

The Great Escape – the Farnhill Connection

If you were to ask people in Farnhill what they knew about the Great Escape, they'd probably tell you about the film starring Richard Attenborough, Steve McQueen, etc., the one with the motorcycle rider trying to clear the fence protecting the Swiss border. If you're really unlucky, they might even try to hum or whistle the theme tune.

Fewer people would be able to tell you that the film was actually based on a true story, about a mass-breakout from a German concentration camp during World War II; and it would be very surprising if anyone mentioned that there was a strong connection with Farnhill.

But there was a connection, and this article aims to recount the story of the rather remarkable Zillessen family, who lived in Farnhill during World War II, and which produced not just a key character in the true story of the Great Escape, but an entire family of war heroes.

The article also includes information about the activities of the Kildwick and Farnhill Welcome Home Fund, set up at the end of the war, and which raised £1000 for the returning service men and women of the two villages.

The pre-war years

Erich Max Theodore Zillessen (known as Eric) was born in Wandsworth, London, in 1888, into a family of German descent. Beyond that, nothing can be discovered about his early life, except that he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), in the 1/11th (County of London) Battalion (Finsbury Rifles) for at least part of the First World War¹.

He married Rosetta Mary Towers in 1916, and four children followed at intervals, born in various locations.

- Marcel Eric Zillessen
Born: 14 January 1917, Northampton, Northamptonshire
- Walter Harold Zillessen
Born: Mar 1918, West Bromwich, Staffordshire
- Geraldine Mary Zillessen
Born: 16 August 1920, St Margaret's-at-Cliffe, Kent
- Theodore Zillessen
Born: 23 January 1926, London

Precisely why the family moved around so much is not known, but a connection with St Margaret's-at-Cliffe, Kent, was retained until at least 1935, when Eric is named as the executor of the will of a deceased resident².



Figure 1: Eric and Rosetta Zillessen with either Marcel or Walter

Note on Figure 1: This photograph was found amongst the papers of Herman Lofthouse. The identity of the two adults is beyond doubt – compare the signature above with that on Figure 11.

However, although the dedication is to “Cross Hills Company Home Guard”, implying WWII, the photograph was almost certainly taken during WWI (by 1939 Eric was 51 and Rosetta was 42). It is undated but was taken in a studio in Edgbaston, Birmingham, suggesting a date between the birth of Marcel and the birth of Geraldine.

The identity of the child is impossible to determine with certainty, but is likely to be either Marcel or Walter.

At some date prior to the outbreak of World War II, Eric became Managing Director of the wool business Gerardson Ltd., which had a factory in Sunbridge Road, Bradford^{3,25}, and the family moved to Farnhill where they set up home at 62 Starkey Lane, in one of a group of houses that was also known as Prospect View.



Figure 2: Eric Zillessen's business card

The Bradford wool industry had strong ties with Germany, stretching back into the 19th century when Germany led the world in the development of the technology associated with dyeing and wool treatments such as water-proofing. It is therefore not very surprising, given the family's connections with Germany, that Marcel was sent to Berlin in the late '30s to complete his education and later became Gerardson's "foreign representative".

Marcel learned to speak German with Berlin idioms and an upper-class accent. He also developed a full understanding of German life and culture and witnessed at first-hand the rise of the Nazi regime, including attending at least one Nazi party rally. He later admitted that, had he been younger and gone to school there, he would probably have succumbed to Nazism⁴.

Meanwhile back home, a fifth child, Nicholas, was born in June 1939. Sadly, he died in 1944.

The Zillessen family at war

All four of the eligible Zillessen children served during World War II, in various services. In addition, Eric, by then over the age for military service, joined the Cross Hills Home Guard as Capt. Zillessen (see Figure 1).

Theodore Zillessen

Theodore Zillessen would have been called-up on his 18th birthday, January 23rd 1944. Although there is no doubt that he served, it has not been possible to determine where or in what capacity. He would not have been sent abroad, as this was not permitted for recruits under the age of 21.

Sister Geraldine Mary Zillessen (service number: 260292)

Geraldine Zillessen, known throughout her life as “Jill”, presumably having already trained as a nurse, was commissioned as a Sister in Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) on February 8th 1943⁵. At this time, the rank of Sister was equivalent to a Lieutenant in the army.

With their distinctive scarlet-and-grey nurses uniforms, QAIMNS were the nursing service of the army both abroad and in the UK.



Figure 3: Geraldine Zillessen, in war-time nurse’s uniform

Geraldine served in North Africa and in Italy²⁹.

Service abroad for a QAIMNS nurse was a very dangerous matter. Because they were not in a service uniform, QAIMNS were not covered by the Geneva Convention; however because of their close associations with the army, they were often not treated as non-combatants⁶.

Pilot Officer Walter Harold Zillessen (service number: 89302)

Walter Zillessen’s war-time career was brief and tragic.

He joined the RAF and was assigned to 86 Squadron, Coastal Command.



Figure 4: 86 Squadron insignia – the motto translates as “flying to liberty”

86 Squadron was formed at Gosport on December 6th 1940, in a coastal fighter role, equipped with Blenheim IVs⁷. Walter joined the squadron on December 14th⁸.

