

# Prisoners of War

Although many studies have been made of the experiences of prisoners of war during the First World War, popular awareness is greater of prisoners and their stories in the Second World War, especially when recalling accounts of The Great Escape, Stalag Luft III and Colditz. Yet a staggering total of almost 8 million men were held captive during the First World War. Allied prisoners totalled about 1.4 million (not including Russia, which lost 2.5–3.5 million men as prisoners.) of which 192,000 were British and Commonwealth. Approximately 3.3 million men from the Central Powers became prisoners. Behind the lines, Germany held 2.5 million prisoners; Russia held 2.9 million; while Britain and France held about 720,000, and even the U.S. held 48,000. Warring nations were expected to abide by the Hague Convention on the fair treatment of prisoners of war, and their rate of survival was generally much higher than men at the Front. Individual surrenders were uncommon and large units usually surrendered en masse (an extreme example being the Battle of Tannenberg where 92,000 Russians surrendered). Once prisoners reached a camp, in general, conditions were reasonable, thanks in part to the efforts of the International Red Cross and inspections by neutral nations, although conditions in Russia remained terrible. Nevertheless, in Germany food was very scarce and starvation was common for prisoners and civilians alike, causing death for approximately 5% of the prisoners.

The ICRC set up its International Prisoner of War Agency in Geneva in October 1914 with the task of centralising information about POWs and the despatch of gifts from home. Lists of prisoners sent to Geneva by warring nations enabled the compilation of index cards and files for each prisoner. The cards were organised by nationality, and also added to individual files were regimental information and grave sites of those that had died. Almost five million index cards were created and 1,854,914 parcels and consignments of collective relief dispatched.

The experiences of some of the Ellesmere Port men held captive behind the German lines in the First World War therefore, gives an interesting insight into the hardships endured and the support given to them from home. Little exists regarding their personal accounts, but newspaper reports from the time are particularly revealing. A couple of local men held prisoner were also repatriated home during the war. This was often arranged by the Red Cross and was usually because the men were very ill and needed hospital treatment at home. In many cases such illness was terminal. Prisoners in such situations were exchanged for German servicemen held in Britain, so there was often a delay in organising inspection boards and other bureaucracy before the exchange could be confirmed. On their arrival back in the UK, the men were interviewed by the authorities to glean

information as to their treatment and other useful detail regarding activity behind the lines. Many of these records still exist in the National Archives, including two examples of local men.

There were various experiences endured by prisoners. Not all were well treated, which is understandable and expected in warfare, despite the agreed conventions in place. Many were put to work behind the lines, usually in industrial work, such as mining, or working on farmland. Universally, their German captors came in for most criticism regarding the quality of the food. The local press at home was clearly vehement in its reportage, and an objective eye is often needed to search for balance. The prisoners were almost always malnourished, but it must be remembered that Germany was suffering regarding the scarcity of food and foreign prisoners were always going to be last on the list of priorities in the doling out of essential supplies. Many prisoners revealed that they would not have seen the war through had it not been for the supply parcels sent from home.

This is testament to the efforts of the Red Cross and the various fund raising organisation that persevered throughout the war to keep men behind the German lines supplied and buoyed with packages of food and clothing. In many cases these would be the only new clothing they would receive to replace the clothes they were standing up in when they were captured.

Fund raising started early on in the conflict, but this report from 17 June 1916, gives a more personal, local insight.

### **Prisoners of War**

The house to house collection in aid of the Ellesmere Port Prisoners of War Fund has been a magnificent success and the committee take this opportunity of thanking the public for the way they have responded to the appeal. At least a penny was asked from each person in each house and the streets were divided into districts. The collectors did their work thoroughly and conscientiously, showing a keen interest in the cause for which they were working and were not content with a casual call if necessary. They worked systematically, and within twelve days the whole of the circulars were distributed, money collected and paid in, a fine tribute to the efforts of the collectors. The sum realised was £35, and this included a donation of 15s from Mr E. Peter Jones, per Nurse Parsons. *(NB. This equated to around 2,200 houses in the district with a total population of around 10,000 – donating 5,000d – as stated here, these averages at a donation of around 1-2d per house)* The outlying districts gave generously. The committee are delighted to feel that they can continue their work for a few months without further appeal, unless of course the number of prisoners becomes larger. Many an Ellesmere Port child did without sweets last week in order to give a penny and place a cross on a card, and one little girl wanted to know could she make a cross for a halfpenny. The collector kindly made up the necessary balance and one more penny was added to the fund. Many people gave who could ill afford to do so, but felt they could not refuse to support such an object. If ever anyone doubted whether the work of sending parcels to prisoners was appreciated they should take charge of a district when the next collection takes place, and the committee assure them that their kindness will be warmly appreciated by the prisoners of war. *(A list of committee members and collectors followed).*

***Chester Observer, 17 June 1916***

On 22 January 1916 a letter headed ‘*Cheshire Soldier’s Shocking Story*’ told of the harrowing experiences endured by former local man Private 6712 George Wells of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cheshire Regiment. He talked of a ‘terrible tale of cruelty exercised by the Germans towards our prisoners of war’, after returning to his new home at 1 Selsby Street, Northampton, after being in the hands of his captors for fourteen months. It was reported that,

‘He went out to the front with a smartness that did credit to his regiment but returned from Germany a cripple on crutches, with both feet amputated from the instep, through the fearful neglect he suffered while in captivity at the camp in Wittenberg.’

Private Wells described his experiences,

‘The guards took a fiendish delight in prodding us with their bayonets. We were kept so short of food that many collapsed through sheer weakness. Then we were sent to Wittenberg. For over six months they never allowed me to write home or receive parcels, and I never had a change of shirt for over six months, and they had taken my cap and great coat when I was captured. The Germans took a delight in keeping us short of clothing as well as food. Through marching about without boots in the wet and snow, my feet soon began to swell up and pain me so horribly that I could not walk. It was not until three captured British doctors came to the camp that my feet received attention, and one of them, Captain Vidal, told me that through my feet being neglected for so long, gangrene had set in and was spreading so rapidly, that to save my life, it was necessary to cut both of my feet at the instep.

They even had savage wolf hounds, which were set upon the prisoners who were found talking to other prisoners through the wire entanglements. One Russian was tied to a post with his feet off the ground and flogged with a strip of rubber piping, until he became unconscious. The worst experience of all was when typhus broke out in camp. In our weakened state the scourge soon spread and the German doctors took fright and bolted. Consequently, the camp was left in charge of the Russians who were the most numerous and the captured doctors, three of whom succumbed. The cruelties went from bad to worse, until the American Ambassador paid a visit, when there was a marked improvement.

The latrines were at some distance. If a man was taken short in the night and relieved himself in the lines he was flogged on bare posteriors with a thick piece of rubber to the point of exhaustion. When the alarm sounded if a man did not get into the bungalow in time he was shot at. One Frenchman was killed in this way, and British officers who tried to go to his assistance were fired at. Any man found in possession of a knife, razor or scissors, would be shot. Men were tied to poles by their wrists and ankles.’

