Harperley POW camp

Memories and monuments

The events leading to the scheduling and consideration of future management of a Prisoner of War camp in County Durham are a reminder of the close interweaving of the past and the present

It came as a surprise to open *The Guardian* one day in 1999 and find an article on Harperley Prisoner of War (PoW) Camp in County Durham. The camp was for sale following the death of the owner, and the survival was of media interest. For us it was a surprise as this was the camp where my father, as a German PoW, spent the years 1944–8. It was a well remembered time, during which his life was to change totally and irrevocably. Some 60 years on, I became involved in having the site designated as a scheduled monument, an unusual turn of events and perhaps a unique dilemma.

Harperley, known in official records as Camp 93, is a purpose-built camp located in Weardale on requisitioned farmland. Originally built in 1943 for Italian PoWs, it soon housed around 900 Germans identified as of low risk. The prisoners were housed in quickly built Ministry of War supply standard huts. Adjacent to the tightly ordered PoW camp lay guards' quarters of similar construction but with slightly grander fixtures and fittings. A 1946 site plan, recently rescued from German files by a former PoW, confirms that over 85% (about 50) of the buildings survive today in varying states of preservation. The site had survived because it had remained in one ownership and, apart from a spell when it was used for agricultural storage and chicken sheds, had been largely mothballed for years. Despite the loss of many internal fittings, sufficient survives – when allied with personal recollections, comparable sites and the limited documentary evidence – to allow the full ground plan and nature and function of individual buildings to be reconstructed.

Among the buildings are two remarkable survivals. One is a theatre, created within one of the standard huts, with a stage, orchestra pit, prompt box and tiered flooring in the auditorium. Walls were decorated with hessian sacking, presumably dyed, and fragmentary cuttings from German magazines remain stuck to the walls in the back stage areas. The second is a canteen building set aside for rest and relaxation in which a series of wall paintings of typical German scenes survive. Here windows were decorated with hardboard curtains painted in chequer patterns.

Aerial photograph of the site taken in 1999. Prisoners were held in the three regimented rows of buildings on the right. The guard's camp lies on the left-hand side

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Life in the camp

The history of Harperley is interwoven with the history of its many inmates, guards and the local community. Unlike contemporary PoW camps in Germany, camps in England were not hidden away but were important elements of the wartime British landscape. Life in the camp was obviously traumatic for many of the prisoners kept away from their families and homelands and uncertain about their futures, but many, like my father, were glad to be out of a war they never had any enthusiasm for. At least their families knew where they were and that they were safe. Prisoners were humanely treated and at Harperley the Camp Commander encouraged them to make themselves as 'at home' as possible. The camp had its own newspaper, *Der Quell* (The Source), and an eleven-piece orchestra performed regular concerts. A dramatic group was formed and performances included a series of comedies at Christmas 1947. There were educational classes and football games, with excursions to play neighbouring teams. The PoWs created and tended small gardens between the tightly packed huts. Craftsmen among them made wooden toys, chess sets and other small wooden articles as well as leather slippers and other goods, given away in exchange for favours or sold to supplement meagre incomes.

However, Harperley's main role was as a work camp from which the prisoners were taken each day to work on local farms. Throughout the country, a large number of such camps were built so that PoWs could be used for work in agricultural, forestry, dam, road and other construction industries. In total some 400,000 Germans and 100,000 Italians were held in Britain as PoWs, the vast majority undertaking hard manual work.

The contribution of PoWs to agricultural production cannot be under-estimated. At a time when increased production was essential to ensure sufficient home-produced supplies despite a reduced local workforce (the majority of able-bodied men being away at the war), the impact of PoW labour helped Britain survive, not least through the harsh winter of 1946–7. Depending on their level of skill, PoWs were paid up to 6 shillings a week – at a time when the minimum wage for a British agricultural worker was 75 shillings a week. My father recalls earning just enough to buy a small piece of cake and a bottle of lemonade each week. The movement of Germans around the countryside to their places of work became commonplace and well remembered and was made possible by an agreement that the majority required little guarding.

