

Prisoners of War and Internees (Great Britain)

By [Panikos Panayi](#)

Summary

During the First World War, hundreds of thousands of men found themselves interned in Britain. These were made up of: civilians already present in the country in August 1914; civilians brought to Britain from all over the world; and combatants, primarily soldiers from the Western Front, but also naval personnel and a few members of zeppelin crews, whose vessels fell to earth. Prisoners were interned in a large number of locations, and could spend years behind barbed wire away from families. The following article provides an outline of the history of internment in Britain during the Great War.

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The Nature of the Internees

During the course of the First World War, hundreds of thousands of men were interned in [Britain](#). These were: civilians already present in the country in August 1914; civilians brought to Britain from all over the world; and combatants, primarily soldiers from the [Western Front](#), but also naval personnel and a few members of [zeppelin](#) crews, whose vessels fell to earth. Civilians and military internees experienced differences in legal status and protection under [international law](#), especially with regard to working within camps.¹ Attitudes towards military personnel, either captured on the battlefields of the various theatres of war or on the high seas, and towards those German, Austrian and other Central Power civilians living in Britain when war broke out and who were subsequently interned may also have differed in some ways. Surprisingly, when Britons came into contact with working military prisoners, they

often displayed acts of kindness towards them. However, the [Germanophobic](#) atmosphere of Britain during the war ensured that they remained a manifestation of the enemy within.²

This internal enemy developed partly from the vibrant German community which had its origins in 18th century migratory flows that evolved in Britain during the course of the 19th century and which totalled 57,000 people by 1914. The German community consisted of a combination of social groups, working in all parts of the social spectrum from prostitutes to merchant bankers all over the country but focused in London. Much smaller numbers of Austro-Hungarians and Ottoman citizens lived in Britain by 1914. Although Germans, in particular, may have regarded themselves as integrated and acculturated to Britain by the outbreak of war, much of British public opinion, driven by a Germanophobic press, did not share this view. As the conflict approached, some manifestations of anti-German hostility occurred against individual Germans. However, they could not have imagined the fate about to befall them.³

Policy

Little government consideration had been given to the internment of enemy troops or civilians before the outbreak of war, but by September 1914 the Directorate of Prisoners of War had been established under the control of the War Office.⁴ The Directorate initially devoted most of its attention to civilians, as captured soldiers remained relatively few in number until the end of 1917, growing substantially following the failure of the [German spring offensive](#) and ultimate defeat of the Central Powers the following year. In the midst of widespread anti-German feeling in the spring of 1915, following the [sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania*](#) by a German [submarine](#) off the coast of [Ireland](#), [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#) coalition government introduced a policy of wholesale civilian internment on 13 May, which would affect all adult male [enemy aliens](#) between the ages of seventeen to fifty-five and would remain in force until 1919.⁵ In October 1916 a Prisoners of War Department, headed by Lord Newton, or [Thomas Wodehouse Legh \(1857-1942\)](#), was established.⁶ The Prisoners of War Information Bureau established in London on 17 August 1914 in accordance with article 14 of The Hague Convention, tracked, maintained and distributed information on individual internees in Britain.⁷ In addition, other [neutral](#) bodies also took an interest in the internees. The [USA](#) and subsequently the Swiss Embassy looked after German internees on behalf of the [German government](#).

Numbers

An examination of the makeup and numbers of prisoners of war in Britain demonstrates the importance of developments on French and Belgian battlefields. The only constants in the period 1914-1919 were the facts that Germans made up the overwhelming majority, joined by a small numbers of Austrians at the end of the conflict, and that captured officers faced automatic removal to Britain.

