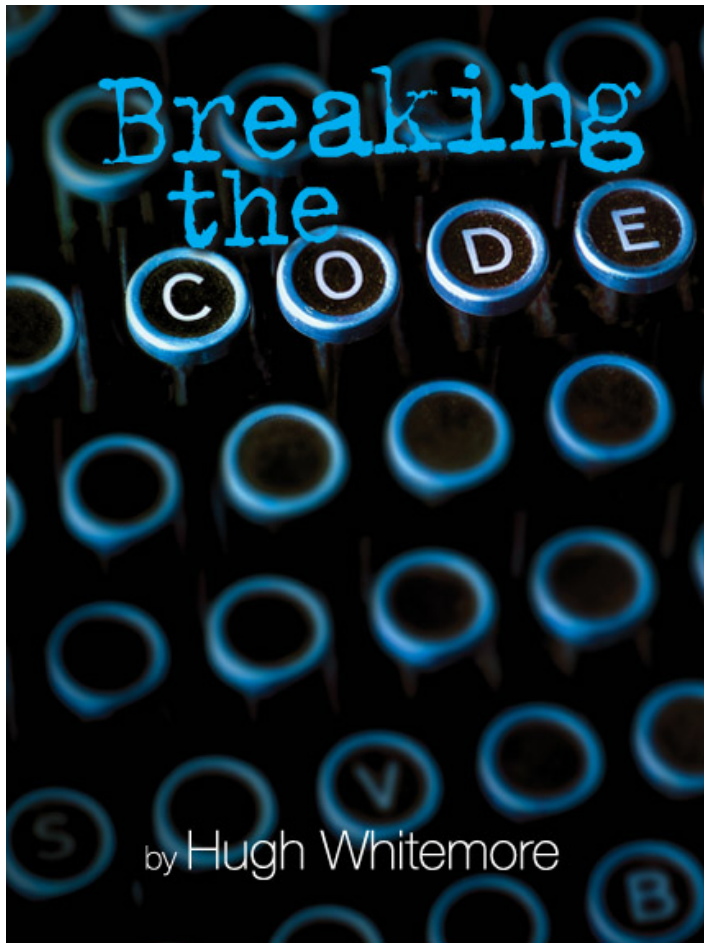


Jewel Theatre Audience Guide

Addendum: Christopher Morcom Biography



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CHRISTOPHER MORCOM

Considered Alan Turing's first love, Christopher Collan Morcom attended Sherborne at the time Alan did. He was a year older, and a year above Alan's level.

Christopher was born on July 13, 1911 in the Bromsgrove District, Worcestershire, England, where his family had a large country house, The Clock House, and a goat farm. (see pp. 14-15 of the glossary). He died there on February 13, 1930 of complications from bovine tuberculosis.



Mezzotint portrait of Christopher Morcom by Norman Hirst (1930). The boys who won the Christopher Morcom Prize for Science, established the year of his death, each received a copy

Christopher's early education was at King's Mead School in Seaford, Sussex. He then attended Sherborne School from May 1925 to February 1930, where he resided at Lyon House. Although he was a top tier in every one of his classes,

like his older brother Alfred Rupert Morcom (1906-1966)—known as Rupert—Christopher loved science and excelled in it. He was awarded the Digby Prize for Mathematics and Science in 1929 at Sherborne. He also won a Natural Science Scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, that same year but died before he could attend.

Christopher was blond and blue-eyed, and slight in build because, unbeknownst to Alan and the students of Sherborne, he had suffered most of his life from the aforementioned bovine tuberculosis, which he contracted from drinking tainted cow's milk as a small boy. The Morcoms kept goats on their farm in order to provide a source of safe milk for Christopher.



Christopher Morcom in the upper fifth, 1926

"Despite his size and the handicap of illness", Alan's nephew Dermot Turing wrote in his 2015 book, *Prof: Alan Turing Decoded*, "Chris played as a rugby forward, and he counted among his house friends the Captain of (rugby) Football. Then, he had charm, ability, modesty, kindness and loyalty. He folded up his clothes at night". Unlike Alan, Christopher followed the rules and observed the conventions of the school; his hands, clothes and school reports were devoid of ink stains; he was a team player and fine athlete; and he managed to excel in all of his school subjects, not just the ones he enjoyed.

Christopher's contemporary and companion at Lyon House, Victor Cannon-Brookes, wrote a book about him, *C.C.M. – A Memoir*, which remains unpublished. In it, he describes Christopher's intellect, smile, artistic nature and sympathy for those in adversity. Dermot Turing writes, "It was easy to hero-worship Chris Morcom," and Alan Turing did. He had come into contact with Christopher Morcom early in 1927 and had been very taken with him. Although Christopher was an older boy from another house, and the students were discouraged from mingling with boys from other houses who were not in their level, Alan was undaunted. As he would write to Mrs. Morcom following Christopher's death, after that first contact, he "wanted to look again at his face, as he felt so attracted". Later in 1927, according to his obituary in the March 1930 *Sherburnian*, Christopher took a leave from school to undergo "a severe operation" for his tuberculosis; he returned, Alan noticed, looking wan and quite gaunt.