*Chester Observer, 22 January 1916*

George then volunteered to help as an orderly in the hospital which was staffed by British R.A.M.C. It was at this stage that gangrene developed in his feet resulting in amputation. By the end of 1915 he had been exchanged and was back in Britain, returning to his new home and wife Florence Wells in Northampton by January 1916. Like many others returning in such circumstances he was interviewed at length by the authorities and the transcription still resides in the National Archives (WO/161/98/363).

Despite his hospital treatment, George was seriously ill and died on 2 October 1918 aged thirty-five. He was buried in Towcester Road Cemetery Northampton. [*Grave ref. 446. 4. 17333. The cemetery contains another 115 First World War burials and 17 from the Second World War, most of which form a combined war graves plot to the left of the chapel. The cemetery also contains five non-war service burials and three Czech war graves*].

From time to time letters were received from behind the lines from prisoners of war. Some were received by families of course, but soldiers frequently sent direct thanks to the organisers of the local funds who tried to keep up the supplies of parcels during their captivity. For example, in 1917 the secretary of the Prisoners of War Society received a letter from Private J. Edwards, who formerly worked at the Mersey Ironworks. His letter revealed that ‘he received six parcels in one fortnight, so that some must have been held up for some time’, but the committee were glad to notice that the special Christmas parcels were amongst those received. He thanked them all for their kindness to him during the time he had been a prisoner of war and hoped to thank the senders personally some day. He was sorry to hear that they could not send any more owing to the new scheme, but said, ‘Never mind, you have done your best for me in time of need and I can’t thank you enough for your kindness’. Private Edwards added, ‘We had a good time at Christmas and New Year and I wish all at the Port the best of luck’. Such contact must have been reassuring for

those at home who could see their efforts to support the troops were clearly worthwhile and getting through.

## Repatriation

The first British prisoners were released soon after the Armistice, and by 15 November most had reached Calais. A large camp was established at Dover to house 40,000 men, which was later used for demobilisation. By 9 December, 264,000 Allied prisoners had been repatriated, thousands of whom had been released en masse to find their own way back to allied lines without food or shelter. Many died from exhaustion along the route. When the returning POWs were picked up, they were sent to reception centres on lorries. There they were clothed and fed and despatched by train to the channel ports. At the receiving camp they were then registered into the accommodation before transport to their own homes was arranged. Returning officers were expected to write a report to explain the circumstances of their capture and show how they had done all they could to evade it. POWs were given a message from King George V – the first ever mass communication from a reigning British monarch – which was in the form of a lithograph written in his own hand;

‘The Queen joins me in welcoming you on your release from the miseries and hardships, which you have endured with so much patience and courage. During these many months of trial, the early rescue of our gallant Officers & Men from the cruelties of their captivity has been uppermost in our thoughts. We are thankful that this longed for day has arrived, & that back in the old Country you will be able once more to enjoy the happiness of a home & to see good days among those who anxiously look for your return. George R.I.’

Yet news still filtered through of deaths in captivity. Private 10276 Edward Tushingam of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment, son of Edward and Ethel Tushingam of 76 Egerton Street in the Port, had been a prisoner in Germany since 8 May 1915. The news of his death, aged 22, was brought by Private France, a repatriated soldier who had been captured at the same time as Private Tushingam. He had spoken to a Lance Corporal Moore, who was with him when he passed away on 4 December 1918 from influenza, and he stated that he was nine weeks without medical aid. The spread of influenza was to develop into a pandemic, and soon took its toll on a population already weakened by the ravages of war. A stone was subscribed for by his fellow prisoners and erected over his grave. He now lies in a Commonwealth War Grave in Hamburg Cemetery Plot VI, Row D, Grave 7. Hamburg Cemetery was used for the burial of over 300 Allied servicemen who died as prisoners of war. In 1923, it was decided that the graves of Commonwealth servicemen who had died all over Germany should be brought together into four permanent cemeteries. Hamburg was one of those chosen, and burials were brought into the cemetery from 120 burial grounds in Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg, Oldenburg, Hanover, Saxony, Brunswick and Westphalia.

At home, the secretary of the Ellesmere Port Prisoners of War Society, the support group formed to ensure close contact, essential supplies, and a focus for communication and repatriation of local men, received word from Mr John Edwards of Wolverhampton that his son Private John Edwards of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Staffordshire Regiment, had died in Germany on 21 November 1918, also from influenza. Only four days before the Armistice he wrote a ‘most cheerful letter’ saying he was quite well and hoped to be home soon. Fourteen days later he was dead. Private Edwards had been a prisoner since 1916, and according to his father, ‘for his relatives not to see him again after all the brutalities he had suffered at the hands of the Germans made it very hard indeed’. He was expected to have attended the ‘Welcome’ on 22 January 1919. The thanks given by his father to the Prisoners of War Society and the Mersey Ironworks Comforts Fund (his former employers) gives some indication as to the support given by these local organisations. He too was buried in Hamburg Cemetery. As the date of the reception approached, more and more soldiers returned, with much to say of their experiences.

The first Ellesmere Port prisoner of war to return home after the armistice was 32 year old Lance Corporal T.E. Creswell (11<sup>th</sup> Cheshires) of Dudley Road. Before the war he worked in the Mersey Iron Works before enlisting on 7 November 1914. He was never wounded, but he was buried by a shell explosion in 1916. Distressingly, his wife received a letter of sympathy from his C.O. who believed he had been killed. He was later taken prisoner in April 1918, but was held behind the lines in Belgium and France, rather than being moved back into Germany. Lance Corporal Creswell was unimpressed with the food and declared, 'it was unfit for pigs, boiled red cabbage, horseflesh and everything half cooked. Occasionally we received a spoonful or half a spoonful of jam. Stewed wheat with horseflesh was occasionally served up'. The Belgian women were very good to the prisoners and ran all sorts of risks in smuggling them food. He continued, 'On one occasion they refused to work and one of their party was bayoneted, the remainder being threatened with machine guns. While we worked for the Germans, the prisoners dropped all the copper and brass they could find into the canal, also tubes for gasoline, regulators for motor transports and a new Daimler car captured by the Germans from the British. While filling shells, they made hundreds of 'duds' taking the detonators out of the chargers. We were about the first party (125 in number) to reach Holland, being taken there by a party of Revolutionists. The men were all well treated in Holland and the band turned out and played 'Tipperary' in our honour'.

