**Camp 186** **Berechurch Hall Camp, Colchester, Essex**

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| **1947 Camp List** | | | | | | | |
| 186(B.C.) | Berechurch Hill Camp, Colchester, Essex | E. | Priswar, Colchester | Colchester 4275/6/7 | Colchester | Lt.Col.R.F.Squibb M.C. | v/202/4 |
| The entry above has been crossed out in blue crayon and the following details handwritten on. | | | | | | | |
|  | *Fornham Park, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk* |  | *Priscamp, Bury St. Edmunds* | *Bury St Edmunds 2322* | *Bury St. Edmunds* | *J.F.Ashton* | *v/202/5* |

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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 |
| TL 994 217 | 168 | 186 | Berechurch Hall Camp, Colchester | Essex | 3 | Base camp | Large complex of huts within a double wire perimeter fence. Large number of  huts have been demolished and replaced by modern accommodation. |

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| There is a book about the camp with many illustrations and memories – ‘Camp 186; The Lost Town At Berechurch’ – Ken Free –2010 –Amberley. I give an outline history and additional details here. I am sure that the 1947 documents below were not available at the time the book was published.  The main function of this large site was as a Base Camp for pows in transit to other camps, and then in transit to repatriation. For ‘ordinary’ pows it seems to have worked well enough with 2500 a month passing through in 1947. For pows who were medically unfit it worked far less well and they were held, often for months, in unsuitable conditions.  There were also pows who were held here on a longer term basis, and what a very mixed bunch they were! Hard core Nazis, war criminal suspects and witnesses, anti-fascists, pow medical and theological students, ‘malcontents,’ and others the British were unsure what to do with.  **1944 – 1945** - Italians recorded. The site was large enough for them to held in separate compounds to the Germans. |  |  |
| 1950 - [raf\_58\_514\_v\_5329 - Aerial Photo | Historic England](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/raf_58_514_v_5329) | Ordnance Survey 1958 |

**September 1944** - The site opened for German pows. Accommodation in bell tents in 5 compounds (A to E) separated by barbed wire.

**16 November 1944** – Death of pow Franz Pohl. He was killed when a guard was accidentally knocked down and his Sten gun discharged. He was later reinterred at the Cannock Chase German Military Cemetery. Six other deaths have been reported during the early months of the camp – I have no further details.

**February 1945** – Work began on building mainly Nissen huts to replace the tents.

**6 March 1945** – Segregation Section of PID – Progress Report 46. *“MEDICAL STUDENTS. – On arrival at No.186 Camp, these were all found to be 100% ‘black’* [Political category C = Nazis] *and within a very few hours they had re-introduced the Hitler salute and generally set about turning No.186 into a miniature concentration camp.*

*As we are endeavouring to make 186 a ‘grey’ Camp, these Ps/W have been transferred by D.P.W. to No.23 Camp, which is now to be considered as ‘black.*’” [Camp 23 was le Marchant Camp, Devizes which had become a ‘Medical Academy’ for pows].

**1945** - Some Spanish pows who were on their way to other camps, (mainly Chorley) were held here briefly. Even though they had been forced to work for the Germans, and many were anti-fascists, because they were captured in France wearing German uniforms, the army had no legal choice but to regard them as pows. (See; ‘We Also Stood Alone’ – E J Castro – 1945).

**Summer / Autumn 1945** – A Catholic Seminary was created in the camp. It had many problems in its early months with ‘malcontents’ and Nazis. Some students requested transfers from the camp due to political unrest - “*Students complained that they had been told that future priests could not be anti-Nazis, because it was unchristian to hate, that breaking one’s oath to the Fűhrer was a serious religious sin, that one of the staff had in the previous April made a speech in honour of Hitler’s birthday, that the removal of badges of rank had been forbidden as an undermining of discipline, that their interests in the political discussions in the camp was frowned upon, and that they were being politically indoctrinated.”* [Group Captives – Henry Faulk – 1977 – Chatto & Windus].

