



Work detail under guard, June 1940

GLEN MILL: THE INTERNATIONAL HISTORY OF A LOCAL POW CAMP DURING WORLD WAR II

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If the story of Britain's servicemen taken prisoner and held by the enemy in the Second World War has been built into the nation's consciousness, primarily through a series of best selling books and popular films, the same cannot be said about the several hundred thousand Axis prisoners captured by the Allies and brought to the United Kingdom. In spite of their numbers, with the exception of memoirs written by those involved, and a few scholarly works, their history remains shrouded in mystery. In part, this is the fault of post-war British governments which, either by accident or design, have lost or destroyed most of the documentation which would have allowed historians to gain a clear picture of the prisoners and what befell them. As a result, individual case studies take on an added importance by allowing the remaining official records to be compared and contrasted with local information to provide both a reflection of the general history of POWs in Britain, and also some insight into the workings of a particular camp, in this case one in the industrial heartland of North-West England.

There could be no better choice of example than Glen Mill in Lees near Oldham.¹ Here the camp was one of the first two to be opened, in the late autumn of 1939, and remained in continuous use as a POW camp until the end of September 1947.² As a result, its history can be seen as a microcosm of the entire history of Axis POWs in Britain from the early days of war in September 1939 to the final re-education and repatriation programmes of the post-war years. Perhaps

because of its size and length of occupation, sources on its history are more abundant than for other camps. The sheer numbers of men who passed through, or were held there for longer periods has more or less ensured that some remembrances of the camp exist. More fortunate still is the existence of reminiscences from one of the captors, Major Walter James, the camp commander from January 1945 until 1946.³ In addition, the post-war local press carried stories about the camp and its population, and occasional items continue to appear when former inmates visit the town or wartime anniversaries are celebrated.⁴ The discovery of film taken in and around the camp during June 1940 at the Imperial War Museum gives an even clearer picture of what conditions for the prisoners were like and formed the basis for a television programme in July 1989.⁵ Although far from a complete record, even this level of information cannot be matched in the official records. Nearly all the camp and relevant guard unit diaries have been destroyed, and the few examples which remain contain very little of value. The more general War Office and Foreign Office files (the two ministries most closely associated with prisoners-of-war) do help with an understanding of government policy, but say little or nothing about individual camps.

Exceptionally, some of the International Red Cross (ICRC) reports on POW camps in Britain have survived in Foreign Office files, including those for Glen Mill in 1942 and 1943. These do give some indication of how the camp was organised, the types of prisoners held there, how the men

were treated and the changes which took place over time. While an invaluable source of information, the reports nevertheless have to be treated with care. The language used by the Swiss visitors was always guarded and issues always raised with the captors in the most circumspect way in order to preserve the relationship of trust between the ICRC and the British government and thus ensure continued inspections.

Glen Mill: A Conventional POW Camp

Glen Mill was first earmarked as a potential POW camp in the aftermath of the Munich crisis in September 1938 when the War Office began the search for suitable sites and buildings. Accommodation of this nature was hard to find. All purpose-built camps were already in use by the armed forces and there was no possibility of POW camp building being given a high priority. Moreover, the choice of location was heavily constrained, both by the security provisions insisted upon by the government and the terms of the 1929 Geneva Convention. As a result, sites in the south and east of the country were ruled out, as was accommodation close to military installations, war industries or seaports. These strictures did impose severe limitations and help to explain why the first two camps were located in the north west of England.⁶ Number one camp was created in the forests at Grizedale in Westmoreland to accommodate captured officers while Glen Mill was used to house other ranks and given the number two.

Built in 1903, the mill had been in more or less continuous use until its closure in 1938.⁷ Thus it was invitingly vacant when the War Office began looking for likely camp sites. The building and its surroundings were in many respects ideal, even if the accommodation was not. The mill building had four floors, each measuring around 72,000 square feet. Plenty of space to billet the expected enemy captives. The site was bordered on the west by a road and on the south by the Oldham-Greenfield railway line. The other two sides were partially or wholly bounded by reservoirs, making any attempt at tunnelling extremely hazardous. However, the mill's builders had never thought that it might be used to house POWs. The outside toilet block which had been perfectly adequate for the mill workers presented real problems when its users had to be watched by guards.

