

A Life Dismembered

3. Sussex 1971-72

In July 1971 I graduated from the University of East Anglia with an Upper Second Class degree in Mathematics. What to do with my life from here on? Getting a 9-to-5 job would be an admission of defeat. But I wasn't too concerned. It had been a beautiful summer, and as a final-year I had been living in the ziggurat residences which you can see on the cover of *Events*. With my own large balcony for sunbathing, and view over the Lake. So I hadn't made much attempt to arrange a graduate career. The only application I remember making was to an obscure part of the Civil Service called Government Communications Headquarters. And that was out of curiosity rather than anything else. Their brochure explained that GCHQ's task was to develop techniques by which messages could be sent securely between Whitehall and Britain's embassies around the world. In those times even the existence of MI5 and MI6 was not officially admitted.

Surprisingly I was invited for interview. From the entrance gate, GCHQ's HQ at Cheltenham looked like a small collection of Nissen huts. But once I and other applicants were bussed up and over the hill, the full extent of the facility spread below was a surprise. In an office we first had to sign the Official Secrets Act, and were then told the true purpose of GCHQ: to crack the secret communications of Britain's Cold War enemies.

I recall two incidents on the guided tour, through laboratories and offices crammed with mainframe computers (PCs and laptops were not even thought of). At one point we passed a room empty except for a small computer sitting idle and dusty. "That's the equipment which Parliament is told we have," our guide chuckled. Then we passed a teleprinter which was spewing out continuous fan-fold sheets covered with Cyrillic characters. "Oh, you weren't supposed to see that," he said unconcernedly, and hurried us on. I didn't take the interview seriously. Unsurprisingly I wasn't offered a job.

In those days, with only fifty universities, which awarded far fewer First Class degrees than today, I was able to land funding for a one-year Masters degree. I didn't choose to study anything useful, of course: I read Algebra at the University of Sussex. I shared a terrace house in Brighton with a postgrad who went to Chile researching trade unions there under the socialist Allende government. After General Pinochet's military coup in 1973 he was interned with other left-wingers in the National Stadium in Santiago, where the Army killed and tortured captives. This is the basis for the events at the end of *Events*.

My only other memory (apart from spending the afternoons watching cricket during another glorious summer, instead of working on my dissertation), was of joining a protest march through Brighton on the day after Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972, when soldiers from the

Parachute Regiment shot 26 unarmed civilians during a march in Londonderry). Office workers of my own age leaned out of the windows jeering as we walked by; I resolved never to get an office job.

But soon my course at Sussex ended. All I had learned from the course was that I didn't actually understand abstract algebra. I had a few more letters after my name, but still no idea what I wanted to do with my life.