The British staff complained of anarchy and communism amongst some students. The seminary was politically screened, some students were transferred, a programme of re-education introduced and it gradually settled down.

**Theatre** - *“The talented Theater des Camp 186 at Colchester had initially abridged plays to eliminate women’s parts. Seeking more morale-boosting general appeal they eventually staged a revue in which the finale, a can-can dancer in drag, brought the house down. Carl Weber recalled this ‘rather grotesque display’ as exemplifying ‘the well-known popularity drag shows enjoy in all-male environments, like camps or prisons,’ adding, ‘the company remained… aware of the problems of female impersonation,’ endeavoring to ‘avoid the cheap effect of “drag shows”.”* Carl Weber, ‘TdC 186: A Repertory Theatre in a PoW Camp’, in Theatre and Film in Exile: German Artists in Britain, 1933-1945, ed. by Günther Berghaus, Oxford: Berg, 1989. Weber’s involvement with TdC 186 led to a career as a theatre director and academic.

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| German actor, Klaus Kinski was held at Berechurch. Some stories in his biography have been challenged as being made-up:  He was conscripted into the German army in 1943. He was wounded and captured in the Netherlands by the British. After being treated for his injuries and interrogated, he was transferred to Berechurch Hall Camp. At the camp Kinski played his first theatre roles. At the end of the war in Europe, he heard that sick prisoners were to be returned first, and tried to qualify in this category by standing outside naked at night, drinking urine and eating cigarettes, presumably to become ‘temporarily’ ill, rather than insane. He was finally repatriated in 1946. |

**1946 –** Large number of pows that had been held in pow camps in the USA arrived and were sent on to other camps. They usually had low morale as they had been misinformed in the US that they were to be returned to Germany. Instead they found themselves in working camps in the UK.

**1 April 1946** – Copy of the camp magazine; [Querschnitt : Monatzeitschrift des Camp 186 - The Wiener Holocaust Library](https://www.whlcollections.org/image/112841/). There was also a magazine – ‘*Werk Brief: Fur Kath.Lagerseelsorger U. Laienhelfer. V. Theologen D. Camp NR.186*.’ (Work letter: For Catholic camp counsellors, lay helpers and theologians at Camp 186). Magazine illustration of pows lining up for the dining hut.

**16 June 1946** – suicide by hanging of Fritz Gruenwald, (recorded in book as Gaunewald). He was later reinterred at the Cannock Chase German Military Cemetery.

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**24 August 1946** – German pow, Christian Aussem, committed suicide. “*He had most likely been contemplating suicide for several days, because he left a signed statement in German, dated 16 August 1946, in which he exonerated himself of involvement in concentration camps near Papenburg…”* details from ’The London Cage’ by Helen Fry, Yale U.P. 2018.He was later reinterred at the Cannock Chase German Military Cemetery where he was recorded as a “German citizen” rather than a member of the armed services.

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| Oversight and development of re-education activities and English teaching for German pows was carried out by PID (Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office) / COGA (Control Office for Germany and Austria – UK). Visits and reports were made. The standard of the reports varied greatly. The visitors took little interest, if any, in activities other than re-education. They rarely mentioned welfare, sports, games, pastimes, crafts, etc of the pows. If there were still Italian pows in hostels, they were usually ignored by PID. |

**6-7 January 1947** – 186 Base camp. Re-education progress report. Strength; 70 officers, 1599 Other Ranks + number on way to repatriation. No hostels.

Commandant: Lt Col R Squibb, M.C. Camp leader: B Deiters (A)

Interpreter: Capt H Lambert [J Lambert in some reports]. Deputy C/l: E Vogt (B)

German M.O.: A Wetzel (A).

The Commandant and British staff were regarded as being supportive of PID re-education aims.

Interpreter Lambert also gave lectures to the pows on linguistic subjects.

The Camp leader was described as; “*a strange person,”* a commercial traveller and, *“an odious toady by habit.”* Despite these comments he was having, “*a deal of success.”*

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| Political screening: | A | B | C | C+ | Unscreened |
|  | 59 | 1033 | 211 | 10 | 356 |

140 pows were appealing against their screening grades – the better the grade, the sooner repatriated, in theory.

