

BACKGROUND NOTES

Prisoners in Arcady exhibition

“**Arcady** is the poetic name for **Arcadia**, a mountainous district in Greece known since ancient times for its quiet rural simplicity” – Macquarie Dictionary

“From a distance- you look like my friend, even though we are at war”

During the four years of the greatest conflict the world had ever known, Germans and Australians lived side by side in peace and co-operation right here in Berrima. In the years of 1915-1919 over 300 Germans were interned at Berrima Gaol; initially named the “German Concentration Camp, Berrima”.

Who were they?

They were mainly captains and officers from German merchant ships, with a few military officers from German Pacific colonies and senior crew of the light armoured cruiser of the German Imperial Navy SMS *Emden*. The vessel famous for spectacular and successful raids on twenty-three Allied merchant ships in the first months of the war.

There was also an unfortunate Bohemian, who had emigrated to Australia with his American wife. Mistakenly interned because the peaked cap he wore led Australian army interviewers to presume he was a German seaman.

The disused gaol was hastily prepared for the prisoners.

Conditions were cramped and primitive in the gaol, which had originally been built to house only 130 prisoners and their guards, so by day prisoners were allowed to roam up to two miles from the gaol and were only locked in the gaol at night after roll-call. A small number had families who rented empty houses in Berrima village to be near their husbands and fathers.

The prisoners became virtually self-governing through an efficient Camp Committee who liaised with the Commandant. In fact relations between the Camp Commandant and his detachment of guards and the German internees were almost always friendly. The guard regarded their periods of duty stationed at Berrima as a “*lolly-stick*” in comparison to being stationed at Holdsworthy, the main camp, where five thousand internees were held. Towards the end there were only 8 guards stationed at one time.

How they occupied themselves.

The internees brought a great deal of excitement as well as culture to the sleepy village. They formed a choir, a band, a dramatic troupe and an orchestra. They constructed a bandstand and theatre in the gaol and held regular fortnightly performances. They bushwalked, abseiled, built tennis courts and a bowling alley, they had football teams, gymnastic and swimming clubs. Classes in a diverse range of subjects were held. English was especially popular.

A U-Boat once sailed the Wingecarribee River!

The prisoners built a number of impressive huts along the river as well as an array of water craft, a dam which deepened the river, and an aquatic playground which included a water slide, diving boards and wharves. Their boating carnivals were much admired for the variety of disguises changing the vessels appearance and for the great spectacle they made. They constructed a foot bridge at the end of Oxley Street, providing a second convenient crossing to the other side of the Wingecarribee River for internees and locals to use.

Mutual respect, tolerance or perhaps a more gentlemanly era?

Amazingly they were even allowed to hold festivities for the Kaiser's birthday or to celebrate the anniversaries of German naval victories. The Australian guards politely stood up with the prisoners when the German national anthem was played at the concerts end.

Not a completely "dry" camp.

Most internees came to quite enjoy their stay at Berrima. Those who returned for a visit many years later looked back on their Berrima days as being spent in a rural paradise, well treated by the guards and with many happy memories.

As well as church services run by a Lutheran pastor, they set up a small bush school for their children. Although only "De-tox 2%" beer was allowed, stills were built hidden in the bush and at least 20 cases of whisky were delivered secretly to the prisoners by an obliging carter. The camp commandant would have been quite surprised had he ventured into the solitary confinement cell under the gaol, which was stocked full of the empty bottles.

Another surprising fact is that the German internees were responsible for the first influx of tourists to Berrima;

"They come by horse, motorbike, car, dray and omnibus. They are all anxious to see the Germans, 'the Huns'. They admire the cabins and picnic places which they then use, leaving behind heaps of paper and rubbish".

From the diary of Frau Hurtzig

A barbed wire enclosure was later erected with the assistance of the internees - not so much to keep the prisoners in, as to keep the tourists out when large numbers were expected on public holidays!

But the real significance of the internment prison at Berrima is what it showed us about the better side of humanity.

"Initial alarm and aversion had been succeeded by tolerance, acceptance and a fair degree of mutual understanding." (Dr John Simons)

The locals at Berrima had seen the internees and their families in their streets and in their shops. They saw them swimming in the Wingecarribee River. They attended their

sporting and aquatic displays. They came to realize that these Germans were humans just like us.

It helped that most spoke English and their purchasing of goods in local shops considerably helped the economy of the ailing town. The fresh produce available from the fantastic vegetable gardens of the internees- most notably Friedrich Machotka, who is buried at Berrima cemetery, was also greatly appreciated. The helpful deeds of the prisoners also endeared them to the townsfolk. Even the schoolmaster, who originally would not let his pupils fraternize with the children of internees, softened a little after the prisoners helped save his schoolhouse from fire. One villager went so far as to help a prisoner escaping and another used to regularly shout at the gates for them to be released.

Not surprisingly, not all assignations were platonic. An internee was named as co-respondent in the divorce case of a local woman.

Apart from economic and cultural, the internees brought a number of other benefits to the region. They were often the first with news from overseas, due to their (illegal) subscriptions to foreign newspapers. The extra long masts visible in the photographs on some of the huts indicate the existence of home built crystal radio sets. They installed the first electricity in the district, powered by their own generator. They may even have been instrumental in suggesting the feasibility of a cement works at Berrima.

Homeward bound at last.

The internees were finally allowed to depart in August 1919 and were forcibly repatriated back to Germany- whether they wanted to go or not (it seems our shabby treatment of 'boat people' goes back a long way)! On their way to Moss Vale Station the departing prisoners marching behind their band, stopped to give three hearty cheers to the Surveyor General Hotel for the hotel's "truly accomplished service".

The New Exhibition.

With the assistance of generous grants awarded to Berrima District Museum, from Wingecarribee Shire Council and Museums and Galleries NSW, Berrima District Museum has mounted a new extensive exhibition on the German internees and their time in Berrima. The exhibition was officially opened in February 2009 by the German Consulate-General. Based on Dr John Simon's excellent book *Prisoners in Arcady* it showcases many of the wonderful photographs taken by Bowral photographer David Speer. It features artifacts made by the prisoners, an early film of the camp and even one old canoe made by the internees, which was washed up from the bottom of the Wingecarribee River in the 1978 flood.

Visits for High School history students.

As the exhibition fits in very neatly with the junior History syllabus which requires students to examine the experiences of Germans living in Australia during World War 1 a school visitor's kit has been developed by retired school teacher Bruce Mumford. Initially local high school students will be invited, and they'll now have yet another reason to visit Berrima and see the history on our doorstep.

Berrima District Museum is the museum of Berrima and District Historical and Family History Society and winner of the 2008 Southern Highlands Business Award for Excellence in an Attraction. This museum offers a range of exhibitions suitable for all ages.

The Berrima District Museum is run by curator Bob Williams and his team of volunteers. Located at the South end of Berrima village beside the bridge it is open weekends and on public, and NSW Public school holidays from 10am – 4pm. Phone 48771130

For Group bookings phone 4889 4405 to arrange an appointment.

Information from *Prisoners in Arcady* by John Simons.

Written by
Bruce Mumford and Lyn Hall

Photographs in the exhibition are from the collection of the Berrima District Historical and Family History Society Archives and John Simons.

Contacts:

Bruce Mumford blmumford@exemail.com.au
or Lyn Hall 4862 4293 lphall@ozemail.com.au

**“...it’s the voice of hope, it’s the voice of peace –
it’s the voice of every man”**

(‘From a Distance’ by Julie Gold)