To Alan's delight, he and Christopher were placed in the same mathematics form in September 1928, taught by a young, progressive master, Canon D.B. Eperson, who had graduated from Oxford the previous year and was known as a gentle, cultured person. What ensued was a fast friendship between Christopher and Alan that was based on their mutual interest in mathematics, which, they discovered, extended to a shared passion for science and astronomy. They did not, however, bond over ciphers, one of the many erroneous plot points in the 2014 movie *The Imitation Game*. Alan would explore ciphers with another friend at Sherborne after Christopher died.

In a letter to Mrs. Morcom, Alan described how mathematics brought him and Christopher together: "During the term Chris and I began sending one another our pet problems and discussing our pet methods." Chris assigned equal importance to scientific and mathematical ideas as Alan did, which was a major part of his appeal. This was as important to Alan as the physical attraction he

had towards his schoolmate. Alan wrote Christopher's mother that he "worshipped the ground [Christopher] trod on," and wrote his own mother that Christopher "made everyone else seem so ordinary". "My most vivid recollections of Chris," he continued, "are almost entirely of the kind things he said to me sometimes". Looking back at that time, Alan would acknowledge that Christopher was his first love.

History vs Hollywood: The Imitation Game (2014) posits whether Alan's attraction to Christopher was mutual. Although the movie implies that it was, Andrew Hodges' biography shows that it was not. Alan wrote of making it a point to sit next to Christopher during class, stating that his friend "made some of the remarks I was afraid of (I know better now) about the coincidence but seemed to welcome me in a passive way." Hodges affirms Christopher's passivity toward Alan, explaining that he gradually took Alan seriously, but always with "considerable reserve." In his writings, Alan indicates that Christopher was aware of his feelings. "Chris knew I think so well how I liked him, but hated me shewing it," indicating that while Chris liked the attention, Alan's affection went unrequited.

Alan managed to devise many ways to orbit Christopher's path. He'd find opportunities before and after Eperson's classes to talk to Christopher about relativity, intriguing him with formulas he was working on and theories he was developing. Hodges recounts, "By accident [during an unplanned visit to the library] he discovered that during a certain period on Wednesday afternoons set for private study [and essay-writing], Chris went to the library and not to his house. (Ross [Chris' housemaster; see Mick Ross' biography] did not allow boys to work unsupervised, fearing the sexual potential in unregulated associations.) 'I so enjoyed Chris' company there,' wrote Alan, 'that ever since I always used to go to the library instead of my study.'" For Alan, this time with Christopher was a vital period of intellectual companionship—something he had never before experienced. Their shared chemistry experiments, extracurricular math work and explorations of the cosmos during this time are touched on in Act I, Scene 2.

When 1929 dawned, Alan joined the sixth form proper; now all of his classes were with Christopher. He continued to attempt to sit next to him in every class, with Christopher exhibiting the same passive tolerance. Alan wrote about that time: "It was not long before we began doing experiments together in Chemistry and we were continually changing our ideas on all sorts of subjects".

Alan admired his friend's attention to detail, his precision about numbers, and his approach to problem-solving. He admitted that "Chris' work was always better than mine," and that "One cannot help admiring such powers and I certainly wanted to be able to do that kind of thing myself. Chris always had a delightful pride in his performances and I think it was this that excited one's competitive instinct to do something which might fascinate him and which he might admire".

During the summer term of 1929, the students were preparing for the Higher School Certificate (HSC), of which Alan wrote, "As always it was my great ambition to do as well as Chris. I was always as well supplied with ideas as he, but have not the same thoroughness in carrying them out." Alan's teachers, form masters, headmasters and especially, his mother, had nagged him year after year over his lack of attention to detail and his haphazard, sloppy style. He assigned no value to those qualities until he became friends with Christopher, whose work habits he now tried to emulate. His efforts in that regard did not go unnoticed in his report card: Eperson noted that his work towards the Higher Certificate showed "distinct promise," and his Chemistry master, Mr. Andrews, observed that he was "at last trying to improve his style in written work". Despite his efforts, he didn't obtain as high scores as Christopher; when they sat their HSC exam in July 1929, the results were Morcom 1436 and Turing 1033.

Nevertheless, the improvement in Alan's work and change in tone of his school reports delighted his father and amazed his brother. His mother made sure to remind her husband frequently that her choice of school had been the right one, and John was pleased with himself for steering his parents away from sending Alan to his school, Marlborough, telling them that "it will crush the life out of him".

Once Christopher turned eighteen, he would take the Cambridge entrance examinations. He was expected to win a Trinity College scholarship as his brother did. Alan began to think of winning a scholarship there, too—a very ambitious goal. Trinity, which held the highest reputation among the colleges in Cambridge, was very selective. Nevertheless, Alan was excited at the prospect of beating the odds. More so, he knew that to fail in his attempt to win the scholarship meant a separation of more than a year from Christopher, who was slated to leave Sherborne at Eastertime 1930.

