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Accommodating Prisoners of War: A Survey of the Weston Hostel

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ABSTRACT
Prisoner-of-war camps were one of the most numerous types of military sites to be established in Britain during the Second World War and yet are one of the least studied. Most comprised a series of temporary huts that were erected from prefabricated components, and whilst some were put to new uses following the war most have now been cleared. The former Weston Hostel near Crewe in Cheshire is one such camp that appears to have originally comprised 35 huts of which 23 survived to varying degrees in 2019, when the site was subject to an archaeological survey prior to its clearance in advance of a housing development. All of the huts were either Curved Asbestos or Nissen Bow types, and were recorded using the latest survey technologies, providing a valuable archive for future research into this diminishing monument type.

KEYWORDS
Nissen Hut; Curved Asbestos Hut; prefabrication; prisoner-of-war camp; hostel; laser scanning

Introduction

A wide range of prefabricated buildings was developed during the first half of the 20th century in response to wartime demand for lightweight, easily erectable structures that used alternative building materials to steel and timber. These are now often referred to as Nissen Huts, although this well-known type was just one of nearly 60 unique designs of temporary wartime structure that were employed across the military and civilian spectrum as schools, hospitals, offices, workshops, canteens, accommodation, storage sheds, aircraft hangars and prisoner-of-war camps.[1] Camps were one of the most numerous types of military sites in Britain and yet they are also one of the least studied, perhaps because typologically they form one of the most diverse.[2]

The precise number of camps set up in Britain to house prisoners during the Second World War is unknown, reflecting the incomplete and sometimes contradictory nature of official records, although a detailed assessment of this monument type was carried out by English Heritage in 2003 as part of their 20th Century Military Recording Project. This concluded that there had been at least 487 sites or buildings that were used to house military prisoners captured by the Allies, and these are mentioned as such on a numerical listing system used by the British authorities.[3] The number and types of camp varied throughout the war, however, and numerous working camps and semi-autonomous hostels were established in rural areas, usually under the administration of a base camp. Some of these 'satellite camps' are not referred to in surviving records, and were for the most part omitted from the assessment survey in 2003. A good example of one such site is the Weston Hostel, near Crewe in Cheshire, which was the subject of an archaeological survey in 2019 prior to the redevelopment of the site.[4]

The survey recorded a suite of redundant 'temporary' buildings occupying land immediately to the west of Snape Farm in Weston that were used until recently for housing poultry and for more general agricultural storage, but had originated from an important role during the Second World War. The site was developed initially in 1940 as a searchlight and heavy anti-aircraft battery installation that was intended to form part of the defence of Crewe, situated 5km to the south-east (Figure 1). Crewe played a crucial strategic role as a hub for the national railway network, and was also home to several industries, most notably the Rolls Royce Works where Merlin aero engines were manufactured.

The anti-aircraft battery at Snape Farm is thought to have comprised six concrete gun emplacements, occupying slightly higher ground that afforded commanding views of the surrounding countryside and the approaches to Crewe; the emplacements are visible on an aerial photograph of 1945. Accommodation for the crew manning the battery was established near Snape Farm, although this was not occupied as the guns were never actually installed in the emplacements.[5] The availability of this unused accommodation was a factor in a decision by the War Office to requisition some 12 hectares of land from the owners of Snape Farm in *c.* 1942 to construct a prisoner-of-war camp.

Prisoners of the Second World War

The prisoner-of-war population in Britain during the early years of the Second World War was small and was composed largely of German airmen and naval personnel until summer 1941, when a large number of Italians were captured by Allied forces in the Middle East. The War Office decreed in July 1941 that 28,000 of these Italian prisoners of war 'should be brought to this country for labour' to alleviate an acute shortage and 15,580 were duly allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture, with another 2,600 to the Scottish Department of Agriculture and 3,000 to the Ministry of Supply for work in timber production.[6] A further influx of Italian prisoners followed in the wake of the 8th Army's victories in North Africa during 1942, creating an urgent demand for additional camps in Britain. Whilst the War Office issued contracts to several well-known construction companies to erect new camps during late 1942 and early 1943, the majority of these were actually built by Italian prisoners from the North African Campaign, living in tents until the prefabricated huts were erected.[7] There was an estimated 154,000 Italians held in Britain during the period 1941–6, representing approximately one-third of the total prisoner of war population in the country.

Upon arrival in Britain, all prisoners were graded according to their political views, and often by the branch of the armed forces in which they had served. Those graded as 'black' were considered to be of higher risk, including ardent Nazis and members of German SS divisions, who were held under the strictest of military conditions in high-security camps. Prisoners that had no particular feelings about National Socialism were usually graded as

