The German prisoner-of-war camp in Dorchester

Dave Martin investigates why there is a war memorial for German soldiers, 'buried in a foreign field', in a Dorset churchyard.

Tucked away at the back of St George's Church graveyard in Fordington, Dorchester, is a fine Portland stone war memorial. It depicts a kneeling soldier who on closer inspection appears to be a German soldier. He wears the distinctive Stalhelm steel helmet and holds a Mauser rifle. Any lingering doubts about his nationality are dispelled by the legend carved beneath him.

HIER RUHEN DEUTSCHE KRIEGER IN
FREMDER ERDE DOCH UNVERGESSEN
1914 DORCHESTER 1918

This translates as, 'Here rest German soldiers in a foreign soil yet unforgotten'. The memorial was designed by K. Bartholmay of Elberfeld and sculpted by Josef Walter of Augsburg, both prisoners of war, as a lasting tribute to the 45 German prisoners-of-war who died in the town. The memorial was unveiled on 27 October 1919 after the war had ended but before the prisoners were allowed to go home.

The reasons for its presence go back to the early weeks of the war. At the outbreak of hostilities some German nationals, such as merchant seamen on ships in port, found themselves in Britain and they were interned. The British government needed to find somewhere to hold them and chose the empty horse-artillery barracks in Dorchester, Dorset which as well as having space also had the military barracks next door. By August 1914, however, the camp was becoming overcrowded with the arrival of German soldiers captured during the Battle of Mons. To extend it a much larger camp was built on the site of Poundbury, a Celtic hill-fort adjoining the town and barracks on its eastern side. This new camp consisted of rows of wooden huts, each housing about 30 men, surrounded by barbed-wire flood-lit fences. Other buildings included a hospital, chapel, kitchens, a theatre and even a YMCA games and reading room. There were also workshops where mail bags were sewn and agricultural thermometers manufactured.

During the war the Dorchester camp was used as a parent camp from which prisoners could be sent on to over a hundred smaller work camps around the south-west of England. It was for non-commissioned officers and men only. It is estimated that over 9,000 men passed through it and at its peak, in 1919, it held *c.*4,500 men. Conditions in the camp were apparently good and it was inspected by the press as well as by the Red Cross. One visitor noted that the men's rations were, 'one-half pound of beef or mutton, potatoes, seasonal green vegetables, white bread and soup. The meat is of good quality and well cooked by the skilful German chefs.' Another noted that their huts were more comfortable and warm than many people's houses.

Relations with the townspeople were not unfriendly. Prisoners were allowed out of the camp under armed escort (ratio of 1 guard:10 POWs) to work on local farms, in timber yards and brick works, to sweep the town's streets and to look after the town's tree-lined walks. They were also allowed out on exercise marches in groups of 200 to 300 men at a time

The German POW camp in Dorchester.

Restoration work on the memorial, including replacement and repainting of the wrought iron bars, was funded by Dorchester Town Council in 2007.

A group of German prisoners at the camp at Dorchester.

and to enjoy the town's open air swimming pool. In the camp itself they played sports, grew vegetables, kept pet rabbits and pursued a range of craft, musical and educational activities.

When prisoners died they were given full military funerals. Their bodies were carried through the town on a gun carriage to St George's Church with German prisoners attending both the service and the burial under guard. The numbers dying were quite low, just 13 up to September 1918. While some wounded came to the camp the more severely wounded prisoners were treated elsewhere. The numbers dying, however, increased by seven in October 1918 and ten in November 1918 as the camp fell victim to the influenza epidemic sweeping across the world. Ironically another 15 were to die in 1919. When the fighting ended in November 1918 it was determined that prisoners would not be released until the terms of the peace had been agreed; and this did not happen until 29 June 1919.

Exactly when the prisoners left is unclear. They were marched off in large batches at night. One suggestion is that as they were so important to local farming their departure was delayed so they could help get in the harvest. Certainly the last men left on 20 November 1919. Of the camp little is left and the site is now a trading estate. Some of the original artillery buildings still survive; three huts remain although not in situ, rabbits still live on the Poundbury hill-fort and the swimming pool remains.

Returning to the memorial, its carved legend containing the idea of the soldier buried in foreign soil carries echoes of the lines of Rupert Brooke's, 'The Soldier' (published 1914):

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is forever England. There shall be
> In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

and before that of Thomas Hardy's, 'Drummer Hodge' (published 1899):

> Yet portion of that unknown plain
> Will Hodge for ever be;
> His homely Northern breast and brain
> Grow to some Southern tree,
> And strange-eyed constellations reign
> His stars eternally.

Thomas Hardy was writing about a British soldier, killed in the Boer War, buried beneath the South African veldt. In an intriguing link Hardy visited the prisoner-of-war camp, gifted German translations of his works to their library and even employed one of the prisoners-of-war in his walled Max Gate garden. No doubt they spoke.

Further reading

German prisoners of war: camp in England for non-commissioned officers and men, British propaganda film of the treatment of German prisoners of war at Dorchester prison camp, July 1917. Imperial War Museum, Catalogue no 441. www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022910

Dave Martin is an historian and writer.