

# POW CAMPS

## What survives and where

*Very little has been written about World War II Prisoner of War (PoW) Camps in the British Isles. Even less work has been done to identify their total number and location. A recent project, however, has recorded and assessed surviving sites in England*

With a few notable exceptions (such as Hellen 1999) very little has been written about World War II Prisoner of War (PoW) Camps in the British Isles. This is surprising given that a large volume of documentary material exists at the Public Records Office. Even less work has been undertaken to identify the total number and location of the camps. Incomplete lists have been published in a number of magazines and on the Internet but often the addresses given are not sufficiently detailed to permit an accurate interpretation. To help inform the future management of known surviving sites such as Harperley (Nieke and Nieke, 22–5), research was needed to discover the number of sites originally built, their location and type, and modern survival.

### Methodology

Given the poor quality of the original address information in wartime documentation, often only the camp number and nearest town or village, the first stage of the assessment was a

map-based search to identify basic locations. For this purpose the mid-1950s Ordnance Survey 1:10 650 scale 6-inch ‘Revision Series’ maps produced the best results, usually showing individual huts and camp boundaries with great accuracy, many of which were identified as ‘work camps’ or ‘agricultural workers’ hostels’. Where the map evidence failed to provide clear results, the location of sites was obtained by the interpretation of aerial photographs held at the National Monuments Record Centre.

There were some problems with interpretation. Most of the camps established during the early war years were within pre-existing country houses, Territorial Army camps, cotton mills, racecourses and so forth, and most of the late wartime sites were located in all manner of buildings, none definable as PoW camps on a map. Only the purpose-built mid-war sites were clearly identifiable. Also, the official numbering sequence included some duplication.

*Aerial view of the former PoW Camp at Easton Grey, Wiltshire, June 2002. The site is now a light industrial estate*



© Bob Bewley

## Typical 'standard' camp

Italian prisoners taken during the 8th Army's North African Campaign built the majority of the so-called 'standard' camps during late 1942 and early 1943, living under canvas until the accommodation huts were built. The most common type of building used was the 18ft 6in-span Ministry of War Production (MoWP) standard hut, although some timber sectional 16ft- and 24ft-span Nissen huts were used at a number of sites.

© Imperial War Museum



Camp 81 (Pingley Camp) at Brigg, Lincolnshire, is a typical example. Built to house 750 prisoners, it consisted of a tented camp, guards' compound, prisoners' compound, prisoners' garden plots, recreation ground and a sewage disposal works. An outer plain wire fence supported by concrete posts and an inner barbed wire fence enclosed the prisoner compound and recreation ground. Within the prisoners' compound a 'sterile' area was established between the inner fence and a further coiled 'Danart' barbed wire entanglement. Contrary to popular belief there were no guard towers at the majority of these camps, as the prisoners held in them were usually considered 'low risk'.