The camp was allocated a nominal capacity of 2,000 prisoners, but in the early months of the 'phoney' war British successes in capturing the enemy were few and far between. By November 1939, there were no more than 150 POWs (excluding officers) held in the United Kingdom and by March 1940, this had only increased to 257.⁸ Most of these early captives were either submariners or merchant seamen together with a very small number of non-commissioned *Luftwaffe* personnel. On Boxing Day 1939, the camp commander, Lieutenant-Colonel H.A. Dennison reported to his superiors that most of his charges were young, with 'little or no knowledge of any creed other than that of [the] Nazi-ism of Hitler's regime' and that eradicating this would undoubtedly take a long time.⁹ In spite of expressing some sympathy for the U-Boat crews who had been bombed, he noted that they recovered quickly when they realised that they were going to be treated as human beings.¹⁰

Most of the early inmates had been interrogated at the Tower of London before being brought by train to Oldham, escorted by detachments of the Grenadier guards. Once in the camp, they were the responsibility of the 6th Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, a unit made up from old soldiers

who had volunteered for the local national defence companies. Many had fought in the Great War and at least one was old enough to have seen service in the South African War.¹¹ As with all the belligerent powers, from the very beginning of the war, shortages of manpower meant that guarding POWs was left to reservists and men too old for active service. On at least one occasion a detachment of regulars was brought in to quieten the inmates who, stirred up by Nazi activists, were causing trouble. There were reports of the Germans marching around the camp perimeter singing Nazi songs. The regulars made great show of rifle drill at parades in an apparently successful attempt at intimidation.¹² Certainly, there were no further recorded reports of trouble in these early months of the war.

Exporting the Problem Overseas

The German invasion of Norway in April 1940 and France and the Low Countries the following month brought an end to the 'phoney war' and a change in the policy on captured enemy servicemen. The military catastrophe of the British expeditionary force to Norway and the rapid collapse of the Netherlands created a 'fifth column' scare in Britain which was fanned by the popular press and taken up by the newly installed Churchill government. Anxious to find excuses and explanations for this series of disasters, attention was focused on the enemy nationals at large in the country. The story of their arrest and internment has been told many times. Civilian internees were handed over to MI5 which placed them in hastily organised camps. However, this was not enough to satisfy Churchill, who made it clear that the most dangerous of these people should be deported overseas. The whole matter was turned over to the secret Home Defence (Security) Executive (HD(S)E), which brought forward concrete proposals to remove enemy aliens from the country at the end of May 1940, but also included plans to deport POWs.¹³ This development sent the Legal Department of the Foreign Office scurrying to see if such a step would breach the terms of the Geneva Convention, but Churchill and his advisers were not to be deflected. All the Dominion governments were asked to co-operate but ultimately Canada was chosen as the sole destination.¹⁴ Internees and POWs were transported to Liverpool for embarkation, including many of the submariners and other prisoners from Glen Mill who left for Quebec aboard the *SS Duchess of York* on 21 June 1940.¹⁵



Prisoners being marched away from the camp to the station at Oldham on 20 June 1940 en route to Canada. They were almost certainly carried on the *SS Duchess of York* which left Liverpool for Quebec the following day.

While the loss of another transport ship, the *SS Arandora Star* on 2 July, and the brutal treatment meted out to civilian internees,¹⁶ few of whom fitted the description of dangerous aliens, ultimately brought an end to deportation and a relaxation of internment. The policy of removing German POWs was continued and this explains the fluctuating population of Glen Mill camp. As soon as sufficient German prisoners had been accumulated in the United Kingdom, another transport was arranged to Canada. This in turn meant that there was no permanent camp population, but a constant emptying and refilling process with only a few prisoners being left behind. These were mainly protected personnel such as chaplains and medical staff who were retained in order to meet the needs of future inmates. This became the pattern for the rest of 1940 and subsequent years. As a result of the periodic deportation of German POWs to Canada, there were never more than two thousand in Britain at any one time before March 1944.¹⁷ On at least one occasion, news that the inmates of Glen Mill were to be shipped to Canada prompted a riot. Beds and furniture were reported broken, windows smashed and a piano defenestrated.¹⁸ Having little scope for direct action, the authorities' response seems to have been to allow the disturbance to run its course before trying to regain control. Although this may have seemed a weak response, it did mean that a direct confrontation with the POWs which might have led to violence was avoided. This was considered all important when any excuse might be used by the Germans to carry out retaliatory actions against British POWs.

An ICRC report of 4 March 1942 gives some idea of what life in the camp was like. The camp was still under the command of Lt. Col. Dennison and had a capacity of 1,500 men. At the time of the visit, there were only 229 NCOs and other ranks in residence, 500 prisoners having been transported to Canada the previous December. Rations were being adjusted to include more potatoes to meet the dietary preferences of the prisoners, but the supply of other foodstuffs such as meat, cheese and jam was being cut back in line with reductions in civilian rations. The men at Glen Mill had received a consignment of uniforms from Germany,

'their best Christmas present', but were continually unhappy about the time it took mail and parcels to reach them. Many of the latter seem never to have arrived at all. The mill contained its own infirmary, a library of 960 books and English classes were offered to the inmates. There were even plans for the YMCA to provide film shows. Prisoners were employed maintaining the camp, and were soon to be deployed in cultivating a four acre kitchen garden.¹⁹ Overall, the ICRC delegate reported his impression of the camp as excellent and the morale of the inmates as good.

