



**Frontman for Blood, Sweat
& Tears jazz-rock band**
David Clayton-Thomas
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Obituaries

John Croft

Artist, spy and Bletchley Park codebreaker who rubbed shoulders with Kim Philby and one day deciphered a message from Hitler

The highlight of John Croft's six months as a codebreaker at Bletchley Park in 1943 was deciphering a personal message from Adolf Hitler demanding the apprehension of General Draza Mihailovic, the Yugoslav partisan leader, and offering a reward of "Eine grosse Menge Gold" (a large quantity of gold).

The previous year Croft had been a young history student at Christ Church, Oxford. He was already "specially enlisted" as a Royal Fusilier and was expecting to be called up at the end of the summer. One day he was approached by Keith Feiling, his tutor. Rather than join the army, might he be interested in intelligence work?

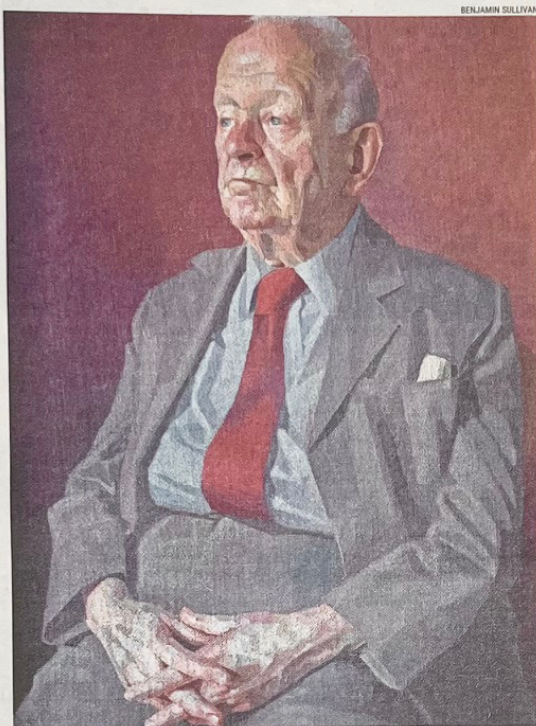
The prospect sounded enticing. He was summoned to meet AD Lindsay (later Lord Lindsay), master of Balliol College, at the master's lodge, "a large Victorian pile rather sparsely furnished and which smelt strongly of a tomcat". The interview was brief: could he read and translate the headlines in a German newspaper? "I could and I did," he wrote in the journal *Intelligence and National Security*.

At a second interview, held in a hut on an Oxford playing field, he met Colonel John Tiltman, a senior intelligence officer who was "almost the parody of a regular army officer with toothbrush moustache and rather clipped speech". Could he solve crossword puzzles? "Not one of my interests." How about chess? He had played it as a child.

However, "I must have acquitted myself reasonably well," he wrote. He was ordered to report to the Government Code and Cypher School in Bedford with two dozen other men, also interrupting their Oxford or Cambridge courses, and a group of crossword experts. Their classes in basic cryptography were followed by a puzzling course in German. "I am still not clear as to the relevance of my achievement in reading a German translation of Dostoevsky's letters to his wife," he wrote. He then joined Ralph Tester's section at Bletchley Park, decrypting messages sent by the German high command using the Lorenz cipher machine, then unseen by the Allies.

Croft, who was also an abstract artist, described a picture of collegiality: "Nobody pulled rank, and indeed some of those entrusted with responsible jobs as military advisers were not commissioned as officers," he wrote. He met Alan Turing in the canteen, describing it as a hub for social life. However, recreational activities were limited and he spent his spare time largely reading or on country walks. On one leave he travelled to St Pancras Station with Edward Boyle, the future Conservative minister, whose parents were at the Dorchester hotel. With no taxi available they boarded the top deck of a No 73 bus but he "soon realised that this was a novel experience for Edward, who had never been on a London bus before".

Although Croft decoded many messages revealing high-value information, he also endured long periods of tedium reading about supplies of lavatory paper to the German front. He sought a transfer and, thanks to an aunt who ran a shop below the Government Communications Bureau (M16) in Berkeley Street, found himself being sized up over lunch by a representative of "C".



BENJAMIN SULLIVAN

Assigned to the bureau's outpost on the top floor of Aldford House, Park Lane, he reported to Commander Alexander Denniston, a small, dapper naval officer. He visited the different sections: "a Chinese one whose denizens worked in a smoke-laden atmosphere with the windows closed in the hottest weather; a group working on the ciphers of the Free French and the Free Belgians; and one-man sections which were reconstructing the United States of America's consular codebook, largely of commercial interest, and reading the Papal Nuncio's enciphered correspondence with the Vatican."

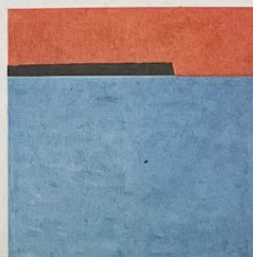
Croft's duties included collecting telegrams from the post office under South Africa House in Trafalgar Square, though he later reflected on the irony that this was almost the same site where Oliver Cromwell's post office had intercepted diplomatic and other mail three centuries earlier. Frustrated at failing to break codes and again bored with the tedium, he tried learning Finnish but had not got far when he was assigned to a new section.