Overall morale was difficult to assess in a transit camp. The pows passing through were not just being repatriated, others were “*malcontents, suspected war criminals, etc.”* Because of the nature of the camp it was run with strict military discipline and there were restrictions on leaving the camp, more barbed wire, and less opportunity for pows to earn money than in a working camp.

Richard Stokes MP had recently visited the camp. He was pro repatriation of pows at the earliest opportunity and there were camp rumours that he stated screening was unreliable (mostly true) which had an unsettling effect not appreciated by the British staff.

The Commandant ordered that the 25 pows under 20 should attend general education lessons and this had a beneficial effect. No other provision was made for other ‘youth’ pows (under-25).

Organising re-education activities in a base camp was difficult – the visitor described actual provision as an “*insipid porridge.”* There was also resistance from some pows: “*The camp was, and to some extent still is, riddled with cliques. Suspicion of ‘Secret service’ lingers from the time when the camp had an I.O. who used ‘spies’ in the compounds.”*

The standard list of re-education activities was given:

Wochenpost and Ausblick – separate appendix.

Newspapers – 105 British papers per day. No German papers. 1 Swiss paper was sent by COGA.

Library – nearly 4000 books, but many were texts and about 600 in very bad condition.

Lectures – every 3-4 weeks

Discussion group – None, but hoped to start.

Films – YMCA and Gaumont British films, but none had been shown for 6 weeks, no explanation given for this.

Wireless – adequate.

Camp magazine – “*Very professional*.”

Press review – Daily news sheet issued.

English instruction – separate appendix.

Information room – showing exhibitions of text and pictures. 1 room in Compound A showed materials about different themes. Another in Compound D had a constant exhibition on “*Germany Today*” as information for those being repatriated.

Other camp activities –

Religion – 55% RC / 45% protestant. The small RC theological seminar continued. Protestants were allowed to attend services at Berechurch Hall Church.

Education – English, French, Esperanto, fruit growing, apiary, law and philosophy.

Entertainments – Greatly encouraged by the Commandant. 2 theatres putting on “*serious plays”* and variety shows. The variety theatre put on shows at other camps.

**12/17 June 1947** – Progress report and “special interviews.” Strength; 52 officers, 1337 OR.

Commandant: Lt Col J F Ashton Camp leader: Bernhard Deiters (A)

Interpreter: Capt H Lambert Deputy C/l: Erich Vogt (B)

German M.O.: Oberst/Arzt Dr Spreitzer (B-)

The Commandant started 10 days earlier; it was noticed that there was already some “*friction*” between him and his officers.

The Interpreter was well respected by the pows.

Camp leader Deiters (“*odious toady*”) was described much more favourably; “*a very sound man,”* he promoted re-education activities. He was due to leave the camp and further praise was given at the end of the report about; “*the very useful work he has been putting in, will be missed.”*

A list of pow groupings was given:

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| *‘Permanent’ staff* | *Malcontents* | *Automatic arrest* | *Frozen* | *C+ personnel* | *U boat Rep.* | *PP Personnel* | *Others* | *Attached* | *RC theological students* | *Medical personnel* |
| *493* | *84* | *7* | *103* | *3* | *100* | *80* | *100* | *14* | *49* | *356* |
| 3 officers  490 OR |  | Suspected war criminals | Suspects OR witnesses |  |  | Protected personnel |  |  | All officers |  |

Simplified screening numbers were given for the permanent staff only: A 30 / B 463. 10 pows were appealing against their grades. 143 pows repatriated to date from the permanent staff.

The morale of the permanent staff varied – it was sometimes difficult for them to see so many others being repatriated while they remained in the camp.

Noteworthy changes to activities:

Discussion groups – as hoped, a series of discussion groups had started and were seen as successful.

Films – Travelling Films replaced Gaumont British. Pows paid to see these films, but there were complaints that many were poor quality.