Italian Interlude

By autumn conditions had altered dramatically. Gone were all the remaining German POWs, to be replaced by 1,575 Italians,²⁰ filling the camp to capacity. A number of local eye-witnesses recorded seeing these men in the camp but were at a loss to explain their presence.²¹ However the changing population of Glen Mill highlights a major alteration in British policy on POWs. In December 1940, British troops in North Africa under General Wavell began a series of highly successful military operations in Libya and Abyssinia. More than 60,000 Italian prisoners were taken in a very short space of time, but problems immediately arose in feeding, housing and guarding such large numbers. Moreover, the political situation in Egypt was such that enemy POWs represented a very real security threat. As a result, Wavell arranged for the transfer of POWs from the Middle East to India. This was followed by further transfers to East Africa, South Africa and Australia, the basic premise being that these men could be used for labour purposes away from war zones. This idea was picked up by officials at the British Ministry of Agriculture who were constantly short of manpower as other ministries and the armed forces took precedence. An initial scheme to import 2-3,000 Italians to work on the land was given a cautious welcome, but soon expanded to encompass the arrival of around 5,000 POWs each month. In this way the problems of POW surplus in North Africa and labour shortages in Britain were ostensibly solved at a stroke.

These plans, while driven by manpower shortages at home, did nevertheless run into problems. The authorities were constrained in their use of POWs both by the strictures imposed by the HD(S)E and War Office, and by the shortage of suitable accommodation for the new arrivals in locations close enough to the work. In total contrast to policy on German captives, the rules underwent a rapid series of ameliorations to take account of the practical realities in using the Italians effectively. While this served to solve some of the difficulties, the problem of even temporary accommodation was more intractable. This may explain why the remaining Germans were removed from Glen Mill to allow for the new arrivals.

Captured in the Libyan desert and held in huge 'cages' often for days with little food or water and no shelter, these Italian servicemen had then been taken to camps in Egypt before undergoing a selection process to ascertain if they had any agricultural skills. Those chosen were then transported from Egypt via South Africa in troopships to the United Kingdom.

Unlike the relatively small number of German POWs captured in the early years of the war, who were mainly professional sailors and airmen or totally committed to the National Socialist cause and convinced of ultimate victory, the Italians were very different. The majority were army conscripts and most felt they had been badly led and let down by their officers. However, their morale was affected



Prisoners being marched away from the camp to the station at Oldham, June 1940.

more by the conditions they had to face as prisoners. Having been captured with only their desert uniforms – and sometimes not even that – they were transported by sea through a range of climatic regions to end up in Britain, a long way removed from their normal environment, both culturally, gastronomically and meteorologically. While the early arrivals were described as 'excellent material' by the receiving authorities, those who arrived later often had fairly horrific tales to tell of their journeys to the United Kingdom. One group had been diverted via New York to get from South Africa to Liverpool, a diversion brought about by shortages of suitable shipping. Another troopship carrying Italians was torpedoed by a German U-Boat with appalling loss of life. Yet even a 'normal' journey was likely to be an ordeal. Shortages of space on board ship meant that some men stayed on deck for entire voyages, often clothed only in the vests and shorts they had been wearing in the desert. Moreover, the lack of acceptable shipboard food and the effects of sea-sickness often rendered these intercontinental travellers weak and malnourished by the time they reached British shores.²²

From an ICRC report of August 1942, it appears that Glen Mill had become one of the main reception camps for Italian POWs. On arrival, the prisoners were given a bath, their existing clothes were disinfected and new ones issued. All were given a medical inspection, and those found to be ill were conveyed to the camp infirmary. Given the nature of their passage to the United Kingdom, it is perhaps surprising how few of these men were ill, although the ICRC visitor did raise the complaint that the rations available for the inmates, while normally satisfactory, were insufficient to meet the needs of new arrivals in the camp who were genuinely malnourished after their journey. From this same report, it appears that few Italians stayed for any length of time in Glen Mill. The camp had a permanent population of only 44 prisoners who acted as cooks, medical staff and administrators. The rest were sent on to work camps, and later to individual farms in other parts of the country, usually within days rather than weeks of their arrival.²³ This may explain the accounts by local residents of Italians being seen marching through the streets of Lees, presumably to or from the Oldham railway stations.

On Loan to the Americans

By the summer 1943, as the invasion of Sicily precipitated the Italian surrender, more than 74,000 POWs had been brought to Britain to supplement the agricultural labour force.²⁴ In the meantime Glen Mill had undergone another transformation. A third surviving ICRC report shows that the camp was still being used as a transit point, but this time by the Americans for Germans in transit from North Africa to the United States.²⁵ In August 1942, the British government had asked the US to act as detaining power for 50,000 or more prisoners in their hands. Although little came of this arrangement, the US involvement in the Tunisian campaign brought an agreement that all the prisoners being taken by the Allied forces in this theatre of operations should be divided between the powers.²⁶ While this took some of the pressure off British resources, the Americans still needed transit facilities for 'their' prisoners and most spent some time in Britain waiting for passage across the Atlantic in returning troopships. While the camp itself appears to have remained under British command, American GIs were certainly used to guard the Germans to and from the railway stations.²⁷ This particular chore was rendered unnecessary later in the war when a platform was built on the adjacent Oldham-Greenfield railway line.²⁸

