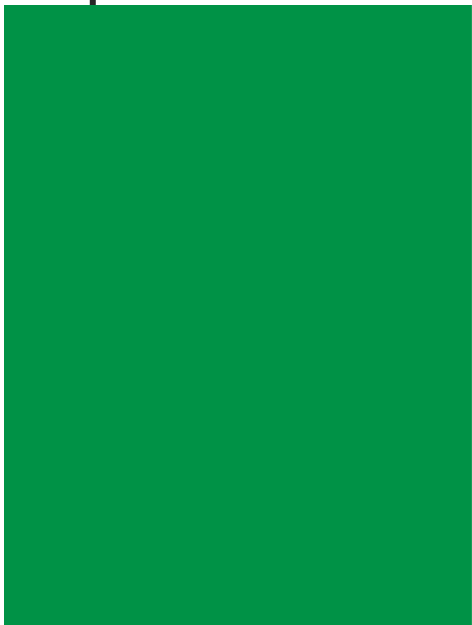


ITALIAN
PRISONERS OF
WAR IN BRITAIN
AND THE
HENLLAN CHAPEL



By Esme Oldham

Italian Prisoners of War in Britain and the Henllan Chapel

1. Introduction

I chose to do my project on Italian Prisoners of War in Britain in WW2. In my investigation I first visited the Imperial War Museum in London for some background information. Next, I went to the national archives in Kew, to look at records dating from the 1940s, and finally I travelled to Henllan in Wales to visit a beautiful chapel built by Italian prisoners of war at the POW camp. I read several books on the subject, these are listed at the end.

2. Background

In June 1940 Italy declared war, and in September 1940 Britain and Italy were fighting each other in North Africa. By January 1941, Britain was winning and had accumulated 130,000 Italian prisoners. Over the next two years, a series of victories notably in autumn 1942, the second battle of El Alamein, and the successful invasion of Sicily in 1943, many more Italian military personnel were captured. In parallel with this, on the home front, there was a large labour shortage, due to the large number of men who had been recruited into the armed forces and food shortages due to German submarine attacks on ships bringing food from overseas. This resulted in a decision to bring Italian POWs to

Britain to add to the labour force. At the end of 1943, there were 75,000 Italian POWs in the UK.



Italian soldiers captured in North Africa in 1941

3.Relationships

- 3.1 Most British people in the 1940s probably saw the Italian POWs through the lens of the popular newspapers, which depicted the Italians as lazy and cowardly. However, contacts between the Italian POWs and camp guards and local people generally resulted in more positive views of each other.
- 3.2 On my visit to the chapel in Henllan it was interesting to hear stories of the locals, I spoke to a woman, whose father had been a prisoner at the Henllan camp. She said that her father didn't return to Italy after the war had ended, instead he stayed in Wales and married her mother who was Welsh. This showed to me that strong relationships had developed as result of the war, and some Italians even started to prefer being in Britain. Most of the other visitors to the chapel appeared to have some family connection with the POWs who had

been interned there. In the Henllan camp 52 POWs stayed behind in Wales after the war.

- 3.3** The Italian POW view of The British depended on their political views: fascists were very hostile. Others much less so and grateful to be safe from the fighting but hoping for an early end to the war.

The public were largely influenced by films and newspapers. The stereotypical Italian POWs were suggested to be:

1. Cowardly
2. Un-military
3. Friendly
4. Amorous
5. Compliant
6. Willing and capable farm workers.

- 3.4** Whilst researching, I came across an interesting event where an Italian POW was presented with a Royal Humane Society award for rescuing one of two boys, whose canoe capsized on the River Cam.

The source below shows a positive memory of a child.

“There was an Italian camp just down the road. They loved children and used to make us wooden toys carved from any bits of wood they could get hold of. They’d leave them on an old tree trunk on the way to work.”
Jean Forrest, Glasgow

4. Life as an Italian POW

4.1 -I visited the national archives in Kew, where I did some primary research into POW camps. I looked at a report on Camp “NO 7”, visited on the 27th of October 1941.

-Camp 7 was 200 by 300 yards.

-Men lived in huts, there were many different types of them: asbestos, wood, brick, and corrugated iron.

-There were 18-23 men in each hut.

-There was sufficient electricity and each hut contained one or two furnaces to keep the prisoners warm.

-Each prisoner would have 4 blankets to keep them warm too.



Italians
building
Nissen huts

-In terms of food, prisoners were given 3 meals a day prepared by Italian cooks.

-Interestingly, the Italians said that they found the ration of meat too much and the ration of bread too little, they said they would normally eat 1kg of bread a day!

-There was an infirmary in Camp 7, where 5 Italian doctors worked and a British military doctor. There were daily medical examinations. There is a photo of one below.



-The agricultural workers were paid $\frac{3}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ d a month.

-Most prisoners worked on the land. They would be transported in lorries and worked 8.00AM-5.00PM.

-They received 35 free cigarettes a week.

