STEVEN FREER, who has died aged 97, was a classical scholar who translated works of natural history from the Latin, having served during the war decoding Italian and Japanese ciphers at Bletchley Park.

He was born on February 18 1920 at Little Compton, Oxfordshire, and educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was a classical scholar. Having suffered ill health as a child, he was passed unfit for military service on the outbreak of war. Instead, in 1940, he was approached by the chief personnel officer of M16 who was recruiting for Naval Intelligence, and later summoned to an interview in Oxford to which he turned up in a scruffy old jacket and flannel trousers.

“One of the people who interviewed me was Alastair Denniston [head of the Government Code and Cypher School],” Freer recalled in an interview, “and I was asked whether I was at all air-minded. I said ‘Not at all’ and I think my frankness rather impressed them. They also asked me whether I did crosswords, and I said no, in fact I really hate them!"

Despite such unpromising beginnings, he was taken on and joined the Bletchley Park research section under Gerry Morgan, working on deciphering Italian Navy messages. Every now and then, he recalled, “after we had deciphered a message about a convoy from Naples, a few days later we would read in the paper that a convoy had been bombed on its way to North Africa, and we thought we had achieved something there.”

One of his colleagues was William Tutte, who became famous as the main solver of the “Tunny” cipher used by Hitler to communicate with his generals. Freer recalled one occasion when a hypothesis on which Tutte had been working for several months turned out to be wrong and his reaction had been “to retire into a corner from which deep sighing was heard.”

In 1942 the Diplomatic Section at Bletchley was moved to London and Freer found himself working in the premises of an old hat shop in Berkeley Street and, for a spell, out of a flat in Park Lane. At one point he was deciphering codes used by the Free French because there was a fear that the organisation had been infiltrated by fascist agents.

Later he was attached to the Japanese section. He did not speak Japanese – all the codes were in numbers – and once a code had been broken, it would be taken to the translators, most of whom were diplomats or consuls who had served in the East and knew Japanese, but did not know about cryptography. Freer would later confess that the only Japanese words he could recall were “cherry blossom” and “goodbye”.

Freer never told his family and friends about what he was doing and later recalled being shocked when, in 1974, F W Winterbotham published The Ultra Secret about his time at Bletchley, the first book to reveal details of what went on there.

When the war ended, the pressure of Freer’s work during that time took its toll on his mental health, leaving him fragile for a number of years. But he went on to find great satisfaction in his work for the Historical Manuscripts Commission, which involved exploring the archives of some splendid houses. He later did voluntary work in the manuscript department of the Bodleian Library and then on a part-time basis at the Oxfordshire County Records Office.

He was an enthusiastic member of the Heredity Society and much of his courtship with Frederica Dennis, whom he married in 1974, was conducted in damp, dark churches while he called out the description of a hatchment he was examining in the far reaches of the roof, all in heraldic language – which she had never heard before.

In 1992 Freer was asked by Oxford University Press to translate Thomas Wharton’s Adenographia (1656), a history of the glands, from Latin into English. This led to his translation of Linnaeus’s Philosophia Botanica (1751), published in English in 2007 and Musa Cliffortiana (1736), published in English in 2007.

In 1888 he was admitted as a lay reader in the Diocese of Oxford and his faith remained at the heart of all he did.

Always something of an eccentric, he never looked out of windows to see if it was sunny or rainy and wore the same clothes whatever the weather. He also never noticed anyone’s background or accent; he treated all he met with kindness and respect.

Freer was a fellow of the Linnean Society of London, and in later life, despite expressing a loathing of crosswords in his youth, he enjoyed doing them in Latin. He listed his hobbies as “history, heraldry, reading, emptying the compost, encouraging a very wild herb garden, and walking the dog, very slowly”.

He is survived by his wife and their daughter.

Stephen Freer, born February 18 1920, died April 26 2017