A Change of Plan: Keeping the German POWs in Britain

The opening of the second front and the Allied invasion of Normandy brought yet another change for Glen Mill. Although some German prisoners taken in the time immediately after D-Day had to be taken across the Channel, it had been the intention to keep captives in France. However, a series of factors conspired to make this impossible. The Allied forces were desperately short of accommodation for the large numbers of prisoners being captured as they moved through Northern France and into Belgium. There was also a real threat of disease breaking out in these areas. One solution had been to hand over POWs to the French to act as a detaining power. This proved to be a mistake, as it quickly became apparent that the French treatment of the POWs was anything but satisfactory and Churchill's War Cabinet, worried about German reprisals against British POWs, made hasty arrangements to bring more of the captives to Britain.²⁹ This in turn complicated matters at home.



Accommodation for the ranks. Bunks in serried ranks on the mill floor.

In spite of the Italian surrender, the British had continued to import Italian POWs from other parts of the Empire for use as labour.³⁰ Although most of these men now had co-operator status and could therefore be kept outside camps, the huge American presence in the country put accommodation at a premium. Some limited use of German POWs as labour had begun in January 1944, but the only way to find enough space for the numbers of Germans being captured in North West Europe was to stop any further import of Italians and bring every available camp into service. The aim was to get all the remaining Italians to opt for co-operator status so that they could be moved out of camps to make way for the incoming Germans, who still had to be guarded and treated according to the terms of the Geneva Convention. Thus they could only be required to do agricultural and other non-war work. Although Glen Mill was not in an area which could usefully employ large quantities of agricultural labour, it was nevertheless reclaimed from the Americans in September 1944, and renumbered as No.176.³¹

The period between the last months of 1944 and the summer of 1945 was probably the busiest in the camp's history, and the origin of its apparent notoriety. It was designated as accommodation for potentially troublesome prisoners, and thus contained a high proportion of men in categories C and D. These were prisoners who were either known to have been subjected to Nazi teachings and served in suspect units, or ardent Nazis from the SS, Gestapo/SD Army, Navy and *Luftwaffe*. Only a few category A (reliable) men were kept in the camp to undertake administrative duties. Unlike their regular army counterparts who were largely well-behaved, the Nazis did everything in their power to disrupt the workings of the camp. The commander, Major Walter James, had to deal with a German camp hierarchy which was dominated by a militant Nazi and SS clique. The camp leader (*Lagerführer*) was their nominee and internal 'order' was enforced by fear and beatings rather than by military discipline. The British found it impossible to appoint camp leaders who would cooperate. Part of the problem was that the commander only had a limited number of sanctions which could be used against the men, and almost none which could be applied *en masse*. As it was, the camp cells only held twelve men and were invariably full. Even when punishment beatings took place, it was usually impossible to identify the culprits.³² While the victims often provided a great deal of information about the activities of the militants after their beatings, they were not prepared to divulge names. These men were invariably transferred to other camps for their own protection after treatment by the camp doctors. The information did have some effect. The British authorities became aware that the Nazis were preparing an insurrection in the event of a German invasion (which they still believed possible). All manner of equipment was discovered, including caches of arms and ammunition stored in various hiding places.

Many types of disruption were attempted inside the camp, but there were also attempted escapes. In August 1943, two German officers, *Leutnant* Wolfgang Kleibomer and *Oberleutnant* Bernhard Schweers had escaped from the camp during its time as an American transit station. They were recaptured some fifteen miles away at Ripponden.³³ However, more concerted efforts took place after the camp became a permanent home for dangerous and disaffected elements. The rush to the latrines first thing in the morning provided three men with the opportunity to rush the barbed wire fences with a home-made ladder and vault to freedom. One broke a leg on landing and the other two were recaptured after two days but even the camp commander described it as "an excellent attempt, beautifully timed".³⁴ Various attempts were made to tunnel out of the compound. Most were foiled by the tunnels collapsing or being flooded but perhaps the most successful escape took place in February 1945 when seven committed Nazis managed to make good their escape. No precise details survive but it appears that one man was recaptured at Castleton station while two others made it to Wakefield and the other four as far as Leeds.³⁵

It was an attempt to disrupt the workings of the camp which led to the most serious incident at the camp. Such was the overcrowding that any attempt at a roll call had to take place outside the perimeter fence. During the counting process on 8 February 1945, an inmate apparently tried to provoke a guard by running at him, and the soldier had fired, killing the prisoner instantly.³⁶ The victim was Paul Hartmann, an SS private, who was considered a troublemaker by his British guards. While the event served to subdue the inmates, it necessitated a formal Board of



The relative comfort of non-commissioned officers' quarters at Glen Mill Camp in 1940.