-It is interesting that in Camp 7 too, religion was very important to the POWs, a service was held every Sunday in Latin by an English priest.

-Games and walks were organised for the Italians at this camp, as well as a sports ground.

4.2 -From my visit to the camp at Henllan I discovered that the Italian POWs there were also very fond of football. The painting below depicts a team of Italian POWs at Henllan playing a football match against a local team. It is now in a collection of objects on display in the chapel.



-The prisoners asked for and received books such as Italian-English dictionaries, and musical instruments such as violins, guitars, saxophones.

-The inspector said that there were no attempted escapes, no disciplinary issues which required punishment, and no complaints.

4.3 Reading the official correspondence held at Kew, I was struck by the different perspectives and interests between government officials. The War Office, which administered the camps, was concerned with using favourable treatment of prisoners as propaganda to subvert Mussolini's regime and also with security issues. The Foreign Office especially after Italy's surrender in 1943 onwards was concerned with relations with the Italian Government which replaced Mussolini's regime. The Ministry of Agriculture wanted to use Italian POWs for food production.

5.The POW Camp in Henllan, Wales

The chapel I visited was built at a POW camp on the outskirts and could hold a thousand men. The prisoners were used to work on farms in Mid and West Wales. Most prisoners arrived in 1943 and left in 1944 when they were replaced by German prisoners.

The camp was made up of many buildings: a hospital, theatre, football pitches, tennis courts, a bowling green, kitchens, offices, cells, transport units, storehouses, bathing facilities and 30-35 huts for sleeping.

These photos below, show an arial view of the camp. The one on the left shows the camp as it was in action, around 1943, and the photo on the right shows the camp more recently, when many huts have had to be demolished due to them being unstable.



5.1 The Escape

At the camp there was an escape incident. At registration the prisoners made a planned commotion, allowing the prisoner to leave the crowd and run to the football pitch. At another registration, the prisoner was discovered missing, the local authorities and local public were alerted, as well as searches. The prisoner stayed put on the field for three days and the authorities began to give up and lose interest. The prisoner left the camp successfully and was never heard of again.

5.2 Facists

At the camp, there were some fascist Mussolini supporters. These POWs tried to poison the food, and as a result were forced to sleep outside for two days, with nothing but bread and water.

These photos below, show the front and back of the kitchen, the tower was used to heat water. Andrew Thompson said clearly that the POWs did not eat pizza!

□



The photos below show the laundry room. On the photo on the right you can see numbers. The numbers corresponded to the hut numbers and underneath them there would have been a hook where the laundry would have been hung.



6. The Chapel

-In the camp, the prisoners created a chapel. They decided to sacrifice one of their sleeping huts and moved into other sleeping huts with the other POWs.

-Mario Ferlito had been recognised for his artwork already and was asked to paint the chapel.

-Unlike the POWs on the Orkney Islands, Mario was not given time off his usual work to complete the chapel, instead he worked by candlelight in the evenings.

- The other prisoners found fruit, vegetables, tea, and coffee grounds for Mario to use for the paints.
- He made the wallpaper out of cement sacks, glued on with a flour and water paste.
- Tin cans were bent into candlesticks. In the photos below, you can see the front and backs of the candlesticks. From the front it looks like a 3D candlestick, but from behind you can see the wooden stick and thin tin cover. These were made from corned beef tins.



- The side altars were created out of Red Cross packing cases.
- Cement was traded with a local producer in return for goods like bracelets, picture frames and cigarette lighters.
- Timber and bricks were obtained from abandoned buildings.
- A bell was borrowed from a local mansion (however the bell was never rung, as it would signal an attack).
- He fashioned mimicked marble pillars out of plaster and painted them.
- He had no tools like a ruler, but instead, he made do with a rope.



7. Mario Ferlito

- Unlike most of the other prisoners, Mario Ferlito was a North Italian.
- He was the youngest POW in the camp and arrived when he was just 21.
- He was captured in Tunisia and was taken on a ship for 2 weeks, all the way to Glasgow.
- He stayed in a camp in Scotland for a couple of months before he was taken to the Henllan camp.
- Ferlito was a jeweller, and inexperienced in the agricultural jobs that were asked of him such as draining ditches and planting potatoes.
- He was underfed and only received two slices of bread, a slice of ham and a tin of powdered milk a day.

-Unfortunately, he experienced some mistreatment from his sergeant. One night the sergeant asked him to work in the field in the rain and Mario refused. The sergeant then phoned the Henllan camp, and a jeep was sent over to take Mario back. He was then put in front of the military court, found guilty, and he was put in prison.

- However, he was seen sketching inside his cell, and as a result was asked to paint the chapel.
- Ferlito worked hard for three months to complete the chapel. He described how he did it in a “trance”.
- Above the altar, on a dome, Ferlito painted a mural of the last supper. It is debated which man is Judas.
- In September 1944, on the opening of the chapel, a chaplain from Morrilton Catholic Church came to bless the chapel. Ferlito received little credit for his work and was upset. The chaplain went over to Ferlito with a box and said, “I’d like to give you this little gift for painting the church”. Ferlito opened the box and in it found just 3 cigarettes!
- Much later, Ferlito, further demonstrated his art skills by painting 14 paintings for the side walls of the chapel. These were done in the 1970s. The photos below are some examples.





