

Anna remembers the Polish community of Whitchurch

During World War II a contingent of Canadian and American pilots lived in Whitchurch in rows of Nissen huts known as Coombe Park Camp. When the war was over and the pilots had left, the Ministry of Defence transferred the camp to Oxfordshire County Council. The forty-eight Nissen huts, together with four flat-roofed buildings, were then provided to refugee families, mostly Polish but some Italian and a few English. The camp subsequently developed into Manor Road as we know it today. All the Nissen huts have long gone and only one of the four flat-roofed buildings remains – it now has a pitched roof and we know it as Whitchurch Village Hall.

A few of the original camp residents still live in Manor Road. Among them, the only remaining descendant of Polish refugees is Anna Szczeponek (*pictured, today*), who has warm memories of her early childhood in Whitchurch (*pictured below, in front of her family's home in 1950*).



While the topic of refugees features regularly in the news today, we have to look back 70 years to the arrival of Whitchurch's Polish community. Anna has written this account of her memories:

My parents were both Polish and they arrived at Coombe Park Camp in 1947. Although conditions in the huts were far from glamorous, people did their best to make them as warm and comfortable as they could. Having survived the war and in some cases labour camps, the refugees wanted to make a life for themselves and their families. They worked hard, often in factories and on farms, to give their children a good education and the opportunity to go to university. Some became doctors, musicians and teachers.



The Polish residents formed their own strong community and central to that was the Catholic chapel. In 1950, one of the Nissen huts was converted into a chapel,

situated where White House Cottage now stands. As the community expanded, this proved too small and in 1956 one of the flat-roofed houses, tucked away at the top of Manor Road behind the last row of bungalows and close to the Coombe Park drive, was made available by Oxfordshire County Council and converted into a chapel.

My grandfather made the altar for the new chapel as he was a skilled carpenter and painter. My father was the sacristan, my cousin was an altar boy and my mother did the flowers, the laundry, mended church vestments and hosted the visiting Polish priest. I helped with breakfast when the priest came to our house after Mass and I used to bake a cake, which always went down well.



The visiting priest came from Reading, initially on his motor bike and later in an old Austin, to say Mass in the chapel on Sundays and holy days. It was also used for catechism classes and preparing children for their first communion, as well as baptisms, weddings and some requiem masses. The chapel was sometimes used by visiting Polish scouts who were camped in the grounds of Hardwick House. I used to enjoy seeing them marching through the village under their banner, singing Polish scout songs.



It was traditional on holy days such as Corpus Christi for processions to be held in the camp. Each family would decorate their gate and try to outdo their neighbours. Young girls dressed in Polish national costumes, or in their white first communion dresses, walked in front of the priest, scattering flower petals (*pictured above*). An altar was set up at the end of the route where Mass would be said. At Christmas and Easter various traditions were followed such as the blessing of the water, fire and food. The food, once blessed, would be taken home to be shared with friends and family.

The refugees built themselves a timber village hall where dances, films and various events were held. I remember on one occasion

having to dress up in my Polish national costume and sing for a radio broadcast that was transmitted across the Iron Curtain by Radio Free Europe (*pictured, previous page*).

Many children from the camp attended school in Goring Heath at the almshouses. Some of the children spoke only Polish at first but gradually picked up English. A Polish class was held on Saturdays which the children attended to keep up their mother language, learn about the history of Poland and have catechism lessons or first communion classes.



Time went by and some of the camp's residents moved away from the area, some emigrated, and others became residents in the Manor Road council houses that were built in the 1950s to replace the huts. The numbers using the chapel gradually reduced and by around 1992 it was no longer viable for the visiting priest from Reading to say Mass to only a handful of people. (*pictured, the priest and Anna in the chapel.*) The old bell was removed and now hangs proudly by the altar in the Polish Catholic church in Watlington Street, Reading. The pictures and religious items were moved to chapels elsewhere.



Over the following years the building gradually deteriorated and became overgrown (*pictured, 2014*). The structure was eventually deemed unsafe and it was demolished in 2014. Petunias are now growing on the site.

I have many happy memories of growing up in the community and of the chapel which was the focal point where we met and worshipped together, keeping up our traditions and our Catholic faith.

Anna Szczeponek

Thank you Anna for providing us with us these delightful and historic memories.

Richard Wingfield, News Editor, Whitchurch Web, January 2016