

Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots: Okehampton



Effects of Conflict

Prisoners Of War in Okehampton

Over the centuries, various global conflicts have made Okehampton into a temporary home for various Prisoners of War (POWs).

In the early 19th century, Okehampton housed Napoleonic Prisoners Of War (POWs). They were mostly French - but there were Danish and Dutch prisoners too. Between May 1809 and February 1812, 336 prisoners were sent to Okehampton: 162 French Navy, 131 Army, 31 ships' passengers, 3 ships' boys, 6 wives, 3 children.

Being a POW did not necessarily mean imprisonment. Okehampton was a parole town, and officer-class prisoners were required to report to a local official weekly (when they were paid a small allowance), and promise not to travel more than one mile from the parish boundary. Some made homes for themselves, and on occasion were accompanied by their wives and children.

In addition to archival records, graffiti cut into a stone table in the Pascina of Okehampton Castle provides further evidence of Napoleonic soldiers. The graffiti reads:

'HIC V...T FUIT CAPTIVUS BELLI'
(Here V...T was a prisoner of war).

According to a local historian (Dr E.H. Young) 'V...T' is believed to be Gilles Vincent, surgeon on the French ship La Rejoirie, who was captured on 10th June 1809.

During World War II, POW camps were numerous; there were sixteen in Devon alone. In the Okehampton district was Camp No. 673 at Bridestowe, on the Leawood estate. The camp was comprised of a number of huts surrounded by barbed wire. It initially housed Italian soldiers (captured during fighting in North Africa), and after D-Day, German soldiers captured in France. Farm production was often heavily dependent on the prisoners, some of whom remained in and around Okehampton after the war.



Top photos: Left: Okehampton Castle. Right: Bridestowe, the location of a WW2 POW camp.

Inset photos: Left: Polish navy in action during WW2. Right: German POWs working at South Nethercott Farm (1946).

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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