Only 3,100 of the 13,600 internees held in Britain on 22 September 1914 originated on the battlefields. Most of the remaining 10,500 came from the German civilian community in Britain.⁸ The total figure of 13,600 included people captured by the British on the seas, both civilians and naval personnel.⁹

The number of captured naval and military personnel remained low throughout the early stages of the war. By 1 February 1915 prisoners consisted of 400 officers (including a small number of Austrians), 6,500 soldiers and naval sailors, together with 19,000-20,000 merchant sailors and civilians (German and Austrian).¹⁰ By November 1915, following the decision in May to intern all [enemy aliens](#) of military age, the number of civilian internees had reached 32,440.¹¹

The number of military prisoners transported to Britain did not begin to increase until 1917 when there was a marked increase in the number of German soldiers captured on the Western Front, even though a significant number had already been interned in [France](#), especially following the [Battle of the Somme](#) where they worked as [forced labourers](#).¹² In 1917, 73,131 combatants fell into British hands, followed by another 201,633 in 1918 as the German armies faced defeat.¹³ These figures translated into an increase in the numbers of military personnel held in Britain. Thus in December 1916 the figure stood at 876 officers and 24,251 men. Naval figures totalled 120 officers and 1,286 men, all but one of them German.¹⁴ By 20 November 1917, 79,329 people were interned in British camps, including 29,511 civilians.¹⁵ By November 1918 the British held a total of 207,357 [prisoners of war](#) throughout the world. The figure within Britain had reached 115,950, of whom 89,937 had been serving in the German Army (including 5,005 officers), together with 1,491 naval personnel.¹⁶ By 5 July 1919 the British held responsibility for no less than 458,392 internees globally. On home soil the figures had declined to 90,276 including 3,373 civilians, 2,899 naval personnel and 84,004 soldiers.¹⁷ While the number continued to fall during the summer, “general repatriation” began on 24 September and lasted until 20 November. During this time, 4,161

officers and 73,118 German men were repatriated. A further 3,624 prisoners, including 704 Austrians and Hungarians returned home between 26 November and 29 January. Finally, on 9 April 1920, three officers and nine other ranks (specially retained prisoners) completed the repatriation of Germans interned on British soil during the Great War.¹⁸

Date	Civilian	Military (including naval)	Total
22 September 1914	10,500	3,100	13,600
1 May 1915	20,000	6,900	26,900
20 November 1917	29,511	49,815	79,326
1 November 1918	24,522	91,428	115,930
5 July 1919	3,373	86,903	90,276

Table 1: Number of Internees in Britain, 1914-19¹⁹

The Camp System

During the early stages of the war military and civilian prisoners in the UK were housed in the same camps, although usually separated from each other within them. As the conflict progressed, different camps evolved for the two groups. The fairly stable civilian population became overwhelmingly concentrated on the Isle of Man, together with a small number of other locations on the mainland, notably Alexandra Palace, Stratford and Lofthouse Park near Wakefield.

Name	Location	Type of Camp	Duration	Approximate Numbers Held at any one time
Alexandra Palace	London	Civilian	1915-19	3,000
Brocton	Staffordshire	Military	1917-19	5,000
Colsterdale	Yorkshire	Officer	1917-18	400

Dartford	Kent	Hospital	1916-18	Up to 3,726
Donington Hall	Leicestershire	Officer	1915-19	500
Dorchester	Dorset	Military	1914-19	3,000
Douglas	Isle of Man	Civilian	1914-19	2,500
Dyfryn Aled	North Wales	Officer	1915-18	100
Frimley	Hampshire	Civilian then Military	1914-15, 1916-18	Up to 6,000
Gosport (Ships)	Hampshire	Civilian	1914-15	3,600
Hackney Wick	London	Civilian	1916-17	100
Handforth	Cheshire	Civilian then military	1914-18	2,000-2,500
Holyport	Berkshire	Officer	1915-19	150-600
Islington	London	Civilian	1915-1919	600-700
Jersey	Jersey	Military	1915-19	1,100
Kegworth	Derbyshire	Officer	1916-19	600
Knockaloe	Isle of Man	Civilian	1914-19	20,000
Leigh	Lancashire	Military	1914-19	1,500
Lofthouse Park (Wakefield)	Yorkshire	Civilian	1914-19	
Nell Lane	Manchester	Hospital	1917-19	Up to 1,665
Newbury	Berkshire	Early Civilian	1914-15	c3,000
Olympia	London	Early Civilian	August-December 1914	300-1,500
Pattishall (Eastcote)	Northamptonshire	Civilian then Military	1914-19	Up to 4,500

