



Extracts from Wiltshire and The Great War: Training the Empire's Soldiers

Enemy Internees and Prisoners of War

When, early in the war, Westbury Rural District Council heard that 500 German prisoners of war (PoWs) were being sent to Wiltshire, a councillor suggested the downs near Imber as a suitable place for them to be held, because this area was well watered. Malice might have been behind the suggestion, because it is one of the bleakest spots in Wiltshire. Had the suggestion been accepted, disease and perhaps death would have been rife, though it could be argued that British troops endured living under canvas in the locality, albeit with a high rate of sickness.

When internment and prison camps were established in Wiltshire they were attached to military bases and airfields. A War Department list dated November 1917 mentions only two prison camps in Wiltshire, at Lark Hill and Perham Down, and an interned aliens' camp at Bulford, but a Home Office report dated January that year lists camps at Bulford, Chisledon, Codford, Lark Hill, Fovant, Perham Down, Sutton Veny and Yatesbury. At that time, they were guarded by men of the Royal Defence Corps, who were either too old or medically unfit for active Front-Line service. In May civilian internment camps were noted at Bulford and Sutton Veny - and at Fargo and Sutton Veny hospitals, where either the inmates worked as orderlies or were patients in guarded wards.

Major J. L. Isler of Switzerland visited five Wiltshire working camps in October 1917. At Codford the camp had held combatant prisoners up to 11 June, when they had been replaced by civilians, comprising 114 Germans, 24 Austrians and 19 Turks. They were employed as carpenters, plumbers and painters and in road-making, being paid from 7d to 10½d an hour and working fifty-two hours a week. At Lark Hill there were 501 'combatant prisoners', fifty of whom were sleeping in tents. On 9 September a sentry had fired into the PoW compound, wounding six men, four of whom had gone to hospital; a court of inquiry found that the sentry was mentally deranged and so not accountable. At Fovant, Sub-Lieutenant W. T. Cruickshank was in charge of 125 Army and sixteen Naval men, with five others under detention for attempted escapes. At Sutton Veny there were 200 German soldiers, who complained about the lack of a drying-room; the camp was to be closed in a fortnight's time and its inmates moved to another nearby.

A list drawn up in October 1918 of camps that might be visited to determine the work skills of prisoners notes 144 PoWs at Chisledon, 179 at Codford, 844 at Lark Hill and 194 at Perham Down.

No camp in Wiltshire met the popular conception of a PoW camp holding large concentrations of men, or experienced any fame or notoriety as did the facilities at Frith Hill in Surrey, Donington Hall or Douglas on the Isle of Man. But several did feature in the national press (though, curiously, not so much in local newspapers) when warnings were issued to the public about escaped inmates. Between May 1917 and June 1918 The Times listed twenty-two escapees from Wiltshire camps.

In May 1917 three Germans escaped from their camp on the eastern side of Lark Hill, near the former British and Colonial Aircraft Company sheds. They had been dressed in German uniforms, but these had been found

discarded. On 13 September that year, three German soldiers and two sailors escaped from Fovant, three being quickly recaptured, the other two being caught a day or so later.

Most escapees were quickly recaptured, but the two who came closest to success were the German sailors Otto Homke and Conrad Sandhagen, who escaped from Lark Hill on 17 April 1918 and were at liberty until early May, when they were caught trying to take a boat on the south-east coast with the aim of crossing to Zeebrugge. They were dressed as civilian sailors, in blue serge clothes and high boots, and between them had an Australian shilling and nearly £1 in English silver coins. A mile from where they were caught they had hidden two bags containing biscuits, bread and other food, clothing, razor, shaving brush and knife. The men looked robust and well fed and one had a large bottle of water.

Some of his compatriots were far less fortunate, 103 dying and being buried in Wiltshire, mostly from the virulent influenza of 1918-1919. In January 1919 at Sutton Veny Hospital 273 of the 573 patients were German. Of graves of the Great War period there were seven at Chisledon, two at Devizes, forty-seven at Durrington, one at Fovant, thirty-eight at Sutton Veny and eight at Tidworth. (In the 1960s the bodies of German PoWs from both world wars were removed from local cemeteries and churchyards and reinterred a Cannock Chase, Staffordshire.)

Those who survived still had a long wait before returning home. In September 1919 Hubert Jaegster wrote from tent number 27 at Lark Hill to his mother in Braunschweig:

“As you will see from this letter, I am in the same sorry state as before, so a reunion is not on the cards for the time being. I know you have been expecting me home for a long time, but you will have to be strong and patient for a few more months. It seems the present government is making no efforts whatsoever to get us back.”

At the end of July there had still been 91,818 PoWs in Britain, but nearly all of these were home by the end of the year.

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