

Notes from Local Interest Group 26th April 2018

Present: Maureen Lloyd (ML), John Price (Rhosgoch), Avryl and Roy Lloyd, Wendy and Dainis Ozols, Judith Coles, Elaine Curtis, Sue Farmer, Joan Lloyd, Carole Gibbs, Ruth and Bill Johnson, Neville Harley, Gaynor Price, Joan Hughes, Shirley Meredith, Jacqui Mills, Sylvia Illingsworth, Richard Thomas, Margaret and John Price (Hay), Edwina Griffiths, Geoff Moore, Sue and John Ievers, Richard Harris, Jeremy and Chris Rose, Grace Davies, Evelyn Bally, Mike Head.

Apologies: Peter and Pauline Spode, Jenny Francis

ML welcomed everyone and started with a few announcements:

1. Thanks to the efforts of John Price (Hay), "Radnorshire From Above" has recently been reprinted. It is an excellent publication, with lots of fascinating aerial photos of the county, and would be an excellent resource for B&Bs, holiday cottages, etc. If you would like a copy, please contact John Price (Hay). Price £12.95.
2. Next month's meeting will see the first of our summer "field trips". We will be exploring the old tracks to Painscastle. Meet outside the village hall at 7.30pm.

ML then introduced our speaker for the evening, Mari Fforde. The subject of her talk is:

Kington Camp: When the Americans came to town.

Mari began by explaining to us where her interest in this subject had originated. She had often driven past a very obvious old water tower on her way to see family near Kington and had wondered what it was. She was told that it had been part of an old WW2 "camp" and so she set about trying to find out more. After some initial investigation, she decided that this would make an excellent local project and she applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund; she was successful in her bid for funding. The aim was to do the research, involving the local community, and then produce a book and a web site, and also to put together an exhibition for the museum in Kington. Underlying the project was a desire to record memories of the camp before it was too late. Initially, her team discovered that a book had been written (in the 1980s) about the camp by John Higginbotham, and this was an extremely valuable resource, but there were no "oral histories" included.

Mari went on to give us some background information about Kington Camp. In 1940, the land had been requisitioned by the British Army to be used for taking in Dunkirk survivors and, during this time, it became a "sea of canvas". The Kington site had a number of advantages: Kington had a station which gave it good accessibility; the land was flat and probably quite cheap; and, the area was remote and therefore considered safe as it was unlikely to be a Luftwaffe "target". However, it was a big shock to the locals when the soldiers arrived. They were pretty dishevelled, many were in a state of shock after the Dunkirk evacuation and there were very large numbers of them. The reality of the war was suddenly brought home to people living locally in a way that they had not been aware of before. Following Dunkirk, it was then used as a training camp until 1942 and regiments such as the Buffs and the Welsh Guards were trained there. Then, in 1943, the two American hospitals were built and this is what became the focus of Mari's project.

Right from the start, the aim was to get local people involved, particularly children in local schools, both primary and secondary. The Head of Humanities at Lady Hawkins School in Kington was especially enthusiastic about the project and many of the school's students, in particular the Sixth Formers, took a very active role in the research. Southampton University archaeologists also

became involved in the research project and they did a 3D reconstruction of the site, helped by the Sixth Formers from Lady Hawkins School. The local primary school children were also active participants and they held a WW2 Day, with "rations biscuits" to eat and other wartime-related activities.

Mari then showed us an aerial photo, taken in 2006, which showed what was still left of the camp. Many of the old buildings remain and they are now used by a turkey farm and as a small industrial estate, amongst other uses. This meant that the team had access to some of the buildings when doing their research and this proved helpful.

Mari went on to tell us the background to the building of the two American hospitals on the site. In 1942, the USA and UK put together a strategic plan to move US troops and equipment to GB in preparation for D Day. As part of their planning, they realised that they would need to make provision for wounded soldiers and the US chief surgeon calculated that these could number up to 90 000. To cater for these casualties, the Americans planned to construct 116 hospitals in the UK. In order to provide medical care in the most efficient way possible, the Americans set up hospital centres and groups. The 12th Hospital Centre was established in Malvern and in its group were the 107th and 122nd hospitals that were built in Kington. The British firm, Wimpy, was contracted to construct these hospitals, using prefabricated sections which were brought to Kington by rail. At peak times, there were up to 450 men working on construction of the site. Kington was chosen because of its station and also because it already had the training camp site. The bridge over the River Arrow had to be strengthened in preparation for all of the heavy vehicles coming in and it still bears the date, 1943. Mari showed us photos of the site, taken in 1943, to give us an idea of the scale of operations. At this time, Kington had a population of around 2000. The hospitals would eventually have a peak capacity of 3500 beds and, together with all of the ancillary staff, this resulted in a very large increase in the "local" population.

The two hospitals were quite distinct from one another; they were separated by just a small lane. The 107th opened on 18th August 1943 and had 83 nurses, 54 officers, 1 Warrant Officer and 448 enlisted men. By the end of December, it had admitted 3509 patients. By the time the 122nd opened on 7th August 1943, it already had 82 patients from Normandy. On 7th August, it received 290 more sick and wounded. It had 36 wards with a bed capacity of 1400 in total. It was a dual-purpose site - a rest camp as well as a hospital. At this time medics were starting to realise that getting over the traumatic consequences (PTSD) of the fighting was equally important. Everything for the hospitals (apart from the pre-fabs) was brought over from the USA.

