

ELSENHAM VILLAGE HISTORY SOCIETY

MINUTES OF MEETING 11th June 2025

MEMORIAL HALL ELSENHAM

Those Present:

Ray Franklin Chairman	Paul Salvidge	Heather Salvidge
Dave Verlander	Sue Beeston	John Beeston
Chris Bush	Diane Bush	Brenda Davidson
Keith Hunt	Jill Hunt	Frances Lambert
Lynda Jolly	Roger Kendrick	Valerie Austin
Roger Clark	Phyllis Clark	Sue Waite
Graham Hebenton	Ann Hebenton	Anne Player
Tony Bailey	Kevin Wood	Tricia Holyomes
Graham Morland	Graham Jackson	Doug Stephenson

Apologies:

Peter Johnson	Sue Johnson	Campbell Dunn
Mike Rea	Margaret Rea	Lynda Dunn
Therese Clear	Tim Snow	Keith Merrifield

We welcome Graham Jackson as a new member.

1. The Chairman opened the meeting and welcomed those present to the meeting

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting 12th March 2024

The minutes were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Speaker, Mark Ratcliffe

Our speaker for the evening was Mr Mark Ratcliff from the Hatfield Regis Local History Society.

Secretary's Note: Thanks go to Chris Bush for the following verbatim report of Mr Ratcliffe's talk

The subject of his presentation was World War II Prisoner of War Camp 116 situated at Mill Lane Hatfield Heath Essex. He outlined the research work that had been carried out to build up a history of the camp. The camps in the UK had been allocated serial numbers, the numbering system had a certain order but gets very muddled, there were serial numbers missing and there were some camps with the same numbers, he had looked at the spread of camps around the country.

To describe the prisoners of war, in the UK in the Second World War, the allies first started taking prisoners pretty much as soon as war was declared, these were generally Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel, we didn't start taking large numbers of land troops until the allies started making progress in North Africa. So in the early part of the war there wasn't a large number of prisoners held here but then after 1942/43 and certainly after D-Day the numbers swelled astronomically so from early 1943 there was a large programme of building camps. So there were between 450 and just over 1,000 camps eventually in the British Isles in World War II, Finding out what constituted a camp and finding out their exact locations is quite difficult. There were main camps, of which Hatfield Heath was one, and they had satellite camps, in some instances there were quite big satellite camps, they also had hostels where prisoners were allocated to and held and in addition to that there were places where prisoners were billeted where they were working, so trying to actually tie down exactly what camps were where and who was running them was quite difficult. There was a camp in Bishop's Stortford near the Rugby Club I don't think it was a stand-alone camp it is not mentioned in any of the records so it must have come under the command of one of the larger sites. There was one in Much Hadham, so it is quite difficult to tie these down. (showing a map of the UK) You can see there was a spread of camps right across the country not so much across the North of Scotland but there was one on the Orkneys. They were not tucked away, they were often in the centre of the village like Hatfield Heath. Some of the more high security camps were tucked away and more isolated, but there was a general spread throughout the country.

The numbers were very difficult to tie down, detailed records of prisoners held do not seem to exist. A snapshot from 1946 to 1948, of the numbers of German prisoners held across the country, and up to 1948 when the last prisoners left, three years after the end of the war. It is believed that the final push to get them repatriated was tied in with the 1948 Olympics, the Government didn't want prisoners to be held whilst we were hosting the Olympic games.

Example numbers

1945	211,200
1946 (March)	265,000
1946 (Sept)	402,200
1946 (Dec)	355,000
1948	2,790

So it can be seen that the number in 1945 nearly doubled in 1946, this was because there were a large number of prisoners held in the United States, and during 1946 the US decided they didn't want to hold them, so they were shipped over to this country and swelled our prison numbers. From September 1946 there was a gradual decrease until the last prisoners (around 550) left I think in July or August of 1948. On YouTube there is a video of the last ship (SS Biarritz) departing from Harwich.

