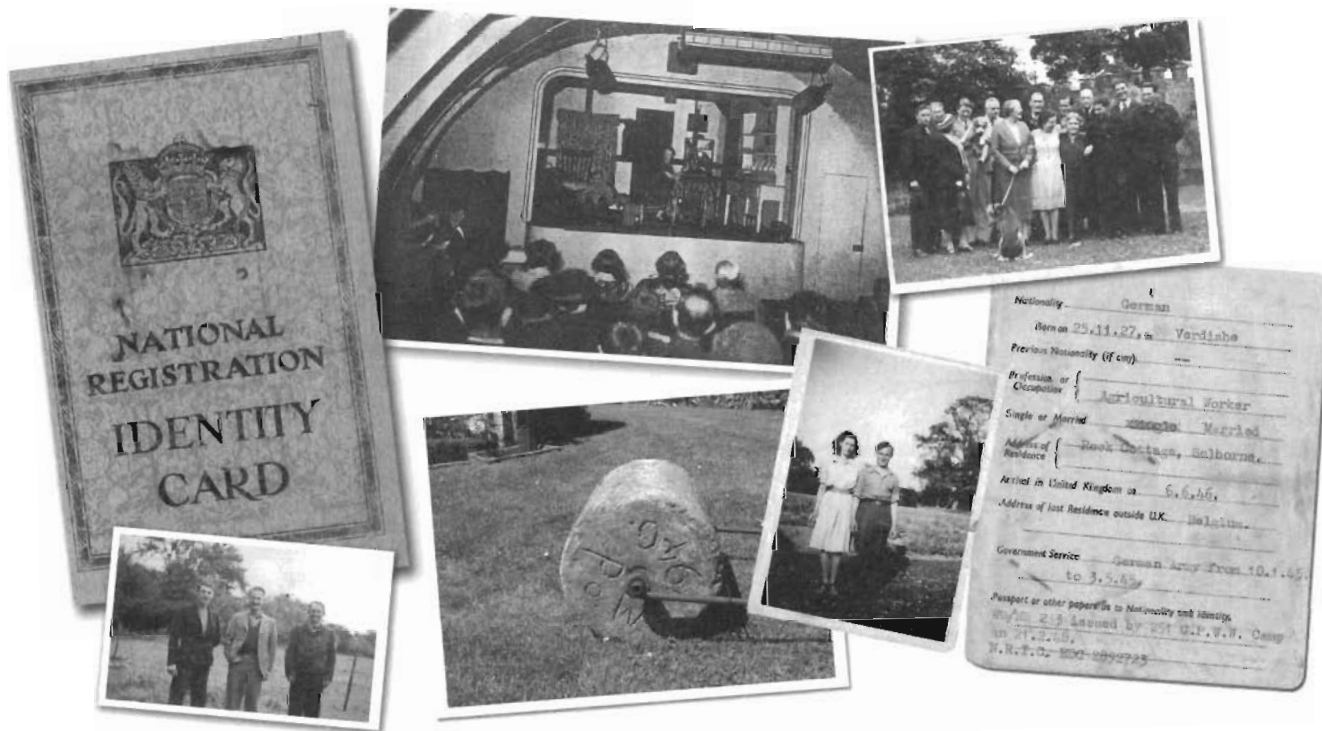


The stories of four German PoW's and a Guard



'Following the article in the last Magazine about the history of Complins, and when it was a German Prisoner of War Camp, we have traced five men who were there during that time. Here are their stories.



PoW from Fishers Camp who settled in Holybourne

The late Ernst Renners, was one of Holybourne's most colourful characters. He had been a PoW (Prisoner of War) in Fishers Prison Camp, where Complins now stands.

Born in Altena, Germany on 25 November 1927, he was in the Hitler Youth, and at 16, was

ordered into the Waffen SS as a private. After only six weeks he was captured by the Americans in Belgium, never having fired a shot. He was sent to Fisher's Camp (251 GPWW) in Holybourne, which was one of the many Prison Camps all over England. It was on a trip into Alton that he met a local girl, and fell in love with one Molly Burgess and remained in the Alton area after the War was over.

