
Prisoners of war at Hellifield

Following the death of Sir William Nicholson of the Peel in 1944 the house was requisitioned by the Ministry of Defence to become a hostel to accommodate prisoners of war who were to work on the land and in other local industries. The prisoners were to come from the main camp which was Camp No.60 Overdale Skipton. This was located where the present day Overdale Park caravan site stands today. The Peel became one of four hostels run by Overdale camp the others being at Gisburn, West Marton and Otley.

The first prisoners to arrive in Hellifield were Italians who quickly formed an amicable relationship with the locals, many football matches were played against the village lads and swimming parties took place in the river Ribble at Halton West bridge where sadly one of the prisoners was to lose his life in the whirlpool there. It is said many of the locals had their first taste of spaghetti during this time cooked by the Italian prisoners!

After the surrender of the German forces in May 1945 the military authorities considered the Italian prisoners to pose no threats so repatriation for them began quickly but for the Germans it was decided a period of political re-education would be required so Overdale camp and its hostels began to receive German prisoners from June 1945. I recently came across some declassified files from the foreign office now in the National Archives, which contain reports of visits and checks on Overdale camp and its hostels which make interesting reading. It would seem the prisoners were screened for their political leanings and past history and were graded as Black, Grey or White, with white being of no concerns. Hellifield Peel was considered a White camp although the reports highlight

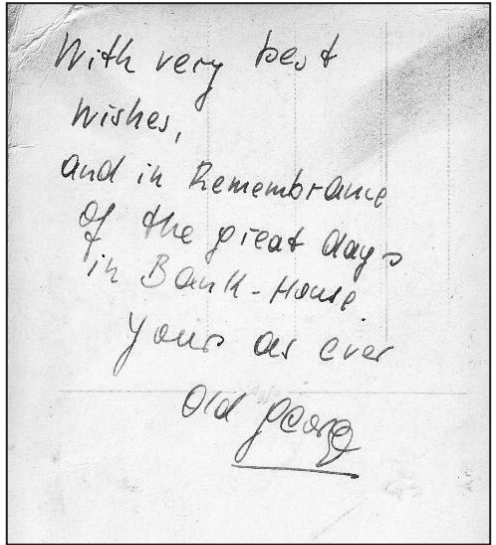
several prisoners in the 18 -25 year age group were resistant and obstructive to the re-education schemes. The number of prisoners at Hellifield ranged from 80 to 170 during this period of operation.

No electricity was provided for the prisoners at the Peel or any of the other hostels but a large battery operated radio played German radio stations and German newspapers and books were brought in. A camp interpreter was provided by the army but was criticised in the official reports for his "weak German" language skills! Hellifield's Co-operative hall (the present day Doctors surgery) was used to screen feature films and performances by the Overdale camp orchestra and theatre company, took place there for the prisoners' entertainment. Many educational courses took place on a wide variety of subjects and the prisoners were allowed to visit the village church and chapel services, a German chaplain attended the Peel for those of the catholic faith. A camp magazine was produced at Overdale and distributed to the hostels.

When my father returned to Hellifield in 1946 after serving with the 8th army in North Africa and Italy and a period of

duty as part of the army of occupation in Austria he resumed his work for Mr. Phillip at Green farm where a number of the German prisoners were working. Several of these prisoners would accompany my father to my grandparents' home on main road where my grandmother provided them with home cooked meals and items of warm clothing were found for them to help combat the cold Hellifield winter. In 1947 the prisoners began to be moved from Hellifield to camps in Scotland to help with the potato harvest there. The German prisoners did not forget Hellifield and I have several warm letters which were sent to my father and grandparents after the prisoners returned to Germany in 1948 thanking the family for all they did for them and for the good times they had whilst at Hellifield.

The photograph shows one of the German prisoners who was at Hellifield and was sent with one of the letters



received by my father.

Bank House mentioned on the back of the card was the name of my grandparents' house on main road (the middle house opposite H's store) so called because on auction mart sale days a branch of the Liverpool bank operated from my grandparents' front room. You can still see on the left side of the door surround where the bank's brass name plate used to be fixed.

John Percy