Inquiry and a degree of panic from the War Office. This shooting of a prisoner by a British soldier was possibly unique in the United Kingdom, although there were one or two other cases in other parts of the Empire. Apart from a deluge of officials from the War Office, the camp was also visited by a representative of the Swiss ambassador (on behalf of the protecting power) and the Papal Legate, complete with "opulent car flying the Papal flag".³⁷ Ultimately, in April a Coroner's Jury returned a verdict of justifiable homicide but the death had undoubtedly occurred at a critical moment for the British authorities. While the war was coming to a conclusion, there were still many thousands of British POWs in German hands, and the possibility of reprisals could still not be ruled out. Hartmann was buried with full military honours in the adjacent Greenacres cemetery.³⁸

The incident did produce some immediate changes at the camp, including ones which the camp commanders had been fruitlessly urging on the War Office for years. The compound was enlarged with a bigger exercise yard and a proper football pitch. While these improvements did make some difference, the Nazi/SS control of the camp continued. Walter James records his decision that the Germans should not have the monopoly on dirty tricks. After a particularly vicious punishment beating, three suspects were questioned. While denying the charges, they did admit to knowing the culprits and were given five minutes to deliver up their names. Failing to comply, they were taken out of the camp to the British compound from where gunfire was subsequently heard. The *Lagerführer*, having witnessed the interviews, returned to the camp convinced that the men had been shot. In fact they were immediately removed to another camp.³⁹

Even discounting the activities of the Nazis and SS men in the camp, overcrowding had undoubtedly been a problem, both for the guards and the inmates. While it had been a transit camp, there had been little complaint, not least because few people stayed there more than a few months. Moreover, the building was never remotely filled. After 1944, prisoners were brought into the camp and formed a relatively permanent population. Nationally, accommodation was in such short supply that the site had to be made to house more than six thousand men – a fourfold increase in numbers fitted into the same building. In order to do this, three tiered bunks were installed on three floors of the mill, so close together that it was barely possible to walk between them. The top floor contained the hospital, but such was the shortage of space that 400

officers had to live in tents in an adjoining compound.⁴⁰ A local paper soon after the war described the camp as "grim and forbidding with unpretentious tower and smoke-blackened walls and frowning chimney stack",⁴¹ and former prisoners were no more complimentary. Siegfried Gabler recalled that,

I've seen Colditz on the television and, believe me, it was a holiday camp compared with Oldham... There were 5,000 of us in the camp and there was no garden – just one little street – and loads of barbed wire. No one dreamt of running away. We saw nothing of the outside world. All we could see was a graveyard. [Greenacres Cemetery] Funerals were the only excitement we had.⁴²

Given the events described above, this may be something of an overstatement, but from the available accounts it is clear that the tactics of the British guards and improvements in conditions could not really change the attitudes of the prisoners. The committed Nazis continued to believe in ultimate victory and the rest of the camp population suffered from the extremism of their colleagues and the essential boredom of camp life. Wood from bunks was used to make chess sets and toys, lessons were provided on every subject, almost invariably by highly qualified university professors rather than 'ordinary' teachers. Only the clothing and food was accepted as exceeding the norms for POWs. The staple diet consisted of porridge with raisins for breakfast, cabbage with Australian mutton for lunch and porridge again, with sausages and bread in the evening. Sundays were special in that mashed potatoes and doughnuts were provided as well.⁴³ Boredom and the lack of space undoubtedly took their toll on prisoner morale, as did the dominance of the Nazi factions. Such was the commitment of the extremists, they even refused to believe that the war was over and only accepted the truth when blackout restrictions were rescinded.⁴⁴

The Final Phase: Denazification and Re-education

The end of the war in Europe marked the beginning of the final chapter in the use of Glen Mill as a POW camp. Once the inmates had come to terms with Germany's defeat, their conduct was 'exemplary'. A whole series of cultural activities were begun. The inmates seem to have included a large number of men from the liberal professions sufficient to staff a completely professional theatre company and a camp orchestra, supplemented by a tenor from the Brunswick State Opera.⁴⁵ How these apparently harmless



Exercise in the abandoned mill. The men could also take turns in completing the camp jigsaw.

