

Quedlinburg men's camp – Christmas in Denmark

Revised 16.01.18



Quedlinburg Camp

The German Prisoner of War (pow) camp at Quedlinburg, a small town in Saxony-Anhalt, was a large men's camp situated near the railway line 2 ½ mile from the town. It consisted of eight compounds with six barracks each designed to accommodate 1,500 men¹. At the armistice it held 12,000 British, French and Russian prisoners although at one point it had housed 18,000.

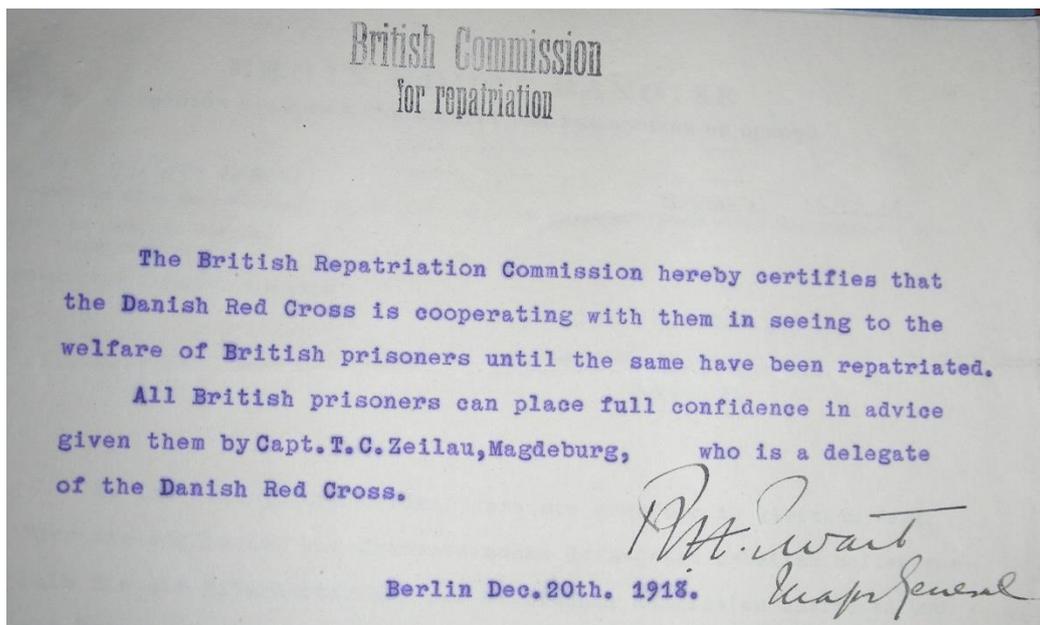
Life was not easy for the men interned in Quedlinburg camp; most were subjected to hard physical labour in local salt mines and brick kilns. The food supplied by the Germans was poor in quality and quantity and it was food parcels from home and the Red Cross bread parcels which had kept the men going. Pte. John Donn, Royal Scots, had been wounded in the thigh and taken prisoner on 23 March 1918. After a few months at Alten-Grabow he was transferred to Quedlinburg. The 19 year old's experiences of working in the salt-mines stayed with him for the rest of his life, including that of seeing "*one of the prison guards being murdered and buried under a pile of rocks down the mine*"². He summarized his WW1 experiences as '*Lewis gunner, wounded by bayonet, POW and salt mine*' but they were not subjects he talked freely about.

On the other hand Norman Cowan met the historian Richard van Emden and his memoirs are published in van Emden's book "Prisoner of the Kaiser". Cpl Norman Cowan, Northumberland Fusiliers, was wounded in the leg and taken prisoner 22 August 1918. He was operated on in a German field hospital and sent on to Quedlinburg where his wound was attended to at the lazaret "*by a British doctor and two Red Cross assistants*". Eventually the wound had healed enough for him to be sent to the salt-mines to work. Norman's family was told he was missing in action and two months went by before notice was received by the Red Cross that he was a prisoner. He didn't receive any parcels or letters from home while a prisoner. Cowan relates that October was "*a disastrous month in the POW camps*" because of typhus fever. Fortunately a fellow prisoner who could understand German was able to update the others with the news he was able to glean - that the Germans were losing the war and that the war would be over soon.

Pte. Arthur William Bishop, Somerset Light Infantry, was wounded and taken prisoner on 10 September 1918, he arrived at Quedlinburg on the 4 November. He must have been happy in knowing that his internment in Quedlinburg would be brief.

¹ Mrs. Pope-Hennessy's Map of the Main Prison Camps in Germany and Austria

² Information from Donn's family.



Captain T.C. Zeilau – Danish Red Cross

On 9 December 1918 Theodor Cizeck Zeilau made an inspection visit of the camp at Quedlinburg. Zeilau, a Captain in the Danish Army, had volunteered to work under the auspices of the Danish Red Cross in assisting the British Repatriation Commission in Germany. He was based in Magdeburg and his area of responsibility covered the camps at Magdeburg, Quedlinburg, Stendal, Wittenberg, Zerbst, Wildemann, Salzwedel and Weber. Zeilau's diary and a file with documents from the Magdeburg office of the Danish Red Cross are in the Rigsarkiv in Copenhagen (Danish National Archives).



