



Colossus: The Secrets of Bletchley Park's Codebreaking Computers, edited by B Jack Copeland (OUP, £11.99)

The prototype of Colossus had what looked like an upended iron bedstead in front with a system of large wheels and pulleys feeding the teleprinter tape. Not surprisingly, it was nicknamed Heath Robinson. In his essay for this excellent collection, engineer Harry Fensom recalls that it started to smoke as soon as it was switched on. But when perfected, Colossus was the world's first large-scale electronic digital computer. The size of a room and weighing a ton, it changed the course of the second world war and eventually transformed all our lives. Colossus was designed by Thomas Flowers in 1943 and built by engineers at the post office research station in Dollis Hill, north-west London. This study reveals the vital role it played in cracking the Nazi codes, especially the teleprinter cipher machine codenamed Tunny, more complex even than the Enigma machine. This astonishing achievement shows that the true origin of the computer lay in the brilliance of the British scientific and engineering community of the 1930s and 40s.

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