

The Weekend Essay

A city with a promise to

It was 80 years ago that Channel Island deportees first arrived in an internment camp in Dorsten. Having visited the city this week to mark the occasion, **Dr Gilly Carr** is confident that these people's experiences will not be forgotten

THE city of Dorsten, in north-western Germany, has a motto: *Erinnern für die Zukunft*, which translates as Remember for the Future.

This is how the mayor of Dorsten, Tobias Stockhoff, started his reply to my email in which I expressed my desire to visit the city to lay flowers on the graves of Islanders who died in the city's internment camp in 1942. The mayor, his chief of staff and the city archivist kindly and happily set aside an afternoon to join me in remembrance of the 80th anniversary of the arrival, on 28 September, of those who were once interned in Dorsten.

Dorsten is the least well known of the civilian internment camps to which Channel Islanders were sent in September 1942 in the first wave of deportations. While most people have heard of Biberach, Wurzach and Laufen, the brevity of the stay in Dorsten – just seven weeks – means that this camp has dropped from popular memory. But not for those who were there, who remember it with a mixture of fear and loathing.

Before being sent anywhere else, 824 people deported from Guernsey and 370 from Jersey in 1942 were sent to Dorsten, where an old Prisoner of War camp awaited them. The Polish soldiers who had previously inhabited the camp had moved out just days before, and nothing had been prepared for the 1,194 men, women, children and babies who arrived on 28 September.

They remained in the camp until 302 unattached men left for Laufen on 1 November 1942, and the remaining 892 were transported to Biberach on 11 November. These train journeys to the next camp last-



■ Dorsten Bürgermeister Tobias Stockhoff, Dr Gilly Carr and archivist Martin Köcher during her visit to the German city to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the arrival of those islanders who were interned there during the Second World War

ed several days and were cold and hungry experiences.

The seven weeks in Dorsten were not like the relatively more benign experiences in Biberach, Wurzach or Laufen. Dorsten differed in several respects, most important of which was the absence of Red Cross parcels.

The Islanders had to exist on watery soup and so lost a lot of weight very quickly. Hunger was a big problem. The extent of this can be best understood through memories of former internees.

Tom Remfrey, from Guernsey, recalled that his father swapped his wedding ring through the barbed wire for some bread. Jill Chubb, current chair of the Guernsey Deportees Association, remembered a man cooking a hedgehog in the camp grounds and skinning it before eating the flesh. Several others refer in their internment diaries to foraging for potato peelings on the camp rubbish tip.

The camp itself was in a poor state of repair. Women and men were split up, and the children stayed with the women. The men were put in wooden barracks where there was a leaking roof and draughty shutters instead of window glass. The women were put in large concrete buildings where there were 80 to a room. They slept in closely packed triple-decker bunks. Having 'inherited' filthy straw palliasses from the Polish POWs, the internees were

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quickly covered in flea and bedbug bites.

The men who were in Dorsten remember the toilets: these were communal holes in the ground with a roof but no walls, meaning that there was no privacy. Using them at night was hazardous. The women were only slightly better off, but watching German soldiers ensured that they had no privacy. Washing facilities were limited to outdoor cold-water troughs. Alternatively, people could fill tins or bowls with cold water and try to give themselves a wipe-down

indoors. Only after a month was a single cold-water shower allowed.

To make matters even worse, Dorsten was an industrial city, which today has a rich industrial heritage. An important part of this was the coal industry. The colliery was about a mile from the camp, and the internees remember how polluted the air was – and soon their lungs, clothes, hair and bodies were black as well.

The camp was situated on the outskirts of the city, dangerously close to a canal.



■ The grave of Florence Manning, who died on 11 November 1942



■ James Waters' graves. Dr Carr asked whether the graves could be cleaned and the names depicted in black paint to make them more legible

remember for the future



■ Bürgermeister Tobias Stockhoff, archivist Martin Köcher and chief of staff Karsten Hartmann at the cemetery

The water level of the canal was much higher than the camp, and there was a serious risk that the main sluice, next to the camp, would be bombed, flooding the camp and drowning everybody. As Dorsten was in an industrial and much-bombed part of Germany, this was a real threat.