Zeilau noted in his diary the information that he sent in his report about the conditions in the camp. The commandant was in his opinion gracious but haughty and with regard to the camp he had done what he could under the circumstances, which was minimal. There were 1298 British prisoners including those in the lazaret. 3 British officers, under Lt H.F. Stewart³ 5th battalion (bn) King's Liverpool Regiment, had arrived and Zeilau judged him to be a good leader and that his arrival alone had seemed to improve the men's morale. The conditions at the camp were very bad: they had no Red Cross food parcels, only the filthy clothes they were wearing and many men had to share a bunk without enough blankets, some were even sleeping on the floor. Two British RAMC doctors³ had arrived at the camp. They told Zeilau that 140 men had arrived in the camp on 5 October having been kept by the Germans working behind the front lines. They were starving and within three weeks 51 of them had died. A German professor at Halle had confirmed that they had died of hunger. The survivors were still in the lazaret.

³ Unfortunately Zeilau notes no more information about the doctors than this.

Zeilau telegraphed for supplies to be sent immediately, he was concerned that delay would cause a "mutiny". It was a problem too that the men were witnessing small groups and individual Russian pows leaving the camp daily in an attempt to find their own way home. After visiting the camp Zeilau went into Quedlinburg town which was festively decorated for the arrival home of German troops. He spent the evening at a Finnish hotel where he had a good dinner "*nothing found wanting here*".

Supplies arrived and Cowan describes the joys of "*the taste of a brew of real tea with carnation milk and sugar and also the taste of old plum or apple jam was lovely*". And there was a change of clothing for them too. They were told they were to be repatriated via a port in the Baltic and while waiting for this to happen a committee organized games and entertainment. They just had to be patient!

From Quedlinburg to Copenhagen

Lt. Col. De Renzie Martin a former pow at Dänholm was part of the repatriation team at Stettin. He wrote in his diary for 21 December that they were expecting a transport of 1600 men from Quedlinburg and Merseburg. The first train arrived at 11pm with 4 officers and 831 men. They boarded ships "Queen Maud" and "King Haakon" immediately. Pte. Cowan⁴ was taken onto "King Haakon" on a stretcher for although his leg wound had healed "*the scar on the back thigh muscle continued to suppurate*". With this group settled De Renzie Martin then tried to get some sleep himself but couldn't, and at 2 am the Merseburg train signalled its arrival. He went to the station with Capt. Stemann, another Danish Army officer working with the Danish Red Cross for the British Repatriation Commission, and not finding the train they walked to Free Harbour. "*After a lot of search*" they found them and then they had "*great difficulty falling them in and sorting out 520 men*". He even had to help "*carry a guards serg. piggy back who had a withered leg*". On top of that another 20 men had "*slipped into the party*", presumably stragglers, and they had been unruly and troublesome whilst they were being installed on the ship. After a hard night's work and with all the men settled on-board De Renzie Martin finally got to bed at 4 am and slept until 9.

It must have been a wonderful feeling for the men to be on-board a ship and ready to leave Germany. However their arrival at the port in the middle of the night cheated them of the warm welcome given to others by the volunteers of the Copenhagen branch of the British Red Cross who normally stood by the gangway and welcomed the men as they boarded ship. Many of the soldiers knew the names of these volunteers as several were those who had sent first food parcels and bread to them from Copenhagen. It was emotional for the ladies too, to be able to assist with "bringing the boys home", to be there as they sailed and left Germany behind them. They did all they could to raise the men's spirits. In the dining rooms tables were set with white tablecloths and refreshments were served in a civilized manner: they were no longer alien enemies but foreign guests to be treated with respect. The "King Haakon" and "Queen Maud" left Stettin on the morning of 22 December arriving at Free Harbour, Copenhagen later that day.

This is the only transport of British former pows from Quedlinburg I have found. When the remaining 470 from the camp left has so far not been identified. By late December official British figures show the camp to have been empty of British pows, only those unfit for transport remaining in the local lazaret.

⁴ Cowan doesn't actually give the date of his transport Stettin to Copenhagen on the "King Haakon".

Greve camp

It was beautiful weather in Copenhagen on Sunday 22 December. "HMS Cardiff" and "HMS Concord" were docked on Langelinie, where the "little mermaid" figure is sited. For a couple of hours that afternoon the warships were open for the public to visit, and many Danes did.



It was an extremely busy day at the Free Harbour in Copenhagen, with many ships leaving for the UK and ships arriving with new parties of British soldiers from Germany for a short stay in Denmark. In fact just short of 3,500 arrived that day from Stettin and Warnemunde. The names of the ships were mentioned in the newspapers and which harbours they had sailed from but so many had arrived in Denmark over the last weeks that no mention was now made of which camps the men had come from. Many Danes were at Free harbour too, to both wave goodbye and welcome the newcomers. L Cpl John Brown MGC one of the Quedlinburg group remarked that "*the population accorded them a splendid welcome*".

It can be deduced from lists of train movements in Denmark and the records containing the numbers of men billeted in each Danish camp that the majority of the Quedlinburg group, 5 officers and 800 OR went to the camp at Greve while the rest went with the others from "King Haakon" and "Queen Maud" to the camps on Amager: Ullerup, Skov and Baggessminde. Others arriving on that day went to the camp at Sandholm and the barracks ship Fynen. In a Greve camp ledger the group is noted as being 1 officer, 16 NCO and 808 OR. Also on that day 3 American NCOs and 19 OR were noted as being on the train from the harbour to Taastrup, the station for Greve camp. Perhaps they were the "*unruly stragglers*" who had boarded the ships at Stettin.

Greve and the Amager camps had been emptied earlier in the day; these men were now on their way home to the UK. The men from Quedlinburg were the 5th group to stay at Greve and given that it was only a few days to Christmas then perhaps local interest had dwindled a bit. Major Marris, Tank Corps, had taken over as SBO at Greve. He had been a POW at Dänholm and volunteered for repatriation duty. The other British officers on repatriation duty at Greve were Capt. Milburne and Lt. Jones.