We were shown some photos taken by Wimpy during the construction. The wards were long rooms, with pot bellied stoves to keep the patients warm and "pitchmastic" floors to help with hygiene; these were very difficult and unpleasant to lay. There were covered walkways connecting the buildings which protected the patients when they were being moved from ward to ward; they were wide enough for a jeep to be driven down! There were not just wards. The buildings included X-ray labs, operating theatres, dental clinics, personnel quarters, chapels, pharmacies, recreation rooms, cinemas, rehabilitation facilities, mess halls, motor pools, boiler houses, ablution blocks, Red Cross rooms, stores and mortuaries. The care given to the patients was of an extremely high standard and it even involved plastic surgery, a very new technique at the time and carried out by renowned US surgeons. The wounded were brought in by special trains which could carry up to 300 patients at a time and, in order to speed up their admission, they were assigned to wards during transport. The trains were so long that the platforms had to be lengthened.

As part of the research, the team and the students used a list of all the personnel who had been awarded Purple Hearts by the hospitals. This medal is given by the USA to all of its troops who are either wounded or killed whilst serving their country. The students "Googled" some of the names in order to try to find former patients so that they could interview them or their families. Mari showed us some of the evidence that they had gathered from these sources, including detail from letters that had been sent home, which often complained about the awful weather. There were other insights which were very interesting. Apparently, there was racial segregation in the American forces at the time and so black and white personnel and patients were kept separate from one another. The two groups of soldiers did not get on and fights would often break out in Kington. Eventually, the two groups had to be given alternate days off to go into town in order to prevent these from happening. It was not just injuries caused by shells and shrapnel, etc, that had to be treated. The winter of 1943/44 was extremely cold and frost bite was a major issue. Patients who recovered sufficiently were sent back to the front to fight; those that did not recover were shipped back to the USA as soon as they were able to be moved.

Many of the people with whom the students made contact had photos of the camp, personnel and patients which they made available to the research team. Again, these provided some excellent evidence for the project. One lady had got in contact with Mari to tell her about her mother's experiences as a nurse in the camp; she also sent some interesting photos. Her mother said that she had worked alongside about 100 other nurses. They lived in cinderblock huts, about eight in each. These were heated by a peat-burning stove in the centre of the room. They slept on straw mattresses and each nurse was given an army blanket. Their meals were usually taken in the mess hall; if the weather was bad, they would eat in their huts. Butter and eggs were sometimes purchased from local farmers. When the nurses had any free time, there were movies and sports on site, or they could walk into Kington. Occasionally, they had trips to London where they would stay in a Red Cross house. Whilst in the capital, they would visit museums or theatres. One of the photos that this lady had taken showed the 122nd hospital chapel hut and Mari showed us a 2006 photo of the same building to illustrate how well it had survived the intervening 60 years.

All of the interviews and other evidence that the project team had amassed were collected together, transcribed and put onto the internet. The book was published ("The Story of Kington Camp" published by Logaston Press) and the exhibition at Kington Museum assembled. As a result of the website in particular, people got in touch with information about the camp and its occupants.

In 2014, a lady wrote to Mari from the USA asking how should could get hold of a copy of the book. Her father had been posted to the camp from July 1944 to July 1945 where he worked in the Headquarters Office. A talented musician, he had entertained those in the camp in his own time. Furthermore, he had made some recordings at the BBC for broadcast on the American Armed Forces Broadcasting Network. What was even more interesting to Mari was the fact that she had an 8mm film (silent) that he had shot whilst in the camp, using his home movie camera. She sent Mari a digitised version of the film, which we were shown. Although short, it had some great shots of the camp and people, a visit to Hereford and her father's journey back to the USA, concluding with shots of the Statue of Liberty as the ship sailed into New York. Mari contacted the Imperial War Museum in London to see whether they would be interested in having a copy of the film and so it is now in their archives, something that Mari is very proud of.

Following an article in the Hereford Times in 2016, a man contacted Mari with some information that he had gleaned from his uncle who had been brought up in the Kington area. The uncle had remembered the American troops' arrival, saying that they were very evident in every way. They drove left-hand drive vehicles, often on the wrong side of the road. The roads were narrow at the

time and had not been very busy before the Americans arrived as few locals had cars. Fuel was rationed and tyres were hard to get hold of. The US vehicles had seemed very large. The uncle remembered an armoured column coming through Kington on one occasion. However, the streets were so narrow that the large US tanks struggled to get around the tight corner at the Bridge and High Street cross. This caused a "bit of a stir" in the town.

After VE Day, the Americans left the camp, virtually overnight. At this time, there was a need for them to set up hospitals elsewhere as the War continued for a few months more in the Far East. After the War, the camp was used to house Poles who had settled in the UK. When the Poles left, the camp was converted into social housing. By 1962, many of the buildings had been taken away, possibly to be re-used or because they were in a bad state and had to be demolished. In fact, it is quite amazing that some of the buildings are still standing and in use today, testament to the quality of the pre-fabs put up by Wimpy. Because the land had been requisitioned by the British Army, not bought, it was eventually returned to the original owner.

Mari ended her talk by saying how delighted she was to meet three local ladies in the audience who had information about the camp. Jacqui Mills' father had worked for Wimpy and had been involved in building the camp. Shirley Meredith had an aunt who had worked at the camp and Joan Hughes clearly remembers the American troops in the local area when she was a child.

At the end of the evening, Bill Johnson thanked Mari for giving us such an interesting and illuminating talk. This is certainly a topic about which many of us knew very little and it is fascinating to think of Kington as playing such an important role in the lives of so many American soldiers during the latter stages of WW2. We are extremely lucky to have had this opportunity to learn more.

Refreshments followed, as always kindly made by Avryl Lloyd and Edwina Griffiths, whilst people had the opportunity to talk to Mari about the camp and her research project.