individuals had been posted to Glen Mill remains unclear. It is possible that the British authorities regarded these intellectuals as dangerous and too much of a security risk to be let out, but more likely that they were just considered as useless to serve in an (agricultural) labour force. No longer so much of a security risk, some of the men volunteered to work in the locality, building roads and houses, working on farms and military depots.⁴⁶ For the first time, the people of Oldham had the opportunity to meet their former enemies. May 1945 was a watershed in more ways than one. Right up until the last days of the war, the British authorities had insisted that there be no fraternisation between German POWs and the civilian population. (This would have been difficult anyway in the case of Glen Mill where the men were not normally employed outside the camp). This ruling was reinforced on more than one occasion in the last months of hostilities as concentration camps were liberated in Europe and the full horror of Nazi crimes was brought home to the rest of the world. Perhaps the people of Oldham did not need reminders of who the enemy were as a flying bomb fell on the Abbeyhills district of the town on Christmas Eve 1944, killing 19 adults and 8 children.⁴⁷ That said, there had been isolated incidents of people helping the POWs. Some mill girls had apparently collected money to provide the camp inmates with cigarettes early in the war,⁴⁸ and another woman befriended a POW detailed to clear snow during the winter of 1944. According to her account, she also managed to put him into civilian clothing and take him to Belle Vue for the day! If the date and story are accurate, it suggests a degree of laxity in the guarding of the prisoners which is not evident from other accounts. However, the most well-known case of civilians helping the POWs is that of Mabel Blagborough. She was given the title 'the angel of Glen Mill' by the inmates for her single-handed attempts to improve their lot, both before and after the war ended. What began with the throwing of teacakes and cigarettes over the barbed wire fence in 1944 graduated to pestering the camp authorities and writing to such disparate people as the Queen of the Netherlands and Stalin.⁴⁹ While this fraternisation with the enemy may not have won universal approval, it does seem that when individuals encountered the prisoners face to face, sometimes the humanitarian impulse won out over the fear and loathing for a hated enemy.

Quite rapidly, the main purpose of the camp switched from imprisonment to denazification and re-education. While the British government was keen to use the Germans as a labour force in the short term, the ultimate aims was to send the men home, suitably de-programmed from Nazism and re-educated into the benefits of democracy. One important aspect of this work was the screening process to weed out any individuals who might have committed war crimes before their capture. Intelligence officers from the Control Commission for Germany and Austria were posted to the camp to interview all the inmates. After this they were 'politically' graded and either remained at Glen Mill or were sent on to other camps for work, re-education and eventual repatriation.⁵⁰

The denazification and re-education process took several forms. Apart from the screening by Control Commission representatives, there were other ways in which re-education was carried out, both officially and unofficially. As the POWs were used as labour outside the camp, so they came more and more into contact with local people. Contemporary accounts suggest that the thaw in relations between residents and their erstwhile enemies took some time. However, individual prisoners did strike up friendships with employers

and other people they met. One man who visited the camp regularly made friends with a prisoner and invited him to spend Christmas Day 1945 with him and his family. This seems to have been an unusual occurrence in 1945, but by 1946, Oldham families were being actively encouraged to invite prisoners to have Christmas meals with them.⁵¹ In the meantime, the conditions of imprisonment had been gradually relaxed in all manner of ways as the immediate memory of the war receded. Shaw Salvation Army Band and the Oldham Tabernacle Choir gave concerts at the camp. The permanent inmates were allowed to take walks within a five-mile radius of the camp and enter public buildings such as libraries, museums and churches. (Public houses, cinemas and cafes remained out of bounds.) In addition, both Oldham Athletic Football Club and Oldham Rugby League Club had invited prisoners to their matches.⁵² In this latter case, it may have been a reciprocal gesture for the prisoners' efforts in helping to clear the Watersheddings pitch of snow.⁵³

The removal of many of the long-term inmates ultimately created room for new arrivals. By 1947, the process of repatriating deportees from Canada and the United States had begun. Glen Mill once again became a transit camp, this time screening and denazifying those men who had been transported across the Atlantic earlier in the conflict. Unlike the small remaining permanent population of the camp who could undertake paid work and leave the compound to go for walks, visit shops and travel on buses,⁵⁴ the prisoners in transit had no such privileges. A journalist visiting the camp in January 1947 described some of these men:

...streams of stiff unbending figures, faces masked in blank, immobile lines, and distant, expressionless eyes, outwardly mindless, soulless automatons.... a glum taciturn dour company who apparently saw not, nor wanted to be seen.⁵⁵

The same commentator was nevertheless inclined to be optimistic.

If appearances are not deceptive, and if this contrast of the friendly prisoners who have been in our midst for some appreciable time with these silent men from Canada means anything, it is that contact with English ways, customs and people is having some influence on the final extinction of the Nazi creed. If that is really so there is some encouragement for those who advocate more fraternisation between our captives and ourselves.⁵⁶

Between 1945 and 1947 some of the barriers and some of the animosities between the prisoners and the people of Oldham were broken down. The process of building bridges was assisted by the recognition that 'the enemy' was human. Increased prisoner access to the local community, designed to convert them to the democratic way of life, also led to fraternisation and even some romantic attachments.

Final Analysis

As the final prisoners were brought back from North America, the decision was made to close Glen Mill at the end of September 1947 and transfer the remaining inmates back to Germany or to other camps in the United Kingdom. The decision was again based more on pragmatic considerations than any idea that all the war criminals had been identified, or that every POW had been imbued with a love of democratic institutions. Essentially the escalation of the Cold War, the gradual return to peacetime normality and the increasing use of civilian immigrants to supplement the labour force created the climate in which these last remnants of Britain's POW population could be sent home.