Mr W.A. Tasker, Ellesmere Port's only civilian prisoner of war, reached Ellesmere Port on Friday 6 December 1918, 'completely broken down in health'. William Tasker was born in Little Sutton in 1880, the son of a canal labourer. By the age of twenty he was following his dream to be a jockey and he was apprenticed to a racehorse trainer at a large stable in Newmarket. When war broke he was riding professionally in Belgium. After an anxious time hiding in a variety of locations, he was finally taken prisoner in 1915. For two months he was imprisoned in Brussels and was one of over fifty men kept in a small room. He was ultimately removed to Ruhleben Prisoner of War Camp which was a civilian detention camp during the war. The village of Ruhleben was then about 6 miles to the west of Berlin, and today is split between the districts of Spandau and Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf. Ironically, given Tasker's occupation, the camp was originally a horse racecourse and most of the time he and his fellow prisoners were lodged in horseboxes. As in most similar circumstances, he reported that the food was utterly inadequate and that had it not been for the 'splendid parcels' sent by the Ellesmere Port Society, which were the best that came into the camp, he could not have lived.

He revealed that while at Ruhleben, the men were confined to barracks for imaginary offences and at these times a pass was required to go only a few yards, and even then a guard had to accompany them. He said, 'On the Kaiser's birthday the big flag with the eagle in all its glory was hoisted. During the day it blew down, but despite all the protests, many of the British were confined to their barracks for this'. While in Germany Mr Tasker was operated on three times, which he felt had a detrimental effect on his health.

The camp contained between 4,000 and 5,500 prisoners, most of them British. Detainees included male citizens of the allied powers residing, studying, working, or on holiday in Germany at the outbreak of World War I. They also included the crews of several civilian ships stranded in German harbours or captured at sea. Prisoners were allowed to administer their own internal affairs and gradually, a mini-society evolved in the camp. Letters, books, sports equipment and a printing press were all allowed into the camp and the detainees organised their own police force, magazine, library and postal service. The latter, organised by Albert Kamps in July 1915, was known as the Ruhleben Express Delivery, and was soon handling over 6,000 pieces of mail per month. Sixteen different postage stamps were issued, which have since become collector's items. However, the German postal authorities declared the service illegal and it ceased operating in April 1916. Even a number of independent businesses, including a casino, also developed within the camp.

Tasker continued to reveal his changed experiences on leaving Germany,

‘When we left Germany a packet of rice could easily be exchanged for an Iron Cross. The change in the feeling of the German people outwardly at any rate was very marked towards the end of hostilities. They pressed souvenirs on the British and were very anxious that the English people should be given a good impression of them. To this end each man was presented with a printed pamphlet published by the Soldier’s Council. It stated that it had taken four years for the German people “who never hated you” (sic) – to come into their own. It had taken four years of endless privations and sufferings to make the people realise they had been ill-guided and misled. By that, they would realise the great party that had to be defeated. The leaflet proceeded to state that four years in the camp had left a mark upon some of the prisoners, some of which had lost a friend, some losing their health, not to speak of financial loss. “Do not hold the German people responsible for this”. They had suffered more than the prisoners without any ill feeling or hatred. They were asked not to hold the German people responsible for the deeds committed by their former autocratic leaders. Before leaving Ruhleben, the prisoners had all their German money taken away from them. A receipt was given to us and we were told we could draw our money in England (it would be interesting to know where)’.

*Chester Observer, 7 December 1918*

William Tasker returned with a souvenir - a belt bearing the words “Gott Mit Uns”. (This was the rallying cry of German troops during World War One (and earlier) as well as being inscribed on various items of apparel such as spiked helmets).

On 7 December 1918, Private J White of 37 Priestfield Road, Ellesmere Port, finally reached home safely. He had been captured 7 months earlier on 10 April 1918, and had been employed behind the lines in a German iron foundry as a moulder. For three months he had lived on little more than potato peelings and his parcels from home were held up at Freduchsfeld. Eventually they made it through and he received twenty-four at one time. Meanwhile, ‘hearty congratulations’ were given by the local press to Mr and Mrs Venables, of Church Lane, Stoak (a hamlet a mile or so south of Ellesmere Port), upon the return of their son from Germany, who had been in captivity since 8 May 1915. Within days of his arrival home, he was knocking at the door of the secretary of the Ellesmere Port Prisoners of War Society on Tuesday 3 December. He wasn’t surprised to find his friend and comrade Corporal Cheetham already there. Cheetham was also captured on 8 May 1915, both soldiers being in the same battalion of the Cheshires, and involved in the same action. Both men knew the importance of the work of the Society only too well, and were keen to make their thanks in person. During captivity, Private Venables suffered memory loss and couldn’t even remember his home address. Nevertheless, he certainly knew who the enemy were, and he was still determined to carry on the fight, becoming a master of non-cooperation. He was once beaten by two guards with a shovel handle for refusing to work while he was ill, but he fought back and at one stage actually put both men down. For this he received the unlikely sentence of 10 years further incarceration, but he appealed and the German authorities thought they could make better use of him as an orderly in a convalescent home. But this just gave him an easier opportunity to escape. He broke out twice, the first attempt seeing him picked up just ten miles from the frontier, while on the second he actually reached it, only to be apprehended by the sentry. Not unexpectedly, Venables was never to be permitted to leave the camp again and his mistreatment only escalated. While in hospital he could not (or would not) obey the nurse as he was too ill, and he only became more co-operative after she struck him with her fists and pointed a gun at him. He described how in 1915 the Germans had food sufficient to supply the prisoners but would not give it to them. The food the Germans supplied them with was not fit for pigs, adding gratefully that it was only the parcels from home that kept them alive.

Münster II Rennbahn (horse-track) Camp was one of four prison camps in Münster, Westfalen. It was a hutted camp constructed on the race-course with an administration building in the grandstand. There were four blocks of specially constructed wooden barracks to hold prisoners, with each block consisting of 22 dormitory rooms capable of holding 200 men each. The camp

population varied from 4,000 prisoners (300 of them British) in the earlier days, increasing to as many as 10,000 towards the end of the war. Most men slept on the floor with a paillasse and two blankets before being given coffee in the morning, barley and potatoes for dinner and maize soup in the evening. Prisoners were allowed out of doors every morning for one hour's recreation. The internees worked in the camp itself, or in coal mines (Augusta Victoria coal mine and coke works) or in agriculture. English prisoners worked in the stables of the 7th Army Corps Reserve Horse Depot. The men worked to improve the camp, later producing its own coins, and men could buy sausage and condensed milk from the canteen. Parcels from England were received but some items, such as alcohol, matches, candles and even compasses were confiscated.

As the momentum of returning soldiers was expected to increase during December, it was decided by the Ellesmere Port POW Society that a 'hearty welcome should be extended to them all'. Anxious that the function should take place as soon as all of the men were home, it was hoped to hold it around Christmas 1918, but their repatriation turned out to be slow and the men drifted back over the next few weeks. The local media were quick to meet them and to recount their experiences and 'tales of cruelty' to a fascinated and appalled readership. But this was still a hamstrung press, restricted by the requirements of DORA, and there was always the understandable emphasis on the wickedness of the enemy.