□

- Overall, Ferlito did not enjoy his time at the POW camp. Unfortunately, he lost his faith during the war. It appears that many other POWs also lost their faith due to the experience of the war. In an interview in 2005, Ferlito said the chapel reminded him of his “lost twenties” and started to cry.
- Sadly, Mario Ferlito died in 2009, but the chapel is very popular and more than 3,000 people visit each year.



Me, at the chapel's altar.



8. The Return Visit of the POWs

- After the war, many Italians stayed behind and married local Welsh women.
- Some went back to Italy only to discover unemployment, and then returned to Wales.
- In total 52 POWs remained in Wales after the war.
- Some did go back to Italy, but several returned to visit in 1977.
- In total 8 POWs along with their families returned, and friendships were formed between the local people with the Italian POWs and their families from Italy.

9. Another camp

- When I had almost finished this project, I discovered by chance that when he was a boy my neighbour, Bill 89 year old, lived an Italian POW camp.
- He lived in a large house in Hooe, Sussex, which had a farm.
- There was a prisoner of war camp there 1943-45.
- The POWs worked on the farm.
- Every morning they would be dropped off in lorries.

- They worked with horses and did manual labour on the farm.
- They all had to wear yellow disks on the back of their clothes to show they were POWs in case they tried to escape.
- My neighbour named Bill, was very friendly with them, even one time he went back to the camp with them.
- He said there was no heavy security, it was very casual, they would simply count them as they went in and out.
- They were always kind, they made jewellery out of spoons for his mother.
- They were fed by Bill's cook on the farm.
- One POW who used to be an electrician in Italy, used to help sort out electrical problems in Bill's house.
- The locals were sympathetic to the POWs, and no one showed any hostility.
- There were also German POWs in the camp.
- One POW helped Bill look after a pet ferret!

10. Other Chapels

Interestingly, it turns out there are many other chapels built by Italian POWs.

- A well-known one was the chapel in Orkney
- It was painted by the artist Domenico Chiocchetti, and was helped by Giuseppe Palumbi, a blacksmith, and Domenico Buttapasta, a cement worker.
- The main mural depicted the Virgin Mary holding infant Jesus, who is holding out an olive branch to Mary as a symbol of peace.
- Domenico used a religious card to help him and copied off it, unlike Mario Ferlito who worked off the top of his head.



-There is also a chapel in Kenya near Nairobi and Australia in the Harvey district.

-Almost every camp had a chapel of some sort.

-There was another impressive chapel in Duck's Cross in Bedfordshire, but this has been demolished, leaving the Okney and Henllan Chapels, the only remaining ones of their sort in the British Isles.

Cost Breakdown

Part 1: research

Name:	Cost
Visit to Imperial War Museum: Child's travelcard Waterbeach-London and lunch	£20.70
Visit to National Archives, Kew, London: Child's travel card Waterbeach-London and lunch	£20.70

Total: £41.40

Part 2: Chapel visit

Petrol for 420 mile round trip	£108.00
Lunches 3X	£15.00
B&B in Carmarthen X2 nights: 16/8 and 17/8	£67.00
Dinner on 16/6 and 17/8	£30.50
Admission to chapel	£5.00

Total: £225.50

Part 3: Resources

'Orkney's Italian Chapel'	£12
'The Italian Chapel in Orkney'	£8.50
'Prisoners of War in Bedfordshire'	£8.95
'POWs and their Captors in WW2'	£13.34
'The Italian Quarter'	£6.23
'POWs: The Home Front'	£4.84
'La Casa Di Dio'	£10.00
IWM London Guidebook	£6.00
The Silver Thread	£3.28

Total: £73.14

Overall expenditure total: £340.04

Funding: £330.00

Sources

Andrew Thompson:

Andrew Thompson looks after the Henllan chapel. In the visit he gave a talk to everyone about the camp and the POWs.

I then stayed behind afterwards and asked him some questions.

Books:

I read a variety of books, there is a photo of them below. I also watched 'La Casa Di Dio'.

Documents:

At the National Archives, I looked at War Office and Foreign Office files.



Last Word

I have enjoyed researching my chosen topic: reading around it, digging into archives and records, talking to people with direct or indirect (e.g., Relatives of the POWs) memories of the experience, seeing the surviving buildings especially the chapel and the objects in it. I have seen how large-scale events (World War Two) impacted on individual lives, how different parts of the Government and the armed forces have interacted, how some people were able to make the best of difficult circumstances and achieve positive results- the chapel, the friendly relationships between captors (prison staff and local population) and captives. I am grateful to the Henry Morris Memorial Trust for giving me the opportunity to pursue my interests; it has been a very inspirational and educational experience.