Press reviews – a weekly review was given by one pow to a meeting.

Religion – RC Padre Alex Grones (A), “*a somewhat mournful character.”* Protestant padre, Hensmann (B). Services at various local churches could be attended.

Education – a wider range of classes available; book-keeping, shorthand, commercial arithmetic, handicrafts, agriculture, maths and sciences, French, biology, geography, German. Some pows studying Latin and Greek formed a “*Classical circle.”*

Entertainment – One popular theatre group, a variety group, orchestra and choir. The choir gave performances to civilians. Sports were promoted within the camp.

**22-31 July 1947** – “*Special report re ‘Malcontents’ and general position obtaining in the camp.”* Strength; 38 officers, 1571 OR.

Only change to senior personnel – a new camp leader: Ofw Hans Heibach (A) – “*admirable and particularly suitable type.”* He had previously been the compound leader for the so-called ‘malcontents’ and had deferred his repatriation for 1½ years.

‘*Considerable friction’* noted between the Commandant and British officer staff. The visitor believed that this was due to the Commandant having *“his own very individual and sometimes peculiar ideas concerning scope* [of re-education] *and the way it should be put over.”* This reason surely did not explain; “considerable friction.”

Up to 2500 pows were being repatriated via this camp per month. Details of the 5 compounds at the time of the visit were given. (Confusingly Compound E had been closed, but there were 2 compound A’s – see below).

A – 71 Malcontents; personnel ‘frozen’ by London District cage; a small number of permanent staff.

B – 812 Medical repatriates (often called ‘CROCK’ cases); 26 non-working N.C.O.’s; 98 U-Boat personnel; a small number of permanent staff.

C – Permanent staff; 19 theological students; others awaiting repatriation (numbers varied).

D - Permanent staff; others awaiting repatriation (numbers varied).

A Officers – Officers ‘frozen’ by London District cage; C+ Officers waiting to be sent to officers’ camps.

Morale was generally high for those ‘others’ awaiting repatriation, stays in the camp were usually brief. Medical repatriates were found to be mostly, *“dull and sullen and justifiably so. It appears that they languish here for anything from 3 to 5 months in varying degrees of ‘discomfort’ until transport is arranged for them.*” For obvious reasons, morale was low for those who were malcontents, C+, and ‘frozen.’

Many of the ‘malcontents’ were youth pows. The visitor pointed out that many of their troubles had been caused by being treated in a, “*tactless manner.”* Particular concerns were expressed over conditions at ‘The London Brick Works’ (TLBC) in Peterborough – it was recommended that an investigation into the company be carried out.

36 of the U-Boat men were due to be repatriated. 62 were from U-Boats whose numbers did not appear on the Admiralty List – total confusion is very apparent as no-one knew the “*correct procedure*” for these men.

Of the 26 non-working NCO’s, some refused to work after their experiences with TLBC, the others refused to work as a matter of ‘rights.’ The Geneva Convention stated that; “*Non-commissioned officers who are prisoners of war may be compelled to undertake only supervisory work, unless they expressly request remunerative occupation.”* The NCOs were stating that the work they were given did not match this description – this was probably justifiable with regard to TLBC, but they also refused to work elsewhere.

**Summer 1947** - Site closed. Many pows and staff transferred to the Fornham site, which was then numbered Camp 186.

Known Camp Commandants:

1947 Lt Col Reginald Frederick Squibb M.C. He served with the Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) up until 1943 when he transferred to the Pioneer Corps.

1947 Lt Col John Forbes Ashton from the Border Regiment. Came from Camp 258 Ellough Airfield, went on to Fornham.

**Further Information:**

[There is a book about the site after it was a pow camp – ‘Colchester Military Corrective Training Centre’ by C McEntee-Taylor – I have not read this].

National Archives - FO 1120/231 – ‘Re-educational survey visit reports for camps 177 to 186’. Used above.

IWM have a copy of the magazine dated April 1947. Ref LBY E.J. 440.