© Anthony Hellen

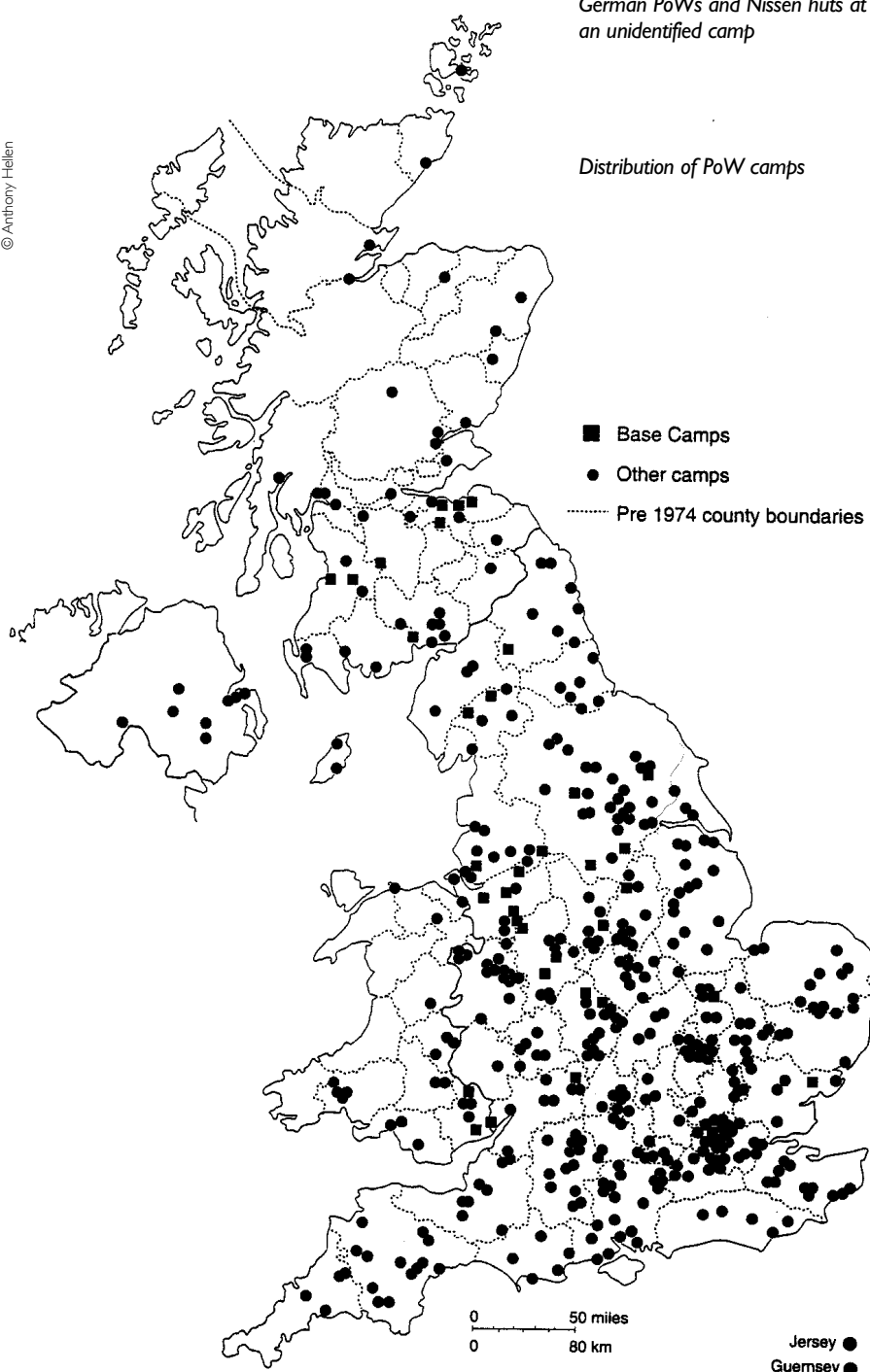
The complex was accessed from a public highway by a single-track spine road. The guards' compound consisted of a group of some 15 huts and a brick water tower occupying a rectangular parcel of land immediately north of the main gate to the prisoners' compound. The prisoners' compound occupied a six-acre square of land and contained 35 huts, including a cookhouse, grocery and produce store, two dining huts, two recreation huts, drying room and showers, two ablution and latrine blocks, a camp reception station (sick quarters), a living and carpenter's hut, and 23 living huts.

The majority of the living huts were ten-bay MoWP standard huts built using pre-cast reinforced concrete frames and wall panels, but eight were Laing composite timber-framed huts clad externally in bitumised corrugated iron and internally in plaster-board. The MoWP huts used for domestic purposes, such as the cookhouse, ablutions and latrines, were built of hollow clay blocks rather than concrete panels.

