

WWII Evacuees and POWs

During WWII around 100 local young men and women left Farnhill and Kildwick, to serve with the forces; most, no doubt, wishing at some time or other that they were back home.

At the same time, there were two groups of people who came to Farnhill and Kildwick who also would probably rather have been elsewhere: they were evacuees and POWs.

Evacuees

The official evacuation of civilian population, particularly children, from major cities in the UK began even before the official outbreak of the war. In all, over 3.5 million individuals were officially relocated¹. The number of unofficial relocations – children sent to live with family members in the country, for example – is not known.

We know of several groups of evacuees who came to Farnhill and Kildwick:

- Mrs Hall and her young son Tommy were billeted at Boxtree Farm following their evacuation from the East End of London soon after the war began; Tommy being just two or three years old at that time. Later they were housed with other evacuees in the Old Post Office in Kirkgate.
- Pupils from Brighton Boys Grammar School were billeted at various locations around Skipton, and attended Ermysted's Grammar School. They included: Victor Deacon who lived with Mr and Mrs Denton at Middleton House, opposite Boxtree Farm, and Ronnie Groves who lived at Farnhill Hall Farm with Mr and Mrs Boothman. They were known collectively as "The Varndean boys" – the location of their school in Brighton².

For one child, sadly, Farnhill did not prove to be a place of safety³.

CANAL TRAGEDY

Evacuee Drowned At Farnhill

That he "Accidentally fell into the canal and was drowned" was the verdict at an inquest conducted by the Craven Coroner (Mr. Edgar Wood) at Farnhill on Tuesday on a child evacuee, Neil Benton, aged six years, whose body was recovered from the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Farnhill on Sunday.

Evidence of identification was given by the child's mother, Elsie Benton, wife of George H. Benton, now residing at 9, Mary Street, Farnhill. When the boy left home, she said, he mentioned that he was going out to play.

Dorothy Mary Simpson, 11, Newby Road, Farnhill, spoke of seeing on Sunday afternoon two children playing on the canal bank. One was the dead boy and the other was named Gordon Allen. They were reaching over the water with sticks. About 2.55 p.m. Allen came to her and said that his companion had fallen into the canal. She went to tell the boy's mother.

FIVE FEET OF WATER

Police-constable Paver said that having heard there were a lot of people on the canal bank, he went to the spot. There was no sign of the child in the water, so he stripped and went in. He found him at about 3.45 p.m. in water five feet deep, near to the place where the child was said to have fallen in. The officer added that there were small fish in the canal and children went there to catch them.

Dr. Alexander Barr said death was due to drowning. When he arrived on the scene artificial respiration had been applied by Police-Sergeant Marsh and Police-constable Paver, and was continued for a further half-hour, but without avail.

POWs

Camp 60, located at Overdale Park in Skipton (now the site of the mobile home park), held a mixture of Italian and German WWII POWs^{4, 5}

Author's Note: A number of Italian POWs housed at Overdale had previously been held on Lamb Holm, a small island at the eastern entrance of Scapa Flow in Orkney, where they were employed in the construction of the Churchill Barriers⁶. While there, they built their own place of worship within the camp: the beautiful and serene Italian Chapel⁷.

As was usual, many of the Overdale POWs were used locally as farm labour – for which they received a small payment in the form of tokens that could be spent in the camp⁸. In her book, the first chapter of which describes the life of a German POW in Overdale, Pamela Howe Taylor writes⁹:

Groups of prisoners could sometimes be seen working in the fields, and crocodiles of young men in drab clothing were escorted, from time to time, through the town centre ...

We have reports of at least two groups of Italian POWs working on farms in Farnhill.

POWs at Farnhill Hall Farm



This photograph shows Italian POWs, under the watchful eye of Herman Lofthouse (far right), with Craven Manor in the distance.

The fact that they are wearing berets with cap badges, rather than the mop-caps that were the usual POW headgear perhaps suggests that this photograph was taken after the Italian surrender in early September 1943?¹⁰

POWs at Boxtree Farm

One of our contributors, Margaret Chapman (nee Rushton), describes how close the relationship between POWs and the local population could get.

My father farmed at Boxtree Farm during the Second World War and we had an Italian POW working on the farm, doing general farm work. He slept and ate at the farm: initially sleeping in the room above the dairy, but when winter came he slept in the house.

He was based at a camp outside Skipton, and had the use of a bicycle to get from camp to the farm.

Ultimately my father had to ask for his removal from the farm as he formed an inappropriate relationship with my mother.

Can you help us further ?

Do you have any further details of the evacuees or POWs that came to Farnhill and Kildwick ? If so, please email us at history@farnhill.co.uk

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The photograph of POWs working at Farnhill Hall Farm was loaned by John Lofthouse.

References

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