

Prisoners of War in Basingstoke

Researched by Jane Hussey , 2016

There were over a thousand prisoner of war camps in Britain during the Second World War. There are lists on the internet giving their official numbers and some locations are recognisable as military camps or stately homes but as Michael Foley concluded in his book *Prisoners of the British* 'It is unexpectedly difficult to discover where the camps were'¹. Many camps established satellite camps, some of which were temporary but lasted for several years. In all the official lists of camps there is not any listed in Basingstoke.

However, I have been told many times by long time residents of Kempshott:

'You know there was an Italian Prisoner of War camp in Winchester Road'

'It was opposite The Stag and Hounds- in Annetts Yard- Where Halfords is now.



This oral evidence was supplemented by recollections from members of Kempshott History Group of the work which was done by Italian Prisoners of War in the area. Hedges were trimmed and a large bowling green at The Kelvin Hughes factory in Winchester Road was made by prisoners.²

In 2014 the following letter was published in *The Gazette*, Basingstoke's local newspaper:

Trying to find David Fish

Sir.—I am looking for Mr David Fish (or relatives) who lived in Barley Mow Farm.

My father Pietro De Ambrosis worked at the farm during the Second World War as a Prisoner of War.

—**Monica De Ambrosis,**
Via circonvallazione 200,
15040 Occimiano AL,
Italy.

I wrote to Monica, we exchanged emails. We agreed that The Barley Mow was the pub in Oakley near Basingstoke. Monica told me that her father worked on a farm behind The Barley Mow. I could not find any one with the surname Fish in the 1939 Registration returns in Oakley or in the Electoral Registers and Kelly's Directories. The records I found confirmed that The Barley Mow was occupied by the Neale family, with Frank Neale as licensee. I concluded that David may have been an evacuee staying at or near the pub.

I searched family history sources to find David Fish. I found the following on *Ancestry*:



Dr David Gomer Fish was born in Portsmouth on 3 November 1929. He worked in banking but loved mountains. He emigrated to Canada where he became manager of The Alpine Club. His first wife, Dr Margaret Trotter encouraged him to pursue an academic career. He returned to the UK studied at LSE and was awarded a PhD in 1966. He had a distinguished academic career in sociology & public health in Canada and internationally. He worked for WHO, UNICEF and University of Nairobi on Aids, Malnutrition and immunization. When he retired from university work he became a missionary in Kenya with his second wife, Elena Abubo. He died in Vancouver on 3 February 2000.

Unfortunately I heard no more from Monica in Italy neither from the relatives of David Fish whom I have tried to contact. I realise that I may be making no more than an educated guess

but I would like to believe that the boy evacuated to Oakley who befriended a prisoner in the war was the same person who became a distinguished humanitarian.

There were nearly 75, 000 Italian Prisoners of War in Britain in 1943, though when Italy surrendered on 8th September 1943 they were no longer prisoners and were classed as 'volunteer workers'. They were employed mainly in agriculture which was very suitable for them as many came from farming families. They were paid a very low wage as volunteers as little as 1½d. an hour. The farmers that employed them were pleased with their work. There are some contemporary photographs on line showing smiling Italian farm workers often with Land Army girls.

Towards the end of the war the camp in Winchester Road was occupied by German prisoners. The first evidence of this was provided by Barbara Applin from the Basingstoke Talking History archive which she managed on behalf of Basingstoke Archaeological and History Society. She sent me the following transcript of a recorded interview made in 2006 by Bill Stanley a resident of Ramsdell:

BILL STANLEY, BAHS 136 2006

How I come to get the job was I passed my driving test in 1939 before the war started so I went in the Army as a driver. (Yes) And then when I came out, , I, I didn't bother too much about getting a job because I had a lot of leave, paid leave, coming and I then heard that the War Agricultural Committee had some offices in Basingstoke and they wanted ex-service personnel to act as driver charge hands, to cart, to cart these prisoners of war to different farms you see. So I applied for the job and, and got taken on. So that's how I came to... And our depot then was where Homebase is now. (Yes, Yes, I remember you saying that in the...) That's right, yes, that right. So that's where we used to have to go in the morning and they usually wanted someone obviously who could make their own arrangements for getting to work seeing as I had a motor bike, that was no problem.

What sort of motor bike did you have?

An Ariel, [laughter] Bet you wish you had it now, it'd be worth a bob or two. Yes. [Laughter] Yes, that was an Ariel, 350 Ariel. And we used to go there in the morning and then pick up... and used to have to be at Winchfield at 7 o'clock in the morning so...

Were they Italians or Germans?

No, they were solely Germans, to my knowledge, they were solely Germans. Only, only, I only took Germans anyway.