Ripon	Yorkshire	Officer	1919	900
Ryde (Ships)	Isle of Wight	Civilian	1914-15	2,500
Southend (Ships)	Essex	Civilian	1914-15	5,000
Stobs	Scotland	Civilian then military	1914-18	4,500
Stratford	London	Civilian	1914-17	Up to 740

Table 2: Major Internment Camps in Britain, 1914-19²⁰

While a small number of locations housed a significant proportion of the enemy army, naval and air force personnel during the war, a large number of camps evolved for such military prisoners during the course of the conflict, especially in 1918 and 1919, as the number of internees grew. A list from January 1918 gives the names of 566 places of internment. These cover a wide variety and size of locations, which held anything from a few individuals to thousands of prisoners. Many places were working camps which fed off the larger places of internment. At this stage even the smallest farm which employed prisoners of war counted as a place of internment. The list also included hospitals which may have looked after a few individual German casualties.²¹

Most of the early camps catered mainly for civilians, including Handforth, Lofthouse Park, Frith Hill, Newbury, Douglas and Olympia.²² One of the first “permanent” camps was established at Dorchester, a “hastily converted army camp”, which opened in the middle of August 1914. As well as housing soldiers it also initially served as home to members of the German community in Britain and civilians and sailors captured on the high seas. The first military internees arrived on 27 August followed by others on 4 September and 18 October. On 8 October 450 civilians faced transfer to the Isle of Man.²³ Dorchester eventually became an exclusively military camp. At the start of 1915, due to the lack of accommodation for internees, the War Office used nine trans-Atlantic liners, divided into three groups of three near Ryde, Gosport and Southend. The ships housed both civilians and captured military personnel but ceased operating by the summer of 1915.²⁴ Another early camp was established in Stobs, near Hawick, in November 1914. It held naval, military and civilian prisoners until July 1916 when the last group moved to Knockaloe on the Isle of Man. Stobs became one of the most sophisticated camps for prisoners of war with its own newspaper,

Stobsiade, and much educational activity. In addition, it also acted as the supply centre to dozens of working camps in Scotland and the north of England from 1917 including those at Catterick, Port Clarence and Crawford.²⁵

Officers' camps emerged as the war progressed, most famously at Donington Hall in Derbyshire, which attracted much negative attention in the House of Commons and the British press because of its allegedly luxurious conditions.²⁶ A large, old castle dating from the 17th century, surrounded by a lovely old park, it opened as a camp at the beginning of 1915.²⁷ In June 1916 it held 102 military officers, thirty-nine naval officers, fifty military orderlies and one naval orderly, and three civilians. Of these ninety-eight army officers and thirty-eight naval officers were German, four army officers were Austrian, and one naval officer was a Turk while all of the civilians and orderlies were German.²⁸ Other officers' camps included Dyffryn Aled, Holyport, Kegworth and Colsterdale.²⁹

Civilian camps became fully operational after the introduction of wholesale internment in May 1915. The most important of these was situated on the Isle of Man. The first, and smaller of the two establishments here, utilised the site of a former holiday camp in Douglas and held 2,300 prisoners. A much bigger camp was set up at Knockaloe, on a site which had formerly acted as a base for 16,000 territorials and which would grow to hold 23,000 men, divided between four sub-camps. The two most important civilian camps on the mainland were at Lofthouse Park, near Wakefield and Alexandra Palace in north London. The latter opened on 7 May 1915 and closed in May 1919 reaching a peak of 3,000 prisoners and housing a total of 17,000 individuals during the course of the war.³⁰

Hundreds of military camps emerged during the latter stages of the war. By January 1918 the most important "parent camps", which provided labour supplies for other smaller places of internment, included Handforth (Cheshire), Blandford (Dorset), Dorchester (Dorset), Leigh (Lancashire), Frongoch (Wales), Pattishall (Northants), Brocton (Staffordshire), Catterick (Yorkshire) and Shrewsbury (Shropshire).³¹