Perhaps it was his fear of losing Christopher, but in November, Alan began to

have premonitions that something would happen before Easter to stop Christopher from going to Cambridge. He soon pushed them aside as he grew more and more excited about spending a full week in Cambridge with Christopher while sitting for the examinations. Unimpeded by the house system, they'd have rooms of their own and a 10pm curfew.

It was a glorious week: dinner in the Hall of Trinity College in evening dress, meeting students from other schools, playing cards and other games, going to the cinema, and trying to break into the Observatory. At the end of a week that Alan called "the happiest of my life," the boys returned to Sherborne on December 13 in time for the last few days of the term. Six days later, just as the term ended, the test results were published in *The Times*. Christopher had won a Trinity scholarship, and Alan had not.

Back at home in Guildford, Alan wrote to Christopher, congratulating him, then later wrote another letter, asking him whether he thought he should try for a college other than Trinity the following year. Christopher's reply, that he "of course" preferred personally that Alan come to Trinity "where I should see more of you" must have gladdened his heart.

Back at school on February 6, three weeks into the term, Alan and Christopher attended a choral concert at school. Alan watched his friend, telling himself, "Well, this isn't the last time you'll see Morcom." He returned to his room, where, as Hodges writes:

That night he woke up in the darkness. The abbey clock struck; it was a quarter to three. He got out of bed and looked out of the dormitory window to look at the stars. He often used to take his telescope to bed with him, to gaze at other worlds. The moon was setting behind Ross's house [the house where Christopher resided], and Alan thought it could be taken as a sign of 'goodbye to Morcom'. Christopher was taken ill in the night, at just that time. He was driven by ambulance to London, where he underwent two operations. After six days of pain, at noon on Thursday 13 February 1930, he died.

Rachel Hassal, the Sherborne School Archivist, wrote poignantly of the tragedy in her article, "The Making of Alan Turing", published in *The Sherborne Formula* (2012-2013):

On the night of Morcom's death, his housemaster spoke to the boys saying, "We cannot tell why Chris Morcom should have suffered a death like this, but there is a reason. Maybe it was to save him from a life of pain or illness; maybe to help some of you in some way, for a friend like that can often by his death do more to influence others even than by his life." This message was critical in helping Alan deal with his profound sense of loss and for him Morcom's death became the catalyst for all his future achievements.

Sara Turing writes about Alan's relationship with Christopher in her 1956 book *Alan M. Turing*. Although she did not perceive any of Alan's romantic leanings toward Christopher—she deigns to ignore her son's homosexuality in her book—she understood the depths of their mutual friendship and its effect on Alan:

In the close friendship and memory of his friend, Christopher Morcom, Alan found special inspiration, but this boy ... died in February 1930. How deep was his attachment is revealed to me in a letter at the time. 'I feel that I shall meet Morcom again somewhere and that there will be some work for us to do together as I believed there was for us to do here. Now that I am left to do it alone I must not let him down, but put as much energy into it, if not as much interest, as if he were still here. If I succeed I shall be more fit to enjoy his company than I am now.' Mature thoughts for one so young.

How poignant and deep was his grief may be gathered from the fact that all his life he kept his father's and my letters to him about his friend's death as well as a large number of letters from Morcom, mostly about science and especially astronomy, and also many letters from Mrs. Morcom and notes of all that had been said about Morcom. Mrs. Morcom wrote that Alan's letter to her had helped her more than anyone's.

Rachel Hassal quotes the same passage from Alan's letter to his mother. She writes further:

With this new sense of focus, Alan set out applying himself seriously to his school work and on securing an Open Scholarship at Kings College, Cambridge, he was made a School prefect and won many school prizes

including in 1931 the School Mathematics Medal. His mother remembered asking Alan what he had been awarded all the School prizes for and him replying in his self-effacing manner. 'Oh! I don't know but I think when you've been a couple of years in the sixth they start pensioning you off.' There was, however, one particular prize that Alan was determined to win the first year that it was announced: the Christopher Morcom Prize for Science. Morcom's family had set up this prize in Christopher's memory and Alan succeeded in winning it in 1930 and 1931. The Morcom Prize is still awarded by the School today, embodying the original hope that, as it had with Alan Turing, 'The competition shall accomplish its end of encouraging the true pursuit of Science among Shirburnians.'



Christopher's family had a stained-glass window, pictured on page 8, made in his memory for the south chapel of Christ Church in the Bromsgrove District, Worcestershire, England. The church is close to their farm, the Clock House, and Christopher is buried in the churchyard. The window is the work of Karl Parsons, who finished it in 1931. It depicts St. Christopher carrying the infant Jesus, whose facial features are modeled after Christopher's.

RESOURCES

Please see separate resources document provided as an addendum to this Guide.