Christmas preparations in Denmark

Advent services had been held in English for the previous groups and preparations were made to give the British and other foreign soldiers who would be in Denmark during Christmas a good festive holiday. English newspapers referring to the home-coming prisoners temporarily detained in Denmark said that *“Christmas will be observed as at home, and as far as possible national Christmas dishes will be provided”*. Anders Jensen⁵ owned several hotels and supplied food and drink to the seaside hotels where the British officers were billeted. A week before Christmas he priced a menu for them consisting of rice porridge (Danish Christmas speciality), roast goose with apple cake as desert. Each table setting would be decorated with a Danish flag and every officer given a ½ bottle of wine and a cigar.

It must have been early evening before the Quedlinburg group arrived at Greve camp after marching from the station at Taastrup. It is probable that after their long journey, they would have eaten a meal and gone straight to bed; but hopefully not before they had a chance to admire the Christmas trees that the scouts from Taastrup had put up and decorated in all the barracks.

A Christmas Eve recommendation

It was of utmost importance for the British that the men were cleaned up and given clean uniforms as soon as possible, both for health reasons and not least so they looked, felt and behaved as smart disciplined soldiers again and not filthy prisoners of war. Even though the Quedlinburg men had received some items of clean clothing one can imagine that they were a scruffy bunch. They would have been queuing to use the showers at Greve on 23rd while those at the Amager camps went into Copenhagen to use the public baths there. This solution to the insufficient bathing facilities at some of the camps was not ideal and Captain Davidson RAMC looked into the extent of the problem and what could be done about it.

His *“Report on the sanitary situation at Copenhagen with regard to repatriated British prisoners of war returning from Germany”* was sent to the top repatriation staff on Christmas Eve. *“Owing to the importance of lice as transmitting agents of disease such as Typhus Fever, Trench Fever, and Relapsing Fever, I have impressed upon all concerned with the repatriation scheme, the necessity of making arrangements for all men to be deloused and issued with clean, disinfected clothing on arrival at Copenhagen and the recommendations which are submitted in this report have been made known by me in personal conversation with all concerned, and have been acted upon.”* He went on *“There is great danger of bedding, etc. at the camps becoming infected with new arrivals, as if the men arrived at the camps at night, they go to their sleeping quarters and not first to the bath and clean clothing stores.”* This had been the case at Greve camp.

“Lives vs. Lice”

Captain Davidson recommended that a shed be built at Free Harbour with bathing facilities which could take 300 men per hour together with a disinfector which could disinfect discarded clothes before sending them to a laundry. Lt. Col Hazard, Base Comdt., & O.C. British Troops in Denmark forwarded Capt. Davidson’s report to the War Office. His comment *“I agree to this report in theory, but am of the opinion*

⁵ Anders Jensen was a master butcher and businessman who owned among other properties the Palace Hotel on Rådhuspladsen and Hotel Marienlyst in Helsingør.

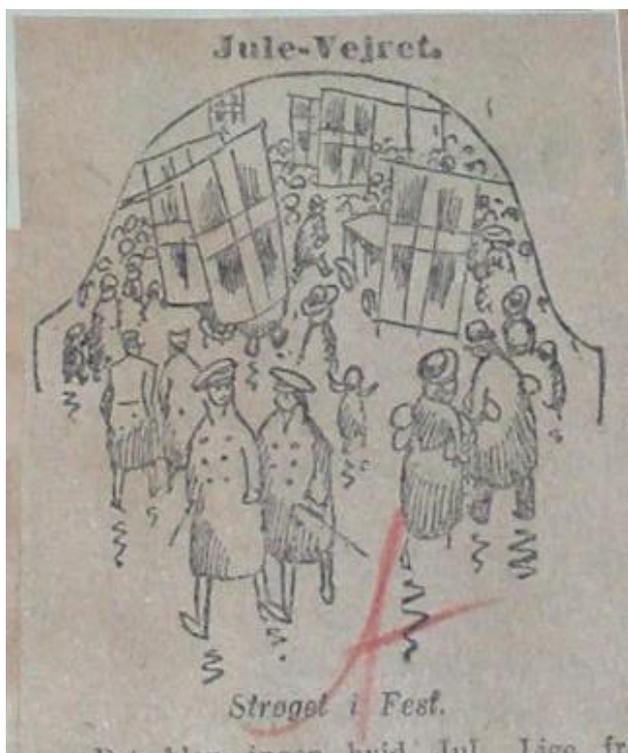
*that if the delousing of any man is going to delay their transfer home, it is better for them to go lousy. It is question of **Lives vs. Lice**".*

The bathing shed with a disinfectant was built, although only the last of the British former pows actually got to use the facility. Fortunately ☺ a photographer managed to get some photos of some of these guys "in action" here.



Photos in "Rigsarkivet"

Celebrating Christmas



It poured down with rain on 23 December so the men at Greve probably stayed in the camp, had a shower and were kitted out in clean clothes and then maybe went over to the KFUM (Danish YMCA organisation) hut where they could write letters home, read magazines, play games and cards and relax. Christmas is celebrated in Denmark on the evening of Christmas Eve. Even though the weather was grey and dismal on the morning of the 24th the streets in central Copenhagen were busy, filled with Danes out doing their last purchases of Christmas presents. There were lots of foreign soldiers and Royal Naval sailors from the ships at Langelinie out window shopping, sightseeing and using one of the cafés that had opened on their behalf for a cup of tea and a sandwich. There were cafés for the “foreign guests” at Charlottenborg and in the “Odd Fellow Palace”. KFUM had also opened a café for them at their premises in Gothersgade.