Private Thomas Nyland, a worker in the Iron Works in the Port but originally from Wolverhampton, had 2 ½ years in Germany after being taken on 8 August 1916. He received the first parcel from the Ellesmere Port POW Society five weeks after his capture. He tried to keep a packet of tea from one of the parcels as a souvenir or reminder that he had not been forgotten by those at home, but he had to use it six months before he arrived home. During his captivity he worked nine months down a coal mine. With little food in gruelling conditions, the men were weak, but if they were unable to send in thirty trucks in eight hours they had to stand to attention for six hours facing the barbed wire. This punishment took place as soon as the men came off duty after doing their eight hours in the mine. Nyland described how he fought hard against the work in the mine, and suffered a good deal in consequence, but he considered it worth it, as eventually the Germans got sick of him and put him on other work, this time in a brickyard which he felt was much easier. They had to send up 6,400 bricks during a night, before their shift was allowed to finish. The reporter was shocked at his appearance pointing to his 'indifferent health' and him 'very thin and careworn after his long internment'.

Rifleman Sam Tuft, another iron worker at Burnell's who moved to the Port from Wolverhampton, was captured on 30 November 1917, and worked behind the lines on light railways from 17 January until 20 September 1918. It took three or four prisoners to push a tip-truck as they were so weak, but the German guard considered this should be done by two, and when Tuft complained about it he was struck across the shoulder with a shovel and knocked to the ground. On another occasion a German sergeant asked him for a light, and on passing him the match he noticed the cigarette was a 'Woodbine'. Incensed at the realisation that the rumours of German soldiers stealing their parcels from home could only be true, he berated the sergeant, only to receive a further beating. He also described how men who reported sick had their bread supply stopped for eight days for doing so.

Private R. Birks of the Royal Welch Fusiliers was taken prisoner on 17 November 1916, after being wounded in the chest under the heart. He told how he was badly treated in a German hospital at Giessen where a German doctor called 'Bullneck' was a 'terror to all'. For helping an Englishman named Farrall, Birks was kicked by a German guard, but dared not retaliate for fear of being shot. He escaped once, but was recaptured, and had to do fourteen days' in the cells. There they received bread and water, and light was allowed to enter the cell only once every four days for an hour at a time. Birks was treated by the German doctors for runny ears, but he had caused this by putting butter down them, so he wouldn't have to work for them. On returning home to Ellesmere Port he

was still suffering from a broken rib, the result of a blow by a German sentry's rifle. In the same camp were the men who had refused to join the Irish Brigade to fight against the English. One of the Irishmen had never done a stroke of work for the Germans during the four years he had been a prisoner. The Germans thought he was subject to fits, but he was a past master at the art of affectation and was never caught. On the day of the Armistice, while all the prisoners in Birks' camp 'went absolutely mad', the Irishman had a special 'fit' at the feet of the German corporal in charge, and in the middle of it he jumped up and told him he had been playing the game for four years! When Birks was released, he and many fellow prisoners were left to walk to the American lines 20 miles beyond Metz. He was found exhausted on the roadside and was taken into hospital, eventually proceeding to Paris. Birks talked of the bitterness he felt for the German civilians, especially the women, who spat upon him as he lay on a stretcher in the middle of the street when he was first captured. 'Things like that,' he said, 'will never be forgotten'.

Private Shelley was a prisoner of war with Private Nyland for 2½ years. For much of that time their food rations consisted of two slices of bread, soup made from mangel tops (beet) and the water they were boiled in. Shelley described the pitiful sight of some of the men so drained that when they lined up on parade they fell down from sheer weakness. They were reported and when the German doctor arrived he kicked the men as they lay on the ground. He also witnessed a soldier in the camp with a very bad cut across his hand. He worked all day until 6pm and was ordered to again turn out for a night shift at 9pm. He was unable to do this, and upon the interpreter reporting the case, they were both attacked by the German guards, who hit them with their rifles. Private Shelley, like many other men in Germany, stated they could not possibly have lived had it not been for the parcels they received from home.

Private E. Chatburn contracted Diphtheria and fever while in captivity and was given up by a German doctor, but a French doctor took charge of him and after four days hard work pulled him through. He felt he was well treated on the whole. Money was no use in Germany, but a piece of soap, or a little dripping was worth a great deal. When the Armistice was signed, the Germans offered the prisoners double pay and double food if they would keep on working. Some Frenchmen and Russians did so, but the British finished on the spot, and took no notice of the machine guns which were brought round.

Short communications frequently reassured those at home that the men were surviving and their supplies from home were getting through. Private W.H. Venables wrote to say he was receiving all the parcels, while Private A Roberts stated: "please thank the people of Ellesmere Port for their kindness. I receive the parcels regularly, and in good condition, also the bread from Switzerland." The local press also reassured their readers that word had been received that Private J. Roberts, Sapper T.H. Lewis, Private T. Cheetham, Sgt Sunderland, Mr W. Tasker, Private Trafford, Private Tushingam, Private Carter, and Private France would soon be home, to the great relief of families who had been desperate for news, some of whom had no idea their loved ones had been incarcerated.

Private Sharples reported he was two years four months in Germany. In the bitter weather of January 1917 he had to stand to attention on roll-call parades in the cold for three days, poorly clothed in little more than shirts and trousers. During his stay in Germany, Private Sharples lost three stone in weight, and returned home with breathing problems, but he too added that the prisoners could not have lived except for the parcels.

By the end of December, the Prisoners of War Committee decided to reschedule the 'Welcome Home' reception for repatriated prisoners to Wednesday 8 January at the Queens Hall, a community hall in the centre of the town. There was still concern that not enough men would be home in time

and they were particularly concerned that Sapper Lewis would be there as he had been imprisoned for almost the whole of the war. Prior to the evening meeting, the Committee intended, 'that they would be entertained at an excellent repast (reminiscent of pre-war days) at Cambridge Road Council School. Mr C.L. Mather was bringing out a capital concert party from Liverpool for the occasion, and every possible arrangement would be made for the men's enjoyment. The silver badged men, wounded soldiers from the hospital, also prisoners' relatives and servicemen on leave will be invited to the evening meeting, also all who have helped the prisoners' work in any way. Mr J.H.Lloyd J.P., and Mr T.W. Francis will represent the Urban District Council'.

But any hopes that the majority of Ellesmere Port soldiers held in captivity would be home by Christmas were soon dashed, and the reception was again put back, to 22 January 1919, in the hope that all would have arrived by then.

In fact, such was the operation to get all the POW's home so huge, that a great many prisoners from all nations spent another Christmas in the camps. Some of their guards had upped and left as soon as the Armistice was declared, while in other camps German officials tried to use the prisoners as bargaining chips for their own safe passage. By the end of November, only around ten per cent of British men had made it home, while only half had made it to allied lines by the end of the year.