Life Behind Barbed Wire

While the treatment of internees generally remained fair within Britain, the confinement of adult men within camps away from their families for extended periods often proved a distressing experience, which, in some cases led to neurosis. The internees therefore had to find ways to bring some sort of normality to their lives. The increase in numbers which occurred during the latter stages of the war coincided with labour shortages in the British

economy which meant that new prisoners were required to work, particularly in agriculture. Those who did not work, including all officers and the vast majority of civilians, found other ways to use their time such as education, theatre and music.

The types of pre-standing buildings or less permanent accommodation in which internment camps were established, which included schools, hospitals, disused factories, tents, stables, farms and castles, tended to determine the standards of housing and living. The standard installation consisted of huts which simply resembled army barracks. As a rule, in the class and status driven societies of the First World War, officers remained separate from their men, unless they used them as orderlies. Civilian internees also received preferential treatment if they could pay for it; in Wakefield prisoners paid ten shillings a week “for the privilege of being there.”³² Stobs provides a good example of a location that might merit the description of a standard camp. An American Embassy official who visited Stobs on 15 June wrote:

The prisoners are housed in huts 120 feet long by 30 feet broad. These are built for 60 men. I found, on an average, 33 men in each hut. There are doors at either end of these huts and four or five windows on each side, each window being about 3½ by 4½ feet.³³

The Knockaloe camp was also constructed of the standard type of military barracks used at Stobs and elsewhere. One Swiss Embassy report noted that: “Perhaps no complaints have been so persistent on the part of the prisoners as those in regard to the condition of the huts.”³⁴ Camps which housed officers usually provided superior accommodation. A US Embassy report from December 1914 wrote that: “Their quarters are comfortably furnished but without luxury.”³⁵ Overall, prisoners generally lived in decent accommodation, even if luxury was unusual.

An examination of the food rations which the internees received also points to their fair treatment, although there were complaints about the quality of English fare. In 1914 the daily ration consisted of the following:

Bread, 1lb. 8oz, or biscuits, 1lb.

Meat, fresh or frozen, 8oz., or pressed, 4oz.

Tea, ½oz. or coffee, 1oz.

Salt, ½oz.

Sugar, 2oz.

Condensed milk, 1/20th tin (1lb).

Fresh vegetables, 8oz.

Pepper, 1/72oz.

2oz. cheese to be allowed as an alternative for 1g. butter or margarine.

2oz. of peas, beans or lentils, or rice.

Prisoners could also purchase “tobacco, small luxuries, and other things” from canteens, throughout the war. Reduction to the ration occurred in the latter stages of the war due to the scarcity of some items as a consequence of German submarine activity.³⁶ Internees usually cooked their own food.³⁷ While the rations may have proved sufficient, the prisoners did not find them especially appetizing. [Gunther Plüschow \(1886-1931\)](#) described the food at Donington Hall as “very good” but also mentioned that “it was English, so that many did not like it.”³⁸

One of the most significant problems faced by prisoners, especially during the early stages of the war, when most captives did not work, as well as by officers and most civilians, who never worked, was boredom. Internees developed sophisticated methods to overcome the monotony. As the Austrian internee [Paul Cohen-Portheim \(1880-1932\)](#) recalled, time “really had to be *killed*, for it was the arch-enemy, and everyone tried to achieve this as best he could.”³⁹

A routine developed as outlined by Fritz Sachse and [Paul Cossmann \(1869-1942\)](#), interned in Skipton, Yorkshire during 1918 and 1919. They described their day in the following way: the trumpet sounded at 8am; the prisoners drank [coffee](#) at 9.15; at 10 they walked outside the camp; they returned at midday for their lunch; they received their post at 2; and they ate their supper at 7.30.⁴⁰ In Holyport, “the post was the Alpha and Omega of our existence. We divided our whole day according to its delivery, and the temper of the camp was regulated by it.”⁴¹ This collective mood existed in several camps and outside events determined it. For instance, the November 1918 Armistice had an understandably negative impact on prisoner morale.⁴²