Everyone was looking forward to a “hyggelig” Christmas evening with peace that had finally come to Europe after four long years of war.

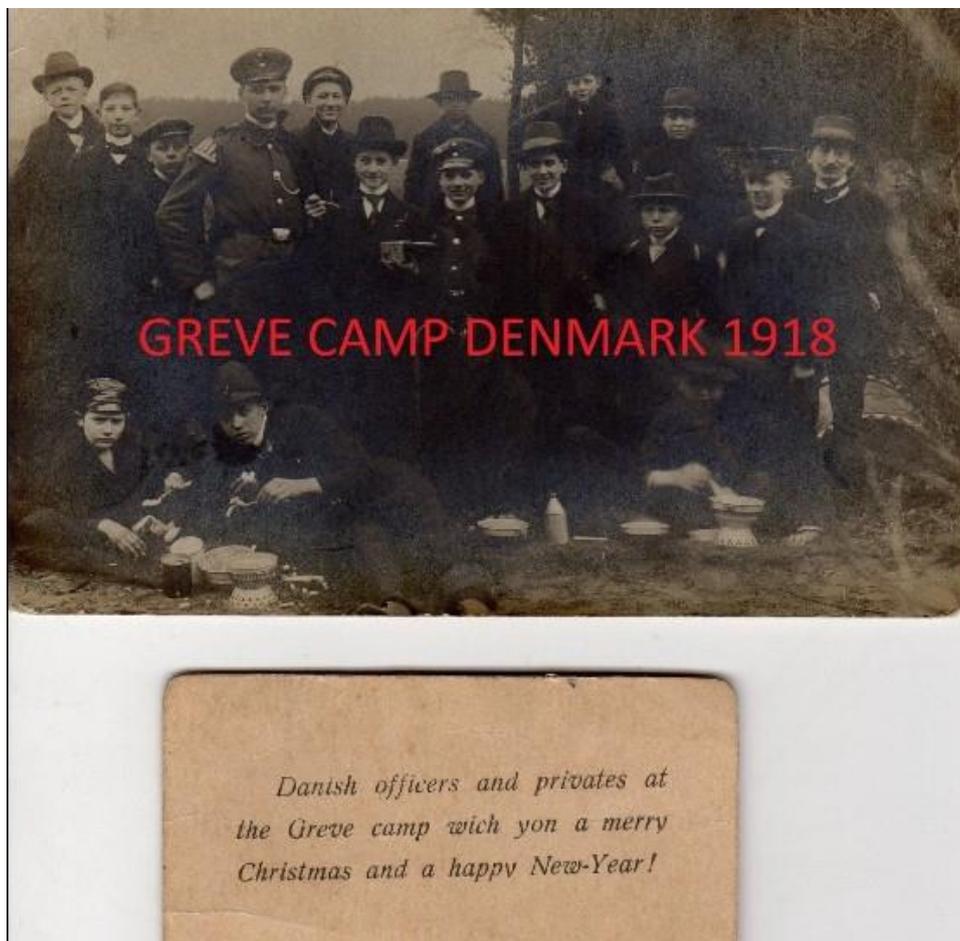
Unfortunately the only description of the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day activities at Greve is brief. Dinner was served at 6 o’clock with small Christmas trees placed decoratively on the tables. While the Danish soldiers on duty had a meal of roast pork and apple cake the British, according to the local Danish newspapers enjoyed a Christmas Eve meal of steak and Christmas pudding⁶. The men at Greve had apparently been lucky that some special supplies sent from England “*porter and Christmas pudding*” had been sent on to their camp kitchen. (At least some Red Cross parcels sent out for the Christmas period of 1917 are known to have included “*a rich Christmas pudding*”⁷). The newspapers also mention that the Danish cooks didn’t know how to cook such puddings and Danish tummies wouldn’t have been able to digest them. Presumably volunteers among the British helped in the camp kitchen. After the meal the men were offered beer, coffee, Danish pastries and cigars.

“The Entertainment Committee for British Soldiers” had sent 500 kronor to the commandant at Greve to provide extra supplies and small souvenirs for them to take home as a reminder of their Christmas 1918 in

⁶ The 700 French ORs billeted at Horserød camp were, after the Danes had consulted with the French Red Cross, served a French style meal of soup, stewed steak and rødgrød for their Christmas Eve meal. They thought the rødgrød novel and asked for the recipe. Rødgrød is a thickened sweet fruit “porridge” served with cream and “rødgrød med fløde” is a Danish tongue twister for foreigners.

⁷ Parcels sent in October 1917 to pows in Bulgaria: “The British Prisoner of War” March 1918

the Greve camp. Even though this was a large sum it wasn't much per person. One could imagine that cards such as this were attached small token gifts given to the men. In the evening when Major Marris walked around the camp with Danish Captain Ipsen wishing all a Merry Christmas they were met with cheering by the men full of Christmas spirit and "For he's a jolly good fellow!"



Several church services were held in English on Christmas Day; in the camps' KFUM huts, in churches local to where British servicemen were billeted⁸ and even on the barracks ship Fyner. Pastor Storm⁹ from the Garrison Kirke and committee member of the British Red Cross in Copenhagen held a church service at Greve. During the service he read a telegram for the men sent to them from Queen Alexandra. Nearby at his Reeslev Church Pastor Wassmann held a Christmas Day service in English. The SBO at the Barfredshøj camp Major Cunliffe read the Christmas text, and sheets with English psalms had been printed especially for the service. Pastor Kent from Taastrup Indre Mission church¹⁰ was also very active holding services in English for the men and the "friends" of this church made known that after New Year that they would be inviting the pows from Greve to social events at their Mission House.