Following training, the squadron moved to Wattisham, Suffolk, in March 1941 and began convoy escort patrols off the East Anglian coast, with a move to North Coates, Lincolnshire, in May. Beauforts replaced the Blenheims from June 1941 with the squadron being fully equipped with the new type by July. These were used for mine-laying, reconnaissance and air-sea rescue patrols, with mine-laying sorties beginning on 15th July 1941⁹.

It was on one of these very early sorties that Walter Zillessen was shot down over north Germany and killed, on 17th July 1941. He is buried in the Allied War Graves Commission Sage Cemetery, Oldenburg¹⁰.

Zillessen, Walter Harold



Cemetery: Sage War Cemetery

Country: Germany

Area:

Rank: Pilot Officer

Official Number: 86 Sqdn.

Unit: 89302

Force: Royal Air Force

Nationality: British

Details:

17/07/41 Age 23 7. E. 5. Son of Eric Max Theodor and Rosetta Mary Zillessen; husband of Nina Zillessen, of Chatham.

Figure 5: Walter Zillessen's grave and recorded details

He is commemorated on the War Memorial at St. Andrew's Church, Kildwick, and also on the War Memorial at St. Margaret's-at-Cliffe, Kent¹¹.



Figure 6: St. Margaret's-at-Cliffe war memorial

Flt Lt. Marcel Zillessen (service number 119089)

When he volunteered at the start of the war, Marcel's fluent German and knowledge of Germany made him an ideal candidate to work for the secret service. He declined, claiming that subterfuge seemed too devious and that he wanted to confront the enemy 'face to face'¹².

Instead he joined the RAF and, after training in Rhodesia, was assigned to 6 Squadron in North Africa²⁵.



Figure 7: 6 Squadron insignia – the motto translates as “eyes of the army”

Equipped with Hurricane IIDs in April 1942, the squadron took on the role of “tank busters” for Montgomery's Eighth Army in its fight against Rommel's Afrika Korps, its Hurricanes being fitted with two 40mm cannons under the wings. This gave the squadron its nick-name, “The Flying Can-openers”¹³.

It was at the very end of this campaign, on April 6th 1943, that Marcel Zillessen was shot down and captured by Italian forces during the battle of Wadi Akarit in Tunisia²⁶. He was immediately flown to Germany²⁵.



Figure 8: Marcel Zillessen

The Axis forces in North Africa surrendered on May 13th 1943.

POW “Axel” Zillessen (number L3 1094¹⁴)

Marcel managed to keep his knowledge of German from his captors and, after initial interrogation, was transferred to Stalag Luft III, located at Sagan, 120 miles east of Berlin (now Upper Silesia, Poland)¹⁵.

