

PRISONER OF WAR CAMP AT KINLOCHLEVEN

by Kath Small

Kinlochleven is split into two counties by the river Leven – Argyll to the south, Inverness to the north. The first world war P.O.W. camp was built to the east of Kinlochleven on the northern bank of the river. This inclusion among articles about Argyll relies on the tenuous point that the camp is but five metres from Argyll, and that the usual approach is from Argyll.

Starting from the remains of the Aluminium factory (now housing a micro-brewery, a nursery and a call centre) the path follows the river east, over a footbridge, then on to the Ciaran path. This ascends gently through woodland and arrives directly at the camp – a distance of about two miles.

Originally, the P.O.Ws used the railway line (now dismantled) up to the earlier temporary factory. This crossed the river at the bridge by the camp. The piers of the bridge are still standing (see picture). The camp was occupied from about 1916 to 1920 and had no apparent later use. As well as prisoners of war there were conscientious objectors, possibly from Barlinnie and Montrose.

The camp was built in a widening of the valley previously used by sheep and then by Highland ponies. It covers approximately 450m x 150m. There are abundant remains of building footings most of which fall into two types – those with concrete pillars for wooden prefabricated huts, and those with concreted hard standings for Nissen huts. The western third was given up to guard accommodation, administrative buildings, hospital and living quarters for the officers. All on higher ground, they afforded a good view of the camp.

With the number of internees being up to 1,200 one would imagine that at least 120 staff and guards would be required, of which possibly 40 would be resident. However, a look at the plan would suggest accommodation etc. for a much larger number. Amongst the Nissen huts for the prisoners was a kitchen, a toilet/ablution block, a recreation room, stage, etc., the whole being set in tranquil and beautiful surroundings.

The men helped to build the 7 km long pipeline from Loch Eilde to the Blackwater reservoir. Their approach to the pipeline was mainly via the 'charcoal burners path' which zig zags steeply uphill from the west end of the camp (and passes more than 24 platforms used for charcoal burning). The prisoners were also employed to build the Glencoe-Kinlochleven road – until recently known locally as the 'German' road. This removed the necessity for shipping goods and workers to the Kinlochleven factory. Work parties were given various tasks in the village where they established good relations with the locals. They founded the 'Lager Theater' (sic) and had various football teams. In the village there are still presents given by the prisoners, and photographs of them. It has been observed that there were no noticeable attempts to escape from these comparatively idyllic settings to get back to the trenches!



Looking over the base of a Nissen hut up river towards the dam



The remains of the bridge across to the camp

This whole area has significance to walkers, geologists and botanists as well as 18th century and world war historians and industrial archaeologists. It is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest, mainly on account of the natural woodland and associated flora.

Unfortunately there is now a 'badger in the burrow' situation. Much of the camp is covered by rapidly regenerating birch woodland due to the reduction both in the number of sheep and of pollution from the factory. The remains of the toilet block graphically show the damage that is being caused. Soon the area of the camp is likely to revert to woodland. However, a local initiative has contacted various groups who have made an approach to Scottish Natural Heritage for permission to implement a woodland management programme and of course funding is being sought. We await the results of this initiative with interest.

References

- Burgess, C., 1996. Pre-afforestation survey for Highland Council. A.O.C. (Scotland Ltd).
Gregor, M. & Crichton, R., 1946. *From Croft to Factory*. Nelson.

Acknowledgements

Local information: Avril Watt and Hamish Small; Photograph by Liz Grieve.

Location

NMRS Site NN 26 SW13 Grid Reference NN 2065 6070
Parish – Kilmallie, Council -Highland

Author's address: Kath Small, Old Post Office, Ballachulish PH49 4JB
Tel. 01855 811 520

OBAN BURIALS

by Charles Hunter

Few people give a second glance towards Oban's only Churchyard at the end of Combie Street, even when they are taking the short cut from Glencruitten Road to Soroba Road through it and through the car park of the medical practice.

Within the triangular boundaries of the Churchyard, the original layout is symmetrical at right angles to the base of the triangle on the side where the car park and new Church Hall lie. There are ten equal rows of forty-four lairs