⁸ A Christmas service was held at Hornbeck Church for the officers billeted there.

⁹ Andreas Vangberg Storm had been Pastor for Sailors and Danish congregations in Newcastle and London until 1902. He was married to Edith Mabel Annandale from Co. Durham.

¹⁰ A revival movement of the "Evangelical Lutheran Church"

Fortunately there is more information in the newspapers about how Christmas Eve and Christmas was celebrated at the camp at Sandholm.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day at Sandholm

Many well-educated and professional Danes had been “godmothers” to individual prisoners of war and sent them letters and food parcels and/or done voluntary work for the Copenhagen Bureau of the British Red Cross or the Danish Red Cross. And they wanted to help when the men were repatriated through Denmark. Mr. and Mrs. Bøgholm had probably been involved and were now doing their bit at the Sandholm camp. Mrs. Bøgholm and the KFUM secretary at Sandholm had taken on the job of organizing the Christmas celebrations here. The funding needed for extra supplies and presents had been donated by “The Entertainment Committee”¹¹ and they were going to give the men at Sandholm a “Merry Christmas” by showing them how Danes celebrated this holiday. It all started with Mrs. Bøgholm instructing the soldiers in how to make Danish style paper Christmas tree decorations; plaited hearts and cones to fill with raisins or sweets.



On Christmas Eve the men ate their evening meal in the festively decorated dining room. Their Christmas dinner menu was first course - risengrød “pudding rice” cooked in milk as a porridge served with a lump of butter and sprinkled with a spoonful of cinnamon-sugar¹², the main course was roast veal, the desert was apple cake and the meal was rounded off with chocolate and cake. Then the men went over to the gym which had been decorated with English and Danish flags. They waited outside for the doors to be opened at 8pm and entered to the wonderful sight of two Christmas trees, beautifully decorated and with lit candles sparkling.

The Christmas party started with an English song and then commandant Willemoes welcomed everyone. Niels Bøgholm then stood up and gave a speech, he was a professor of English, and everyone listened to what he had to say in complete silence. Next was a British officer Mr. Thomas’s turn; he read the Christmas text. With the serious part of the party over young women carried trays with sweets and nibbles around to the happy groups of men, each was also given a small Danish flag to pin on their uniform as a decoration. Later in the evening a group of nisser (a type of Danish gnome/elf who eat rice porridge - Father Christmas helpers) arrived and to the accompaniment of organ music they sang and danced around the Christmas trees. Then the nisser



¹¹ “The Entertainment Committee” was a group of civilian British and Danish anglophiles lead by Danish Prince Aage who funded and organized “extras” for the former pows. Their base was in the Hotel Phønix, Copenhagen.

¹² The Christmas Eve dinner for Danish soldiers in camp was risengrød and roast pork.

handed out presents to everyone. Christmas carols were sung in English and the evening ended with a prayer led by Lieut. Storgaard at 10pm.

At some point during the evening a small group of comrades had had an idea and needed to get the go ahead for it. Their spokesperson, a negro decorated with Christmas tree decorations, asked for permission to hold a small entertainment the following day and presented their plan. The leader explained that all they needed were some tables to make into a platform, some blankets to rig up a dressing cubical and some civilian clothes, preferably women's clothing. They would provide an entertainment with some playacting and some songs, promising to keep their language clean. Permission was given.¹³

Pastor Hans Kock held a church service in English for the men at Sandholm on Christmas Day morning.

The group of entertainers must then have had a busy afternoon making their preparations and they were ready on time. They had built a platform at one end of the gym placing a line of Danish and English table flags along the front edge to prevent "*the not so experienced performers*" from falling over the edge! They had constructed, out of fir trees and blankets, changing rooms on each side of the "stage" and decorated the stage curtain with some colourful paper flowers. The negro was an experienced entertainer who had worked professionally in England and Germany before the war and had often as a soldier entertained his comrades. The others followed his orders quickly and willingly even though to others he sounded both comical and pedantic. Two of the group stood guard during the afternoon to keep the curious out while the others practiced.

The doors opened at 7pm and the gym quickly filled up with an audience eager for the show to start. Captain R.W.G. Robinson¹⁴ 5bn Durham Light Infantry (DLI) had been given the job of introducing the acts. He was the son of a vicar from Durham and he was, according to a Danish newspaper article, the perfect host. Intelligent and sympathetic, he had been interested in Christian-social work since university and in a most charming manner presented the performers with respect and humour. The acts were varied from a corporal playing solo on his cornet, a sailor singing love songs with officers and men joining in on the choruses to a large soldier reciting a serious piece. Then there were the comedians and a pierrot with an oversized paper trumpet who started his act with:

Here's to Denmark the Land of nice girls,
With sweet smiling faces and bright golden curls,
We've just come from Deutschland the land of much soup,
When crossing the Oceans the soup looped the loop.

The best act of all was the negro, the newspaper described him as being dressed in the proper spiffy negro way with a walking stick, elegantly pressed trousers and a colourful tie. He was escorted by a young sailor, dressed and made up as a beautiful young lady who charmed them all but unfortunately also had a rather

¹³ Details from newspaper articles.

¹⁴ Captain Ralph William Godwin Robinson 5th Durham Light Infantry MC taken prisoner 27th May 1918. He was a vicar's son from Castle Eden.

rough singing voice. This entertainment ended with a fantastic tap-dancing number. The audience laughed and applauded; the whole show was a great success. What a shame the negro's name wasn't given.