Into the new year, the men began to arrive in greater numbers. Lance Corporal Len Clarke had been behind the lines since 23 March 1918, and his wife did not know for over 4 months that he was captured. He worked in an iron mine in Luxemburg for three months. Private D Mayhew of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment was in captivity for twelve months and received his parcels regularly while making cement blocks. He said, 'We witnessed first-hand the treatment of Russian prisoners which was abominable. They were glad to act as servants to the British prisoners and would do any odd job to get food'. In fact, many soldiers commented on their pitiful state. Many felt they had nowhere to go, their country was in chaos and there seemed to be no coordinated organisation for their repatriation, many remaining in the camps on meagre rations after the British had left. Mayhew revealed that at one time he was engaged in making oil tanks to store the oil stolen from Romania, while German women worked hard alongside with picks and shovels. He declared, 'When the German women saw the warm woollen clothing sent out to the British prisoners, their eyes nearly popped out of their heads. One day a member of the Soldiers' Council gave an address in the barracks, and asked them to remember the starving German women and children when they (the prisoners) got back to England. Someone asked whether the British prisoners would have got home in under two years had the Germans won the war. The lecturer gave no reply and left the hut'. Private Mayhew said 'Crippen was not in it with the Germans who would do anything'. He continued, 'There were some good and some bad. I was at Mannheim during the British air raids, which took place at 11p.m. each day. The men used to time them while in bed and say "Another ten minutes lads", and sure enough they came to the minute. The raids lasted for periods of two weeks and as one squadron left they met a fresh one coming. The British used to like the raids, because, of course, all work was stopped while the raids wore on. The women used to faint when the raids started, but only got chaffed. We got all the news, as a German lad used to bring a paper each day, and an Australian, who had picked up a lot of German used to translate it for us. One curious case we read of was of a German who had four sons, two fighting for England and two for the Germans. The father had been in England since he was 16 and had a butchering business in Liverpool. He had been sent to back to Germany and had been sorry ever since. When the men left Hamburg they saw lots of shipping, but the ships were bad condition and in need of paint after their long rest'. [He may have been sent back to Germany after the Lusitania riots in Liverpool].

Private A Corker (Sherwood Forresters) had been a prisoner of war for four years and 2½ months. He described how he had a terrible time at first and was very glad of the parcels from Ellesmere

Port. He came direct from Hamburg, and spent his Christmas in the minefield off Heligoland. Their principal food in Germany was soup made from sugar beet or turnips and water. For two years he had to let his beard grow. His general treatment was rough and he was kicked about a good deal, but was fortunate enough to miss the bayonet treatment. The commandant at Bohmte (Lower Saxony) was a terror according to Corker. He used to make the food for the English as poor as possible in the hope that they could not eat it, and he could then secure it for his own pigs which he kept in the military store area. He had four men doing nothing else but carrying pig food. The camp was so bad that it was eventually broken up and the men dispersed to other camps.

On 4th January 1919, one of Ellesmere Port's oldest prisoners of war, Private A France, returned home. It was reported that,

'He was captured on 8 May 1915, and was one of the first recipients of the Ellesmere POW Society's Parcels, of which he spoke very highly. He had a rough time in Germany and was once kicked into a canal by the Germans. It was in very cold weather and he had to stay in his wet clothes, which froze on him from 8am until 2pm. The food given to him in Germany he complained 'was not fit to feed pigs with'. At Bokelah the men were attacked with bayonets for refusing to work. One was killed, 10 wounded and 25 were sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment. When the Armistice was signed, Private France walked for three days to the Dutch frontier, where the released men were warmly welcomed. Private France was met by Sgt Sunderland of the Cheshire Regiment, who was helping the authorities with the repatriation work. Private France described the high cost of goods in Germany, 'turkeys were £6 15s each and cigarettes 2½d or 3d each. Tobacco (so called) was as much as £1 per lb, and you could buy Germany for the price of a piece of soap. Pepper was £4 per lb. The men who came from working behind the lines were in a terrible state and often were too weak to feed themselves having to be fed with spoons'.

The following week saw the long awaited arrival of Sapper Lewis, and the local press carried the following article under the headline;

### **Sapper Lewis Returns - German Barbarities**

Monday was a red letter day in the history of prisoners of war owing to the arrival of Sapper Thomas H. Lewis, who was captured by the Germans on 23 August 1914. Three days later he escaped and with two officers for company, crawled for a long distance on his hands and knees until they met a Belgian civilian who gave them a lift in cart to Maubeuge, [just inside the French border], and although spokes were knocked from the wheels by shells, they arrived safely at their destination. He went straight into hospital after his Scarlet Pimpernel experience and the French surrendered the town on the 8 September, Lewis again being taken prisoner. Here he had a lively experience, being surrounded by hundreds of excited Germans with bayonets drawn and was spat upon and called 'English Swine' and other nice names. On leaving there, he had a narrow escape through being in possession of a jack-knife, which was part of his engineer's equipment, and was accused of gouging German's eyes out in Belgium.

After three days travelling in a cattle truck with 70 others, they were taken to Friedrichsfeld, but on the way German sisters came up and gave food and wine to French prisoners, but gave the English nothing and called them 'English Swine'. At Friedrichsfeld they got a 'hearty' reception from the German people, who assembled in thousands, kicked the prisoners and spat on them all the way to the camp. A German officer passed and shouted in excellent English 'Englishmen, you are the dirtiest people on the earth.' Mr Lewis wishes he had him in Ellesmere Port today. No barracks had been provided and the men were sleeping in the open in the wet. They had 300 Prussian guards to look after 80 British prisoners. The men had only one blanket each, and the food for two men for three days was easily put into a small salmon tin. Three English medical officers arrived. They took from them all their medical instruments and subjected them to an examination to prove that they were doctors. Although these British medical men were in the camp, they were not allowed to practise in any way whatever, even though the British needed attention.

At Christmas 1914, these officers made a collection for the British prisoners and they received about 7½d each to buy cigarettes etc. He told them they must imagine they had turkey, Christmas pudding etc. Actually they had for their dinner, rice, so badly burnt that none of the men could face it, but they made the best of meal times, and gave hearty cheers for the Major and sang 'God Save the King.' At this time, the men were very badly clothed. They wore sabots, Belgian pants, and short French jackets and always had to wear their blankets around them owing to the cold. The Major was exchanged in 1915, and as soon as he arrived in England, he sent back parcels of warm clothing to Friedrichsfeld for the men and this made Major Bronskill R.A.M.C. a very honoured one in the camp.

In this Lager they never had any soap. There was no sanitation. The only water available was surface water and the men preferred drinking this to the coffee (so called) which was black and sour. They were in such a plight that Lewis and a man named Murphy from Levenshulme, Manchester, used to go out each night with a bucket of coffee and bathe themselves in it. It made them so brown they were almost like n\*\*\*\*\*s, but it was their only method of keeping themselves clean. About this time Lewis had his first experience of being chained to the post. His offence was asking the whereabouts of a loaf of bread, which was missing. He was fastened to the stump with chains from 7am until 9pm and all the food he got was a small piece of bread and water to drink. He was chained so tightly that the chains bit into his arms and legs. He had no jacket on, and was in a state of collapse, the German doctor having to visit him twice. This is a sample of German treatment in the early days of the war and Lewis had only asked about the bread on behalf of his comrades. His only so-called trial was that a German officer stood about 150 yards away from him and then a soldier came and said he had to do three days on the stump. Lewis never had a chance to say anything at all.