By the end of the war the concept of a concentration camp psychosis had developed, an idea perpetuated by one of the inspectors from the Swiss Embassy in London, [Adolf Lukas Vischer \(1884-1974\)](#), who published a book on the subject. He actually spoke of a “mental unity”

amongst prisoners, although he recognized that “there are many degrees” of “barbed wire disease”. He claimed that “very few prisoners who have been over six months in the camp are quite free from” it. Vischer put forward several causes of the disease, including complete absence of any chance of being alone; ignorance of the duration of captivity; and irregularity of communication from home. [Barbed wire](#) served as a powerful symbol of the prisoners’ plight.⁴³

Prisoners of war devised a variety of ways of relieving their boredom, one of the main causes of “barbed wire disease”. Education acted as a good counter to the tedium of internment and several of the more established camps developed substantial libraries and numerous courses. For instance, the first catalogue compiled at Handforth in autumn 1916 listed 2,522 books, which came from a series of German charities. By April 1917 the camp also ran fifty-six courses with 1,600 students.⁴⁴ Camp IV at Knockaloe possessed 18,080 volumes by 1919.⁴⁵ At Lofthouse Park, in Wakefield, a “very thorough Educational scheme” was organized “on University lines” enrolling about 500 prisoners, one third of the total and beginning on 1 October 1917.⁴⁶

Several camps had their own orchestras. For instance, Handforth had a band with between twenty-five and thirty players, while the internees in Skipton had performed forty-two concerts by August 1919, with programmes that included everything from [Carl Maria von Weber \(1786-1826\)](#) to [Richard Wagner \(1813-1883\)](#).⁴⁷ [Theatre](#) also became a common activity in many camps. Stobs, for instance, had several dramatic societies, which produced hundreds of plays during the course of the war.⁴⁸ Arts and crafts also became part of everyday life.⁴⁹

[Sport](#) and other physical activity also helped to relieve the boredom of camp life. Stobs, for instance, held sporting festivals on a regular basis. The third of these, which took place in August 1915, included athletics and football.⁵⁰ The seventy-two combatants held at Rosyth in Scotland and working 9.5 hours per day in the local brickworks in June 1917 had access to a “sports field outside the camp...every evening, where the prisoners have a bowling alley and a football ground.”⁵¹

The camps also held religious services on a regular basis as was the case, for instance, at Dyfrynn Aled.⁵² Stobs developed an advanced Roman Catholic and Evangelical religious life. The latter held a weekly Sunday service and, in the summer of 1916 established a choir. They used a hymn book from the [YMCA](#) entitled *Heimatlieder für die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*

*in Grossbritannien.*⁵³

Both military and civilians prisoners experienced relatively low death rates. The most common cause of death consisted of injuries sustained on the battlefield. In addition, hundreds of prisoners died as a result of [influenza](#) outbreaks which affected a series of camps during 1918 and 1919.⁵⁴ The German military cemetery at Cannock Chase in Staffordshire is the final resting place of some 2,140 prisoners who died in Britain during the Great War, approximately 800 of whom were civilian internees, most of them victims of Spanish Flu.⁵⁵

Employment

The most dramatic development for German prisoners of war consisted of the decision by the [British government](#) to make wholesale use of them for employment from the end of 1916. Until that time internees had carried out little work, partly due to trade union opposition and partly because of the level of Germanophobia which existed within the country which could potentially have made it dangerous for “small parties” of prisoners to work in the open. In addition, internees could only carry out unskilled labour and could therefore only fill some labour shortages. Some men were employed as bakers, tailors and shoemakers in the camps, but no work of national importance could be undertaken. Until the end of 1916 no prisoners in Britain worked on the land. In the autumn of 1916 the Prisoners of War Employment Committee came into existence.⁵⁶ It was dissolved following the Armistice “and the allocation of prisoners of war to various forms of labour was vested in the War Office, which acted in close accord with the Department of Civil Demobilization and Resettlement of the Ministry of Labour.”⁵⁷

The employment of prisoners of war was a complex operation which involved numerous rules and regulations. In the first place, only combatant men and non-commissioned officers were eligible. Furthermore, the prisoners could not work with “civilian, British or civilian Alien labour”. In addition, no application could be put forward until local labour resources were exhausted.⁵⁸ Employers who needed prisoners would have to make an application. The new employees could only work the same hours as local workers.