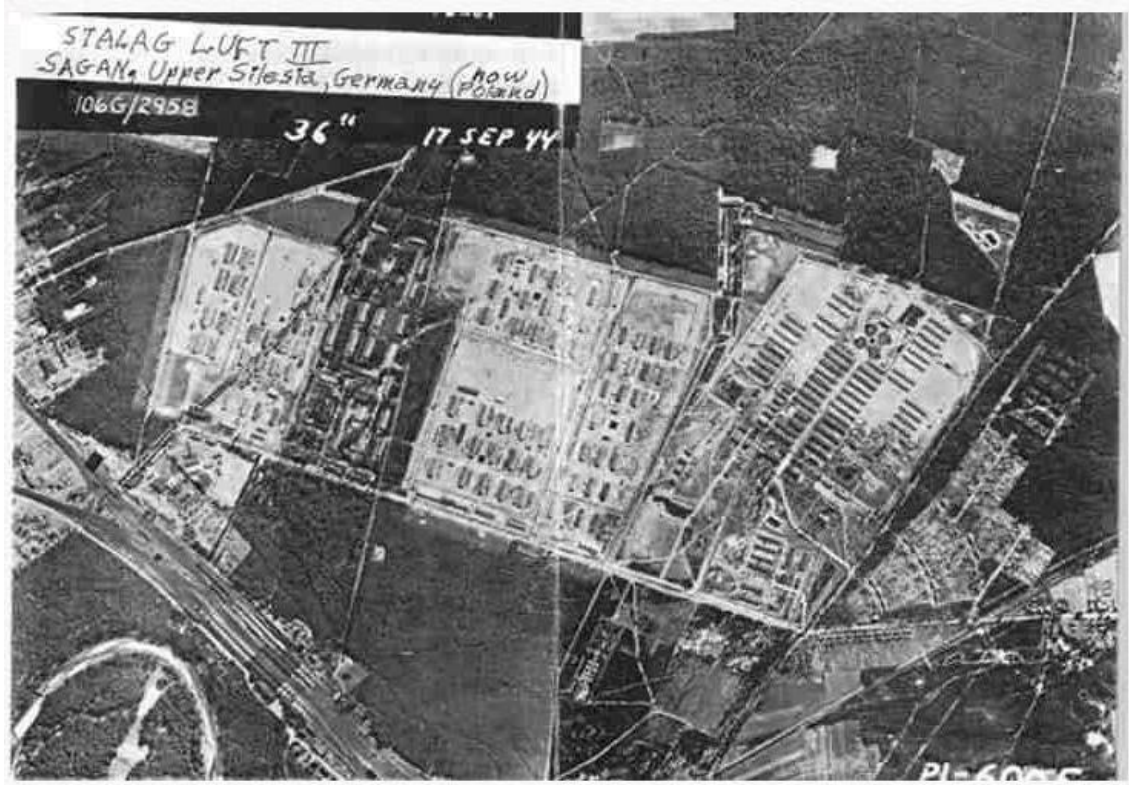


Figure 9: Aerial photograph of Stalag Luft III

Stalag Luft III was opened in 1942 to house captured allied airmen and eventually expanded to house around 10000 men, in five separate compounds, on a 60 acre site. It was designed to be the Luftwaffe version of Colditz; supposedly escape-proof and designed for “difficult” prisoners or those who had already tried to escape from other camps¹⁶.

Marcel must have arrived in Stalag Luft III at just about the time, in April 1943, that three escape tunnels (Tom, Dick and Harry) were being started. The escape committee quickly saw his potential for the escape effort and put him to work befriending the camp guards. Very soon he was winning their confidence by helping to write love letters home to their wives and girlfriends, and simultaneously undermining their morale¹².

Once ingratiated with the guards, Marcel set about procuring pens, ink and stationary, which were then used to forge the documents and passports needed for a successful escape¹⁷. He also bribed one of the guards, with chocolate and cigarettes obtained from prisoners’ Red Cross parcels, into drawing a map of the paths through the woods to Sagan railway station and providing an up-to-date railway timetable.

Throughout his time in the camp, Marcel preferred to be referred to by what he called his “cover” name, Axel, as he thought this would better enable him to travel as a Swede, should he ever get the chance to escape¹⁸. That chance occurred on the night of March 24th 1944, when Marcel and two hundred other men gathered in Hut 104 to take part in the mass-breakout that became known as “The Great Escape”.

The escapees were split into two groups. The first group of 100, which included Marcel, were called “serial offenders”; these were guaranteed a place and included those who spoke German well or had a history of escapes, plus an additional 70 men considered to have put in the most work on the tunnels. The second group of 100, considered to have very little chance of success, had to draw lots to determine inclusion¹⁹.

The escape did not go well. Between 9pm at night and 5am the following morning, only 76 of the two hundred had made their way along tunnel “Harry” and out into the woods beyond. Then, due to a signalling error, the 77th man emerged from the tunnel just as a guard passed by.

Marcel might have stood a good chance of getting away but, although he was close to entering the tunnel, his opportunity was lost when the escape broke down. This is his account of what happened next²⁰:

I cannot describe what it was like when it finally broke. The Germans were absolutely livid, there were dogs rushing around the camp and guards were pouring in from all over the place.

There was still around 150 PoWs left in the hut at the time we heard shots being fired. People came pouring down the tunnel telling everybody, ‘it’s all over’.

Once I realised that the escape had broken I just leapt out of the hut. I ran as fast as I could and jumped through the window into my own room.

The window must have been 5ft off the ground, but I shot straight through it.

The Great Escape was over.

Of the 76 that got out of the tunnel, all but three were recaptured. None of the three were able to return to their own country until after the end of the war (two Norwegians spent the rest of the war in neutral Sweden; and a Dutchman travelled across Germany and occupied France, reaching Spain where he sought refuge in the British Embassy in Madrid).

50 of the escapees were subsequently executed by the Gestapo¹⁵.

Marcel remained at Stalag Luft III until the end of the war: the German authorities unaware of his role in the escape.

Towards the end of the war, with the Russians closing-in from the east, the prisoners were force-marched out of the camp. At the first stop, Marcel and four others escaped into the woods and returned to the camp which, by then, was full of refugees^{20,21}. They were subsequently liberated by the Welsh Guards²².

The post-war years

Once the war ended, the surviving Zillessen children returned home to Farnhill.

Marcel's return, on VE Day itself, was reported in the Craven Herald²⁵. No mention was made of his role in the Great Escape, which he never spoke about publicly.

For Geraldine, it is likely that the war ended a little earlier than for the others. On June 24th 1944, she married an American serviceman, John George Condon; and in June 1945, gave birth to a son, Michael.

Throughout the war the people of Farnhill gave their support to those who were in the services and regular gifts of money were distributed by, amongst others, the Methodist Chapel²³. Just before the end of the war, the Parish Council launched a "Welcome Home Fund" – with Eric Zillessen as its secretary. They set themselves a fund-raising target of £1000, which represented £10 for each of the 100 men and women of the two villages who served during the war.

Following the privations of the war, the two villages seemed to enjoy themselves raising the money and there are reports in the local newspapers of many fund raising events. Even the children of the village got involved³⁰.

