

Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots: Okehampton



Hosting a Navy in Exile The Case of the Polish Camp

During the Second World War, the Polish Navy was in exile in Britain, based originally in Devonport, Plymouth. In December 1944, the decision was made to move the officer cadet training unit to Okehampton (via Bickleigh), to a camp previously occupied by American forces. The camp remained operational until December 1946. Its remains can still be found on the site of the Rugby Club today.

The camp was named after the Polish ship ORP Baltyk. In addition to training cadet officers, it was run as if it were an operational ship. ORP Baltyk comprised a large group with the Reserve Unit - a Transitional Unit (seamen who were awaiting demobilisation or who were temporarily incapable of service), and the Camp Unit, which was the permanent crew on the ship. Many stayed only for short periods before being called away for duty.

Despite the uncertainties of war, elements of 'normal life' did continue: dances were

attended; marriages were celebrated; Holy Mass was held; and the camp had its own Post Office. The Officer's Mess was a popular venue, and the bar had an unusual name: 'The Lost Weekend'.

After the war, the camp became a resettlement centre for Polish naval servicemen, preparing them for a post-war life in the UK (visit our 'Seeking Refuge' banner at The Victorian Arcade to find out more). It's estimated that several thousand naval personnel would have passed through the camp during the WW2 and resettlement period.

Some camp residents made permanent homes in the town. Local historians Mike and Hilary Wreford note that two of them, Tony Smul and Peter Skrzypczak, who had represented the Polish Navy at football, went on to join Okehampton Argyle Football Club - Tony as an excellent goalkeeper and Peter as an acrobatic full back.

"My Dad was the son of a coal mining engineer from Silesia who went and joined the Navy in 1938. When I asked him: 'Why did you join the Navy being so far from the sea?', he said 'Well, it seemed an exciting thing to do'".

Antoni Olszowski, British-Polish, about his father, Stanislaw Olszowski

Top photos: Left: Naval officers and men at the Okehampton camp. Right: Some remains of the Naval Camp in Okehampton.
Bottom photos, left to right: Marriage of a Land Girl to an American soldier (1944); Okehampton Castle; US troops on parade during WW2.

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