

Guernsey Deportees Association

Newsletter No 9

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email: guernsey.deportees@gmail.com

Welcome Everyone to our Special Newsletter.

In our last Newsletter we mentioned the possibility of Dr Gilly Carr making a visit to Dorsten to mark the occasion of the 80th year since deportation of the Channel Islanders began. Dr Carr (Gilly) did in fact make that trip and her report forms the basis of this Special Newsletter. I know from personal experience that many deportees will not wish to be reminded of the conditions and their experiences in Dorsten, but nevertheless it is important that events such as these are recorded for those who were not there, and for future generations. I would also like to record our thanks to Gilly for making this visit on our behalf which I know was a very emotional and difficult journey to make.

On behalf of the Deportees, Gilly read the following words in a ceremony with Mayor Stockhoff, accompanied by his Chief of Staff Karsten Hartmann and city archivist Martin Köcher.

“Greetings from the Guernsey Deportees Association to the Burger Meister and people of Dorsten. Firstly, I would like to thank Dr Gilly Carr, who is also officially representing the Deportees, and the people of Dorsten, for making this event possible.

Today we mark the occasion, 80 years ago, when Deportees from the Channel Islands first set foot in Germany at Dorsten, after a long and arduous boat and train ride.

Although as events unfolded Dorsten was only a transit camp for the deportees, it was a place of horror for those men, women and children taken from their homes, families and friends to be held in filthy and unsanitary conditions, not knowing what their fate would be.

On this occasion we remember those who died in Dorsten because of their incarceration and for those who survived those terrible times, we give thanks. I believe it is so important to mark events such as this to ensure the lessons that we have all learnt are never forgotten and to pass onto future generations the importance of those lessons of peace, love and compassion. We also acknowledge the importance of reconciliation, and at this time we offer the hand of friendship to the people of Dorsten from all of our members.”

Finally a reminder for Association members to give me your name, if you have not already done so, and wish to attend the coffee and mince pie event at les Cotils 10.15 in the Bar Area on Dec 6th.

Stay Safe, Jill Chubb - Chair Guernsey Deportees.

“Remember for the Future” - Dorsten’s Wartime Internment Camp in Germany

By Dr Gilly Carr

The city of Dorsten in north-western Germany has a motto: *Erinnern für die Zukunft* or ‘Remember for the future’. This is how the Mayor of Dorsten, Tobias Stockhoff, started his reply to my email in which I expressed my desire to visit the city to lay flowers on the graves of Islanders who died in the city’s internment camp in 1942. The Mayor, his chief of staff, and the city archivist kindly and happily set aside an afternoon to join me in remembrance of the 80th anniversary of the arrival, on 28th September 1942, of those who were interned in Dorsten.

In an emotional ceremony, I explained the history of the arrival of the Channel Islanders in Dorsten and placed flowers on the graves of those who died there, as did Mayor Stockhoff, who was accompanied by his Chief of Staff Karsten Hartmann and city archivist Martin Köcher. We said a prayer over the graves, and I read out letters of greeting from the Oberbürgermeister of Biberach, Norbert Zeidler; the Constable of St Helier, Simon Crowcroft; and the Chair of the Guernsey Deportees Association, Jill Chubb. The Deputy Bailiff, Jessica Roland, also sent a brief message.

Dorsten is the least well known of the civilian internment camps to which Channel Islanders were deported. While most people have heard of Biberach, Wurzach and Laufen, the brevity of the stay in Dorsten – just seven weeks – means that this camp has dropped from popular memory, but not for those who were there, who remember it with a mixture of fear and loathing.

824 people deported from Guernsey and 370 from Jersey in 1942 were sent - before anywhere else – to Dorsten, where an old Prisoner of War camp awaited them. Nothing had been prepared for the 1194 men, women, children and babies who arrived on 28 September. They remained in the camp until 302 unattached men left for Laufen on 1 November 1942, and the remaining 892 were transported by train to Biberach on 11 November. These journeys to the next camp lasted several days and were cold and hungry experiences.

The seven weeks in Dorsten were not like the later relatively more benign experiences in Biberach, Wurzach or Laufen. Dorsten differed in several respects, most important of which was the absence of Red Cross parcels. The Islanders had to exist on watery soup and as a result lost weight very quickly. Hunger was a big problem. The extent of this can be best understood through memories of former deportees. Tom Remfrey recalled that his father swapped his wedding ring through the barbed wire for bread. Jill Chubb, Chair of the Guernsey Deportees Association, remembered a man cooking a hedgehog in the camp grounds and skinning it before eating the flesh. Several others refer in their internment diaries to foraging for potato peelings and cabbage stumps on the camp rubbish tip.