So ended an eight-year history, during which time this one camp had played a part in more or less every major facet of changing British policy towards Axis prisoners of war.



"For you, the war is over". Prisoners in step contemplate life behind barbed wire (which also doubled as a washing line).



German POWs attempting to clear the pitch at a snowbound Watersheddings on Friday 31 January 1947. All their efforts were in vain as a further fall overnight forced the Saturday game against Leigh to be postponed.

Beginning as a permanent camp for other ranks, it became successively; a holding point for Germans who were sent on to Canada, a receiving station for Italians being brought to Britain, a transit camp for prisoners of the Americans being sent across the Atlantic, a permanent home for German captives again, and then finally a denazification and re-education centre. Its local notoriety stemmed primarily from the prisoners held in the camp; ideologically committed NCOs, sailors and submariners early in the war, those considered politically or militarily unsuitable for work later on. The very nature of this type of camp population made disruption and disorder almost inevitable, especially when it was combined with the gross overcrowding experienced in the nine months leading up to the war's end. Conditions were certainly worse than in some other camps, but it was primarily the militant nature of the Nazi and SS contingent which did most to earmark the camp as a trouble spot. Indeed, it seems likely that the War Office deliberately used this particular location as a dump for troublemakers – thinking it was better to concentrate the problem cases rather than spread them out. The transitory nature of the camp's inmates prior to 1944 helps to explain why there were few disturbances in the early years of the war. After September of that year, the existence of a permanent population looking at an open-ended stay in the camp allowed militant elements to take control and for tensions to build. Under the circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that there were not more incidents like the one involving the unfortunate Paul Hartmann.

In some important respects however, the history of Glen Mill does not provide an accurate picture of British policy. The arrival of the Italians at the same time that Germans were still being sent overseas as too dangerous does show the contrasting British view of the German and Italian enemy. Later on, for purely pragmatic reasons, the perception of German POWs also changed. From being regarded initially as uniformly dangerous, there was a move towards rehabilitation of some captured enemy soldiers which would allow for their use to carry out work permitted by the Geneva Convention, even to the point of being employed without supervision. The selection and categorisation of prisoners meant that the criminal (SS) and politically unreliable elements had to remain locked up, and this explains the unrepresentative make-up of the camp population of Glen Mill in the last months of the war.

Finally, this history also demonstrates that even in a camp apparently dominated by Nazi militants, there were many ordinary men, probably wrongly categorised by the British, perhaps pleased to be out of the war, but also frustrated by years of imprisonment, and after the war's end, worried about their future and keen to return home to their families. This very ordinariness may help to explain why, even before it was officially sanctioned and approved, some of the local people began to see the POWs, not as enemies but as fellow human beings. Not everyone in the community saw this as right or appropriate, especially those who had suffered personal losses as a result of the war. Nonetheless, the gradual introduction of the POWs into British (or in this case Oldham) civilian life, became one of the stepping stones towards at least partial reconciliation.