The majority of prisoners held in this country were put to work forming an important part of our labour force whilst our men were overseas in the army and most of them worked in the fields, certainly in Hatfield Heath, a rural community, most of the prisoners worked on the local farms, But, also, they worked on preparing building sites and a variety of other fairly tough labouring work. There were a proportion of unemployable men usually for health reasons (around 11,000 sick unemployable 13,000) but also other reasons. for example, being too high risk, that would be senior officers, others described as having strong Nazi sympathies they would be held in separate camps rather than being released into the community to work.

So, Camp 116, before I found this document which was in the National Archives, all the oral evidence in the village seemed to indicate that the camp was built in 1941/42 that seemed slightly odd because at that time we were not holding large numbers of prisoners in this country. Two years ago, I went down to the National Archives to find a few documents there on the background to the camp. There was a memo dated 6th March 1943 commissioning a number of camps including Hatfield Heath. There was a numerical numbering system, Camp 116 to be based at Hatfield Heath, in March 1943 it wasn't actually sited at that point, I suspect that they knew where it was going but it wasn't ready. They had allocated a Camp Commandant, Major A.O.N. Rowland who had previously been in charge of a camp in Ely. So that was March and we believe, the indication was that the camp would be built by civilian labour, all these other ones we believe were actually built by the prisoners themselves. The prisoners would arrive on site, be held in tents, and they would construct the huts and the infrastructure surrounding the camp. It was sort of pouring misery upon misery not only being in a prison camp but you were expected to build it. (To give an idea of the location a couple of plans were shown) showing the location of Hatfield Heath in relation to Bishop's Stortford and the road layout. In more detail, within the village off of the road to Bishop's Stortford, a road that went to Sawbridgeworth, another to Chelmsford, the camp was built up a little lane and occupied the fields at the end of the lane which were owned by two

separate farmers, the land was requisitioned from them and was returned to them in the 1950s.

A map showing the outline of the camp which was built to what was called a standard pattern with a large prisoner compound and these were all huts, barrack huts and there were some other ancillary buildings including a hospital, they had quite a variety of other buildings, Separate to that was a guard's compound the main entrance to the camp was off of the lane, quite a long driveway through the guard's area and there was a gate controlling access to the prisoner's area. Barbed wire surrounded the prisoners' encampments. It is believed there was also a recreation area, although in a later photograph taken in 1946 that area seems to have been taken up by tents, probably as a result of the upswell of German prisoners from the States, and it is believed to cope with that they had to put tents up on the recreation area, the photograph shows what appears to be a football pitch, certainly looks like a sports field. By 1946 the War had ended and the security of the camp was getting far more relaxed. This was never a high security prison and as time went on the security got less and less, it could probably be called an "open prison". Google Earth showed a picture of the camp in recent times, as of the current date the camp is about 60% complete, but in various states of disrepair.

The first prisoners to be held there were Italians they were largely captured in North Africa. In 1944 after the allied landings in Normandy we started taking large numbers of German prisoners and certain camps were designated to be turned over to hold German prisoners, Hatfield Heath was one of them. A list exists of the German occupied camps not including Luftwaffe or Kriegsmarine which were thought to include more Nazis. The Luftwaffe at that time were deemed to be a higher risk and submarine crews too. The camp authorities were asked if there were any issues in this and Hatfield Heath didn't seem to have any concerns. Hatfield Heath had a capacity of 536 but we have some 1946 figures showing how that changed.

There were satellite camps and hostels. There was a large satellite at a place called Hill Hall near the present junction of the M11 and M25, quite why this was linked to the Heath I don't know. There were camps in the Epping Forest area. There was no obvious link between Bishop's Stortford and the Heath camp, There was also a hostel over in Hertford and there is a document saying that 116 had a hostel at a Command Supply Depot at Hertford. In 1943 the supply depot would have been involved in allocating equipment to army units so it seems a bit odd to put captured prisoners into that environment. I suspect they were not actually working within the supply depot that was just their base. This was in 1943 before the Germans arrived in numbers so these would have been Italian prisoners. We don't know how many stayed there it wasn't a big site it was up on Hall Hill and there are some buildings that remain turned into housing. Hall Hill, an imposing house still visible from the M25 Motorway had a number of uses, during the War it was used for accommodating troops; afterwards it was turned over to POWs it was also a girls school then used as a ladies' prison.

