

Whitchurch Camp, 1943 to 1960

A talk given by Peter Hawley to the History Society in Whitchurch village hall
on 20th March 2014.

The camp was originally more often referred to as at "Coombe Park" than "Manor Road". As I will show, it had a short but important military history before the Polish connection was made and the term "Polish Camp" began to be used.

For much of WWII and just afterwards there was a lot more varied activity in Whitchurch than many of us can perhaps imagine. As early as October 1940 the Rector wrote in his Parish Letter:

“We gladly welcome the presence of Royal Engineers who by their excellent conduct and cheery behavior have found a warm place in many hearts (is that an indirect way of saying ‘lady friends’?). We particularly enjoyed their recent military parade to St Mary's Church.”

These Engineers were engaged in portable and removable bridge construction – Bailey bridges and pontoons – and many of us have regretted their absence at the Toll Bridge during the recent reconstruction. I believe they lived at first under canvas, at either Walliscote Farm or Thames Bank.

It was not the only wartime activity that livened up the village. A lot of you will know that the Racquets Court of Swanston House was used as a packing plant for Borwick's Baking Powder. The History Society received a letter of reminiscences in 1994 from Hon Robin Borwick, who had been a boy living at Swanston House at the time. One of his anecdotes contains quite a shock:

“During the war, an army camp was built in one of the fields of Coombe Park. The first thing that Teddy Howard, the landowner, knew about it was when he found builders digging foundations in his field.”

Apparently, Whitehall had failed to get the requisition paperwork through to him. We are told that he was so distressed that he had a heart attack and died. (By looking through the parish records I found that the date of his death was 27 March 1943. It is only from that information that I have been able to establish when work actually started on the camp.)

But military bridge training on the Thames had been going on much earlier. Joan Wilcox's book on Pangbourne contains a picture of Royal Engineers training here during WW1 and another showing them in 1939. Robin Borwick continues:

“It became a bridging school for the British Army, subsequently Canadians, later Americans. Two officers were billeted at Swanston House and Walliscote House (where the factory girls lived in the stables.) Later in the war Mrs Howard was moved to the Victorian back quarters of her house and the main house was commandeered as a rest camp for the American air force.”

In fact, the bridging school used by soldiers of the three nations was at Thames Bank, with its lawns running down to the river opposite Pangbourne Meadows. It was already up and running long before the Coombe Park camp and the men had initially been camping or billeted around the two villages.

But when the Yanks were coming, that sort of provision was suddenly not good enough. We hear a little more from the village scrapbook of our former parish clerk, John Holmes, writing in the 1970s, whose family maintained a small factory for war production at their house The Haven in Eastfield Lane:

“Where the village telephone box stands is the entrance to Coombe Park, part of which is now Manor Road and shared by residents of the Council Estate which was built in the latter half of the 1950s on the site of the army camp Nissen huts and concrete buildings, later used by Polish and other refugees.”

One of those concrete buildings was eventually turned into a village hall (the building which we are now in). It was opened as a village hall in 1962, modernized in 1972 and again later. Another was turned into a more permanent Catholic Church which flourished until the 1980s, or 1990s, but is now derelict.

Prior to that time the Polish Community had enjoyed a very cramped chapel in one of the Nissen huts and a wooden community hall located somewhere near the present Polish Church Garden.

The thing that was most shocking to the Howards, which may have contributed to Mr Howard's death, was that what was being taken over in 1943 was actually the most prominent front portion of their Park. Until then, their visitors had passed through ornamental wrought iron gates close to the High Street and proceeded up their private drive. This part of the drive became the public road that we know today.

Furthermore, just west of the Old Barn (now Old Barn Cottages) the verge widened out under an avenue of yew trees and it was on that verge, well before we reach the present Manor Road estate, that the first seven round-topped army Nissen huts were erected, in close parallel formation and with their entrances facing the Howard's private drive. It was sometime later that the gates of Coombe Park were relocated to their present position, alongside the present village hall and beyond those first huts.

One of the seven huts became a temporary Catholic chapel until the later concrete one was built. Another became the original Whitchurch home of Anna, who is here today. Many more huts were constructed to the left of the drive on the site of the Manor Road estate we know today.

Our former postman, the late Peter Woodage, wrote in 1983:

“So the first American GIs had arrived in January 1944 and waiting for them was a new camp (built under the Lease-Lend programme). We local lads should have been at Sunday School but we had heard that the "Yanks" had come. Our first contacts were over the railings behind the building which is now the Village Hall. Going for the asking were sweets, chocolates and tinned cheese, not to mention our introduction to Nescafé instant coffee.”

“One particular day stands out, when a host of various types of bridges were being busily assembled both on the river and in the meadow. It turned out that a mammoth demonstration of bridging was being laid out for General Eisenhower and General Bradley. Subsequent research has shown that this was the only time the Supremo visited us. By 0830 on 4th July 1944 all the troops had gone.

But not quite all. Joan Wilcox has shown that the final Bailey bridge was built in May 1946 by No 10 Training Battalion of the Royal Engineers. This was the only time the public were allowed to cross the river on any of these bridges.

By this time the population of the military camp had become very small. In about 1946 and 1947 the camp was made available to the County Council for public housing purposes and in the following couple of years many of the structures were offered to the Polish Housing Association, though a few English and Italian families were also housed there in about 50 of the huts. Most of the Poles were ex-servicemen, many just married. Children came fast.

One later eyewitness, a university contemporary of Robin Borwick and David Laing, was Count Nicholas Tolstoy, who was a master at Whitchurch House Preparatory School from 1954 to 1956. In an interview when he revisited in 2007, he said:

“Next door was the Polish Camp where the Polish maids came from. Little wars used to break out from time to time between our boys and the boys from the Polish Camp, where there were a lot of families with children. The Polish boys never did anything very naughty but sometimes used to break into the school grounds for a bombardment of conkers, on all sides.”

When Council Houses were built in place of the Nissen huts, the original seven huts to the right of the drive were not included in the redevelopment but became the site of three new private bungalows (Fir Bank and others) which occupy that position today. Many of the Poles stayed on in the newly built houses but all except Anna eventually drifted away, often because they wanted to live nearer to their work.