And did they seem to be a cheerful bunch of guys?

Yes, very good. They were... I suppose there were good and bad the same (Yes, yes) as in all things. But, but the gang that I had were certainly a very good gang of prisoners. And they got on quite well with me all right or I got on quite well with them because I... instead of preferring to sit about all day I worked with them. (Yes, yes) And so yes, we got on quite well.

The second source came to me directly from Eric Smith who spoke to me at a meeting of Kempshott History Group in 2015.

Eric has lived in Basingstoke for nearly all his life. He was evacuated to Queens Road aged two in 1940 during the phoney war. His family moved back to London but were then bombed out. They came back to Basingstoke and lived in Cumberland Avenue for a while. They then moved to *Birksholme* a house next to The Stag and Hounds.

Eric remembers the Prisoner of War camp opposite his home very well. The accommodation was in wooden huts and the site was surrounded with a wire fence. When the Italian prisoners were moved out an extra strand of barbed wire was fixed on top of the fence in preparation for German prisoners. That was the only extra security measure; from Eric's recollections there was very little security. Eric, his older brother and their friends used the camp as a playground and the German soldiers as playmates.

Eric remembers having his hair cut in the guardroom and playing in the camp's sports-hut. He recalls that the prisoners kept homing pigeons in a purpose built loft. He and his friends attempted to teach English to the prisoners. He was given so much fruit cake that the Germans had in large slabs in their bedside lockers that he developed an aversion to it and seventy years later still cannot eat it. The Germans used their innate craft skills to make toys and ornaments. Two house bricks were carved to form a mould; the prisoners would pour molten lead into the mould between the bricks to make toy planes. A chicken-pecking toy was made from a table-tennis bat and carved wooden chickens. Eric still has a pair of intricately carved heart-shaped photo frames featuring the windows of an Alpine chalet that were given to him by the prisoner that made them.



The prisoners were transported by lorries to work in farms and nurseries in and around Basingstoke. Eric remembers a very large German who the boys nicknamed Tarzan. He worked at Joint Nursery in Cranbourne Lane where he met and later married a Basingstoke girl. They lived in South Ham and Tarzan worked as a carpenter at Lansing Bagnall. Eric cannot remember Tarzan's real name but know that he died a few years ago.

Eric's fraternisation with the prisoners ended abruptly one day. He saw a convoy of American tanks passing along Winchester Road. Seeing a gap between the vehicles he rushed across the road calling out, 'Got any gum chum?' He did not see an army van coming in the

opposite direction and was knocked down. Someone ran to tell his mother who thought that he would be under a tank. He suffered a broken leg and was taken to Basingstoke Cottage Hospital. He was to stay there for four months. Eric told me that the ward was dark and bleak because the window had been bricked up as an air raid precaution.



By the summer of 1947 all Italian prisoners of war had been repatriated, apart from about 1400 that stayed to work as 'civilian rural workers'. A year later when German prisoners were repatriated over 15 000 stayed and were known officially as European Volunteer Workers. In spite of protest from unions Eastern European workers were also imported. Polish workers in particular occupied the prisoner of war camps, including the one in Winchester Road. Kelly's Directory for Basingstoke records in four editions from 1952 to 1955 that next to The White House in Winchester Road there was a *Voluntary Agricultural Camp, Ministry of Agriculture*. Kempshott history Group member, Gary Bone, remembers that as a child in about 1953 riding on the top deck of a bus going along Winchester Road he would look down on the camp with some trepidation.

A FOREIGN FIELD

Almost as much unknown as the Winchester Road POW camp are the memorials to eighteen German soldiers in Worting Road Cemetery Basingstoke.

In section A at the town's cemetery sheltered by a beech hedge and above the roar of the Ring Road hedge there is a section of well-maintained war graves. The grass is immaculately manicured with not a weed in sight. The seventy-one Portland stone headstones stand in straight lines each with a small cultivated patch of garden containing small shrubs, spring bulbs or summer roses.

About twenty-six headstones have regimental badges of British regiments: two have the anchor of the Royal Navy and six the RAF badge. There are nineteen with the Canadian Maple Leaf dating from the First World War.

At the back of the section there are eighteen headstones all with the symbol of the basalt cross. At first I thought they were Polish graves but on looking further I realised that they were memorials to German Soldiers. The inscriptions on the headstones give just the minimum information, no ranks nor regiments: in one or two cases just a surname and initial. The earliest grave dates from August 1944, the last from April 1945. They all died after D Day.

The German equivalent of The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*. Their website gave me more details of the German casualties; for several of them there is the note, 'died in hospital'.

I knew that Park Prewett Hospital was a military hospital from 1940 and that Sir Harold Gillies and his team did pioneering work with plastic surgery there.

