**Camp 6** **- Ashton Court, Bower Ashton, Somerset**

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| **Prisoner of War Camps (1939 – 1948) - Project report by Roger J.C. Thomas - English Heritage 2003** | | | | | | | |
| OS NGR | Sheet | No. | Name & Location | County | Cond’n | Type 1945 | Comments |
| ST 557 718 | 172 | 6a | Ashton Court, Bower Ashton | Somerset | 5 |  |  |

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| **Location:** The Ashton Court estate and manor house is west of Bristol.  **Previous use:** The estate belonged to the Smyth family for many generations. It was used as a military hospital during WW1. During WW2, there were several camps in the estate and nearby area – including a Polish camp, transit camp, RAF headquarters and US Army Command Headquarters.  **POW Camp:** In official documents, only one visitor to the camp listed it as ‘6A’ – all others just used the number ‘6’.    Two camps; 124 Ashtongate / 124a Bedminster, were located nearby and there were working links between the camps.  **October 1946** – camp / unit formed.  **1946 to 1948** – German POWs working as No.7 Bomb Disposal Squadron were listed here with various detachments (FO 939/83);  “No.7 BD Squadron RE (PW) No.6 P.W. Troop, (BD) Ashton Court Camp, Long Ashton, Bristol 3. Tel.Bristol 64291  Detachments  Detachment No.7 BD Sqdr. RE, The Golf Club, Saunton, Nr.Braunton, North Devon. Tel Braunton 308  Detachment No.7 BD Sqdr. RE, Oaksey No.89 PW Camp, (attached) Easton Malmesbury. Tel.Malmesbury 3112  Detachment No.7 BD Sqdr. RE, att. No.42 G.P.W.W. Camp, Exhibition Field camp, Holsworthy, Devon, P.W. Hostel “A” Camp, Tregrehan, Nr.PAR/Cornwall, Tel PAR 312.” |  |
| **Ordnance Survey, 1955** |

**27 November 1946** – Captain S Coffman from COGA (Control Office for Germany and Austria (UK)), visited to conduct a Re-education survey.

The camp was listed as; “*No.6 PW Bomb Disposal Platoon, of No.7 Bomb Disposal Coy*.”

Strength – 0 Officers, 108 Other Ranks.

Commandant 7 Bomb Disposal Coy; Major I Powell Camp Leader; St/Fw Helmut Schigas (B)

Commandant 6 Platoon: Capt H Bennett Deputy CL; -

Interpreter; - German M.O.; -

“*Although Capt Bennett is primarily responsible for the POW platoon, Major Powell as C.O. of Parent Unit* [the bomb disposal company] *takes an active interest in the PW, being a German speaker.”* In one 1948 report he is listed as being from the RAMC / in the next S.Staffs.

*“The PW comprise a specially selected number of tradesmen suitable to bomb disposal work. They are formed into a Platoon under the command of a British officer and are attached to a Parent British R.E.* [Royal Engineers] *Unit.”*

The camp leader was described as; “*a man of sound ideas and is extremely anxious to get political re-education going*.” This was not reflected in later reports.

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| Political Screening: | A | B+ | B | B- | C | Uns |
|  | 3 | 9 | 17 | 4 | 3 | 72 |

A brief history of the camp was given which stated that it had existed for a little over one month. The camp was regarded as; “*high standard – well constructed Nissen Huts, light and airy and excellent hygienic facilities.”*

Morale was recorded as fairly good – the major negative factor being the length of time in captivity. The pows seemed to be content with standards, one commented; “*Whatever we ask for, is granted as quickly as possible*.” Pows were able to visit the nearby, larger, Ashton Gate Camp 124 where there were more facilities for entertainment and sports. Within this small camp, the Commandant was converting a hut to be used for handicraft work, with tools presented by the British staff.

As this was a new and small camp there was little evidence for political progress and the camp was considered to be ‘grey’ (B). 50% of the pows were ‘youth’ (under-25), but they were not seen as a problem. One pow was recommended for the special training course at Wilton Park.

Very few re-education activities were being developed, partly due to the small size of this camp. The standard list was given:

Wochenpost / Ausblick – 30 copies and 10 copies respectively per month.

Newspapers – only ‘The Times’ and ‘Radio Times’ were received regularly, paid for from the camp’s welfare fund. British staff occasionally brought in papers, but only a few had been received from Germany.

Library – none. Needed to be supplied.

Lectures – none. Also needed.

Discussion group – once per week, with topics mainly of political interest. A camp ‘parliament’ was being set up and the Commandant had agreed to cooperate with it.

Films – none

Wireless – a radio and extension loudspeaker had been supplied.

English Instruction – not started and no text books available. Some pows already spoke English.

Other activities:

Religion – no camp padre. Pows able to visit Camp 124 on Sundays for services.

Orchestra – 6 players performed various kinds of music. A piano, drums, violins, piano accordion, etc., were on loan from the British officers. Music sheets were needed.

