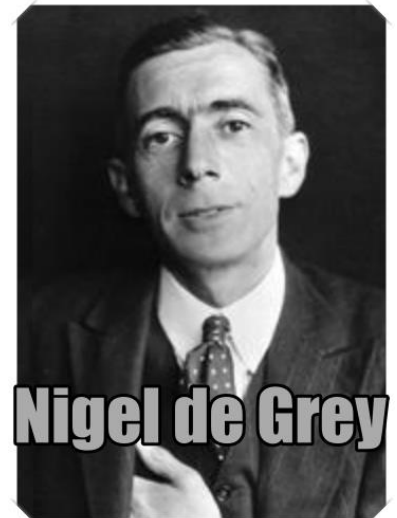


From the Archives

Nigel de Grey – famous British codebreaker at Roehampton Club in World War One

The Club recently received an enquiry from a historian who was researching the background of those responsible for the development of our military and secret intelligence services. Mark Lubienski is a lifelong Londoner with a keen interest in this subject. He is a volunteer at Bletchley Park – home of the legendary World War Two code breakers. He also works as a tour guide at the RAF Museum in Northolt where he specialises in the story of the Battle of Britain. During his research, Mark had established that one of the most important figures in the history of British Signals Intelligence, Nigel de Grey was based at Roehampton Club with the Royal Naval Air Service for his training in the use of Kite Balloons in late 1914, early 1915.

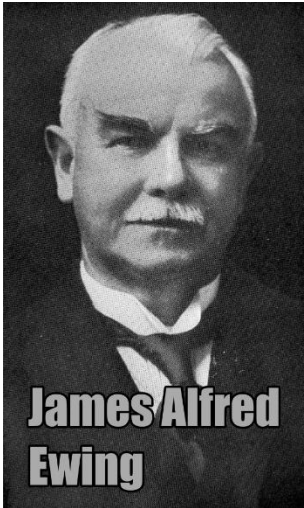


The balloons were used by the military for intelligence gathering, artillery spotting and were also used at sea for anti-submarine purposes. These activities were featured in a previous article in the *Recorder* in 2018 under the title of *The Balloonatics – unsung heroes of the First World War*.

Nigel de Grey was born on 27th March 1886 – son of the Rector of Copdock in Suffolk and grandson to the fifth Lord Walsingham. Educated at Eton College and became fluent in French and German. After his training at Roehampton Club, he was transferred to Belgium where he saw action. Early in 1915, he was transferred to the Naval Intelligence Division based at the Admiralty Building in Whitehall where the section was referred to as 'Room 40'.

De Grey was introduced to other intellectuals and academics who had established themselves as eminently qualified to address the challenge of infiltrating enemy communications. Room 40 was described as a maze of interconnecting 'cubby holes, dens and barrack-like typing pools of various shapes and sizes. At peak capacity, it employed some 800 wireless operators, ninety cryptographers and other specialists. The leading characters responsible for the success of Room 40 included a mixture of individuals with diverse backgrounds. Presiding over this group from November 1915 was 44-year-old Captain (later Admiral) Reginald Hall, known as 'Blinker,' due to a pronounced facial twitch said to have caused one of his eyes to 'flash like a Navy signal lamp', a trait he combined with a penetrating stare, luxuriantly bushy eyebrows, and

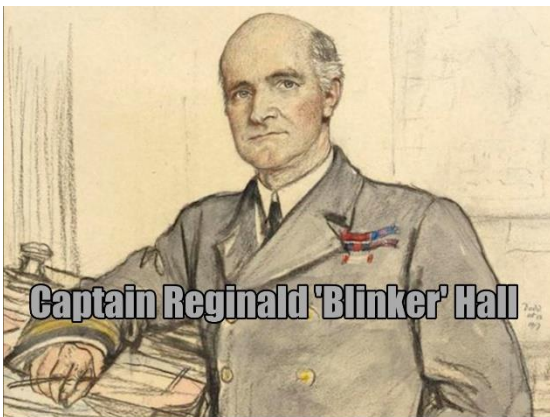




conspicuously false teeth. These characters started their work under the overall leadership of James Alfred Ewing - an accomplished silver-haired Scot who had served previously as the first Professor of Engineering at the University of Dundee and went on to take up an academic post in Cambridge.

At the outset of the war, the Admiralty found themselves with a growing pile of intercepted German naval signals in code which they were unable to understand. Using three major German code books captured by the British Navy, Ewing went about the recruitment of the first British codebreakers to decipher the messages and change the course of the war. Due to the secrecy of his work, Ewing could not openly advertise these positions, relying heavily on his network of Royal Navy connections and associated recommendations. One of the first recruits was Alexander Deniston – another quiet Scot, fluent in German and was also an accomplished hockey player having represented GB in the 1908 Olympics.

Charles Rutter soon followed and, using his knowledge of German, was able to recognise the various layers of code in the messages and how to decode them. In 1915, the remit for the team was expanded to include the deciphering of diplomatic messages requiring a new group of analysts beginning with George Young – a former diplomat with an understanding of different languages and how to look for different meanings.



This was also the time when Nigel de Grey was added to the team. Working with others, de Grey was responsible for deciphering a message sent by the German Foreign Office to the German Ambassador in Mexico via the German Embassy in Washington, USA in which the Germans were encouraging Mexico to declare war on the United States. The words allegedly used by Nigel de Grey reporting the content of the message to Captain Reginald 'Blinker' Hall were as follows; 'Do you want to bring America into the

war?'. The message later became known as the 'Zimmerman Telegram' confirming the incredible success of the first British codebreakers and laying the foundations for the development of Bletchley Park in World War Two.

Steve Riedlinger – Club Archivist