The soup served up there was wretched. If a man found a piece of potato, the feat was received with a loud cheering. The soup was made of boiled sour cabbage and men who did try and eat it usually got dysentery. He was of the opinion that the sour bread at this camp must have been left over from 1870, as it was here where the French prisoners were then shot'.

Thomas Hewitt Lewis came home to be welcomed by his wife Elizabeth and his young son Tom, who was only four when he left in August 1914. Thomas first signed on as a driver for the Royal Engineers aged 19 in 1904 serving until 1907. Consequently he was one of the first reservists called up in the Port, having been mobilized at Aldershot on 5 August, and sent straight to the Front. He wasn't officially recorded as a prisoner of war by the army until 27 January 1915, as until then they seemed to be unaware of his actual whereabouts. On his return to the UK he was sent to a repatriation camp at Leith on 4 January 1919, before being given home leave. He was stood down as a reservist on 2 May 1919, and was finally discharged and demobilized on 31 March 1920. He later worked as a patrol guard in a local oil works, before his death in 1949 aged sixty-four.

### **Joe Mercer and the Football Battalion**

Joseph Powell Mercer was born in Higher Bebington on 21st July, 1889. As a teenager while learning the bricklaying trade, he played football for the Burnell's Ironworks football team - Ellesmere Port F.C.- as a promising centre-half. Scouts soon became aware of his qualities and in 1910 he was snapped up by Nottingham Forest, then in the top flight. While in Nottingham he lived in digs, returning home during the summer break, where he carried on working in his 'proper job' on local building sites. In June 1913, while back in the Port, he married Ethel Breeze in the local parish church of Christchurch. Joe still looked upon himself as a bricklayer, his true occupation - how times have changed for footballers; despite still being in the first team in one of the most famous clubs, he still put down his occupation as bricklayer on the census form of 1911 and his marriage certificate of 1913 - no mention of 'footballer'. And this despite playing over 150 regular first team games between 1910-1914. His footballing career did pay well however. The maximum wage was £4 per week, but even if he was earning less than this, he was still far better off

than the skilled and semi-skilled who were averaging £97 and £63 per year respectively, and many of his contemporaries were unskilled labourers on much less than that. But at the peak of his playing career, the outbreak of hostilities put paid to any further aspirations on the footballing front. It must have been a week of tortured emotions for him, given that his young son, Joseph junior, the first of four children, was born 5 days after war was declared on 9 August 1914 at their home in 32 Queen Street, Ellesmere Port (in those days there was a true close season, from the end of April until the beginning of September, and the Mercers had retained their family home). His infant son would also become a footballer, and one day would manage the England football team.

Of course, with the general opinion across the country that it would all be over by Christmas, most footballers probably felt they should carry on playing, until the authorities – be it the F.A. or the government - told them otherwise. Inevitably, the focus of discussion on who ought to be serving soon turned to sportsmen. Pressure came, for example, from the author Arthur Conan Doyle, who appealed on 6 September 1914 for footballers to join the armed forces:

‘There was a time for all things in the world. There was a time for games, there was a time for business, and there was a time for domestic life. There was a time for everything, but there is only time for one thing now, and that thing is war. If the cricketer had a straight eye, let him look along the barrel of a rifle. If a footballer had strength of limb, let them serve and march in the field of battle.’

[On 28 October 1918 his son, Kingsley Doyle, died from pneumonia, which he contracted during his convalescence after being seriously wounded during the 1916 Battle of the Somme].

Others even verbally attacked the West Ham United players calling them effeminate and cowardly for getting paid for playing football while others were fighting on the Western Front. C.B.Fry, the well-known amateur footballer and cricketer, called for football to be abolished, all professional contracts be annulled, and furthermore, that no one below forty years of age be allowed to attend matches. Eventually, the F.A. – after considerable pressure – called for clubs to release professional footballers who were not married to allow them to join up, while the War Office worked with the F.A. to organise recruitment drives at games that were still being played.

Sections of the press though saw this as an attempt by the ruling classes to stop the one single recreation enjoyed by the masses on just one day in the week. The *Athletic News* angrily declared.

‘What do they care for the poor man's sport? The poor are giving their lives for this country in thousands. In many cases they have nothing else... These should, according to a small clique of virulent snobs, be deprived of the one distraction that they have had for over thirty years.’

Many footballers did not wait for Christmas, and heeded the call by early December 1914, when the 17th Service (Football) Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment was established. Within a few weeks the 17th Battalion had its full complement of 600 men. Not all were footballers however, as many recruits were local men who wanted to be in the same battalion as their football heroes. Nevertheless, by March 1915, it was reported that 122 professional footballers had joined the battalion.

It was this battalion that Joseph Mercer joined in December 1914. He had returned to start the new season in early September, but felt it was time to enlist. After months of training, the battalion reached the front line on 15 January 1916. In a two week spell in the trenches four members of the battalion were killed and 33 were wounded. The battalion also took heavy casualties during the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. Joseph Mercer survived the war and spoke about his experiences to the local press on his return home<sup>4</sup> January 1919,

### **Prominent Footballer’s Experiences**

Ellesmere Port people are always interested in the career of Sergeant Joseph Mercer, the Nottingham Forest half-back, who at one time played for Burnell’s Ironworks. He is now one of

Ellesmere Port's repatriated prisoners of war, and thanks to his fine physique he has come through the ordeal well. He enlisted in the Footballer's Battalion on 16 December 1914, and we may say at the outset, that he considers this battalion one of the finest for good comradeship that ever crossed to France.

He went over to France on 17 October 1915 and after 20 months fighting in the line, was taken prisoner on 28 April 1917. The battalion was in some heavy fighting including Delville Wood, where they lost 300 men in 1½ hours. Sergeant Mercer was wounded in the head by shrapnel in August 1916. He was taken prisoner near Arras. His company went right through a village, but the right and left were held up and he heard afterwards that only two of the company got back. He was hit in the leg, and shot in the shoulder by a bullet. He lay in a shell hole for several hours and was under a British barrage for two hours being very thankful when it finished. Sergeant Mercer tried to get back to British lines, but ran into a German machine gun party, which settled matters.

He was taken to Douai in a motor ambulance and then to Langensalza, a three days' journey by train. The food was such that no wounded man could tackle it at all. He was pleased to see Britishers helping in the hospital and later got in touch with Jim McCormick, Plymouth Argyle's right half-back who was a great help. The food at Langensalza was terrible, and often included raw fish and black bread and coffee twice a day. Only the Russians could eat it, and they were from behind the line, almost at starvation point. Sergeant Mercer states it reminded him more than anything of Woodward's sea lions. He afterwards was sent to Giessen, and here the other prisoners shared their parcels until those for the newcomers arrived from home. At this camp five-a-side football contests were arranged. The prisoners subscribed half a mark each towards the prizes and the sides were picked in fives as the names came out of a bag. They had to buy wood from the Germans to make goalposts and nets were made from string taken from parcels received from England. An amusing feature of the contests was that the Germans would not allow the referee to use his whistle because it excited the guard. He had to use a little bell and even at times a mouth organ. To enable the British to have their usual 'flutter', a book was made on the matches. The prizes for the contests were all given in cash.

