

Napoleonic Prisoners in Penicuik.

Some background.

The war between France and Great Britain Dates from 18th May 1803 until 20th November 1815, 12 years. The battle of Trafalgar was 21st October 1805.

In the spring of 1803, after the short-lived Peace of Amiens it was necessary to find accommodation for the prisoners of war.

The French revolution was 1789 – 1799.

The main French adversary was Napoleon Bonaparte is suggested that he would fight with anyone. The Swiss, The Dutch, The Belgians and Russians and of course Great Britain.

After being finally defeated he was imprisoned on Saint Helena.

In the period around 1709 when Valleyfield started production of paper the main ingredient was the use of old rags. These were sourced from Edinburgh but mainly from France. The ground for the mills was purchased from Sir John Clerk of Penicuik. Valleyfield Mill was later bought by Charles Cowan. In 1796 the mill was producing 2-3 tons of paper a week with a workforce of 30. It eventually became the largest papermill in Scotland.

It is said the bank notes of the Commonwealth were printed on Penicuik paper. Walter Scott had the Waverley novels printed on the paper.

This was not the only papermill in Penicuik but one of four busy producing quality paper. There were 10 mills for Penicuik to Lasswade. all feeding off the water from the River Noth Esk.

The requirement for papermaking was:

- Waterpower from the river.
- Clean water for the process.
- A flat area for the mill and associated buildings.

- An ample supply of rags.

Because of the war the supply of rags from France stopped resulting in Valleyfield mill and others closing.

In the early part of the war France and Britain exchanged prisoners. Around 1802 France held 16,000 soldiers and seamen. We had 122,000.

At this time the only prisoner of war camp in Scotland was Edinburgh Castle but in 1799 proposals were advanced to make Neidpath Castle at Peebles, Inchkeith Island in the Firth of Forth and Linlithgow Palace prisoner of war camps. None of the proposals were taken up.

Edinburgh Castle held 1,100 French Prisoners in 1796 -1801. After the resumption of the war there around 12,000 so other accommodation had to be found. Therefore, in 1803 the government leased **Greenlaw** House, nine miles south of Edinburgh and one and a half miles from Penicuik. The site now occupied by Glencorse Barracks. This was basically a stone house for accommodation and ground surrounded by a wooden palisade with several Pill boxes for the armed warders. The ground around the house allowed the prisoners to walk about during the day.

The first prisoners arrived 67 of them arrived on 19th September 1803. By the end of the year there was 100 by end of 1804 160, and five years later 450.

There were many boys within the prisoners as young as 12 years old.

The overwhelming majority were seamen a few officers and petty officers.

Mainly tradesmen like carpenters, boatswain, coopers, a writer or clerk, an armourer, a sailmaker and others.

Some of the men, captured off Havana Cuba, were brought first to Belfast, then Greenock and marched to Edinburgh Castle and ending up at Greenlaw. There was suggestion at our meeting that perhaps the prisoners were transported by the canals from Greenock to Edinburgh.

Other accommodation was urgently needed. **Esk Mills** was the first linen mill in Scotland but for whatever reason, the effect of the war, lack of investment in newer machinery or couldn't compete with the mills at New Lanark. It was bought by the government. Esk Mills was able to accommodate 1,000 prisoners. Again, a timber stockade surrounded the site. Control of the prisoners was a bit lax. This duty was carried out by the militia, soldiers recruited from all over Scotland.

Eskmill received their first prisoners, 192, in 1811 from Greenlaw. Within a month it housed 2,817. They were soldiers but mainly seamen of varying ranks.

There were several escape attempts from Eskmill. On one attempt the prisoners lifted the flooring and crept into an opening of the lade. 23 escaped, one was shot, five were brought back and 17 escaped. Two made it to Kelso where they got picked up. Most were then sent to Edinburgh Castle to solitary confinement. The remaining prisoners at Eskmill were all put on short rations for three days as the "bounty hunters" were paid a guinea plus £1.10s, expenses, for each captured prisoner

Valleyfield the third Penicuik prisoner of war depots was by far the biggest. Indeed, it was the last to open in Penicuik, for the first 18 months it was the biggest in Scotland. Due to the large numbers of prisoners being held the building within the factory grounds had to be extended. As the river North Esk ran through the mill grounds this was rerouted out with the camp area by the prisoners. Like Esk Mills it fell on hard times due to the war and lack of its basic ingredient, rags. The Cowans sold the mills to the government for £10,000.

Valleyfield appears to have taken prisoners from all over the country as far away as Plymouth. The grand total of prisoners held from its opening in 1811 until its closure, in 1814, was around 7,500.