Recreation room – The commandant had utilised a hut to create a recreation and quiet room with armchairs, writing tables, built-in brick fireplace, etc.

Recommendations were made for more items mentioned above to be supplied.

**1 / 3 January 1947** – a further visit by Captain S Coffman from the Segregation Section to look at political screening. Strength – 179 O.R.

No changes to senior staff from the previous report. There was a new deputy camp leader – Uffz Brandt P (B+)

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| Revised Political Screening: | A+ | A | A- | B+ | B | B- | C | C+ | Not known |
| - | 4 | - | 19 | 61 | 31 | 63 | 1 | - |

This was a very high number (36%) of ‘C’ category (Nazi) pows in comparison to other camps. Many pows were seen as sceptical about democracy. Part of the negative attitudes arose because many of the pows had been previously held at Munsterlager camp in Germany and had expected to be released from there, instead they were transferred to the UK. A second reason given for this camp, which I have not seen referred to elsewhere, arose from an incorrect article in the Daily Mail on 28 December 1946. The article had stated that a number of German officers had been allowed to return to Germany for Christmas on word of honour that they would return later.

A new hostel had been opened at Saunton, N.Devon, 103 miles away. 60 of the 179 pows were located there.

The camp leader received another fairly positive description; “*Very popular with the men for his fair mindedness. Although not intellectual himself, gives full support to re-education.”* This was not reflected in the next report by a different visitor.

The deputy leader, Paul Brandt, was able to speak very good English and had been partly educated in England. “*Good type of man with keen intellect.”* He was recommended for the special training school at Wilton Park. Interesting to note that he was classified as (B+), considering he had been a member of the SA [Sturmabteilung = Nazi Brown shirts] and NSDAP [Nazi Party member].

The hostel leader at Saunton was Willi Olschewski (B) – “*regular soldier pleasant and efficient. Has insufficient background for re-education but is interested enough to try and learn.”*

Re-education activities continued to be meagre. A follow-up report on English Instruction (14 January) listed 5 small classes learning English.

**4 April 1947** – Mr A Thomas made a short report on Saunton hostel. Strength 108. O.C.: Lt Kerr. Camp leader: Olschewsky, Hwm (B)

Morale was seen as good. Re-educational activities included a ‘democratic circle’ of 20-30 pows (including 2 ex-SS), and a ‘cultural circle’ with 6 pows. A press review was held each Saturday evening. ‘The Times’ newspaper was received. There was a wireless set, but no library and no films had been shown.

**27 June & 2 July 1947** – ‘A T St.L Duff’ visited the camp to carry out a re-education report and interview candidates for the special training centre at Wilton Park. The camp is listed as; 6 POW Pl. No.7 Bomb Disposal Coy.

Strength - OR 201. 125 are located at Ashton Court; 62 at Saunton; 14 at Par (150 miles away).

Saunton – ‘The Golf Club, Saunton, North Devon. Hostel leader; Hwm Willi Olschewski (B)

Par – Exhibition Field Camp 42, Holsworthy, Devon – detachment was based at Hostel “A”, Tregrehan, near St Austell – Hostel leader; Ofw Gerhard Scholaski (B).

Senior personnel remained unchanged.

The camp leader, Helmut Schigas, was described as; “*37 years of age, professional soldier since 1929, native of east Prussia, married, Protestant. Unimpressive individual, quite non-political and disinterested in re-education. Not a very good type*.” This may be an accurate description, but all too often if a camp leader was not interested in re-education they were described negatively.

The Deputy Camp Leader; Uffz Paul-Friedrich Brandt (B+) – “*32 years of age, wholesale tobacconist, native of Mecklenburg, single, Protestant. SA 33-38*. *NSDAP* *35.*” He had attended a training course at Wilton Park. “*Good type, quite sincere. Should be able to run re-education here but seems to lack initiative. Is to attend Bristol University WEA Summer School.”*

Simplified screening figures were given; A – 2 / B – 199. 25 pows had been repatriated to date.

Morale was regarded as Fair. Many pows were from eastern Germany and poor news from home was a depressing factor. The pows showed little interested in politics.

There was little interest shown by the British staff or the pows in re-education. The standard list of re-education activities showed slight improvements:

Wochenpost and Ausblick – separate report.

Newspapers – only a local paper and Picture Post had been added to the list of papers received.

Library – started, but only 180 books, 60 of which were in English.

Lectures – 2 lectures had been given.

Discussion Groups – ended as the leader had been repatriated.

Films – fortnightly from the YMCA.

Wireless – BBC programmes for Pow and Hamburg Radio were popular.

Press reviews – none

English instruction – separate appendix

Information Room – None. Hoped to be an exhibition soon about the United Nations.

Other activities:

Religion – services were held at Camp 124.

Education – 1 class of 6 pows learning Spanish.

Entertainment – the orchestra continued, mainly dance music.