The numbers of working prisoners of war increased dramatically from the 3,832 of September 1916, especially following the general growth in the total of internees during 1917 and, more especially, 1918. In March 1917 the figure still stood at only 7,029 but had increased to 27,760 by December 1917 (including 1,782 civilians), 45,710 by June 1918 (including 2,360 civilians), reaching a peak of 66,853 (including 1,356 civilians) in December 1918. By August

of the following year the figure had fallen to about 34,000.⁵⁹

Prisoners found employment in a wide range of occupations, but agriculture dominated, fuelled by fears that the harvest of 1918 could not be gathered due to lack of labour supplies. Although only 16.7 percent of those employed worked in this area in February 1918, the figure had increased to 60.5 percent by November 1918. The growth in the total of German prisoners employed in agriculture resulted from a series of conscious schemes to recruit them. While some lived in working camps, to which they returned at night, others found employment in “migratory gangs” which lived on the farms where they worked. The prisoners certainly seemed to have proved valuable to farmers during 1918.⁶⁰ Apart from agriculture, internees found employment in a wide range of other activities. In July 1918 prisoners worked in aerodromes, quarries, timber production, shipyard construction, brick manufacture, cement making, road building and aluminium smelting.⁶¹

Those prisoners who worked received payment, which averaged at about 1.5 pence per day. In addition, they also obtained higher food rations. Thus, those not employed received 2,000 calories per day, while those who worked could obtain up to 3,300 calories.⁶²

Conclusion

An overall assessment of the life of internees in Britain between 1914 and 1919 would describe it as relatively comfortable. Instances of deliberate mistreatment were rare. The British state in the main fulfilled its obligations under the [Hague Convention](#). But this relatively good treatment did not prove of much comfort to those individuals incarcerated in a British concentration camp. Isolated from their families, they had to find new temporary meaning for their lives, desperately looking forward to the end of their captivity. They tried to create a relatively normal lifestyle (as normal as could be hoped when surrounded entirely by men of military age with little time for privacy). Most of them managed to keep themselves sane by educational, cultural, sporting and religious activity. When employment became the norm for soldiers in 1918, this group had more of an opportunity to take their minds off their surroundings. Once released they would return to the chaos of post-War Germany.

Panikos Panayi, De Montfort University

Notes

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21. NA/WO162/341, Report of the Prisoners of War Information Bureau. ↑
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23. Jackson, The Prisoners 1989, p. 135; Schmidt-Reder, Bruno: In England Kriegsgefangen! Meine Erlebnisse in dem Gefangenenlager Dorchester, Berlin 1915, pp. 47, 52, 54; Plüschow, Gunther: My Escape from Donington Hall, London 1922, p. 163. ↑
24. Panayi, Prisoners of Britain 2012, p. 90. ↑
25. Ibid., pp. 93-4. ↑
26. See, for instance, Hansard (Commons), fifth series, vol. 70 (1915), 557-560. ↑
27. Plüschow, My Escape 1922, pp. 178-179. ↑
28. Reports of Visits of Inspection Made by Officials of the United States Embassy to Various Internment Camps in the United Kingdom (London 1916). ↑
29. Panayi, Prisoners of Britain 2012, pp. 101-13. ↑
30. Ibid., pp. 91-3. ↑
31. Ibid., pp. 101-7. ↑
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33. NA/FO383/33, Reports on Visits of Inspection made in June 1915 by US Embassy Staff to Various Camps. ↑
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50. *Ibid.*, p. 191. ↑
51. *Ibid.*, p. 189, ↑
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53. Stobsiade, October 1917. ↑
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