My father was eager to spend as little time as possible in the camp and soon joined the parties working on local farms. Here he was able to use skills developed on his own family farm in Silesia to good effect. Like other prisoners, he was generally well and kindly treated by local people keen for cheap labour. Placements that provided free meals during the day to augment the meagre camp rations were always highly prized. Security throughout was generally low-key and it was not unheard of for the guards accompanying them to and from work to disappear into a local hostelry at midday and not reappear for the return to camp! Eventually a system of billeting PoWs on farms was developed to allow more personal freedom and a break from camp routines.

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Survival in 2002: some of the standard huts in which prisoners were housed. Conserving these buildings and finding suitable re-uses will be a major conservation challenge

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Game bird in a German forest. One of the surviving wall paintings

Courtesy of Reinhard Nieke

Reinhard Nieke (second from left standing) and some of his hut group at Harperley in 1945

Repatriation began after the war, although the authorities showed some reluctance to lose their additional labour force. By 1949 all who wanted to go had been sent home. This left some 25,000, my father included, to stay on. In his case he no longer had a real home to return to, his Silesian home having been given to Poland after the war under international agreement. (The resultant ethnic cleansing of some 13 to15 million native Germans from their ancient homelands in Pomerania, East Prussia and Silesia remains the largest single refugee movement in European history). He had found a local farming family to stay with and indeed marry into.

Significance and future management

Shortly after the survival of Harperley became widely known, English Heritage was asked to comment on its national importance and the possibility of any statutory designation. Our impression then, now confirmed by Roger Thomas's national assessment of PoW camps (Thomas, 18–21), was that the nature of the site and the extent of survival were both remarkable and unusual. In total perhaps some 1000 PoW camps were created in Britain, of which around 100 were, like Harperley, purpose-built, though the vast majority of these have long disappeared. In considering it for protection, it was heartening to find a groundswell of local interest in securing the future of the camp and much support for the idea that it should be preserved. The publicity raised much interest in Germany. A range of personal and media requests for further information appeared, for example, from a man who wanted to see whether the paintings might have been by his late father-in-law, an artist who had been a PoW in England. (Sadly the paintings are unsigned but it now appears that the artist was held in a camp near London.) The site owners and local planners discussed future options. Overall, designation was thought to be appropriate only if a suitable and sustainable re-use could be found that would preserve as much as possible of its character, key buildings and plan form.

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Rural idyll of a boy piper and his flock. Another surviving wall painting by a different hand

A new future has been agreed. The camp has been bought by a local couple well aware of its history and interest. They are working closely with English Heritage's North East Regional

Team to identify appropriate repair, refurbishment and management programmes, that should allow at least part of the site to be opened to the public. In view of these new developments, scheduling was felt to be an appropriate management tool, and the site is now a scheduled monument – the first such camp to be protected in England.

Troubled pasts

Dealing with this site has been difficult, both professionally and personally. Harperley was a significant part of my father's past. His experiences as a PoW are well remembered – some frequently recounted, others locked away. Recollections of the actual camp are partial – he has no memory of the theatre or wall paintings – in part because he worked hard to spend as little time as possible there, returning only to eat and sleep. Some of his strongest memories of the period are of working in the local area. Although we had heard rumours over the years of its survival, the camp itself was never a place he considered re-visiting. Sixty years on he is surprised by the degree of survival and is helping us try to understand the site better. These buildings provoke memories that might otherwise be lost. Life as a PoW was not easy; nor was life as a German in post-war England.

Preserving this site will ensure that the experiences of the thousands of PoWs, held at camps like Harperley, are not forgotten as memories fade.

Harperley has an important wartime story to tell, particularly important for the wide-ranging experiences of the PoWs, guards and local community. Many of these stories now need to be drawn together and recorded. The strength of local knowledge and interest in the site should not be forgotten, and a community-based recording project would be valuable. Overall as an educational resource, the camp has enormous potential. We hope that Harperley now has a secure future and can stand as a memorial to the PoW experience in Britain. □

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Harperley will be featured in the BBC's ten-part 'Restoration' series to be broadcast in August and September. The programme will include some former PoWs visiting the camp and an orchestra playing in the theatre.

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The theatre, with its orchestra pit, prompt box, stage and decaying wall decorations clearly visible