

Instant Fame and a Nation's Shame

By Mike Trippitt

LATE ON 20TH JULY 1969, I stared at a grainy black and white TV screen wondering what the fuss was all about. At 6 years old I would normally have been in bed, but we'd gone to my grandparents' house specially to watch television.

Grandad insisted, as I fought off sleep, that I stay awake: "We are watching history," he said on more than one occasion.

Although the events were fifty years ago and the pictures were blurred, I remember them as though they were yesterday. How right Grandad was to keep me alert.

The world witnessed the first moon landing that night. Nations watched in awe as Neil Armstrong stepped from the Eagle onto the lunar surface.

Overnight Armstrong's life changed. Thrust into the spotlights of the world's media, the first man on the moon struggled to adjust to celebrity life. His achievement did not define him. He remained a reluctant hero, whose shyness disguised his brilliance as an aviator and a scientist.

Though Armstrong's name has been known throughout the world for fifty years, he stands in sharp contrast to another reluctant, shy, yet brilliant man whose name and achievements were unknown for over half a century.

A few weeks ago, I visited Bletchley Park for the first time. I felt compelled to read a biography of Alan Turing afterwards and to watch *The Imitation Game* film.

Alan Turing's achievements are immense. Not only did his codebreaking at

Bletchley save millions of lives and shortened the war by two years, his work in computer science after the war led to him being regarded as the father of modern computing. Computers would take Armstrong into space 20 years later.

Little wonder that this year BBC viewers and listeners voted him Greatest Person of the Twentieth Century.

The country he served was slow to regard him a hero and during his lifetime kept his achievements secret. Instead, it prosecuted him and chemically castrated him for being nothing more than gay. He died a broken man at the age of 42, long before homosexuality was decriminalised in England.

Ten years ago Prime Minister Gordon Brown formally apologised, describing Turing's treatment as "appalling" and "utterly unfair". "You deserved so much better," he said.

Turing was eventually pardoned by the Queen in 2013.

Neil Armstrong became famous 50 years ago, but Alan Turing more recently. They have so much in common: humility, integrity, decency and ability. Each merits his place in history. But Turing still deserves more.

On a recent trip to Manchester I stopped outside the university where Turing worked after the war, and sat down on a memorial bench beside his life-size statue.

"Sorry," I said.

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