

DORCHESTER'S POW CAMP

On 14 August, 1914, the townsfolk of the quiet county town of Dorchester awaited the arrival of the 1.50pm train at Dorchester South railway station with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. For weeks they had witnessed the comings and goings of contractors at the town's empty artillery barracks, at Poundbury. Around the perimeter of the barracks hundreds of yards of barbed wire fencing had been erected and a state of the art electric light system, consisting of 15 lamps, giving 2,000 candlepower had been put in place by the County of Dorset Electrical Supply Co.



Dorchester POW Camp

Included among the usual passengers getting of the train was a very special group, which consisted of 18 German civilians, guarded by Scottish Fusiliers. None of the prisoners wore uniforms, as they were all civilian internees, some of whom were unfortunate merchant seamen who had been caught in British ports. The first batch of uniformed prisoners followed that evening and huge crowds came out to see them.

The Dorchester camp was a 'parent camp' and had administrative responsibility for other camps over a wide area, including Worcestershire, Berkshire Sussex and Devon. Camps were designated prison camps, agricultural camps and working camps.

By the end of August, 1914, there were already 1,000 inmates housed at the artillery barracks and it was clear that the existing accommodation was inadequate. It was, therefore, decided to construct a wooden hatted camp. The huts, which were built by local labour at the insistence of

local trade unionists, had stoves and electric lighting and each accommodated 30 men. Medical facilities were provided at the artillery camp hospital and in some of the huts. There were also workshops, kitchens, a games room, reading room, theatre and chapels. By February, 1915 the camp was exclusively military, 'other ranks.' The civilians were dispersed to other camps and the officers sent to the officer only camp at Donnington Park. At its height, the Dorchester housed, in the spring of 1919, 4,500 men, equivalent to almost half of the town's civilian population.



POW Muster Parade

It was not long before Dorchester's townsfolk came to terms with the enemy in their midst. Each day prisoners could be seen going for recreational walks and the town soon recognised that it had a potential workforce. Prisoners swept the streets and maintained the trees in the Walks. Thomas Hardy recruited one prisoner to work on his garden at Max Gate. On sadder occasions Durnovarians witnessed the funeral procession of a prisoner who had died, making its way to Fordington Cemetery, where 45 were buried during the duration of the camp's life.*



Under The Hague Convention rations at the camp were supposed to be the same as those of British troops and there appear to have been few complaints. Only one was recorded; that the soup was too thin and, as a result, the German Chef's were changed.

When it came to discipline few cases are recorded at Dorchester. One minor event was recorded by a local woman in a postcard. She told of a group of prisoners sent to a local farm to work. At the end of the day the farmer refused to feed them, so they refused to go out again. The outcome of their withdrawal of labour is unknown. The woman added that she had been to a concert given by the German band. In the 1960's the Dorset Evening Echo reported that a Dorchester man, who had worked in the camp as a trainee electrician, was locked up by some of the prisoners during a minor riot, but I have been unable to substantiate the story.

As in all good POW stories there were escapes. The most audacious was carried out by Oberleutnant Otto Koehn, who had been taken prisoner off a German freighter on route from the USA to Germany. After arriving in Dorchester Otto was soon planning his escape, which centred on the fact that some of the older prisoners were being repatriated to

Germany. On the day of their departure, among their luggage was a matchbox packing case, measuring 3ftx2ftx2ft. Inside this was the 6ft plus Otto, three champagne bottles full of water, some malt extract and a dozen bananas. There was also a rubber pillow filled with oxygen. The party's immediate destination was Tilbury, where the SS Batavier lay offshore waiting to take Otto to Hamburg. He might have made it, had not some stevedores decided to roll the heavy packing case along the jetty. Its occupant had had enough, and Otto broke out of his box, head first. He was returned to Dorchester, but there is no record of his punishment. The Dorset County Chronicle's report on the matter was headed, 'German Jack in the Box.'

On 16th September, 1915 five men escaped from the camp. Two of them, Josef Strutman and Walther Iven, made their way at night to Moreton station where they bought tickets for Waterloo. The news of the escape was reported throughout the district, and when two Southampton policemen searched a train they found them carrying third class tickets, £1 13s and a map of the south of England. Iven stated that he belonged to the German regiment of guards and Strutman that he was a sailor on a U-boat. Two of the other escapees got as far as Hartlepool, where a crane man in the docks saw the 2 men behaving suspiciously and reported the fact to Alderman MacFarlane, a stevedore contractor, who called the police

The most tragic attempt for freedom was made on the night of 17 May, 1919, when a Pole, Franz Radgowski was shot trying to cut the barbed wire fence near the camp latrines. He was mortally wounded and when asked why he was making the attempt, bearing in mind the War was over, he said, 'I want to go home.'

The rest of the inmates did go home. On 28 August, 1919, the Chronicle informed its readers that, 'All the POW's have now been repatriated, and the great internment camp will be no more. The majority of the inhabitants' departure was virtually unknown, as the prisoners left in large batches at night.'

Little remains of the camp, or the artillery barracks for that matter. The hospital building remains, but is in bad repair. The riding school, used as a carpentry workshop by the prisoners, is being used as offices. The old stable block is used as a TA centre. The rest was flattened and became the Grove Trading Estate. Fortunately, some memories of the camp were recorded by the camera

I do a one hour illustrated talk on the camp, if you know of any organisation that might be interested I can be contacted on 01305 263824. I also do one based on my book, 'Dorchester Remembers the Great War.'

Brian Bates

** In the 1960's the bodies were transferred to the German communal cemetery on Cannock Chase.*