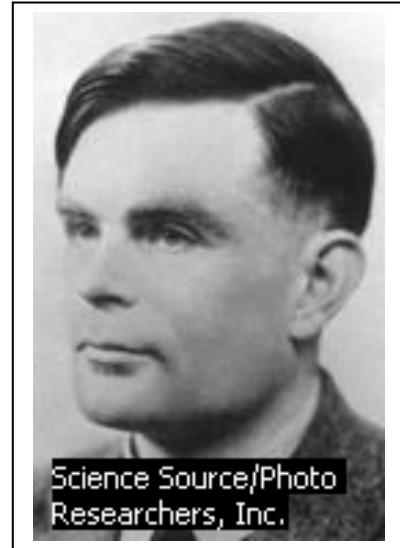


Alan Turing (1912 – 1954)

During World War II he applied his ideas on the nature of thought and logic to help create the first embryonic computers. From such primitive machines he envisioned a computer industry and machines capable of intelligent thought.

His father was an official in the Indian Civil Service, and his education was in traditional English preparatory and public schools which paid little attention to science. He emerged as a quiet, firm, intensely individual, and isolated person.



He was also a very unusual character, full of all sorts of quirks sometimes endearing and sometimes irritating. He was not a person who fitted in – either socially, or scientifically. He would certainly not fit into the picture of scientists busily making observations and correcting the results.

For Alan Turing the scientist was also – according to the law – a criminal who was caught by the police early in 1952. His crime came to light because he resisted a petty form of blackmail arising out of an affair with a young man in Manchester. Turing refused to say he had done wrong, but he had foolishly given the police a statement and had to plead guilty. He was given a year's probation.

The mathematician's war, like the physicists' war, had not ended in 1945 – although it remained a lot more secret. The disclosure of his crime obliged him to cease such work, and his visits abroad created further anxiety for the state. None of this explains his death in June 1954, but one can safely say that it took place against a background of acute pressures. He died by eating a cyanide-poisoned apple.