Images exist of a chap called Hans Keske, a German prisoner, the photographs show him standing by the camp perimeter and in the 1970s he went back and re-posed the photographs.

By September 1946, the peak of German prisoners held, Hatfield Heath Camp had nearly 900, the original capacity was around 500 so that's why the additional structures, probably tents were put up. 169 prisoners were billeted out on farms and other places where they were working and Hill Hall had another 900 so there were nearly 2,000 prisoners under the command of the camp commandant who was by this time Lieutenant Colonel Barlow. He had only 7 officers and perhaps 40 other ranks so it can be seen that this wasn't high security. We are not talking about guards walking around the perimeter with dogs, searchlights or gun towers, it was quite a light touch.

A bit about what life was like for the prisoners. A picture exists of the Heath Camp it was taken probably in 1946 so peak numbers were here. There was an article in the Illustrated London News with photographs that went along with that article of prisoners at the Heath Camp or working near the Heath camp. A photograph taken from the water tower, a three-storey water tower in the middle of the camp which fed all the huts in the prisoner and guard areas. When the camp was built the facilities were all pretty modern, they had flush WCs, sinks with running water, they had electricity and most of the local villagers were living in cottages with wells, gas lamps and no flush toilets. So although they were prisoners their living conditions weren't too bad. So you can't help wondering what the local villagers thought seeing these facilities being built for people supposed to be the enemy and living in some ways in better conditions than the villagers.

The photograph shows a cohort of prisoners all lined up, it shows the barrack huts for the living accommodation, there's a sentry box there. And another thing that fascinates me, these are all flower beds. We've been through a War and "Dig for Victory" campaigns and the Germans are planting flowers! You would have thought they would be encouraged to grow vegetables for food. But they prettied the place up with these lovely flowers. The heating in the huts wasn't good, there was one pot-bellied stove in the middle of the hut and I know from the accounts of the prisoners that that was one thing they didn't like, the temperatures in the Winter were too low.

An enlargement of the photograph shows the guards that were waiting for the prisoners to come through and you might notice that there are two different colours of uniforms. The prisoners are marching towards the gate and there are a couple watching them go all in white they are perhaps cooks or bakers, there was a bakery on site and the guards are waiting down there. Two chaps look like British army uniforms the other five are clearly very different. Black or very dark colours the headwear is like a peaked cap and they are wearing a sort of diamond badge on the sleeve and we understand that they were trustee prisoners. Because there weren't enough guards to look after them there was a hierarchy within the prisoners they were entrusted to control and look after their fellow prisoners and they seem to have had an identifying uniform.

A photograph of a typical hut interior shows at the back three tier bunk beds running down half of the room, fairly rudimentary benches and tables, there is a stove with a chimney going up. The huts themselves were mainly wood all prefabricated.

Over the years I have collected various bits of ephemera including an identity card from an Italian prisoner it would have had a photograph on there but I don't have that, it has all his details, name, age, height, weight etc and he would be expected to carry that with him at all times and produce it on demand. This other document is a record of a prisoner's journey through the camp system the prisoners did move around quite a bit. Captured in March 1941, he came into the British Camp system in 1942 stamped in at Camp number 2 then there are various stamps as he changed camps. On 22nd May 1944 he entered Camp 116.

The Camps had their own money, a variety of notes, the pennies were like fabric tokens. The notes are stamped, it is unknown if that was the date of issue or when they were cashed. They would be used to buy little extras generally at the camp shop. The prisoners were paid for their work not probably a living wage but all their board and lodging was provided !

Being held in the camp they spent a lot of time writing. There were two types of standard letters, one was like a postcard made of cardboard, with space for prisoner's details and stamped 116 and on the other side space for their message.

