

# Wharfedale & Airedale Observer

## Why a piece of war time history will live on in Wharfedale

By Annette McIntyre

There is an image in an Otley school of St Joseph and the baby Jesus. And that simple carving is one of the few reminders of wartime camps in the town which was once occupied by thousands of German prisoners.

The identity of the man who created the poignant work is now long forgotten but his decision to present it to the Parish Priest of Our Lady and All Saints Church, has left an enduring memory of the now almost forgotten prison camp.

The carving, which is now at St Joseph's School, is one of a small but fascinating number of artefacts left from the camps on Weston Lane.

And photographs of the piece are among a dossier of research which has been presented to the Second World War Experience centre by the Wharfedale German Circle.

The WGC carried out research which had never been done before to unearth the story of Otley Camps 164 and 245, before presenting their findings to the Horsforth-based museum, and to Otley museum.

The work, which was part of a much wider Teutonic Links' research project, includes interviews with former internees and local people who remember the PoWs, as well as photographs and copies of atmospheric paintings of the camp and of the surrounding countryside by former prisoner Heinz Lutz.

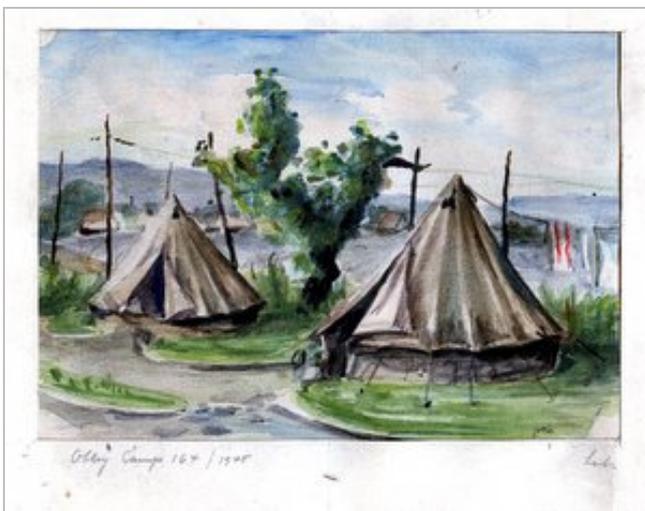
The Second World War Experience centre also has one of Mr Lutz's original watercolours showing the tented camp in 1945.

Mr Lutz, who survived the horrors of the Eastern front, spent the last few years of the war in prisons camps in Otley, Sheffield, the Lake District and Northumberland, before returning home to Germany where, at the age of 83, he is now a highly regarded architect.



Former POW Heinz Lutz, as

he is today



Mr Lutz formed an enduring friendship with Yorkshire miner Arthur Davies, which lasted until Mr Davies' death 12 years ago, and he gave him the watercolour of the Otley camp which is now in the Second World War Experience centre..

And the former officer is one of those who have helped the WGC with their research.

The WGC says it normally steers clear of topics closely related to the Second World War because of the sensitive nature of people's feelings towards Germany,' but it added: "With the sixtieth anniversary of so many things to do with the end of the war happening in 2005 , it seemed appropriate to include the PoW camp in the research.

"The camp, we soon discovered, was anyway a part of Otley's history that was important and that it had not been researched before, so what we found ourselves doing was initiating some work that was better later than never.

"The memories of former PoWs and others who remember the camp - the main primary sources for this facet of Otley's history - will soon be gone, and recording what we were able to do was seen as opportune."

Shirley Wise, from the WGC, said some people in their 80s still had very unhappy memories of the war and of German people, and the whole issue could be a sensitive one. But she said there were lot of interesting stories about the prisoners who arrived in Otley in 1944.

"They were so young and people befriended them - particularly when the war was over," she said.

The prisoners did not begin arriving in Otley until 1944, and in many ways the conditions were surprisingly lax.

Mr Lutz remembers that as an officer he was allowed to travel outside the camp, but on one occasion missed his train and was left stranded in an unfamiliar town, where the police arranged for him to be put up for the night.

He has described how the other guests at the hotel were astonished to see a German officer in full uniform at the breakfast table.

Another internee Fritz Weiss remembers leaving the camp each day by lorry to go to railways stations such as Bingley and Keighley to help unload trains.

He then went to live and work at Otley Hospital for three years.

His time as a PoW came to an end in December 1948, after which he spent another three years working with the British Army bomb disposal unit.

Mr Weiss was one of a number who stayed on in England. He married a local girl, and spent the last 36 years up to retirement selling ice cream in the Aireborough district.

Gunter Reichel, was taken to the Otley camp in May 1945 and stayed there for 12 months. He married an English girl in 1948 and was officially released as a prisoner of war less than a month later.



He remembers that from Christmas 1946, by which time he was at the Horsforth camp, PoWs were allowed out on their own for the evening as long as they were signed out by British people. He had his first pint of English beer at The Old Ball in Horsforth in 1947, but had to stand outside as PoWs were not allowed in.

Later he used to visit the British Legion in Manningham with his brother-in-law, and after several weeks was asked if he would like to join.

Ewald Feldhaus, who also arrived in Otley in May 1945, went back to Germany in 1948 to be officially de-mobbed - but then came back to build a life in England.

Locals and PoWs remember discipline being fairly lax at the camp as the war neared its end, with friendships and sometimes romances springing up between the two sides.

But even so there are a number of recollections of two prisoners being shot by the guards when they crossed a perimeter.

They are believed to have been buried at Otley cemetery along with five others who died while they were interned at the camp.

All of the bodies were later moved to the German Military Cemetery on Cannock Chase.

In the introduction to its material the WGC says: "However, we would like to make special mention of the seven PoWs who died whilst interned at Otley Camp, whose families and friends in Germany may well be completely unaware of their fate."

Now only a small fragment of the camp remains - a disused dilapidated gateway structure - and the WGC wonders whether any legal protection is possible to preserve this remnant of a brief but important part of Otley's history.

The Second World War Experience is keen to hear any memories of the Horsforth camp - or any other wartime memories.

Simon Braithwaite, from the centre, said they had been very excited to received the material about the Otley camp.

They have been in touch with Mr Lutz and say they would not rule out a visit from him to the centre.

He said the PoW camps had been largely forgotten.

"We didn't really have anything about the camps here," he said.

The centre, which is a charity, can be contacted at 5 Feast Field (off Town Street), Horsforth, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS18 4TG. Tel: 0113 2584993 and 0113 2589647. [www.war-experience.org](http://www.war-experience.org) Visits to the centre are by appointment.

6:57pm Wednesday 17th January 2007