

## **Glendale Local History Society – POW CAMP 105 (WOOLER), including murder, music and reconciliation**

On 13<sup>th</sup> September, Philip Rowett gave a fascinating talk about the Prisoner of War (POW) camp in Wooler. The camp first housed Italians, who lived under canvas while they erected buildings and who carved the lions which now adorn the school gateposts. From 1944, 600 German POWs replaced the Italians, later rising to 1500.

After D-Day, German POWs were transported in barges across the Channel to Portsmouth or Southampton, then by train to one of the many camps which were built across the UK (many expressed surprise at travelling in carriages rather than cattle trucks).

Most German soldiers spent some time in captivity, and at one time there were over 400,000 POWs in the UK, more than the number of Allied troops at home

After serious violence between prisoners with different allegiances, it became policy to allocate prisoners to one of three different categories of camp, based on an assessment of their loyalty to Hitler and the Nazis: 'white' – those hostile or with no allegiance to the Nazis; 'grey' – members of the Party it was thought could be rehabilitated; and 'black' – zealous Nazis. Unsurprisingly there was a shortage of specialised accommodation at first (some POWs were sent to Canada) but camps were built across the UK, the camps for 'black' prisoners in the remote Highlands. Camp discipline relied on a 'white' leader maintaining order and communication.

A variety of regimes were used, but most POWs were employed – building roads and houses, clearing bomb damage and working on farms – at rates of pay acceptable to the relevant trade unions; the POWs had the same working conditions as the UK population except for freedom of movement and access to firearms. At one time POWs were a quarter of the UK workforce.

No. 105 German P. W. Working Camp had several out-stations, including Chatton, Hetton House, Cornhill, Weetwood, Craster, Rothbury & Whittingham. It was a relaxed regime housing 'white' prisoner, many of whom worked on local farms, often staying at their place of employment overnight. The farmer was their employer and they were under his command, with visits from a camp supervising officer.

In their free time, prisoners were busy growing vegetables, making toys, reading (the camp had a 1000-book library), giving and attending lectures and concerts, attending Lutheran & Catholic church services, and playing sport, especially football and boxing.

The high standard of musicianship was widely appreciated. The camp choir, the 12-piece orchestra and the camp band performed across North Northumberland: for example, leading the carol singing in Wooler Market Place in 1946 and a Grand Concert at Lucker in August 1947. Exceptionally gifted was Kurt Burghaus, who had been twice wounded on the Eastern front and later captured on the Western Front. He led among others the Berwick Choral Union & the Eyemouth Choral Society. He married a local singer, Vera Dryden, and when they left Northumberland for him to take up post as organist at St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Glasgow he wrote of 'the great kindness and friendship we've received' from the 'warm-hearted people'. He featured in a 1951 BBC Light Programme national broadcast of community singing from the cathedral.

Initially POWs were viewed with distrust, but their good humour & hard work was matched by the goodwill of the local community and they were accepted: for example, it was common for prisoner-workers to be welcomed by the farmers' families, to eat together and at Christmas exchange home-made gifts. In the severe winter of 1946-7, 20 POWs volunteered to help the Skirl Naked shepherds rescue sheep trapped in deep snow; also in 1947, prisoners helped a West Horton farmer save 250 tons of hay from a barn fire. Several POWs married local women and stayed in the area.

The murder to which the title referred was of a German POW who was beaten to death in a surprise attack and his body discovered by the River Till. Another prisoner was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

All UK camps were subject to inspection by the Swiss Red Cross. By July 1945 their reports showed the huge disparity between the conditions in Germany and in POW camps. At the end of the war, POWs could expect to spend a year as rehabilitation before being released. (Those whose home was in the Soviet zone faced imprisonment if they returned, so became Displaced Persons, some housed in the Land Army hostel, now a Youth Hostel.) Local farmers, who faced a labour shortage at the same time as high demand for food production, objected when the prisoners went home!

The camp was dismantled in 1952-3, and the site used for the middle school.

**The next meeting is on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> December at 19.30 at the Cheviot Centre, Wooler, when Margaret Kirby will be speaking on *The cult and culture of monasticism*, which brought innovations in all the arts, as well as in agriculture and engineering, and shaped Christendom for over 1000 years, seen locally at Lindisfarne and at the Border abbeys.**