Outside contacts – very limited contacts with Bristol University. A group of pows had visited Cheddar caves. However, pows were able to join in with further links organised through Ashton Gate Camp 124.

**13 September 1947** – English Inspector’s Report by T R Gibson. Lists the camp number as ‘6A’ for the first time.

There were no longer any English classes being held.

**8 October 1947** – Mr Duff returned for another Re-education Report. Listed again as Camp 6.

Strength - 183 OR – 101 at Ashton Court; 50 at Saunton (same hostel leader); 32 at Plymouth (hostel leader – Ofw Hermann Casper (B). 45 pows had been repatriated to date.

No changes to the senior staff.

Comments were very similar to the previous report. There was little interest in re-education, focus was on the work and relaxation. Slight changes - German and Swiss newspapers were being received; there were 300 books in the library, the camp received the pow magazine published by Camp 124.

The orchestra had stopped. Pows were allowed to visit Bristol – another reason why pows were not particularly interested in activities within the camp.

**30 November 1947** – another (pointless) English Inspector’s Report by T R Gibson. Mr Gibson again listed the camp number as ‘6A’. There were still no classes.

The pows were described as; “*a happy lot*.”

Hostels for this camp were being reorganised. Saunton was still listed, but another detachment of 50 pows was being sent to a new hostel near Winchester.

**1 to 2 January 1948** – Major P J O’Donohoe carried out a re-educational survey.

Strength 190 O.R. – 125 at Ashton Court; 56 at Saunton; 9 at Oaksey. Screening was just given as; B:190. No changes to senior personnel.

Good relationships with fellow-workers in the Royal Engineers, and with local civilians were noted. Discipline was liberal, late passes for special occasions were given. The negative morale view arose from news of bad living conditions and “*domestic mortality*” in Germany.

There was a good range of contacts with outside agencies – Theatre Royal, Bristol University, International Club, local Conservative and Labour Parties, Workers Education Association…. Over Christmas there had been many invites for pows to Christmas and New Year’s parties.

No particular changes to the low level of re-educational activities. There were no educational classes.

Religion – “*Kraus from Camp 124 looks after evangelicals and Father Kreis from Camp 44 visits the Catholics*”.

Entertainment – *“Table tennis is popular, and games have been played against the local Customs House. There are football matches against civilians. A small orchestra of 6 men, under Brandt [*Deputy C/L] *still functions and played at the Folk House, Bristol, on New Year’s Eve; permission has been granted for the use of the piano in the Serjts’ Mess*.”

**11/14 April 1948** – B I Jamset carried out a Re-educational Survey.

Strength – 179 O.R. – 93 at Ashton Court; 44 at Saunton; 13 at Oaksey, Gloucestershire; 29 at Torquay, Devon.

Commandant 7 Bomb Disposal Coy; Major I Powell Camp Leader; O/Schm. Hermann Gall (B)

Commandant 6 Platoon: Capt H Bennett Deputy CL; Uffz P E Brandt (B+)

Interpreter; - German M.O.; St/Arzt Dr K-H Pospiech (B from camp 124).

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|  | Hostel/Detachment leaders – Saunton, W Olschewski (as before); Oaksey, Gefr B Ludwig (B); Torquay, Fw H Koernig (B). “*The detachments are engaged for the most part on mine-clearance off the coasts of Devon”.*  Simplified screening – B+ 20; B 104; B- 50.  A general summary of the attitudes of the pows towards re-education was given. Screening was regarded as being poorly carried out and ineffective.  Resettlement experts were due to visit. There were general worries over clothing, food supplies and employment in Germany. Many of the pows from the eastern zone expressed fear of returning. Some regarded the setting up of a West German State as essential – but only on a temporary basis. Currency reform (waehrungsreform) was regarded as important by 50% of the pows.  In comparison to all previous reports about lack of re-educational activities and general apathy towards it, this summary stated that amongst the pows; “*There is 100% agreement that these facilities have been excellent, and their value seems to be keenly appreciated…*” When asked what worked well – “*access to a Free Press*” and contacts with British folk were regarded as important.  Good outside contacts were the prime positive factor in all the pow camps. This camp had very good local contacts and many pows had formed friendships which they were sorry to break. The Kings Cinema in Bristol still refused to admit pows – this was keenly resented as no other cinema maintained such restrictions. |
| **Abandoned camp** |

**6 May 1948** – In a report following a lecture, the commandant suggested that there were too few pows left to warrant any further talks. The camp closed soon after.

**After the camp**: Following the death of Dame Esme Smyth in 1946 the estate was left uninhabited for 13 years. It was purchased in 1959 by Bristol City Council and parts of the mansion and later the parkland were restored.

**Further information:**

National Archives references:FO 939/88 6A Working Camp and 7 Bomb Disposal Camp with link to FO 939/331 6 Bomb Disposal camp, Ashton Court Camp – used above.