The camp itself was in a terrible state of repair. Women and men were split up, and the children stayed with the women. The men were put in wooden barracks where there was a leaking roof and draughty shutters

instead of window glass. The women and children were put in long concrete buildings where there were eighty to a room. They slept in closely packed triple-decker bunks. Having 'inherited' filthy straw palliasses from the Polish POWs, the deportees were quickly covered in flea and bed bug bites.

The men who were in Dorsten remember the toilets: these were communal holes in the ground in a windowless shed. Using them at night was hazardous. The women were only slightly better off, but watching German soldiers ensured that they had no privacy. Washing facilities were limited to outdoor cold-water troughs; alternatively, people could fill tins or bowls with cold water and try to give themselves a wipe-down indoors. Only after a month was a single cold-water shower allowed.

To make matters even worse, Dorsten was an industrial city, and a colliery was about a mile from the camp. The deportees remember how polluted the air was – and soon their lungs, clothes, hair and bodies were black from the coal dust and pollution.



Remains of the old Colliery

The camp was situated on the outskirts of the city, dangerously close to a canal. The water level of the canal was much higher than the camp, and there was a serious risk that the main sluice, next to the camp, would be bombed, flooding the camp and drowning everybody. As Dorsten was in an industrial

and much-bombed part of Germany, this was a real threat.

Autumn quickly advanced, the temperature dropped, and those in the camp now had cold to add to their hunger, dirt, and misery. The hunger and wet and damp conditions quickly led to illness. On 10 October, just a fortnight after arriving, James Waters died of pneumonia in his camp bunk, leaving behind his wife Elizabeth. He was soon followed by four-month-old baby Brian Skipton, who died in Dorsten hospital on 23 October. He also died of pneumonia and couldn't keep down his mother's milk. Brian left behind his parents Francis and Phyllis, and older siblings Anthony and Shirley. Finally, on the day the deportees left the camp, on 11 November 1942, Florence Manning died from pulmonary oedema, caused by a combination of water on the lungs coupled with weakness of the heart. Her husband, Monty, stayed behind in Dorsten for an extra day to see his wife buried. It must have broken the hearts of the deportees to leave behind three members of their community in Dorsten.



Flowers Placed on the Graves on behalf of the Deportees By Gilly.

The sadness is still palpable in St Agatha's cemetery in Dorsten today, where James Waters, Brian Skipton and Florence Manning lie alongside the Polish POWs who had previously died in the camp.

The engraved names of the three Islanders are now difficult to read. Although the graves are well kept, lichen and 80 years of weathering, coupled by industrial pollution, has affected the graves. I asked Mayor Stockhoff whether he could arrange for the graves to be cleaned and repainted. In the city I had also observed a number of 'History Stations': information plaques with timelines of various aspects of the city's history. I asked if it was possible for one to be created for those who were held in the camp, as the presence of a camp in the city during the war was little known to local people. This suggestion was met with enthusiasm.

Later, the archivist joined me in a visit to the site of the camp, now wooded over with tall trees. As an archaeologist as well as a historian, I wanted to see if any traces still survived on the ground. We examined the old maps and were able to identify that the three surviving concrete buildings on the site were original; they are now used for social housing. In an area used by the local archery club, among the trees, bushes, and undergrowth, I found a few of the old hut platforms. "There were no *Englanders* in the camp!" exclaimed an 83-year-old archer, but we soon corrected him.



A Concrete Shelter

I was shocked – that the camp should have vanished almost entirely in 80 years but armed with a hand-drawn map by John

Webster, now kept in the Guernsey Archives, together with his war diary, I found the camp's potato and coal cellar.



Gilly Identifies one of the Camp Remains

Other traces included a concrete shelter for the guards, a piece of water pipe, some tiles – perhaps from the showers - and part of an old barbed-wire post, rather appropriately snapped in half. Everything was covered by leaf litter, but digging a little with a stick revealed the sandy ground described by deportees, on which puddles once stood after showers of rain.

Dorsten is no longer an industrial city; much has changed. There is now a well-respected Jewish museum in the town, and I was touched by how readily the Bürgermeister agreed to meet and help, and join me in remembering Brian Skipton, James Waters and Florence Manning. I left Dorsten with confidence that more will now be done to remember the Islanders and the camp, and with a strong sense of the sincerity of the city's motto: "Remember for the future"