Six school-children: Colin Walmsley, Jack Parker, Geoffrey Allen, Max Parker, Norman Jennings, Leslie Allen and Jill Walmsley have been going round Farnhill with a comic horse and have this week raised £1 5s for the Kildwick and Farnhill Welcome Home Fund.

Perhaps the largest event was a Garden Party, held at Kildwick Hall on July 7th 1945. It seems likely that at least four members of the Zillessen family attended this event. It was reported in the Keighley News³¹.

Welcome Home

Kildwick Hall Scene of Pretty Garden Party

A highly-successful effort by the Kildwick and Farnhill Welcome Home Committee took the form of a garden party and social gathering, held at Kildwick Hall on Saturday, by kind permission of Mrs. Sharpe ... the openers were Gunner Clarence Moore and Flight-Lieutenant Marcel Zillessen, both ex-prisoners of war, who expressed the delight it gave them to be free men once more ... Mr. E Zillessen, secretary of the fund, thanked Mrs. Sharpe for her kind hospitality.

A baby show attracted a large number of contestants from a wide area, and the awards ... were: Up to six months, 1. Maureen Watkinson; 2. Michael Condon. Six to 12 months, 1. Ian Armstrong; 2. Graham Hodgson. Twelve months to two years, 1. Neville Barrett; 2. Colin Waugh.

During the afternoon and evening selections were rendered on the lawn by the Skipton Prize Band, under the direction of Mr. Wilkinson, and costume dances were given by Miss Irene Ogden (Keighley) and her pupils. About 500 sat down to tea, served by ladies interested in the effort. There was a home and produce stall, and sideshows included a treasure hunt, throwing at the wicket, quoits,, and a "Mystic Lady". Donkey and pony rides, supervised by John Hargreaves, Dennis Wilcock, Frank Barrett, and Cedric Lister, were very popular ...

The day's proceedings ended with a dance in the Kildwick and Farnhill Institute which was very largely attended. The sum of £89 was raised by the day's proceedings for the Welcome Home fund effort, which now stands at over £200 towards the target of £1000.

On April 27th 1946, the fund held the first of two events at which a cheque for £10 was presented to each of those who had been "demobbed", and also to the families of those who had died on active service.

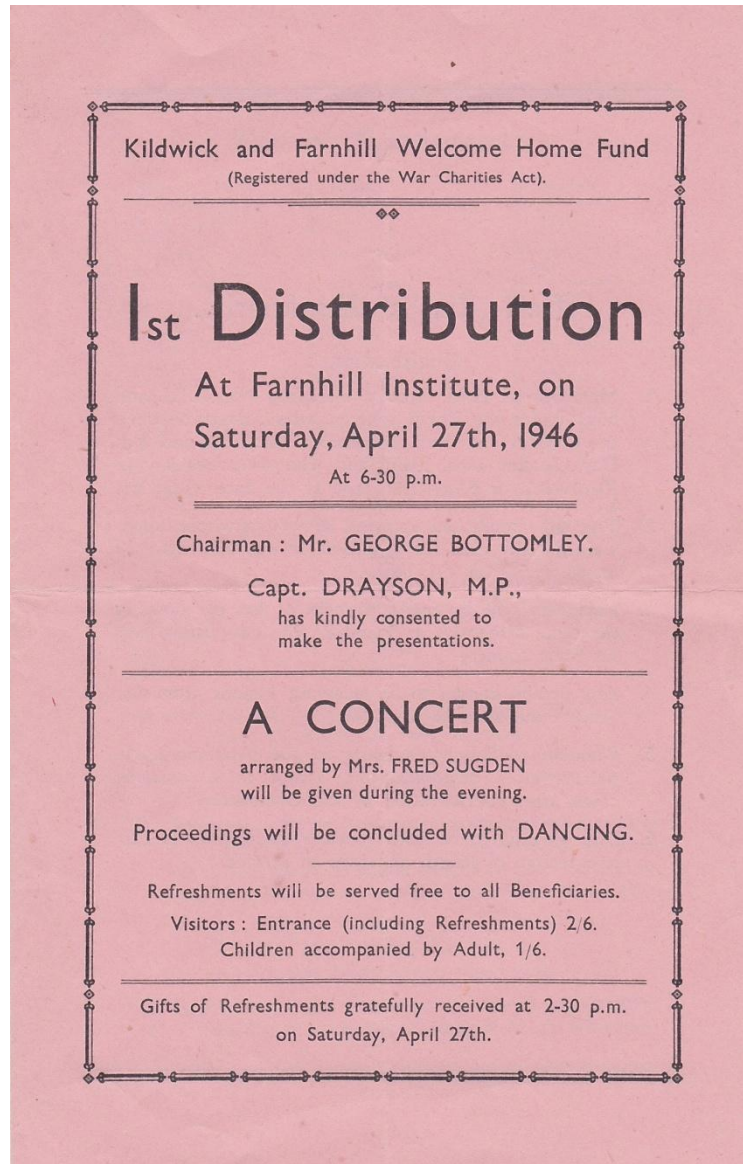


Figure 10: Programme for the first distribution from the Kildwick and Farnhill Welcome Home Fund

The list of beneficiaries, which probably forms a definitive list of all those who were called-up from Kildwick and Farnhill during WWII, includes the names of the four Zillessen children.

