

MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR: PRISONERS OF WAR

The wave of jubilation that swept the nation after armistice terms were signed was followed by two further ripples of emotional expression. First, the grief over the enormous losses in men, which ultimately lead, amongst other actions, to the introduction of Remembrance Sunday, local War Memorials and the Royal British Legion. Secondly, the joy of families at the prospect of their kith and kin still serving in the forces, swiftly returning to civilian life and peace time activities. However, amongst the latter, a group, seldom mentioned have arguably, become the forgotten men of the Great War.

German forces captured some 300,000 Commonwealth servicemen on the Western Front during the Great War. Many were held prisoner in occupied territories in France and Belgium but the majority were confined to camps throughout Germany. Although POW rights had been agreed internationally prior to the war, Germany like other nations in the war did not initially have the organisation or facilities to feed, clothe or suitably billet large numbers of prisoners. In general, Officer prisoners fared better than NCO's and Other Ranks; were housed in seperate camps and were not forcibly put to work. The Red Cross monitored camp conditions but despite the checks on mistreatment, conditions varied and official figures show over 11,000 servicemen died in captivity, although it is elsewhere claimed that thousands more, reported missing in action, were worked to death as slave labourers. It is true that some prisoners died of wounds, exhaustion/accidents while working in coal/salt mines, quarries and steel works. However, the most frequent cause of prisoner death in German camps was disease. Men weakened by inadequate diet, workload and non healing wounds were prone to disease particularly the Typhus outbreak in 1915 and later the spanish flu pandemic.

In Mayfield, POWs were not forgotten and on the 19th January 1919 a welcome home dinner was organised by the Conservative Club for six ex POWs who had arrived home. It is clear that much time and effort went into the arrangements and organisation of this dinner with special menus cards being provided by a celebrated artist of the age, Charles E Brock. It is not yet known if there were more than six Mayfield men who were Great war POWs and research continues. The welcome home dinner was by all accounts a great success and following dinner, drinks and entertainment a toast was offered to the six ex POWs present:

Private Stephen Godfrey 1st Battalion East Kent Regiment

Private J E Eldridge

Private G Rebbeck

Private T Whapham

Private W Rogers Duke of Wellingtons Regiment

Air Mechanic C Sivyver RNAS

Air Mechanic Sivyver was a POW who had been interned in Holland (a neutral Country) after his airplane had ditched in the English Channel in 1917. All of the others had been captured on the Western Front at various times between 1914-1918.

In response to the welcome home toasts, three of the men responded with a brief account of their experiences. Private Stephen Godfrey provided an harrowing insight into his time as a POW which stretched from October 1914 to January 1919. An account of this dinner and the brief accounts of three of the men can be found in the Kent & Sussex Courier 24 January 1919 Page 6.

It is hoped at some future date to provide as full an account as research reveals of their time as POW; to discover if there were other POWs and also to uncover any experience of a POW not captured/held on the Western Front but in a different field of operations.