The Prisoners.

So net total of Penicuik Prisoners between 1803 and 1814 was approximately 9,600. The record keeping in the three camps was poor probably due to the overwhelming numbers.

Where did all these prisoners come from, where were they captured? English Channel, North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, Bay of Biscay, Cuba, Mediterranean, Caribbean and Indian Ocean. Battle of Trafalgar or many of the less famous battles with the French.

The vast majority were seamen with some soldiers.

There were quite a few Americans detained in Penicuik, the first arrivals were observed by the publishers Wm Chambers.

All the prisoners were “registered” on arrival at the camps. Height, build, colour of hair and eyes. This was used to help with arrest if they escaped.

There were a few women and young children in the camps as it was normal for French women to follow their men into battle.

Nationalities and Ages.

By no means all the prisoners at Penicuik were French. Of the 122,000 prisoners in Britain, it has been estimated that only about two thirds were French.

Prisoners were taken from ships, maybe not French but supporting France. There were privateers in ships. Britain at that time had a vast Navy.

A selection of nationalities were Poles, Germans, Russians, Dutch Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Maltese, Greeks Canadians (Quebec and Montreal), West Indies, Brazil etc. Americans during the war 1812 – 1814.

The ages of the prisoners varied in ages from 9 years old to 69. It should of course be remembered that no more than a mile from the camps young boys and girls were employed underground in the coal

pits of Clerk of Penicuik, the Marquis of Midlothian, the Duke of Buccleuch and many other local collieries in Midlothian.

Clothing and Food.

“It was very cold and there were no windows, no warmth, no fruit but the cabbages were very large” This was the recollection of a French prisoner 30 years afterwards whom Sir John Cowan of Beeslack met in Paris in 1845.

The large cabbages for use in the prisons were probably grown in the fields adjoining the camps at Cornbank. Vegetables were grown for the use prison; it was said that the prisoners worked in manacles. Food rations for prisoners of war was inevitably a chronic source of discontent. The levels of rations were determined by the Transport Board in Chatham.

The food supplies were supplied by contractors who had to bid for the contracts for bread, meat fish, oatmeal and weak beer. When you consider the numbers of prisoners in the three camps the quantities must have been staggering. There were no means of refrigeration for the meat and fish. The standards of the meal, oats and barley would be very low. Fresh bread was supposed to be delivered every day, again the prisoners complained on the quantity, quality. You would wonder why the prisoners were not allowed to make their own bread? One concession was that they could make 6p weak beer. This was per gallon! They were allowed to resale the beer and the profits allowed them to buy clothing and extra food.

Clothing and bedding were also very important for the prisoners. again, all supplied through contractors tendering. The specification was dark blue cloth, red cloth, yellow serge with metal buttons. The reasoning behind these colours was that the prisoners could be identified if they escaped and it would be difficult to be resold.

On 18th February 1811, the agent at Eskmill was sent 2000, jackets, waistcoats and pairs of trousers, as well as 3000 shirts, 1000 pairs of

Shoes and 1000 pairs of stockings. Shoes were only to be used on special occasions; clogs were worn at all other times. These clothing items were supposed to be renewed every year the agent at Greenlaw complained that he had never had the clothing renewed in 51/2 years.

Bedding was a hammock and a blanket. These were erected every day about 4.00pm and taken down in the morning. Punishment for disobeying orders, fighting and the like was that the hammocks were not allowed to be installed and the prisoners had to sleep on the floor.

Fighting and disorder was rife amongst the different nationalities. This sometimes ending in the death of a prisoner. The French would duel with the half of a pair of scissors attached to a stick. Rowdy and insubordinate prisoners were transferred to other camps like Perth. If serious they would be sent to the Black Hole in the camp or the black hole at Edinburgh Castle. Sometimes groups were sent to ships hulls in Chatham to spend the remainder of time there.

There were 16000 British prisoners in France, and we had 80,000 plus another 40,000-subjects allied to Bonapart. Release and repatriation were very sporadic. Very small numbers were released prior to the end of the war. mostly old, infirm and the very young. Some sailors joined the British Navy, mostly Flemish, Prussians etc.

Conclusion.

It was staggering the number of prisoners that were kept in the camps of Great Britain. The conditions were appalling. Penicuik not only had more prison depots than any other town or village in Britain but also became the only site of the only monument in Scotland to Napoleonic prisoners of war who had died in captivity. The large stone monument was erected by Alexander Cowan in 1830 at Valleyfield to remember the 309 men and boys who died between 1811 -1814, in the place where the dead are buried. It includes the inscription

All men are Brethren.