Other Christmas Eve and Christmas Day celebrations

It wasn't just at Sandholm that the men experienced a Christmas to remember. On the barracks ship Fyner *"Christmas turned into a glorious celebration with church-service and Christmas-tree and there was no lack of friendliness from the English towards our visitors, both men and women that came on board during the Christmas holiday"*¹⁵. Although that is the extent of Captain Emil Wessel's description of Christmas on the ship, in his memoirs he tells of the theatre they had on the top deck *"this Temple-of-art brought the men much pleasure. Shows of different kinds were performed at all times of the day, and the program was very varied: plays, concerts, variete-shows and sports displays. Amongst the English soldiers were singers and actors from England's finest stages. However it was especially the boxing matches that were popular and pulled a full-house"*. The men on the Fyner did in fact organize and put on a pantomime during Christmas.



This piece isn't about the officers' Christmas in Denmark, but to follow up on what they actually were served on Christmas Eve: Anders Jensen tweaked his original suggested menu and in the seaside hotels where the officers were billeted the meal consisted of fish, roast goose and as desert "ris a la mande". "Ris

¹⁵ Captain Emil Wessel : Orlovsminder

a la mande¹⁶ is cold rice porridge mixed with whipped cream, chopped almonds and vanilla sugar served with warm cherry sauce. Capt. Henry Wilkinson DLI, billeted at Hornbeck spent Christmas Eve in Copenhagen and got the train back just in time *“The Danish dinner awaited us, complete with Christmas tree, wine, cigars and the rice the custom allows. To bed fairly early, amid the strains of music and singing in the lounge”*. He was otherwise very social and enjoyed a number of outings, visits to the theatre etc. while in Denmark so it is a pity he wasn't up for Christmas fun and so could have told us about it in more detail.¹⁷

The weather was fine on Christmas Day. In Copenhagen a Christmas service was held at the English church, St. Albans, in the morning. Pastor Kennedy led the service while an emotional highlight was when young Magnus Hansen sang solo to the accompaniment of Clausen playing the organ. The service was attended by Admiral Sinclair from “HMS Cardiff” with all his officers, the officers from the British Repatriation office and officers and men from the minesweepers and all from the British Legation. In the afternoon “HMS Cardiff” which was not officially open to the public had so many Danes wanting to visit that they did let the most interested on board.

Groups of soldiers and sailors wandered up and down Strøget, the main shopping street in Copenhagen. The soldiers cafés mentioned earlier may have been open. Danish families were out for a stroll too and the atmosphere of seasonal cheer and goodwill filled everyone with hope for a peaceful future. Everyone was



happy. The newspapers wrote about how in the evening British sailors had been dancing around the Christmas tree on Rådhuspladsen. Young Danes joined in and a lot of fun was had by all. At the other end of Støget on Kongens Nytorv, groups of British and French soldiers gathered as late as 11pm. Outside the Hotel D' Angleterre they sang Christmas carols, sung as they should be with croaky and hoarse voices straight from the heart. It was described as being a fantastically moving experience by the hundreds of Danes also on the square.

Boxing Day

After fine weather on Christmas Day a storm was about to hit Denmark on Boxing Day. After a couple of days' holiday the transports started again. But not without trouble, once again there was a problem getting enough Danish stokers to coal the ships, which of course according to the newspapers was something of a scandal considering the numbers of unemployed receiving benefits. However Frederik VIII left Free harbour at 3pm on 26 December with 1500 passengers both officers and OR. Amongst them were 2 officers from Greve and 5 officers and 450 OR from Sandholm. *“Thousands of people were there to see us off, and apples and chocolates were thrown to us in abundance. It was a tremendous send-off”*. They were in for an eventful journey with a snow storm as they passed Skagen and *“on the Saturday afternoon, in the North*

¹⁶ Rice porridge was eaten by the working classes while rice a la mande had become popular amongst the middle class as desert Christmas Eve.

¹⁷ Capt. Henry Wilkinson repatriation story will be described in Repatriation from Dänholm - Appendix C.

Sea, we picked up a sailing craft flying distress signals. We went to her assistance, and picked up five Dutchmen who had been without food and water for two days."



Captain Cecil King's watercolour of boarding at Danzig 25.12.18

HMS Concord and HMS Wessex arrived at Copenhagen with 404 former prisoners from Danzig as passengers. This was an unusual event as the Admiralty had decided that the former pows were not to be transported on Royal Navy ships as there wasn't adequate accommodation for them. The captains of these ships obviously took pity on these men to prevent them being stranded at the port in bad weather without any supplies on Christmas Day. Over the Christmas holidays the repatriation sailings were disrupted by both the bad weather and the need for the ships crews to take a short break. These former pows had been held in a number of camps deep in South Eastern Germany in an area now in Poland, to the North East of Cracow. They had been concentrated in Lamsdorf camp and the rail journey from there had taken them 42 hours, it being so cold on the train that all they could do was lie down and cover themselves with blankets¹⁸. With the above-mentioned group leaving Sandholm earlier in the day these men were to take their place. However the weather had got so bad it was not thought acceptable for them to have to walk from the station in Lillerod to the camp considering their physical condition and the group stayed the night in sheds in Free Harbour. This wasn't as bad as it sounds. Anders Jensen¹⁹ had got his staff to whip up the

¹⁸ Account of Cpl C E Green, 1bn Scots Guards held in the Imperial War Museum.

¹⁹ Anders Jensen had also found time to get married on Christmas Eve.

necessary amount of goulash needed which was then transported to Free Harbour in an army food supplies vehicle and it was served with warm bread buns and beer.