List of Beneficiaries :		
W. Allen	J. Heaton	K. Simpson
R. Armistead (A.T.S.)	E. Hicks	Percy Slater
C. D. H. Bartlett	M. Hill	A. Smith
R. Baxter	T. Hodgson	J. N. Smith
M. Beedom	Leslie Holmes	Richard Smith
K. Bell (W.A.A.F.)	A. Horner	Stanley Smith
W. E. Bennett	J. Hutchinson	R. Stephenson
J. Blakesley	J. Jones	H. Sugden
H. Blakesley	Clifford Kitson	D. Sugden
L. Blakesley	Chas. Kitson	E. L. Taylor
R. Blakesley	J. Kitson	A. Thompson
T. Blakesley	S. Kirk	J. Tillotson
H. Boothman	D. Lister	S. Tillotson
J. Bracken	A. Lofthouse	E. Tidswell
F. Butterfield	A. Lofthouse (A.T.S.)	R. Walkden
J. Carter	H. Longmoore	G. Walker
L. Clarkson	L. Lonsdale	A. Walmsley
G. M. Condon (Q.A.I.N.S.)	R. Lonsdale	W. H. Wass
G. Croft	C. Loughenbury	H. Ward
H. Crossley	C. Moore	N. Ward
H. Critchley	L. Moore	D. Ward (A.T.S.)
F. Earnshaw	W. Moore	G. Waterhouse
G. W. Fletcher	W. Marklew	C. E. Whiteoak
D. Foster	B. Overend	J. Whitaker
A. Gill	B. Parker	R. Wilson
H. Greenwood	H. Pollard	F. Windle
C. Happs	W. Rishworth	J. Windle
D. Hargreaves	D. Robinson (A.T.S.)	H. Whittaker
A. O. Hartley	G. Sharpe	M. E. Zillessen
J. Hayton	K. H. Sharpe	T. Zillessen
K. Haworth	L. C. Sharpe	
Payments will be made to the next of kin of those who gave their lives for this country:—		
G. Teal	W. Bracken	E. Holmes
J. Bancroft	W. H. Emmott	T. Gill
E. Bracken	W. H. Zillessen	

Figure 11: List of beneficiaries from the Kildwick and Farnhill Welcome Home Fund.

The event was reported in the Craven Herald²⁷.

“Welcome Home” Cheques of £10

Memorable Kildwick and Farnhill Ceremony

Fifty-three returned Servicemen and women of Farnhill, at a public gathering on Saturday evening, received at the hands of Mr. G. H. Drayson, Skipton’s M.P., who also served in the Royal Artillery throughout the war, an envelope containing a cheque for £10, and an illuminated card with the following inscription:

*“In recognition of the devoted service you rendered to your country during the war 1939-45.
May you live long to enjoy the fruits of victory.”*

The gifts were possible through the generosity of the people of Kildwick and Farnhill in building-up a Welcome Home Fund. Last year, on May 10, a meeting of representatives of various organisations of the two villages was arranged by the Farnhill Parish Council and the Kildwick Parish Meeting to discuss the inauguration of a “Welcome Home” Fund. Officials were appointed and, at a later date, a “target” figure of £1,000 was agreed upon. Towards this £850 has already been raised. ...

Mr. George Bottomley presided over the gathering and supporting him on the platform were: the Rev. J. Knight Calvert (Chairman of the Welcome Home Fund committee), Mr. E. Zillessen (Secretary), Mr. H. Kitson (Treasurer) and Mr. and Mrs. Drayson.

Mr. Bottomley described the gathering as a memorable one for the district, for not only was it the first public presentation of its kind in the Craven area, but it gave them the opportunity of meeting the Service men and women who had given so much in the country's interests. Some of the Servicemen they would never meet again, but they thought of them with pride and affection: they knew they had done their duty and that their work was finished. The two villages answered the call nobly, and out of a population of 680 over 100 joined the Services ...

An example of the presentation cards distributed at this event is shown below.



Figure 12: An example of the Welcome Home Fund's commemoration card – this one presented to the late Arthur Lofthouse. The signatures include that of Eric Zillessen, secretary of the fund

A list of the attendees included in the Craven Herald, but not reproduced here, shows that Marcel was the only one of the Zillessen children present at this event. However, Theo attended the second event that took place in March 1947, when Eric Zillessen made the presentations.