After 1944 and particularly following the surrender of Germany, many camps were hard pressed to hold the number of prisoners taken; additional accommodation was provided in bell

German PoWs and Nissen huts at an unidentified camp

Distribution of PoW camps





## PoW Camps

*One of the standard design buildings surviving at Brigg, Lincolnshire*



© English Heritage/Roger J C Thomas

tents erected within the prisoners' compound. In May 1946, Pingley was responsible for 1,862 prisoners, 984 of whom were housed at the camp and the remainder were either billeted out or lived at one of four hostels (Elsham Hall, Elsham Mount, Elsham Manor and Scawby). At some camps the capacity was substantially increased by the erection of new prisoners' compounds, with accommodation mostly under canvas, but a few sites like Camp 86 (Stanhope Camp) at Ashchurch, Kent, eventually acquired 16ft-span Nissen huts to replace the tents.

### Survival and condition

Although much work has already been carried out, a clear understanding of the numbering system mentioned above has not been possible.

A national total of 1026 camps is unlikely, given the large gaps in the numbering sequence, for example, 300–402, 412–553, and 702–1000. In terms of plan form, the majority of sites in the numerical sequence 25–122 conform to a common basic shape, giving a total of about 97 'standard' camps. This total currently represents approximately 1/5 of the known number of 487 PoW camps positively identified throughout the British Isles.

The condition of 53 of these 'standard' sites has been positively established and can be taken as a representative sample to assess probable rates of survival across the country. As a general rule, survival diminishes the further south and east one goes. Clearly land values and greater demand for brownfield sites has exerted some influence; national government policies have also had an effect on this pattern of survival. A number of sites have been demolished to permit the building of schools and the planting of forestry, while the majority of the extant sites have survived because they were used as agricultural hostels by the county agricultural committees of the late 1940s and early 1950s. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of camps became hostels for international students doing seasonal agricultural work, but with the exception of Camp 90 (Friday Bridge Camp) at Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, this practice appears to have come to an end by the early 1980s, when the remaining sites passed into low-grade agricultural and light industrial uses.

Of the total of 53 'standard' sites examined, 33 have been demolished, though footings may survive, nine are semi-extant (at least 20% of structures have been demolished) and eleven are extant (over 80% of structures remain standing). Camp 93 (Harperley Camp) falls into this

*Mickey and Minnie Mouse, painted on the inside wall of a hut at Brigg, Lincolnshire. Contemporary graffiti often survives, giving these sites added social significance*



© English Heritage/Roger J C Thomas

category and has now been scheduled (Nieke and Nieke, 22–5). The terms ‘semi-extant’ and ‘extant’ do not necessarily imply that the huts remain in good condition; on the contrary, and with a few notable exceptions, the standard of maintenance at these sites has been minimal or non-existent. It should be borne in mind, however, that the buildings were originally designed for speedy, low-cost, non-skilled construction and intended only for a short-term temporary use. Nevertheless there are a handful of sites that have been maintained to a high standard and these particular sites do give a good impression of their original appearance.

## Implications

Some 20% of the ‘standard’ PoW camps survive sufficiently to provide a clear impression of their original plan form and appearance. Some remain in use: Camp 83 (Eden Camp) at Malton, North Yorkshire, is a museum dedicated to ‘The People’s War 1939–1945’, Camp 108 (Thirkleby

Camp) near Thirsk, North Yorkshire, is a farm, while Camp 100 (St Martin’s Camp) near Gobowen, Shropshire, is a light industrial estate. Though these surviving examples are significant sites, even those where only footings survive tell a story and contribute to the local scene. They are also a reminder both of the presence of PoWs in England during World War II and the integration of some former prisoners into the local community. From this comparatively small number of surviving sites, some will now be considered for protection to ensure that these sites are not needlessly destroyed in the future. □

**Roger J C Thomas**  
**Military Support Officer**

### Reference

Hellen, A 1999 ‘Temporary settlements and transient populations. The legacy of Britain’s Prisoner of War camps’. *Erdkunde* (Archive for Social Geography) 53(3), 191–211



Ettington Park PoW Camp, Warwickshire, 1946, showing clearly its plan form