The commandant at Giessen was usually very fair and held the British up as a pattern to other nationalities in the camp for their cleanliness, not that he loved the British any more for it. The commandant at Meschede once met a prisoner coming from the stores carrying two tins of food. The man was too loaded to salute – the commandant led him to a drain and made him pour the contents of the tins down the drain. Later he had to do fourteen days 'strafe'.

Sergeant Mercer left Giessen for Meschede on 17 March 1918, and his new camp was known to be one of the worst in Germany. The prisoners were non-commissioned officers, men who were no good to the Germans for work, which meant a great deal. The distributions methods were such that they stood very little chance of getting their parcels. One portion of the camp was set aside to receive men of all nationalities who had been working behind the lines. Those who lived through this ordeal were in a terrible state, but quite 25 per cent died, and as many as five Britishers were carried from the train dead on arrival at the camp. No one had been allowed to take them any food, the prevention of disease being the excuse made by the Germans, and special guards were provided carrying switches of barbed wire with which they used to strike at any prisoners trying to take food over the fence. One day, one or two N.C.O.s were allowed in to take in the names of newly arrived prisoners. A man brought in a bath of so-called soup and the starving prisoners absolutely mobbed him. There was such a rush that as soon as one man got a bowl full it was upset in the crush and all the soup was wasted.

Efforts were made to start a British Help Committee at this camp and despite all German efforts to stop it, it was eventually carried through, mainly by the efforts of Petty Officer Brooks of the R.N.A.S., a neutral named Rogeburg of the North American Y.M.C.A. and Sergeant Mercer. It took about four months to get going, but was of great benefit afterwards, bulk supplies of parcels being obtained, which kept the men going until the parcels came from home. The camp accommodation was ten thousand and when the Armistice was signed this number had

increased to 22,000 by men coming into the camp from working parties. Men were walking about all night and things were very bad. The camp authorities asked the prisoners to appoint delegates to visit Army Headquarters, but the British refused to do this, saying it was against their discipline. The German idea was to get the Armistice terms moderated.

En route to the frontier, it was pitiful to see the German women and children without food and the prisoners gave a good deal away, even of the little they had. While at Meschede, the Germans pillaged the prisoners' supply of medicine, in fact, the Help Committee wrote home to ask the Depot at Hove not to send further supplies. A tunnel was made at Meschede with a view to escape but it was discovered by the Germans and the prisoners from the whole barrack, about 250, had to do 21 days "dark cells" in batches of thirty. Sergeant Mercer was not ill-treated himself, and says that the Germans never tackled anyone strong – it was always the poor chaps from behind the lines who had no strength. He adds that it was fine the way the Britishers stuck together under all circumstances, and if a man is a prisoner of war it soon brings out the bad or good in him. Except for the stiffness in his arm, Sergeant Mercer is sound in wind and limb, and soon hopes to be able to take up football in real earnest'.

*Chester Observer 4 January 1919*

After the war Mercer resumed his career with Nottingham Forest, but after 5 years away he knew he would have to drop to a lower league, and returned to his Wirral home to sign for Tranmere Rovers in 1921. Considering he had taken a bullet to the shoulder, shrapnel in the head, wounds to the leg, then resumed a physically demanding career, it is surprising that his death in 1927 was caused by health problems resulting from a gas attack in the trenches ten years earlier. To have coped with such handicaps in his post war career is remarkable. Something to consider next time the latest overpaid prima donna dives like a swan and rolls over half a dozen times, after a passing defender happened to cause a heavy draft of air turbulence. When Mercer went down, he really had been shot.

Joseph Mercer junior was only twelve when his father died. He regularly watched his father play for Tranmere, before he signed on for Ellesmere Port as a teenager. In 1932 at the age of eighteen he had signed for Everton, where he spent fifteen years, winning a championship medal and captaining the side, before having his own career interrupted by war like his father. After serving in the war he moved to Arsenal where he spent nine years captaining them to two FA Cup finals and two league championships. He played twenty-seven times for England and also captained his country. After a serious leg injury finished his playing days, he had a successful career in management culminating in a caretaker manager role of England in the 1970s. He died in 1991.

And on the subject of gas attacks, its effects seemed to make men do the strangest things, as this report in the Chester Observer showed,

'An ex-soldier, aged twenty-four, committed from Ellesmere Port, was indicted at Chester Assizes this week for bigamy, by marrying a woman of fifty years, a widow with twelve children, after deserting his wife. The court could not understand what prompted the strange match, but it took the lenient view that the effects of gas on foreign service might have been responsible, and passed sentence of three months' imprisonment.'

*Chester Observer 30 November 1918*

## **Further research**

**The National Archives** [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

The National Archives does not hold a comprehensive list of all British and Commonwealth POWs. Consequently, it can be difficult to establish whether an individual was actually taken prisoner and,

more particularly, in which camps they were held. An estimated 192,000 British and Commonwealth captives were taken during the First World War. There is no comprehensive list covering all of these prisoners of war, and any documents which are known to survive only cover a fraction of those who were captured. There is very little information on prisoners of war who were liberated after the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

### ***British Prisoners of War, c1760-1919 (TNA Online Research Guide)***

It is essential to access this online research guide which gives comprehensive assistance and advice. Space restrictions does not permit further details here, but this should be your first port of call as this document may not only answer some of your questions, but will certainly give you further ideas for other lines of enquiry.

### **British prisoners of war: interviews and reports (1914-1920) (WO161/99/177)**

Search and download facility for interviews and reports concerning 3,000 British prisoners of war primarily concerning servicemen who escaped internment, were repatriated before the end of the war, or were incarcerated in a neutral country. There is usually a small charge to download .pdf copies of the actual record. Before your search try to find out the persons name, rank, regiment and a date range and location. Documents are increasingly being made available online so it is advisable to check the TNA website to view current progress. These documents, from the series WO 161, were compiled by the Committee on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War and provide the main source of personal information for Prisoners of War (PoWs) captured during the First World War. They consist of pre-Armistice reports made by repatriated, escaped or interned Officers, Medical Officers and Other Ranks, and occasionally Merchant Seamen and Civilians. Unlike many other records, they often describe what happened after the battle. However, it should be noted that they represent a tiny percentage of the estimated 192,000 British and Commonwealth captives.