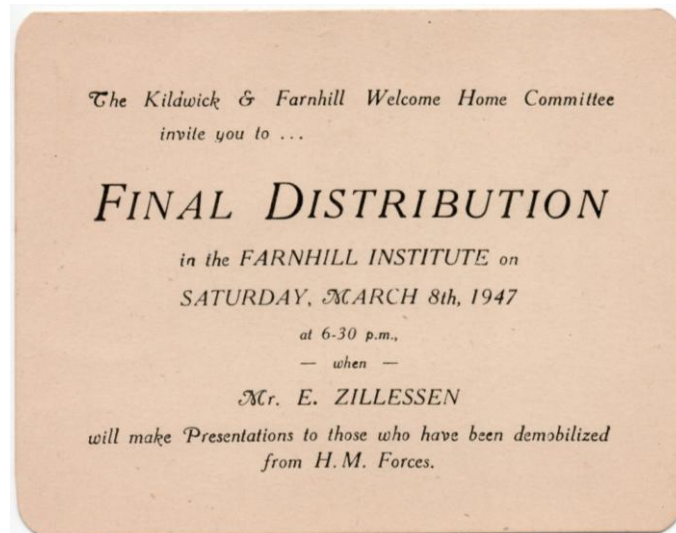


Figure 13: Invitation card for the Kildwick and Farnhill Welcome Home Fund “Final Distribution”

This event was also reported by the Craven Herald²⁸:

FARNHILL

“Welcome Home” Gifts – *The second distribution of gifts in connection with the Kildwick and Farnhill “Welcome Home” scheme was made at a gathering in Farnhill Methodist School on Saturday. The first distribution was made on April 27, 1946, when 55 ex-servicemen and women received their gifts. The fund commenced in the previous May and the “target” figure of £1000 was realised in less than 16 months. On Saturday each of 27 ex-service personnel received an envelope containing a cheque for £10 ...*

The Rev. J. Knight Calvert, chairman of the “Welcome Home” committee presided and supporting him on the platform were Mr. E. Zillessen (secretary) and Mr. H. Kitson (treasurer) ...

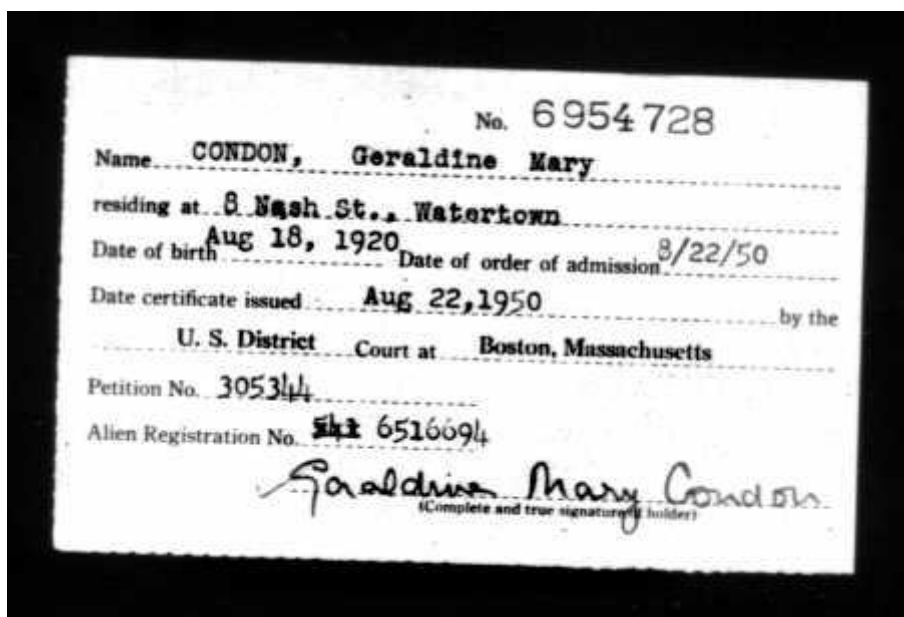
Mr. E. Zillessen then presented the cheques, shaking hands with and speaking to each recipient. He said that he was very gratified at being asked to make the presentations. It had been a labour of love in raising the money for the fund and he was indebted to the officials and members of the committee for their splendid efforts ...

No further public presentation of gifts will be made. Demobilised service men and women who have not yet had their gifts and those still serving with the Forces will receive them privately.

Geraldine did not attend either of the Distribution events. At the end of March 1946 she and her young son, Michael, had set sail for the USA aboard the Queen Mary, arriving in New York on April 4th. (Presumably her husband John was already in the States.)

Her mother Rosetta and brother Theo travelled out to the States, for a visit, early in 1948: they are both recorded as arriving in New York on January 17th 1948 and returning to Liverpool on April 10th 1948. In addition, Marcel is recorded as arriving in Liverpool from New York on December 3rd 1948; although when he travelled out is not known.

Geraldine became a US citizen in August 1950.

A black and white photograph of a naturalization document for Geraldine Mary Condon. The document is a rectangular card with a white background and black text. It contains the following information: No. 6954728; Name CONDON, Geraldine Mary; residing at 8 Nash St., Watertown; Date of birth Aug 18, 1920; Date of order of admission 8/22/50; Date certificate issued Aug 22, 1950; by the U. S. District Court at Boston, Massachusetts; Petition No. 305344; Alien Registration No. 541 6516094; and a signature of Geraldine Mary Condon with the text (Complete and true signature of holder) below it.