He worked on a farm in Selborne, and in 1948 had to get debobbed in Germany. His Wartime ID card shows that he later returned in October 1949 to live in Fishers Camp for eight months. He then went to the YMCA hostel at Cuckoos Corner. [This site subsequently housed Crouchers factory before

becoming Bonhams Close and Downsview.]

In 1953, he married Molly [Magazine Issue 5] and lived in Selborne but until 1961 every time he was away from home for over 14 days, or if he went abroad, he had to report to the local police station to get his 'Aliens Card' stamped. He subsequently moved to 131 and later to 135, London Road, Holybourne.

Until his sudden death in 1994 after a knee operation he was often seen cycling through the village, moving from one garden job to another, and is remembered affectionately as a very hard working and popular family man.



Correction Spring Issue

Jane Hurst contributed the centre page article in the last issue about the PoWs rather than Janet Cane.

Please could you amend your own copy and let me know of any other mistakes, anonymously if you prefer!

Editor



Willi Gerlach: An allotment man

Willi was another hardworking German PoW who, after the war, rented a total of 18 allotments in Holybourne from the Misses Complin who had lived in Fishers. There he kept some cattle and chickens and bred prize 'Large White' pigs, but his landladies insisted that his pigsties must be hidden by climbing roses.

In 1972, after planning permission was given for this allotment land to be developed into Gaskell Close and Thornton End, he moved his livestock to the far end of the Treloar Hospital site and for 20 years provided Hog Roasts at many charity functions.

Willi was born in Southern Germany and was conscripted into the 'Areibtsdienst' or Land Army when he was 18 years old. Later, he joined a Heavy Machine Gun and Mortar regiment who still used horses to move their equipment. Half his Regiment were sent to the Russian Front and perished at

Stalingrad, but Willi was lucky enough to be sent to France. In a bloody battle against some American tanks, he was amongst a handful that survived, but was wounded in the leg. Three weeks later he was captured, paraded around Paris after it was liberated, and then sent to Manchester, where he says it rained a lot! Subsequently he was transferred to Thedden Camp near Beech.

He recalls that all German Prisoners were issued with a brown uniform and wore a distinctive yellow patch sewn into a cut out area on the back. Those who ran away (and presumably were re-captured) had to have two yellow patches but by 1946, it was sufficient security for a PoW working on a farm to promise his employer that he would not run away. Willi lived in the hutted Thedden camp (number 294) in the woods near Beech and has recently revisited the site at Thedden Grange.

In 1946, after he had gone back to Germany to be 'demobbed', he decided to return to Alton and wanted to show that 'not all Germans were the same'. He married a local widow 50 years ago and his life story has recently been published and is now available from The Little Green Dragon bookshop in Alton.



A German PoW happy to be in England

Heinz Muhl was also at Fisher's Camp and stayed in Alton after his release. At 80, still a bachelor, he lives in Grebe Close.

Born in Reasonburg in West Prussia, near the Polish border, he recalls that he was conscripted into the German infantry in 1942 at the age of 17 and was sent to the siege of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Subsequently he was captured by the Russians and somehow was handed over to the British, and so came to Holybourne. He remembers only that the Guards at the camp were very nice, and that he was sent to work on a farm in Selborne.

After the war he worked in a horticultural nursery, was a porter at the Henry Gauvain Hospital and at Treloars Hospital. Then for 20 years, he worked at Dan Air, Lasham, and was in charge of the cleaners. He has been back to Germany just once to see his brother and is very content with his lot here in England and still works one day a week in the Alton House Hotel kitchen.

Gordon Harriott - who was one of their Guards

Gordon Harriott was one of the British Army guards at Fishers Camp in 1945, and returned to Holybourne after World War II to marry a local girl. This is a brief account of his eventful career.



Gordon was born in Grays near Tilbury. At aged 19, he was a milkman and thus in a protected occupation, but he says that in late 1944 there was an urgent call for 3/4 million more men to join the services. He was conscripted into the RASC (Royal Army Service Corps) and became a Dispatch Rider (DR). Eventually as a driver, he did a regular run from Fareham delivering mail to eight local PoW camps including Stroud, Bramdean, Bramshott, Thedden, Fishers and Cuckoos' Corner in Holybourne.