Of the Danish weather Pte. Townsend wrote in a letter home *"I might mention it is surprising the number of people, even little boys and girls, that speak English. I really thought we had made a mistake and landed in England instead of Denmark! We had rather a cold passage from Stettin to Copenhagen; strong snowstorms are quite the fashion. I hope you are having better weather in England than we are her. I don't suppose this is a bad place in summer, but at the present it is not much of a health resort!"*

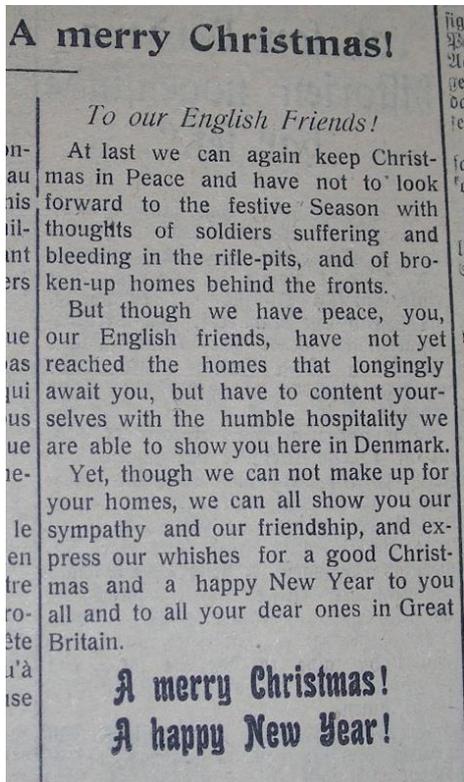
A couple of days earlier the newspapers had written that Lieut. Freshwater from one of the cruisers had arranged a boxing match between boxers from the local sports club Sparta and some of the sailors for Boxing Day. On Boxing Day the main "foreign soldiers in Denmark story" in the papers was about all the filthy prisoner of war uniforms that the British were taking off! They, it seems, had been offered to the Danes, which after disinfection and cleaning were to be given to the poor. There were also stories about men from Greve camp selling their unwanted items to a "rag and bone man" from Taastrup. Another snippet in the newspaper was about a collection made in the 25 Danish branches of some English insurance companies. It was an initiative taken by Gerson Melchior & Co. (Norwich Union), Aug. Borgen (Guardian) and Jørgen Hoppe & Co. (Sun Insurance Office). 2,500 kr had been raised and given to British Consul Erskine to buy gifts that would remind the repatriated men of their stay in Denmark.



27 December on the "Plassy" for Leith

The Plassy had arrived from Leith on Christmas Day. Movement order no. 7 gave details for the "Plassy" which was to leave Copenhagen on the 27 December for Leith. 844 of the passengers were to be the men from Greve including the 22 Americans. The rest were 344 from Fynen and 24 from the hospitals, i.e. 1212 OR in all and 12 officers. The group from Greve was to take the train from Taastrup to arrive at Free harbour at 12.22. It was another busy day with ships arriving and leaving, amongst them was the British

hospital ship HMS Formosa which arrived back at Free harbour from Leith. The Plassy sailed at 4pm, the weather was still windy but better than the day before, and it would appear that it was an uneventful voyage over to Leith. The Scottish newspapers reporting their arrival *"All the men looked well, and were in capital spirits."* This could be explained by the good time they had had celebrating Christmas in Denmark, that they were nearly home and by the fact that those needing medical attention had been left behind.



The Danish newspapers printed a heartfelt thank you to the Danes from the British chargé d' affaires on behalf of the men being repatriated. The Danish people had in a most generous manner given the men a Christmas they would never forget. And there was something fairytale and unreal over it after the nightmare of war and internment that the men had experienced. Pte. John G. Donn, Royal Scots a former POW at Quedlinburg was most likely on his way home on this sailing of the Plassy. It wasn't his few days in Denmark that he remembered. According to his grandson he *"probably said no more than 20 - 30 words in total on his WW1 experiences during his lifetime although until the day he died there was no salt dish on his table - if you wanted salt in his house you had to go to the back of the cupboard to get it and then make sure you put it back."*

Left behind in Denmark

Some of the interned men from Quedlinburg were still in Denmark. Cpl. A.C. Anderson 4bn Yorkshire Regiment, The Green Howards had been taken prisoner on 27 May 1918 and had celebrated his 20th birthday on 11th November at Quedlinburg. He was presumably in the group who had arrived in Denmark on 22nd and one of the group of approximately 30 who had been billeted at Skovlejren. Alfred sent a letter home to his parents in Sheffield from "Wood" camp on 27 December unfortunately he doesn't say when he left Quedlinburg and how he got to Copenhagen. However he wrote that he *"had a really good Christmas. The Danes have treated well beyond all expectations. After we had had our Christmas dinner, the King's Gamekeeper²⁰ brought in some partridge and plenty of partridge soup. This has occurred three days in succession."*



Cpl. Alfred Clements Anderson

²⁰ Skovlejren was near to King Christian 10's pheasant shoot in the wooden area on Amager called Kongelunden.

The next letter they received from him was sent on 1st January 1919 from Craighleith Military Hospital, Edinburgh, to say that he had just arrived in Scotland. He explained *“The reason I am in hospital is that the authorities think it is necessary as a precaution, because I & several more had diarrhea whilst in Denmark. There has been dysentery about & they wish to be sure we are clear before they send us home.”* Alfred and the rest of the men billeted at Skovlejren were all on the “Ajax” which left Copenhagen on Sunday 29 December. It was another very busy day at Free Harbour with ships coming and going and with many Danes watching and waving. The “Ajax” arrived at Leith on New Year’s Day but almost nothing was written about this journey and the welcome given in the Scottish and English newspapers other than it was a **“Happy New Year for the prisoners”**.

