter arrived at my home (James, 2017). In it, James describes what he calls the “old guard”, including [Theodore Chaundy](#) (1889–1966) of [Christ Church, Oxford](#), and a “new guard”, led by the statistician and mathematician [David Kendall](#) (1918–2007), from 1946 a tutor at [Magdalen College, Oxford](#), and later a professor in Cambridge from 1962. Kendall was a contemporary statistician with David Champernowne, another colleague of Turing as mentioned previously, and the two overlapped at Oxford in the late 1940s and 1950s (Gittins, 2017). Apparently, Turing lectured at one of Kendall’s seminars in Oxford, with a small audience, including James. So, there is at least one living memory of Turing having visited Oxford University in an academic capacity.

Finally, this is a plea to any reader who may have further information or know someone with additional knowledge on any further Turing-Oxford connections to get in touch with the author by email on [jonathan.bowen@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.bowen@lsbu.ac.uk). It would be especially wonderful to confirm the Eisenhower-Turing visit if there is any further evidence to be found. But at least there are indications, if only verbal and circumstantial, that Alan Turing did visit Oxford on a number of occasions, and written evidence for at least one occasion (James, 2017; 2021).

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