

Eastcote Prisoner of War Camp

Many people do not realise that exactly 100 years ago, a camp was being set up in Eastcote, which would eventually come to house more than 4500 German prisoners of war,

At the outbreak of World War 1, there was a great need to roundup and keep aliens of Germanic origin, living and working in the UK. More than 200 of these were German seamen working on British Merchant Ships. The NSFU(National Seamen and Firemans Union) took it on themselves to look for suitable venues to house these men for the duration of the war, and Eastcote House with around 60 acres of ground was purchased on their behalf to fulfill this role. The property was purchased from the Gresham family on the 9th November 1914, but a contract agreement had been entered into, and work had been started preparing the site for a large number of men 2 months earlier.

The government had agreed to fund the camp to the tune of 10/- (10 shillings now 50p) per man per week, and initially 60 aliens were housed. They were guarded by a contingent of policemen armed with cutlasses and by local boy scouts.

The camp produced local difficulties for the villagers, including the closure of some footpaths, and temporary closure of roads when the internees were marched around the village for exercise. Sewage from the camp appears to have been well managed.

By April 1915, there were 779 men interred. Relations were cordial and friendly. A German prisoner writing home in December 1914 states that he camp comprised a large dining tent housing 800 men, and many sleeping tents each taking 8 to 10 men. The food was good, the camp brilliantly lit. There was a wash house, with hot and cold water, and 12 bath/shower units. They had a cinema and a generous beer and tobacco ration. Wooden huts were being built, and it was a splendid place to be interred. The camp was set up by merchant seamen for displaced merchant seamen, and there was a strong bond between the internees and the administrators.

All this changed on the 7th May 1915. On that day, a German submarine torpedoed the transatlantic passenger ship the Lucitania, with a loss of 1200 men, women and children. The whole country was horrified. At the camp, with its merchant sailor, basis, feelings ran particularly high. A concert was cancelled and the Camp Commandant explained what had happened to the internees. He was totally mortified when their response was to break out in cheering and singing patriotic songs. Things would never be the same again.

Almost immediately the camp management had written to the War Office, suggesting that they should take over the facility as a prisoner of war camp, and gave recommendations as to how it could be expanded to take up to 10,000 men. This was agreed, and the War Office officially took control on the 11th October 1915.

The first report on the camp by neutral inspectors was in February 1916. This reports that there were 600 Germans and 60 Austrians in the camp. By April 1916 this had increased to 1559. They were housed in huts 200ft by 30ft, there was an hospital fully fitted out and staffed by doctors, a cinema, kitchens, bakeries, and a large recreation hut. There was also a 9 acre recreation field for sport. By the summer the camp was 100% military prisoners, guarded by the military. It was fully lit by electricity in contrast to the remainder of Eastcote which did not get electric power until 1930.

By the time of the final report on the camp, two months after the end of the war, there were 4509 prisoners, and in addition a further 14,507 in satellite camps around the country but responsible to Eastcote (by now renamed as Patishall POW Camp). During the war, there were 18 escapees from the camp, none of which succeeded in getting back to Germany. Most were too comfortable to want to get back to a wretched war. 32 of the prisoners had died at Patishall, some of wounds from the war, others from the flu epidemic which was devastating in 1918 and 1919.

Prisoners were allowed to work on farms within 3 miles of the camp. With the shortage of labour, we can expect Bugbrooke farms to have had men from the camp working for them for mutual benefit.

Although the war ended in November 1918, peace negotiations were to last another 18 months, and the last prisoners did not leave until November 1919. The effects of the camp were sold off in big sales in March and August 1920. One of the huts, the former guards mess room, was purchased by Patishall village and used as the village hall until 1977, when it was finally replaced. The land was sold off in 1923. Eastcote House is still there.



Detained in England – Eastcote POW Camp Pattishall. Colin Chapman & S Richard Moss

Photo from the 1916 book. – German Prisoners in Great Britain published 1916

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