### **TNA website also has online Research Guides:**

- War Dead: First & Second World Wars
- Prisoners of War in British Hands: 1698-1949
- British Army Officers' Records: First World War 1914-1918

### ***Visiting The National Archives at Kew***

#### **Foreign Office reports (1915-1919)**

Catalogue search tool with descriptions of 11 million documents from the UK central government, law courts, and other national bodies for correspondence and reports on people who became prisoners of war during the First World War in FO 383.

PoW Interviews 1917-1918 National Archives Series WO161/99/177. No 1037.

### **Searching for an individual**

The guide 'Researching British & Commonwealth Prisoners of War: World War One' is held at the reception desk and includes such information as;

- Copies of nominal indexes of British, Irish, Colonial and Indian PoWs extracted from WO 161/101
- The National Archives' references to identified nominal lists of Military and Merchant Navy PoWs
- List of PoW camps in Germany and enemy territory
- Indexed map of the main PoW camps in Germany and Austria
- The primary source for personal information are the reports made by repatriated, escaped or interned Officers, Medical Officers, Other Ranks, and occasionally Merchant Seamen and Civilians, held in WO 161/95 to WO 161/100 and indexed by WO 161/101. As well as a narrative of variable length, these reports usually include details of unit, home address, when and where captured, wounds suffered, transfer between camps, comments on treatment and

conditions in camps and escape attempts. A copy of the entire WO 161/101 index is available in the Research Enquiry Room at Kew and can also be downloaded from TNA Documents Online.

**British Library Newspapers** [www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html](http://www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html)

British Library British Library Newspapers, Colindale Avenue, London, W9 5HE

Tel: 020 7412 7353

Contemporary national and local newspapers often include lists of PoW or details about individual captives.

**The Red Cross** [www.icrc](http://www.icrc)

The British Red Cross ([www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)) does not hold records of individual prisoners of war or civilian internees. These are held by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva. A search can be made on receipt of a written request. Please be sure to provide as much detail as possible in your letter. It is essential that you include the name and nationality of the individual you are enquiring about. The following information, if known, is also extremely helpful to their search:

Date and place of birth / Father's name / Date of Capture / Regiment / Army Number.

Searches are not a priority for the ICRC which is still fully occupied with similar humanitarian work in the present day. Searches of an historical nature may therefore take a considerable time to complete.

To apply for a record of a prisoner of war, or for more information, access the enquiry form on their website or please write to:

Archives Division and Research Service, International Committee of the Red Cross, 19 Avenue de la Paix, Geneva CH-1202, Switzerland

**Imperial War Museum** [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)

Although the Museum does not hold any official documentation or comprehensive listings of Prisoners of War, it does have a large collection of material that will be helpful for providing background information and explaining about their experiences, including documents, printed books, photographs, and oral history. Further information can be found on the website.

Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, Lambeth Rd, London SE1 6HZ

Tel: 020 7416 5221

**Great War Forum** <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/>

Founded by Chris Baker, the best forum on the web for those interested in or researching WW1 history. Threads on POW research posted regularly.

**Firstworldwar.com** [www.firstworldwar.com/photos/prisoners.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/photos/prisoners.htm)

A multimedia history of the First World War - photographs of prisoners and camps.

**Absent Voters List (AVL)**

Servicemen over the age of 21 became eligible to vote in their home constituency as the result of an Act of Parliament passed on 6th February 1918. The first so-called Absent Voters List (AVL) was published on 15th October 1918 and was compiled from details supplied by the men themselves before the closing date for applications of 18th August 1918. Copies are usually held in local record offices.

**Further Reading**

**Van Emden, Richard**, *Prisoners of the Kaiser: the last POWs of the Great War* (Pen and Sword) 2000

**Jackson, Robert**, *The Prisoners 1914-1918* (Routledge) 1989

**Stibbe, Matthew**, *British Civilian Internees in Germany: The Ruhleben Camp, 1914-1918* Manchester University Press (2008)

**Slader, ed. Douglas**, *In Ruhleben* Naval & Military Press Ltd (2005 N&M Press reprint - original pub 1917).

Life in a civilian internment camp for British internees in Germany. Based on letters home from one of the internees and on the camp journal. Ruhleben was an Internment Camp in Germany for British internees, and the first part of this book contains letters from one of the prisoners (referred to as 'Richard Roe') to his mother.

**Pyke, Geoffrey**, *To Ruhleben – And Back* (by a former prisoner who successfully escaped from the camp in 1915).

*See also Ruhleben Camp research advice:*

**The Story of Ruhleben Camp** - <http://ruhleben.tripod.com/id16.html>

**The Joint War Committee and the Joint War Finance Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in England**, *Voluntary aid rendered to the sick and wounded at home and abroad and to prisoners of war 1914-1919* (1921)

This is the most comprehensive, single-volume record of the Red Cross and its commitment in the First World War. Members of the British Red Cross and the Order of St John were organised into Voluntary Aid Detachments (the term VAD later came to be used for an individual member as well as a detachment).. This is not a book listing individual case studies nor does it catalogue wounded or missing men by name. What it does do however is give a background the invaluable work carried out by British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John in England.

**O' Rorke, Benjamin G.**, *In the Hands of the Enemy: Being the experiences of a prisoner of war* (2009 N&M Press reprint - original pub 1919).

Memoir of POW in captivity in Germany written by a Coldstream Guards chaplain captured at the battle of Landrecies in August 1914, but eventually repatriated in 1915. Illustrated with the author's own drawings.

**Waugh, Alec**, *Prisoners of Mainz*. (2009 N&M Press reprint - original pub 1951).

The early memoir of Alec Waugh, elder brother of novelist Evelyn, recording his capture and captivity in Germany at the end of the Great War. Waugh was serving in the trenches of Passchendaele with the Dorset Regiment. Captured in the German offensives in March 1918, this book records his experiences as a POW.

**Messrs Cox & Co.'s Enquiry Office**, *List of British Officers taken Prisoner in the Various Theatres of War, August 1914 to November 1918* (2009. N & M reprint - from 1919 edn).

Some 8,700 names are listed, including officers of the RAF, RNAS, RN Div and Dominions. Names are shown by regiments/corps and by battalions within regiments in the order of capture. Deaths in captivity are noted together with dates reported missing and dates of repatriation. The index lists every name in alphabetical order. A very valuable source of information.

**Pope-Hennessey**, *Map of the Main Prison Camps in Germany and Austria*

A reproduction of the map and gazetteer showing the principal Central Powers' Prisoner-of-War camps in Germany and Austria, compiled by Mrs **Pope-Hennessey** and published by Nisbet and Co. in the First World War. ISBN1904897045

**Machray, Robert**, *Hun Inhumanity to Helpless Men*, Article in *The War Illustrated*, 25th January, 1919

**Harris, C, & Whippy, J.** *The Greater Game - Sporting Icons who fell in the Great War* (2008)

**Riddoch, A. & Kemp, J.** *When the Whistle Blows: The Story of the Footballers' Battalion in the Great War* (2008)

**James, Gary** *Football With A Smile: The Authorised Biography of Joe Mercer, OBE.* (1993).

## **British Memoirs**

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