

1903-1979

Charles Wynn-Williams

Contributed to the development of the modern computer

Charles Eryl Wynn-Williams was an electronic engineer and physicist, who was influential in the development of nuclear physics and computing.

Wynn-Williams was born in Swansea. On graduating in electronics at Bangor University, he began working at the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge, under the supervision of the physicist and Nobel Laureate Ernest Rutherford. Wynn-Williams conducted pioneering research on electronic instrumentation for detecting and counting atomic particles in experiments with radioactivity and nuclear physics. His electronic devices transformed experiments in nuclear research, which was difficult to reproduce and hence scientifically controversial in its early years. The devices were used in James Chadwick's discovery of the neutron in 1932. Among these inventions was his 'scale-of-two counter', which used electronics for counting with binary numbers, a major milestone in the development of the modern computer.

In World War II, he worked on radar at Malvern but was called to Bletchley Park to enhance Turing's Bombe machines with electronic processors to crack an improved Enigma ciphering system. He also helped build a machine, the Heath Robinson, to crack the Lorenz cipher, which was a forerunner of the Colossus, the first electronic computer. After the War, Wynn-Williams taught physics at Imperial College. He returned to Wales and died in 1979 in Dôl-y-bont, Dyfed, Wales.

Full name: Charles Eryl Wynn-Williams

Born: 5 March 1903

Hometown: 'Glasfryn', Uplands, Swansea, Glamorganshire, Wales

Occupation: Physicist

Died: 10 October 1979

Best known for: Development of the modern computer



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