No. 6954728

Name CONDON, Geraldine Mary

residing at 8 Nash St., Watertown

Date of birth Aug 18, 1920 Date of order of admission 8/22/50

Date certificate issued Aug 22, 1950 by the

U. S. District Court at Boston, Massachusetts

Petition No. 305344

Alien Registration No. 541 6516094

Geraldine Mary Condon
(Complete and true signature of holder)

Figure 14: Geraldine Condon's naturalization document

She died in Florida as recently as 2010, just a few days short of her 90th birthday – the last surviving member of her generation²⁹.

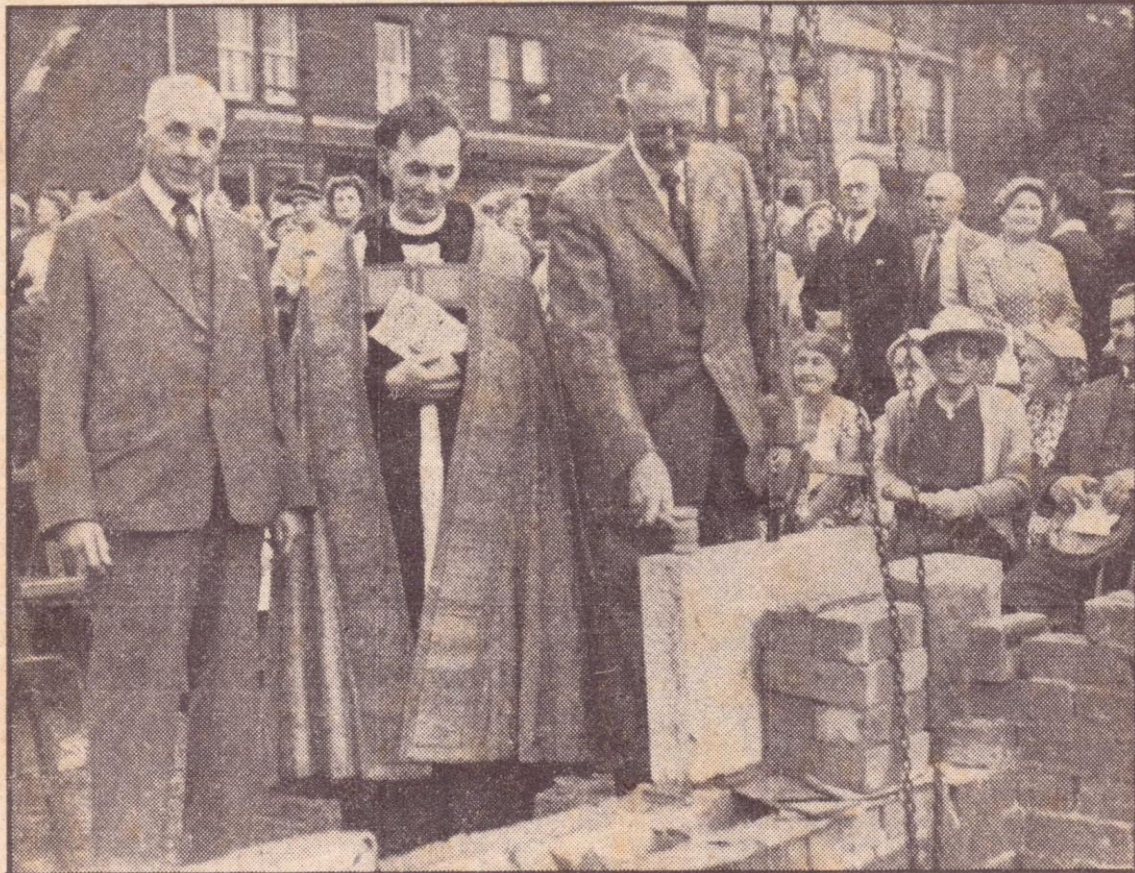
There is evidence that Eric and Rosetta Zillessen continued to live in Farnhill until at least the end of 1949. When the Kildwick estate was broken up and sold at auction on November 9th, the details for Lot 6, which included property and land at the junction of Grange Road and Starkey Lane, show that Eric Zillessen was renting just over 300 square metres of land at a cost of 2s per annum³².

At some point in the early 1950s the Zillessens left Farnhill and moved to Bingley.

However, Eric maintained a link to Kildwick Church and, in 1955, he laid the foundation stone for the new Parish Hall erected in Station Road, Crosshills. (The building is now the warehouse of Viamed Ltd.)

THE KEIGHLEY NEWS, SATURDAY, AUGUST 27, 1955

CROSS HILLS STONE LAYING



Laying the foundation stone of the new church hall of Kildwick St. Andrew's Church which is being erected at Cross Hills. The stone was laid by Mr. E. Zillessen, of Bingley, one of the founder-members of the Friends of Kildwick Church. Also in the picture are the Rev. S. A. Selby, Vicar of Kildwick, and Mr. G. Green, who presided.

