

The Great Escape from Wellesbourne – German Prisoners of War on Lowes Lane

In 1917 The War Agricultural committee saw the need to turn barren tracts of land into cultivated areas with Prisoners of War providing the labour. And so, in August of that year, the first German P. O.Ws arrived in the Stratford upon Avon area, to clear some land at Mr. Lane's Farm, Little Drayton.

With most of the young men from the surrounding area still at the Front and the appeals for girls to join the Land Army paying little dividends, additional farm labour was needed in the Wellesbourne parishes.

Holly Lodge in Lowes Lane, Wellesbourne Mountford was at the time a large house incorporating a stable block which the military requisitioned in 1918. With some additional work from the local builder, Owen England, the Lodge was now ready for its first intake of German Prisoners.

It was late, about 9.30 p.m. on Saturday the 15th June 1918 when the first contingent arrived to a reception committee of curious villagers. A Lieutenant Kelly, accompanied by several guards, escorted them on the last leg of their journey from Ettington Station to Holly Lodge. The early indications were that their work was good and that they were performing satisfactorily.

The Holly Lodge camp was under the control of its 'parent camp' and the country's largest, Poundbury, Dorchester. The welfare of the prisoners was paramount and they were paid for their labours.

In preparation for the yearly harvest, a further 30 non commissioned officers arrived in Wellesbourne three weeks later from Dorchester. On this occasion they were billeted to the farmers and were considered to be 'a fine body of men.'

The villagers thoughts though, were still with their own and a Garden fete was arranged for Thursday July 16th at Wellesbourne Grange, in aid of the Prisoners of War Fund for Wellesbourne men.

For the German prisoners the environment was not however to every ones liking. On Sunday morning, the 18th August 1918, three prisoners made their bid for freedom but were recaptured in time for the full story to appear in the following Saturday's edition of the Warwick Advertiser.

Since its conception in 1914 and with about 4500 prisoners at any one time only four prisoners ever escaped from the parent camp in Dorchester.

There were strict rules applied concerning prisoners and official notices were issued to the farmers. For example:

'On farms where German Prisoners are billeted Land Army women must not be employed.'

'On farms where prisoners come from a camp daily then Land Army women can be employed but only on another part of the farm'.

'Women must not transport prisoners between farms or camps'

'Threshing gangs may be employed on farms where Germans Prisoners are billeted but prisoners must not assist in the threshing'.

'Prisoners from camps should not be given food by a farmer'.

In Salford Priors one was prosecuted for doing just that and fined 5 shillings or 1 month in prison for default.

It was not until the end of October 1919 that the German camp at Holly Lodge bade farewell to its last prisoners. They sang as they marched through the village on their way to Stratford station, en route for Dorchester. Villagers turned out to wish them 'goodbye' as they left in good spirits, a far cry from the poor dejected souls that arrived.

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