The other type was a bit like the old-fashioned airmail, thin paper, tri-fold. Over the years I have collected about a dozen letters from prisoners. They don't say anything particularly earth shattering – they were subject to censorship but as time went on that may have been eased off a bit. One letter does mention the Olympics so it was felt that they would all be coming home before then. Others talk about the prisoners taking sugar and coffee (a rare commodity in Germany then) with them back to Germany. Mainly it's "How is Wolfgang and all good here". Occasionally they would get to write a letter in an envelope.

There are photographs of prisoners working in the fields, they had these identifying marks on their clothing, some people would say it was to give the soldiers something to aim for one on the leg, one on the back of their jackets, more probably it was just to distinguish that these were prisoners. When they were working out in the fields they formed reasonably good working relationships with the farmers and the people they were working with. In our archives we have a photograph of the prisoners drinking with the landlord of the local pub. Generally, they seemed to work hard, particularly in 1944, probably the German prisoners could see which way the War was going.

There was a Catholic Chapel in the camp; the non-conformists were catered for in the Congregational chapel, it's not clear if the minister came up to the camp or whether the prisoners went down to the chapel. There was also a camp theatre, a barber's and a bakery.

There were roll calls and a photograph shows a fairly senior chap, possibly the camp commandant and another chap with a triangle on his shoulder. I believe that's what they called the camp leader who would act as a conduit between the prisoners and the camp authorities, a senior German officer probably.

Some photos were published on social media by the grandson of a prisoner Verne Presh who was at 116. There is a picture of him and his friend in the camp garden, it looks as though they kept bantams, for the eggs presumably. He appears to have been billeted out in the Lee Valley.

With 2000 men there would be the chance that some prisoners died, one prisoner Willi Klem committed suicide in March 1947 depressed about still being held. It must have put a lot of pressure on people being held so long with no end in sight. He was found in snow beside the road and eventually buried in Bishop's Stortford Town Cemetery where largely German prisoners and aircrew were buried. After the War in the 1950s they were moved to Cannock Chase. That area of Bishop's Stortford Cemetery has never been re-used. The Italian dead who were there were moved down to a cemetery in Surrey.

Boxing Day 1946 possibly the darkest day in the history of the local village football team, a group of prisoners challenged the local team to a game and beat them 11-0. Said to be 700 spectators half villagers half prisoners. After the match both sides went back to the camp and had tea and cake or a few beers. Showed the integration of the camp and its prisoners with locals.

A Camp newspaper was produced from October 1946. Last year details were discovered on the internet and a copy was obtained from the Holocaust Library down in London, date October 1947 first anniversary edition, – 15 pages a lot of political and economic writing, in 1947 the prisoners were aware that the Soviet Union was in control of certain areas, the German economy wasn't great. Some poetry, short stories and sports reports, football, table tennis.

Research hasn't found out much about the process for choosing prisoners for repatriation. Prisoners were held it is said because they were a vital labour resource, some unrest in society about their continued detention may have played a role in their release. Some prisoners didn't want to go home, due to circumstances some didn't want to go back to Soviet control especially in the East of the Country. The political situation in Germany was difficult. Some prisoners had formed relationships here and many of them stayed in the area.

Clippings

A German prisoner of War escaped in April 1945 but was captured at Harlow railway Station after a few hours.

Italian prisoners of war acted as firemen in July 1945

In October 1947 prisoners would catch the bus into Bishop's Stortford via Little Hallingbury it was found that by the time it got there, prisoners were taking up all the seats much to the dismay of local people in Hallingbury. It shows that by this time the prisoners had quite a bit of freedom.

Two prisoners walked to Harlow met two young girls and broke into a house stayed the night and stole various items including a radio a bottle of brandy two pairs of trousers and a rifle. Apprehended back at camp there was a trial and they were sentenced to six months. The two girls ended up marrying Germans, but not the two that broke into the house.

Aftermath

Summer of 1948 prisoners gone, the camp was there with decent accommodation, water, toilets, electricity so the local Council suggested use of the camp for housing. The Government refused they wanted the camp for housing displaced persons from Europe.