I then looked in *Taking the Pulse of Basingstoke* edited by Barbara Applin and published by BAHs. This contains many quotes from The Basingstoke Oral History Project. The section that was most relevant to my research was a transcript of an interview by Susan Richmond who was secretary to the Medical Superintendent at Park Prewett in 1944-5. She recalled that in 1944 Park Prewett was the first transit hospital from the Normandy beachheads. There were plans to bring the wounded by rail from Southampton, but more were transported in fleets of ambulances driven by 'Fanys'.

'They all came in higgledy-piggledy: Germans and English, there were no guards, they were just put in the ambulance and those who could walk hobbled in....'

The Germans either stayed and were treated or went into camps. They looked a bit scared because they couldn't believe that they could just come in like this. They were just treated as patients. And, of course they couldn't speak English which was quite difficult and very few people could speak German.

It had been suggested that the soldiers may have been buried originally at the Park Prewett Cemetery and reinterred at Worting Road after the war. The cemetery's superintendent, Keith Davies, searched the burial records for me and confirmed that all the German soldiers had been buried within a few days of their deaths. During my research into these graves I have been impressed by the feelings of reconciliation and compassion shown to these soldiers. As Susan Richmond said there was no distinction made between German and British soldiers apart from the language difference. These eighteen men, and boys, were treated for their

wounds and made as comfortable as possible for several months, in some cases, before they died. In death they were treated as honourably as any other and this continues, seventy years later, in a well-maintained 'part of a foreign field'.

GERMAN WAR GRAVES AT WORTING ROAD CEMETERY BASINGSTOKE

PLOT	RANK	FIRST NAMES	SURNAME (Alternative spelling)	BORN	BIRTHPLACE	DIED (BMD index ref)	AGE	Buried
A71		Hans	BARTH	04/09/1920		15/10/1944 (2c 264)	24yrs 1mths	18/10/1944
A 22	Sergeant	Willi Paul	BANKOWSKI (Bankowsky)	30/08/1902	Brieg	25/09/1944 Hospital (2c 269)	42 yrs	28/09/1944
A43	Obergrenadier	Walter	BERGER	17/12/1925	Grunwettersbach	27/08/1944 (2c 260)	18yrs 7mths	30/08/1944
A46		Felix	BUCHLER (Bucheler)	1926		Aug-44 (2c 261)	18 yrs	03/10/1944
A66		Alfred	GRUBERT	1915		Q1 1945 (2c 345)	30 yrs	03/02/1945
A42	Upper Pioneer	Walter	HERRMAN	11/06/1925	Bremen	28/08/1944 In hospital (2c 261)	19yrs 2mths	30/08/1944
A44		Erhard	KIND	20/01/1906		07/09/1944 (2c 263)	38 yrs 6mths	11/09/1944
A 41	Private	Karl	LOIBL	25/01/1907	Eglhausen	14/08/1944 In hospital (2c 256)	37 yrs 6mths	16/08/1944

A 95	Stabsgefreiter	Wilhelm	MUELLER	23/11/1913	Bremen	15/04/1945 In hospital (not found)	31yrs 4mths	19/04/1945
A65	Corporal	Gunter	RAECKE	03/11/1922	Cottbus	11/03/1945 In hospital (2c 359)	22yrs 4mths	14/03/1945
A23		R	SCHLEDAIG			Not found		30/09/1944
A40	Obergrenadier	Artur	SCHATTKOWSKI (Szattkowski)	20/10/1925	Heath	13/08/1944 In hospital (2c 255)	18yrs 4mths	16/08/1944
A70	Corporal	Anton	SIEBEL	02/01/1923	Geimersheim Bavaria	18/10/1944 In hospital (2c 266)	21yrs 9mths	Oct-44
A64		Bernhard	SITTKO	09/08/1925		20/03/1945 (2c 263)	19yrs 7mths	24/03/1945
A45	Corporal	Carl Georg August	SUSCHLAF	11/04/1912		21/10/1944 (2c 267)	32yrs 6mths	03/10/1944
A68		Werner	TAUBNECH	1921		27/11/1944 (2c 278)	23 years	30/11/1944
A67		Nicholai	WASSILIEFF	1882		Q4 1944 (2c 284)	62 years	16/12/1944
A47	Corporal	Otto	WOLF	08/02/1902	Kordorf	13/10/1944 In hospital (2c 264)	42yrs 8mths	18/10/1944

NOTES

- 1) Michael Foley, *Prisoners of The British*, Bank House Books,
- 2) Conversations with Bernard Williams and Wendy Maddox
- 3) Barbara Applin, *Taking the Pulse of Basingstoke*, BAHS 2005

SOURCES

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