Figure 15: Eric Zillessen laying the Parish Hall foundation stone

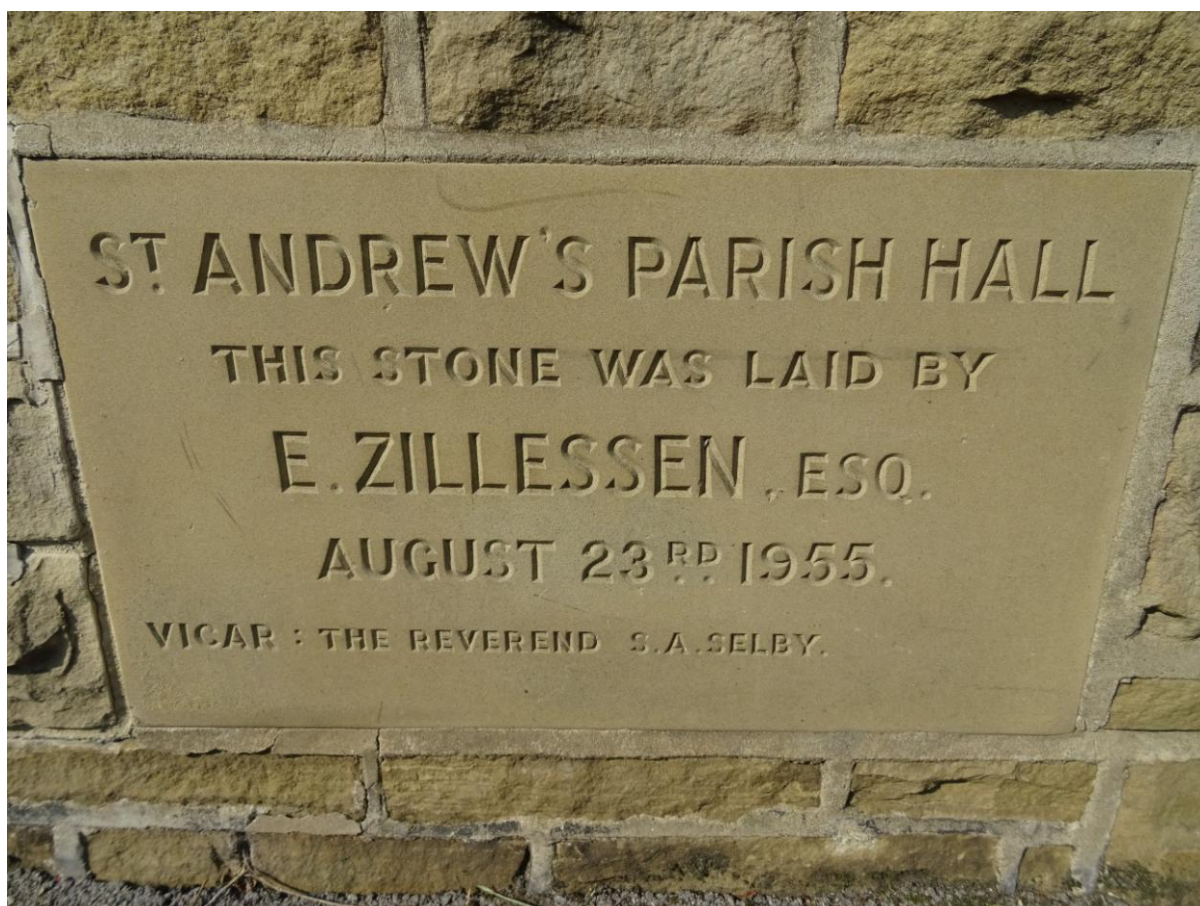


Figure 16: The Parish Hall foundation stone. With thanks to the staff of Viamed Ltd.

Rosetta Zillessen died in 1970, and Eric in 1975.

After the war Marcel resumed working for his father's company. He later moved to a wool company in Darlington.

By the 1970s he had left the wool trade and opened a chain of fast-food restaurants throughout the North-East. He subsequently retired to Robin Hood's Bay, where he ran a bed and breakfast establishment with his wife²⁴.

Marcel Eric Zillessen, hero of the Great Escape and former resident of Farnhill, died at Robin Hood's Bay on January 8th 1999.

References

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- 29 <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/floridatoday/obituary.aspx?n=geraldine-condon&pid=145983953>

30 Keighley News, June 9th 1945

31 Keighley News, July 14th 1945

32 Hollis & Webb auction catalogue, 1949; copy in the possession of the History Group

Acknowledgements

The Farnhill Local History Group would like to thank Marcel and Keith Bunnett for suggesting this article and supplying information on the Zillessen family in Farnhill. Keith was a close friend of Theo Zillessen, and named his son Marcel after Marcel Zillessen.

The documents shown in Figures 10, 11 and 12 were loaned by John Lofthouse, from his late father's papers: the photograph shown in Figure 1 and the business card shown in Figure 2 have been found recently amongst papers belong his grandfather, Herman Lofthouse, who was a member of Kildwick Home Guard.

Additional information and the invitation card shown in Figure 13 was provided by Helen Moran, who also did some of the archive research.

Considerable assistance was provided by the staff of:

- Skipton Public Library
- Keighley Public Library
- Darlington Public Library
- Eden Camp, North Yorkshire
- and the staff of Viamed Ltd, Station Road, Crosshills