Some squatters moved in for a while | November 1948, a family that had been living in a stable in High Roding.

The Camp was used in 1949 as a hostel for construction workers building Harlow New Town then as a YMCA hostel.

Mid 1950s the land and the buildings were handed back to the two farmers.

Memories

A lot of the prisoners were quite talented craftsmen and they made a lot of items, paintings, a toy panda, a mechanical toy made by Italian prisoners for a girl in Sawbridgeworth – made out of a packing case with little chickens powered by a little lead weight which caused one of the chickens to peck “the ground”.

As mentioned, some of the prisoners stayed in the area also one of the guards, Edward Jameson whilst working in the camp he met and married a local girl and his son was active in the British Legion.

A prisoner, Gerhard Vogel, married a local girl and lived in the Harlow area; this was his journey:

Captured in Normandy shortly after D Day

Brought back to Portsmouth

End of June 1944 shipped to The United States

The allocation of prisoners between different countries was a bit hit and miss – we didn't have enough capacity here and there was a general division, the British can have so much and the Americans can have so many

Vogel was in the States until 1946 Then he was brought into Liverpool

And then ended up at Hatfield Heath

He mentions a visit from Cardinal Frings who was a Cardinal from Bonn or Cologne who came and toured around the Prisoner of war Camps I don't know if he actually visited the Heath Camp (confirmed by Franz Hog that he did indeed visit Camp 116 and addressed prisoners in the refectory, he also went to Chelmsford and he held a service in Westminster Cathedral). Gerhard Vogel was freed in February 1948 but wasn't discharged from the German army until the end of the year.

Another prisoner, Hans Teste corresponded with Spike Milligan who was in the army in Africa. They exchanged correspondence and Spike said they were both in Africa at the same time - they met up and had lunch. Spike Milligan told this story saying we must have actually fired at each other, the fact that we survived must mean we were bloody awful shots. At the end of the meal the German signed the menu and said "Dear Spike Sorry I Missed You"

Future

A Year ago, after a protracted battle, Planning permission was granted to redevelop the prisoner area for housing and to demolish all but one hut, everything else will go. The Guards area is to be redeveloped for three large multi-million pound lodges.

The Water Tower will be a house three of the other buildings were proposed for holiday lets. Refurbishment of the huts would not have been practical as many were in poor condition and would have been unlikely to have resembled the originals. Ideas for a camp museum did not come to fruition. Sad in many ways but was built only for five years and it has been lucky to have it so long.

END

6. Open Forum and Any Other Business

6.1 Visit to Saffron Walden Museum

A number of members have shown an interest in a guided tour of the Saffron Walden Museum and the Reserve Store. We have spoken to the museum and the latest information is as follows.

Guided tour of the Museum is £30 during daytime hours, £96 evening hours.

Guided tour of the Shire Hill Store is £30 during daytime hours, £96 evening hours and £200 for a half day on Saturday

Refreshments are £30 per group

Group size is up to 20 although 25 is doable
Normal museum entry charges are extra currently...

Adult: £2.50; Concession (over 65 or student) .£1.25

Any weekday can be accommodated but in practice depends on what other groups are visiting, contractors working on site etc. and staff availability.

Any member who is interested in a visit, please e-mail the secretary with your availability and he will organise some possible dates.

6.2 Future Talks

We try very hard to find speakers that members will find interesting and informative.

We hope you enjoy our speakers but we would like to hear from you if you have any ideas for future speakers or subjects of interest to us and if you know of a speaker on subject that would go down well, please let us know.

6.3 Clavering Castle Open Day

Members are advised that the Clavering Landscape History Group are holding an open day at Clavering Castle on 21st June from 10am to 4pm. There will be tours of the castle site and a display of finds. There will be other activities available at the church.

6.4 Teas and Coffees

Our thanks go this evening to Sue Waite and her helpers who kindly brewed the teas and coffees.

7. Date of Next Meeting

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday 10th September 2025 when Chris Bush will give a talk about "Listed Elsenham".

ENDS

Minutes Agreed: September 2025
Ray Franklin - Chairman