

Friends and Foes in Wartime Britain

Once again in November we remember past wars, especially their impact on local families...

Anyone of a certain age may remember the story of Bert Trautmann, who, while playing for Manchester City, endured the latter part of the second half of the 1956 FA Cup Final against Birmingham City with a broken neck. What some may not remember is that he came from Germany, not as the result of some expensive transfer fee, like today, but as a prisoner of war.

The good hearted ladies near his camp in Lincolnshire had taken pity on the inmates in spite of official disapproval of fraternisation, since they saw them as just 'boys' caught up in a situation which was not of their making. Such kindness impressed Bert and helped with his decision to stay on when formally released.

Here in rural Shropshire the drive for increased food production led to the problem of finding extra hands, when so many had been called up. One answer was using such prisoners. In this way a group from the Ellesmere camp came to Red House Farm in Old Bicton, spending their days with the Paddock family sharing mealtimes and work.

Karl Kópper came from Darmstadt, while Emile Hófling came from Offenbach near Frankfurt and, like Bert Trautmann, were appreciative of the kind way in which they were treated. Both were married and in their thirties.

After eventual repatriation they kept in touch for a while and some of their letters have been preserved in the Paddock family archive. Emil had poor English, so clearly he was helped by a friend typing a letter which is reproduced here.

Both commented upon the shortage of food and were grateful for food parcels from Bicton. The weather patterns in 1947 were not helping.

Meanwhile, at Churncote an Italian PoW lived in with the Clark family like a traditionally farm worker and therefore had more freedom after work. This enabled him to frequent Bicton Village in order to meet the girls of the neighbourhood. In particular, he fancied one from the Woodlands Cottages, so that her protective friends took care to keep an eye on them both!

Other stories about him passed on through the family concerned the typical Mediterranean love of wine and hatred of birdlife. He dipped into an alcoholic tonic meant for the horses in his care, while taking the farm's shotgun to blast both the owl in the orchard and the crowing farmyard cock!

Elsewhere labour shortage was being helped by the Women's Land Army, some of whom lived in a hostel along Preston Montford Lane. Since adapted to other uses, the huts still survive as a lasting monument to those times.

Some girls finished up marrying into local farming families including Rodenhurst, Everall and Glover, to name but a few. Another, however, was caught 'leading the vicar into temptation', thus ending his career in the Parish.

One very pretty girl working for James Paddock at Bicton Farm was looking for male company beyond the village. At this time, a unit of the American Air Force was based out at Atcham and used the social facilities provided by Shrewsbury, where they could meet local girls. This led to a few 'GI brides' including the Land Girl from Bicton Farm.

One American, Lloyd F Smith, however, decided to stay as a sort of 'GI bridegroom', joining the Frost family. For many years, they lived in Shepherd's Lane, but he never forgot his roots. When he eventually died aged 73 in 1981 the gravestone in Bicton had military simplicity, recording his role with the US Air Force during World War II. Indeed it looks more like an official war grave.

Many of these stories have relied upon local 'oral tradition'. If readers have any more to offer, let us record them here before they get forgotten.



Preston Montford huts

Landarmy Hostel

Offenbach/Main, September 27, 1948

Dear Mrs. Paddock,

Many thanks for your kind letter of July 25. I was very glad to hear from you. My former firm engaged me again, and I have worked there since 3 months. I think very often of you and the work I had done there during the time of my captivity. Dear Mrs. Paddock, you mustn't think our present situation is splendid. There are lots of difficulties to overcome just now. By the currency reform we lost all our savings, and all prices are sky-high now. The lack of food causes us much trouble. Our rations in fat and meat consist of very little quantities or nothing at all. Perhaps it is somewhat immodest on my part, dear Mrs. Paddock, but I should be very glad if you were kind enough to send me a parcel, chiefly with fat. I shall not forget you, and as soon as I'll be able to, I'll send you some first quality leather goods of our well-known Offenbach leather industry. You'll hardly fancy how glad my wife is to have me again with her. We have to muddle through somehow and to try ^{to} make a common effort in order to overcome the present difficulties. We hope that there'll be no other war. Peace is the thing we want above all. Otherwise the world will never recover from the last blows. I should be glad to hear from you soon, and I wish this letter might find you in the best of health.

I close my letter with kindest regards from me, my wife and my father.

Yours,

Hope you won't forget your prisoner.

Her Lüpfing