This was concerned with signals between a control centre at or near Moscow and outposts in eastern Europe, the Balkans and as far away as western France. They were recognised as being sent by a former Met police officer and Communist Party member who had moved to Russia in the 1930s, but cracking them proved difficult. Eventually Bernard Scott, a Cambridge mathematician, discovered that the key

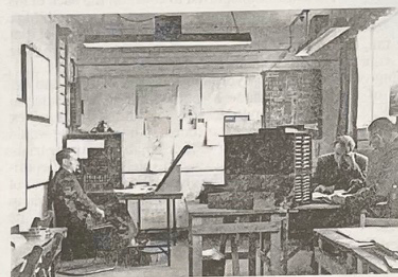
lay in a text from a certain English edition of Shakespeare. Croft and Scott scoured the British Library for the right edition but never found the one the Russians were using. "Presumably it was a pirate edition," he said.

On occasion Kim Philby, later exposed as a double agent, visited Aldford House. "There was nothing odd about his occasional visits as he was in M16 and, in that capacity, he read the decrypts," Croft said, though later he connected a mysterious break-in to Philby's presence.

When the war ended Croft returned to Oxford. He had not been back there long when a military policeman knocked on the door asking why he had been absent without leave from the Royal Fusiliers. "The brilliance of army



Towards Nare Head by Croft, who pursued oil painting without training



The portrait of John Croft, far left, by Benjamin Sullivan that hangs in the Reform Club of which he was a member for more than 80 years; left, the intercept control room in Hut 6 at Bletchley Park; below, Croft in the 1940s

records meant they had only just caught up with me," he told Nick Hewer, the TV presenter, in Hewer's book *My Alphabet: A Life From A to Z* (2018). "Problem was, I had been sworn to secrecy and couldn't tell him what I'd done in the war. He very kindly decided not to arrest me."

Ivor John Cohen was born in Bronesbury, north London, in 1923, the only child of Oswald Cohen, who had served with the Seaforth Highlanders during the First World War, tapping German telephone lines on the front line, and later worked for Paramount Films, and his wife, Doris (née Phillips). His father's family were of Dutch-Jewish origin and had emigrated to England in the early 19th century. A cousin was Ronald Phillips, the celebrated Mayfair antiques dealer (obituary, May 3, 2026).

He was educated at The Hall prep school in Hampstead and at Westminster School, by which time the family had changed their name to Croft. One of his contemporaries was Rudolf von Ribbentrop, son of Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German ambassador to London and later Hitler's foreign minister, whom he recalled revealing pink underwear when he stripped for a shower.

By 1940 the family were living in a Baker Street flat, which was hit during a German bombing raid. On another occasion he was walking to work when a V2 fell on Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park. "It was the biggest bang I've ever heard. Glass fell out of all the windows on Oxford Street," he said. "The strange thing was, there were no people running screaming through the streets. It was a terrible experience but there was no hysteria."

Back in Oxford after the war, he struggled with producing weekly essays and sought refuge in the Bodleian Library, reading about Cromwell's intelligence service. He asked his tutors if he could switch courses and investigate the origins of the Secret Intelligence Service, but was firmly warned off. However, his inquiry had repercussions. In 1947 he applied to join GCHQ but was turned down. He appealed to Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary, but received a courteous refusal.

Applying to study history of art at the Courtauld Institute, he was interviewed by Anthony Blunt, also a Soviet double agent, who asked about his war-

time career. "I said that I had been employed by a department of the Foreign Office, which was the stock answer to all such inquiries," he recalled. Blunt did not pursue the matter, but a noticeable chill fell over their conversation.

By 1949 he had taken a PGCE and was teaching in a London school and two years later joined the civil service as an inspector in the Home Office children's department. He moved to the Home Office research unit in 1966, becoming head of the unit in 1972 and remaining in that position when it merged with the crime policy planning unit in 1981, emerging as an internationally renowned criminologist.

During this time Croft, a softly spoken figure with a sharply analytical mind, was pursuing his oil painting, despite having no formal training. His style was described as "non-figurative, minimalist, work derived from landscape". Between 1958 and 2023 he exhibited regularly and in 1967 he was one of 15 artists featured in the *Survey '67* exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, including Basil Beattie and Jennifer Durrant. His work can be found in the collections of Oxford University, Cambridge University and the London School of Economics.

Three years ago his 100th birthday was celebrated with an exhibition at the David Simon gallery. A couple of years after retiring in 1983, Croft moved to the Isle of Man with his partner, Ray Kelly, who worked for Air France and predeceased him. Sir Laurence New, the island's lieutenant governor, assumed that his career in the Home Office had some clandestine significance and appointed him to the statutory tribunal on the interception of communications, but "during the five years I served as a member, it never met", he recalled.

By the mid-1990s he had settled in Bath where he continued to paint and was an enthusiastic contributor to community groups. He visited London for haircuts at Truefitt & Hill in St James's Street and to socialise at the Reform Club, where he was a member for more than 80 years and where his portrait by Benjamin Sullivan hangs today.

John Croft CBE, Bletchley Park codebreaker, civil servant and artist, was born on January 6, 1923. He died on July 12, 2026, aged 103