NOTES

- 1 The author would like to thank the staffs of the Imperial War Museum, Oldham Local Studies Library and Greenfield Library, and the financial support of the Department of English and History, Manchester Metropolitan University.
- 2 H. Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in britischer Hand: Ein Überblick* (Munich, 1974), pp.3-4. Miriam Kochan, *Prisoners of England* (London, 1980), p.1. *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 18 September 1947.
- 3 Walter James, 'Glen Mill - A Prisoner of War Camp', *Bulletin of the Saddleworth Historical Society* XXIV, (1994) pp.1-12.
- 4 Freda Millett, *Oldham and its People* (Oldham, 1994) pp.67-8 includes some eyewitness accounts of the camp but mis-dates its establishment to 1943.
- 5 'A Foreign Field' Forgotten Front Series (producer Bill Jones), Granada TV, 21 July 1989.
- 6 Similar constraints existed on the siting of camps for enemy nationals interned after the fifth-column scare in May 1940. Two of the main camps for these people were in a partially completed housing estate in Huyton, near Liverpool and at Warth Mill in Bury. Peter and Leni Gillman, *Collar the Lot!* (London, 1980) pp.97-9.
- 7 Duncan Gurr and Julian Hunt, *The Cotton Mills of Oldham*, 2nd. edition., (Oldham, 1989). p.33.
- 8 Employment of Prisoners of War: Agenda for meeting on 21 November 1939, Public Record Office (PRO) MAF47/54.
- 9 Kochan, *Prisoners*, p.4. This seems to have been true for most of the captured German servicemen.
- 10 H.A. Dennison (Commander No.2 Camp Glen Mill) to Colonel Trench (Intelligence Division, Naval Staff), 26 December 1939, ADM/10069.
- 11 Letter, E. Whitehead, *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 17 September 1976.
- 12 William Martin, 'Wartime trips behind the Glen Mill wire', *Oldham Weekly Chronicle*, 20 February 1986.
- 13 The activities of the Home Defence (Security) Executive, also known as the Swinton Committee after its chairman Lord Swinton, remain shrouded in mystery. Set up as an advisory committee by Churchill, its minutes PRO CAB93, CAB113 have been retained by the Cabinet Office, probably because the HD(S)E papers also contained advice on the internment of supposedly dangerous British nationals.
- 14 For more details on these negotiations and the background to the policy see, Bob Moore, 'Axis Prisoners in Britain during the Second World War: A Comparative Survey' in, Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford, 1996)
- 15 Letter from J.D. Daly, *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 11 August 1989.
- 16 Gillman, *Collar the Lot!*, pp.192-5.
- 17 H. Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, pp.20-21. Kochan, *Prisoners*, p.3.
- 18 D.M. Hulley, *The Glen Mill Story*, n.d., n.p.
- 19 ICRC Report Prisoner of War Camp No.2, signed R.A.Haccius, PRO FO916/308.
- 20 ICRC Report Camp de Prisonniers de Guerre No.2, signed by M.H. de Pourtalès, 18 August 1942. PRO FO916/308.
- 21 William Martin, 'Wartime trips behind the Glen Mill wire', *Oldham Weekly Chronicle*, 20 February 1986.
- 22 ICRC Report Camp de Prisonniers de Guerre No.2, signed by M.H. de Pourtalès, 18 August 1942, p.4. PRO FO916/308.
- 23 ICRC Report Camp de Prisonniers de Guerre No.2, signed by M.H. de Pourtalès, 18 August 1942, p.2. PRO FO916/308.
- 24 War Cabinet Paper, WP(44)36, Employment of Italian Prisoners of War, n.d. (probably January 1944), PRO CAB66/45. Table: Italian O.R. Prisoners of War, PRO PREM3/364/2.
- 25 H. Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, p.4. notes that the camp, given the title ETO PWE No.3 was one of ten such transit camps used by the Americans in Britain.
- 26 George G. Lewis and John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army, 1776-1945*, (Washington, 1955), pp.83,90.
- 27 William Martin, 'Wartime trips behind the Glen Mill wire', *Oldham Weekly Chronicle*, 20 February 1986.
- 28 Hulley, *The Glen Mill Story*, n.p.
- 29 Minute 5, WM(44) 129th. Conclusions, 29 September 1944. PRO CAB65. See also, Bob Moore, 'Axis Prisoners'.
- 30 For more details on this, see Bob Moore, 'Axis Prisoners' and Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, 'Britain, the Allied Negotiations on Italian Co-belligerency and the Prisoner of War Question, 1943-45, *International History Review* XVIII/1 (1996) pp.28-47.
- 31 H. Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, p.4.
- 32 James, 'Glen Mill', p.10.
- 33 'Glen Mill History', *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 4 August 1989.
- 34 James, 'Glen Mill', p.7.
- 35 'Christmas Comrades', *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 12 June 1989.
- 36 Kochan, *Prisoners*, p.61.
- 37 James, 'Glen Mill', pp.4-5.
- 38 His body, together with those of three other servicemen who had died from illness in the camp, were exhumed in 1962 and reburied at the German military cemetery on Cannock Chase.
- 39 James, 'Glen Mill', pp.10-11.
- 40 James, 'Glen Mill', p.1.
- 41 'A Visit to Glen Mill Camp', *Oldham Standard*, 11 January 1947.
- 42 Kochan, *Prisoners*, pp.41-2.
- 43 *ibid.*
- 44 James, 'Glen Mill', p.11.
- 45 Kochan, *Prisoners*, p.42.
- 46 Far more volunteered than were used. Those who for political reasons were not allowed to work were taken on route marches across the moors under minimal guard. James, 'Glen Mill', p.9.
- 47 Hartley Bateson, *A History of Oldham*, 3rd. edition, (Otley 1985), p.220.
- 48 Letter, E.Whitehead, *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 17 September 1976.
- 49 Hulley, 'Glen Mill', n.p.
- 50 'Visit to Glen Mill', *Oldham Standard*, 11 January 1947. Kochan, *Prisoners*, p.92. This is problematic. Prisoner accounts maintain that there were substantial transfers out of the camp in 1945 and 1946, but James insists that in the latter year there were 2,500 arrivals and only 60 departures. James, 'Glen Mill', p.9.
- 51 *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 27 December 1946 records that 110 German POWs were able to spend the day with Oldham families, out of a total of 300 then resident in the camp.
- 52 This appears to have been one of the few attempts to convert the German nation to Rugby League before Eurosport TV began broadcasting Australian Winfield Cup games with a German commentary in the late 1980s. *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 11 January 1947.
- 53 See photograph, *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 31 January 1947.
- 54 'Glen Mill to be Closed', *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 18 September 1947.
- 55 'A Visit to Glen Mill Camp', *Oldham Standard*, 11 January 1947.
- 56 *ibid.*