In 1947, as a Corporal, he was made responsible for Army Transport at Fishers. Whilst on guard duty there he used to see a pretty young girl with a baby in a pram passing the guardhouse every day at midday. They became friendly and he learnt that she was a nanny to Mrs Gadban at the Grange (now the hotel).

He remembers being called to a big fight in Alton between some prisoners. They were all very drunk, and it transpired that, unbeknown to the guards, they had an underground still near the cookhouse where they produced their very own brand of whiskey!

continued overleaf

A Polish dilemma

Earlier, as a DR over in Wales, Gordon witnessed a fight between a German prisoner and a Polish soldier working as a gardener in the British Camp.

After they were separated, it transpired that they were brothers! Born near the Polish-German border, the elder had joined the German Army and the younger brother the Polish Army. By an amazing co-incidence they had ended up in the same PoW camp. It seemed that the younger brother had made the right choice!

After he was demobbed in 1948, Gordon returned to Holybourne and married Marion Mylward, the nanny from the Grange. He became a driver for her family's building firm and lived in Inhams Road. When Mylwards closed, they moved to Four Marks. Sadly he lost his wife 3 years ago.



CB Everett

Hans Krings - A visitor from Germany

Captured in North Africa aged 19 in the Afrika-Korps, he spent 3 years as a prisoner in the USA and eventually came to Fishers and Thedden Camp on 14 May 1946. He returned to Germany on 16 August 1947, but in 1995 he came back to see Thedden, he says, 'seeking his past'. He was delighted by the warm welcome he received when he and three friends plucked up enough courage to call on us at Thedden Grange.

He wanted to be remembered as a German soldier, and not a Nazi.

Sheila Carey-Thomas

German Prisoners - History of Alton

In 1973 C. W. (Charles) Hawkins wrote* in his 'Story of Alton' that "German prisoners of war were employed on the farms and billeted in the paper mills, which were otherwise unoccupied. They were marched to and from their jobs accompanied by an armed soldier, and we eyed them with the same incredulity as we today would eye a man from Mars".



Can anyone confirm that the paper mills were used for this purpose? **Tel 549666**

*(Ed. This book is sadly out of print, but if anyone has a spare copy please ring)

Book review

'From Schöneiche to Alton, a Prisoner of War who stayed'

Willi Gerlach's story by Ian Fleming £5 all proceeds to local 'Arthritis Care'.

In the mid 1990's, Ian and Julia Fleming met Willi Gerlach for the first time. 'A short, thickset man in his early 70s with the strong arms and hands of an outdoor worker...and a smiling face with twinkling eyes', writes Ian in his prologue to the book.

Nearly ten years later, having realised that Willi's unusual life story really deserved to be recorded, Ian began the long process of listening to Willi tell the tale of his life, spending the next 18 months writing what is a very readable and at times moving account.

Willi had been a POW in the second World War and after the war, chose to stay on in England. He worked in the area in farming and brewing, marrying a local girl and raising a family here in Alton. Ian uses Willi's words whenever possible to tell the story of a man who saw and experienced the great upheavals in Europe from 1925 onwards.

Willi's story deserves to be read as a testimony to an aspect of 'immigration' that is often ignored, but much more common than many realise. His is also the story of the many workers in the local agricultural and brewing industries whose jobs have now disappeared. Perhaps he is an example of a true European! In any case he is a true Altonian

Jackie Slack

Little Green Dragon, Normandy Street Alton



Three Missing Servicemen

In the Holybourne Church Graveyard, there are three military gravestones.



However, none of the men are recorded on the War Memorial in the Church. Private Webb died of his wounds in 1920 after the WWI memorial had been erected [Village Magazine Issue 3, pp 10 & 13]. The other two were buried during WWII but the Vicar has no information about this inconsistency.

Does anyone know why they are 'missing' from the list? Perhaps Corporal Blondon, Able Seaman Gilroy and Private Webb should be remembered this year at the Remembrance Day Service on 11th November?

Information needed for the Vicar 83240 or editor@holybourne.com or tel 549666