Autumn quickly advanced, the temperature dropped and those in the camp now had cold to add to their hunger, dirt, and misery. The hunger and wet conditions quickly led to disease. On 10 October, just a fortnight after arriving, James Waters died of pneumonia in his camp bunk, leaving behind his wife, Elizabeth.

He was soon followed by four-month-old baby Brian Skipton, who died in Dorsten hospital on 23 October. He also died of pneumonia and could not keep down his mother's milk. Brian left behind his parents, Francis and Phyllis, and older siblings, Anthony and Shirley. Finally, on the day the internees left the camp, on 11 November 1942, Florence Manning died from pulmonary oedema, caused by a combination of water on the lungs coupled with weakness of the heart. Her husband, Monty, stayed behind in Dorsten for an extra day to see his wife buried.

In 1945 the old town of Dorsten was almost entirely destroyed in a bombing raid. As a result, 319 townsfolk died and were later buried in the same cemetery as the internees. Fortunately the cemetery was not destroyed in the bombing and neither, it seems, was the camp.

The city's archives also largely survived although a roof collapsed, letting in mice and rats who nibbled at the records. However, the city of Dorsten still has the death certificates of the internees, as well as a photograph album detailing the original construction of the camp in 1935 as a barracks for Austrian soldiers of the Sturmabteilung, or SA, the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.

It must have broken the hearts of the internees to leave behind three members of their community in Dorsten. The sadness is still palpable in St Agatha's cemetery in Dorsten today, where James Waters, Brian Skipton and Florence Manning lie

alongside the Polish POWs. On 28 September, I explained the history of the arrival of the Channel Islanders in Dorsten and, in an emotional ceremony, placed flowers on the graves, as did Mayor Stockhoff, who was accompanied by his chief of staff Karsten Hartmann and city archivist Martin Köcher.

We said a prayer over the graves and I read out letters of greeting from the Oberbürgermeister of Biberach, Norbert Zeidler; the Constable of St Helier, Simon Crowcroft; and the chair of the Guernsey Deportees Association, Jill Chubb. Jessica Roland, the Deputy Bailiff of Guernsey, also sent a brief message.

The engraved names of the three Islanders are now difficult to read. Although the graves are neatly kept, lichen and 80 years of weathering, coupled with industrial pollution, have affected the graves.

I asked Mayor Stockhoff whether he could arrange for the graves to be gently cleaned, with the letters marked out with black paint so that they would be more legible.

In the city I had also observed a number of what are locally called History Stations: information plaques with timelines of various aspects of the city's history. I asked if it was possible for one to be created for those who were held in the camp, as the presence of a camp in the city during the war was little known to local people. This suggestion was met with enthusiasm.

Later, the archivist joined me in a visit to the site of the camp, now wooded over with tall trees. As an archaeologist as well as a historian, I wanted to see whether any traces still survived on the ground. We examined the old maps and were able to identify that the three surviving concrete buildings on the site were original. They are now used for social housing. In an area used by the local archery club, among the trees, bushes and undergrowth, I found a few of the old hut platforms.

'There were no Englanders in the camp,' exclaimed an 83-year-old archer, but we soon corrected him.

It seemed shocking – even as someone used to excavating such traces – that the

camp should have vanished almost entirely in 80 years but, armed with a hand-drawn map by John Webster, now kept in the Island Archives in Guernsey, together with his war diary, I found the camp's potato and coal cellar.

Other traces included a concrete shelter for the guards, a piece of water pipe, some tiles – perhaps from the showers – and part of an old barbed-wire post, rather appropriately snapped in half. Everything was covered by leaf litter but digging a little with a stick revealed the sandy ground described by internees, on which puddles once stood after showers of rain.

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I left Dorsten with confidence that more will now be done to remember the Islanders and the camp, and with a strong sense of the sincerity of the city's motto: Remember for the future.



■ Dr Carr found remnants of the camp's potato and coal cellar at the site