Cpl. Norman Cowan, who had been moved onto the ship in Stettin on a stretcher, must have been taken directly from the “King Haakon” to a hospital in Copenhagen for treatment. He describes his stay in Denmark as several months of rest and rehabilitation so the wound must have demanded some serious attention. He tells *“after weeks recuperating and fattening up, we left, one very wet and windy morning on a converted cargo ship called the Ajax and set sail for Leith in Scotland”*. For him to have been in Denmark for 1 ½ months he must have left Copenhagen on 13 January which was the last time “Ajax” made this crossing. This was the last transport from Denmark, and it took 1000 British former pows in Germany home to the UK²¹.



The “Ajax” leaving Copenhagen 13 January 1919

²¹ There were a number sick still not well enough to be transported and stragglers were still turning up

This last British transport was something of an event and despite the bad weather a large crowd assembled at Free Harbour to wave goodbye, according to the newspapers several thousand. There were representatives from all the involved parties; the Danish Ministry of War and Justice, the Red Cross, from where the men had been billeted etc. There was a lot of singing, hurraing and exchanging mementos going on and a military band played for two hours before the Ajax finally sailed somewhat delayed at 3.30. There had been some problem in getting the 83 Japanese who had been billeted on the Fynen over to Free Harbour. Photos of the departing ship were printed in newspapers and magazines. Cowan doesn't mention any of this. On the other hand he tells *"Having been so well fed in Denmark, some men began to complain about the quality of food on board ship. A rather annoyed chef made an announcement that he was prepared to give a gold sovereign to anyone who ate the dinner provided on the Ajax when the ship entered the North Sea the next day. A big storm blew up and the rocking and tossing of the ship gave all but the crew a severe bout of seasickness, myself included. We spent most of the journey hanging onto the sides of the rigging and being truly ill."* Neither does he mention the grand welcome given this last mass arrival of pows at Leith so he maybe he had been repatriated with Cpl. Anderson on the Ajax journey a fortnight earlier.

Norman Cowan remembered being sent for a de-brief at his regimental depot in Tidworth before finally arriving back at his mother's home in Newcastle. She had thought him dead having not received any notification of him being a prisoner of war. This does sound strange as Norman had had every opportunity over the last month to write letters and telegrams home from Denmark and on arrival in the UK and they would certainly have been delivered! He doesn't appear to have been invited to a "welcome home do" either as many of the returned pows were. *"There were no celebrations, nothing. They'd forgotten the war, the civilians, they were fighting each other to gain a job, there were strikes and all sorts. Life had to go on ..."*. Norman Cowan died in March 2002 nearly 104 years old.

Left behind in Germany

Sick men unable to travel had to be left behind in lazarets in Germany when the camps were emptied. Pte Bishop, Somerset Light Infantry, mentioned at the beginning of this article was wounded on 10 September 1918, taken prisoner and had been interned at Quedlinburg. He was still there weeks after the others had arrived at their homes in the UK.

Captain Zeilau had left the Magdeburg office but other Danish officers had taken over his work here with the Danish Red Cross. A letter was sent on 23 January 1919 from this office to HQ in Berlin with information regarding the sick former pows who were in hospitals in their district. There were 15 British in the hospital in Magdeburg and 1 in the hospital at Helle, all 16 were ready to travel²². A parcel was sent the same day to Helle hospital for Pte. E.A. Surtees²³ containing 1 tunic, 1 pr. trousers, 1 vest. 1 pr. Pants, 2 prs. Socks, 1 pr. Boots size 8 and 2 shirts; and so kitted out Surtees could make the journey home. There were two patients, one British and one French, in the hospital at Quedlinburg who were not well enough to travel.

²² Their names and regimental details are on another document

²³ Pte. Edward Arthur Surtees, R.E. formerly Northumberland Fusiliers

A document dated the 8 February was sent from British Red Cross in Berlin to the Magdeburg office "We are informed that in the "Städtischem Krankenhaus Quedlinburg, (under the charge of the German Dr. Eck), the British prisoner of war, Arthur Bishop, Somerset Light Infantry Regiment, Company D. is at present under treatment. This man requires the following comforts; Chocolate, biscuits, sugar, milk, cubes, tinned meat, butter and 20 cigarettes: if possible, kindly supply him with these comforts".

of the letter received from the "Young Men's Christian Association" in Berlin, under date of February 11th last, viz:-

....."Our secretary urges that we send him a supply of "biscuits, cocoa, condensed milk, fruit conserves, sugar, "as well as some tea and coffee. The cocoa is especially "desirable according to the sister in charge. May we there- "fore urge that you arrange to send Pte Bishop a parcel with "supplies as mentioned above. For safe delivery we would urge "that you send the parcel by registered mail. His full address "is: Pte A.W. Bishop, No.290038, 13th Somerset Light Inf.Regt, "Lazarett Quedlinburg." -

A parcel was sent and one was to be sent weekly to Bishop. In another letter sent 4 days later Pte. Bishop appears to have been visited by a YMCA secretary who repeated the importance of such as the listed items being sent to him "*biscuits, cocoa, condensed milk, fruit conserves, sugar as well as tea and coffee. The cocoa is especially desirable according to the sister in charge*". Let's hope that that he was comforted by the parcel and the knowledge that he was not left behind and forgotten. 25-year-old Arthur Bishop died on 14 February 1919. He is buried at Niederzwehren cemetery. The personal inscription on his headstone, chosen by his mother, is "At Rest".

Sources

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Greve card on page 11, found on-line but unfortunately didn't note source.

Websites

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Books

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