

PRISONERS OF WAR

THE grass is long now at Moorby. Most of the buildings have been demolished to make way for arable land, and the theatre has been turned into a chicken shed, but the memories linger on—memories of when Moorby was the biggest Prisoner of War camp in Lincolnshire during the Second World War.

Between 1940 and 1946, Lincolnshire 'played host' to thousands of PoWs from Italy and Germany, and even a number of Polish refugees. They were quartered in the numerous hostels and larger camps that sprang up all over Lincolnshire at this time, from Crowle to Market Rasen and from Brigg to Horbling, near Sleaford.

It was to Horbling that Domenico de Falco, an artillery man with an anti-aircraft unit in the Italian army, was brought as a PoW in 1943. Now a naturalized British citizen and living with his English wife, Kathleen, in Kirton Lindsey, Mr. de Falco's story alone, from his capture in North Africa to the end of the war, is a remarkable and fascinating one.

Like thousands of other Italians Mr. de Falco surrendered in North Africa in March 1943, but these massive surrenders presented great difficulties to the French and Americans, as well as the British, who found it almost impossible to cope with the problems of food and shelter. So, after he had surrendered in Maret, near Tunisia, Mr. de Falco was forced to spend ten tortuous weeks wandering in the blazing heat of the North African sun, living on raw eggs, poppy seeds and the occasional 'survival pack', containing ten biscuits, six lumps of sugar and coffee which American patrols sometimes threw them, before finally being taken in by a British camp. But life was almost as hard once he reached the camp, with only one loaf of bread and a kilo of rice to every 25 men, and after only a month he decided he had to escape.

His chance came when he volunteered to drive lorry loads of PoWs to the cattle boats, which transported the men to Britain. Leaving his lorry at the quayside, he boarded the boat and spent more gruelling weeks at sea, until the ship finally docked at Liverpool. 'When I got off the ship I kissed the ground,' he remembers. 'It was so wonderful to be on dry land.' From Liverpool he and his fellow prisoners were transported to Bury, where he spent 30 days, living in a converted chocolate factory, and from there on to Horbling.

At first, the PoW 'camp' at Horbling, as with Moorby, was only a grass field, on which bell tents were pitched. But within three months the prisoners, with the aid of civilian contractors, had constructed a permanent site, with living quarters, hospital facilities and recreational amenities, which included a concert hall. Mr. de Falco himself remembers performing in several productions. 'Script-writers, musicians, singers and comedians, we all came together to put on shows,' he recalled.

by TERESA PENNELL

Life in a PoW camp seems to have been a mixture of hard work and play. Parties of men were sent out to clear ditches and harvest wheat and corn, working up to 12 hours a day in the summer, at a wage of 8s. a week, although very lucrative overtime money was paid by farmers 'on the side.' As the war continued, and a growing number of PoWs arrived in Lincolnshire, more and more men were billeted out on farms in the area.

A PoW could apply to be billeted, and if his request was granted he would eat and sleep on the designated farm, instead of having to be transported there daily. Security was lax, if not non-existent. From April 1943 Italian PoWs were even allowed to be billeted on the coast. As well as working for an individual farmer, the prisoners regularly formed labour gangs, but here again, as Mr. de Falco recalled, there were no security precautions taken. Often a warden would simply hand his unloaded rifle to one of the prisoners and tell him to keep an eye on things until he returned, usually about seven hours later.

Beds and mattresses for the PoWs who were billeted on farms were supplied by the government, which also provided ration books. In his turn, the farmer was expected to provide the prisoners with hot liquid refreshments during the day and, if required, with facilities for cooking a midday meal.

Although prisoners always had their own cooks, rations for them, as for most people, were scarce and farmers' wives were keen to fill the gaps in their empty stomachs, but it took some time for them to become accustomed to traditional English food. 'We were brought steamed pudding, but nobody fancied it, so we put it in the horses' manger,' he smiled, 'but even they wouldn't eat it.'

Most of all it was pasta that the Italians missed, but they soon found ways of making gnocchi and spaghetti from powdered egg and potato flour.

The Italian PoWs were inventive in many other ways too. Using small forges inside the camps, they would melt down half crowns—'there was more silver in them than in florins,' according to Mr. de Falco—and make them into rings, which they would sell locally. They wove baskets and moulded pieces of soggy bread into ornaments, such as sabots, which they painted with poppy dye, and there was much wood carving too. But perhaps the most romantic works of art created by the Italian PoWs were the murals they painted on hostel walls. Sadly most of these paintings have crumbled away, but fragments of a fascinating one remains at Stourton Home Farm at Great Sturton, where one can just recognise a typical Italian church flanked by cypress trees.

After Italy's surrender in late 1943, Italian PoWs enjoyed even more freedom—the Germans, of course, were another matter—and were allowed to make unaccompanied trips into the towns, as long as they abided by a 10 o'clock curfew, which was later to be lifted. Mr. de Falco often went to the cinema at Boston—he was billeted at Swinsehead Bridge—but was gently reprimanded on more than one occasion by the local policeman, known as 'Handlebars', because of his ginger moustache, for being an hour or so late.

With the end of the war many PoWs were repatriated, but a number stayed on to make new lives for themselves in Lincolnshire. More German PoWs chose to remain than Italians, but Mr. de Falco was already seriously thinking of settling in England when a chance meeting in a theatre queue in Boston made up his mind for him. For it was here that he met his future wife, Kathleen, in 1946 and the following year they were married.

The return of repatriated prisoners from Britain to Italy was made a pretext for fantastic stories of 'British cruelty', with tales of ill-treatment and food shortages. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Domenico de Falco's memories of war-time Lincolnshire are pleasant ones. 'I was very impressed by the way the people in this country treated us. We were not short of anything.' And after the time he spent as a PoW in Lincolnshire he said; 'It didn't take me long to decide to stay.'

Stourton Home Farm Hostel where 170 PoWs were billeted. ▶

▼ Moorby PoW Camp.