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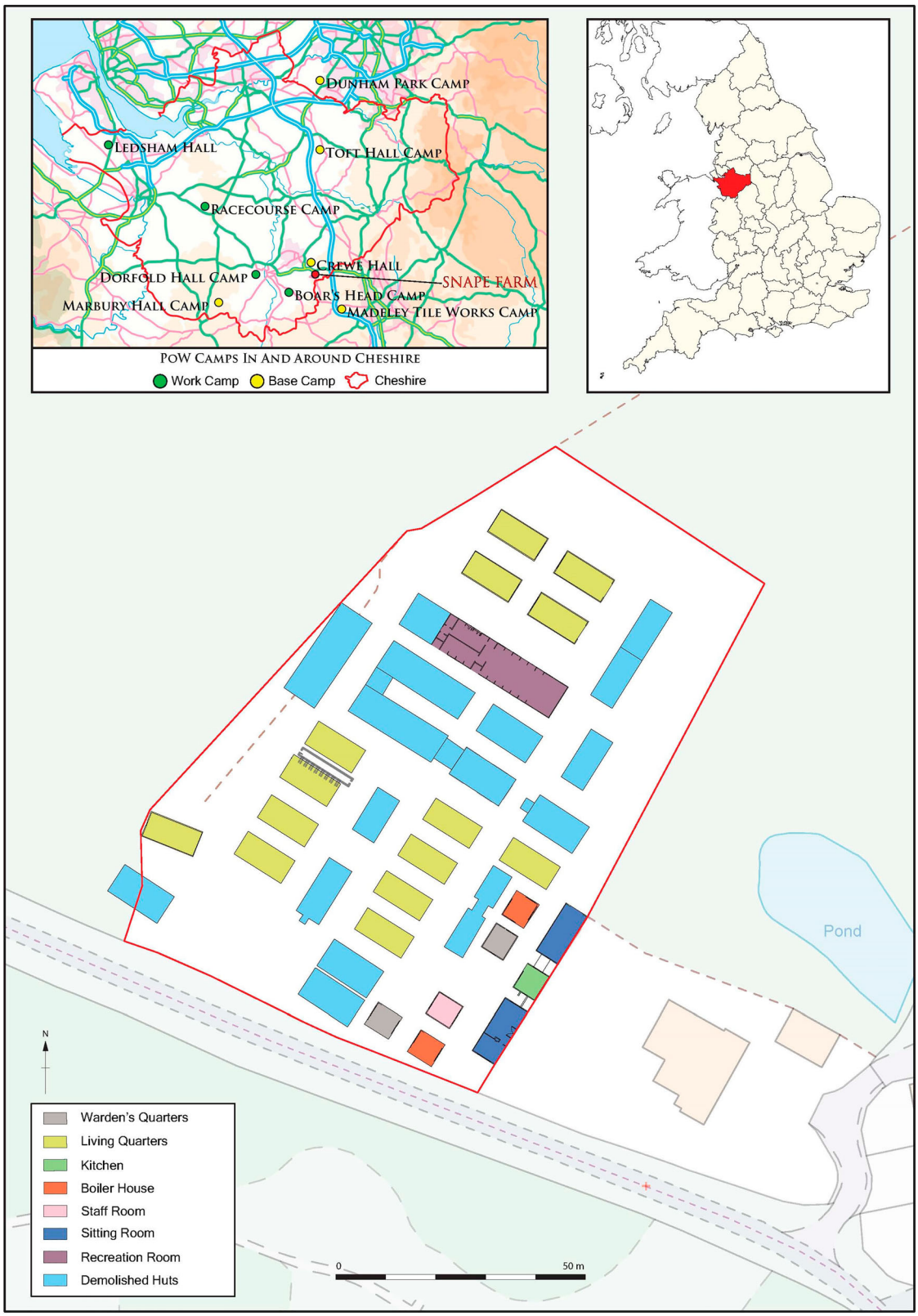

Figure 1. Location plan.

'grey' prisoners, whilst 'white' prisoners were anti-Nazi and considered to be of a lower security risk. The majority of Italian prisoners were graded 'white' or 'grey'.[8]

It was general practice for Italian prisoners that worked on farms to be marched back to their camp each evening, which could involve travelling some distance. This brought about the introduction of the 'work camp', although prisoners still had to travel from the camp to where they were required to work. A change in the system saw the establishment of 'hostels' for prisoners who worked well and displayed good behaviour. The hostels were typically of simple construction with few security measures, allowing greater flexibility for the prisoners. It was intended that each of the work camps would have around three hostels, although the actual number of hostels parented by a base camp was often as many as seven. Each hostel housed around 50–70 prisoners who could work within a 5km distance from their hostel, with the main base camp forming the administrative centre.[9]

Each prisoner-of-war camp was allocated an official number within a prescribed numerical sequence, ranging from Camp 1 (Grizedale Hall, Ambleside) through to Camp 1026 (Raynes Park,

Wimbledon), although some sites have different numbers at different dates, the same camp number can be used for different locations and some sites have a letter suffix rather than a different number.[10]

A photograph taken in *c.* 1947 identifies that the camp to the west of Snape Farm was 'Weston Hostel', with a sign that includes the number '189 G.P.W. Wkg Camp'. Cross-referencing this with the official list indicates that Camp 189 was a base camp located in Dunham New Park at Dunham Massey, near Altrincham (Figure 1). Established on land belonging to Roger Grey, the 10th Earl of Stamford, the camp was intended to house American troops, who arrived in October 1943 but relocated to Aldermaston in May 1944. Lord Stamford was then informed that the site was to be used as a base camp for prisoners of war.[11] The troops had been billeted in structures of timber and brick that were capable of holding up to 3,500 prisoners of war, although the addition of corrugated huts increased the capacity to just over 200 huts.[12] With around 6,000 prisoners by 1945, it is believed that a series of hostels were located around the surrounding area in Cheshire, the Weston Hostel being one. This hostel is not given a number on the official list of camps, and was probably re-categorised as a 'working camp'/'hostel' following the conversion of the Dunham Park army camp in 1944.

Typical Camp Layout and Hut Types

A typical prisoner-of-war camp consisted of a guards' compound, prisoners' compound, prisoners' garden plots, recreation ground and a sewage-disposal works. An outer plain wire fence supported by concrete posts and an inner barbed wire fence typically enclosed the prisoner compound and the recreation ground. The guards' compound usually comprised administration offices, soldiers' quarters and ablutions, officers' quarters and mess, fuel store, detention block (calaboose) and a water tower. The huts in the prisoners' compound will have included a cookhouse, grocery and produce store, dining huts, recreation huts, drying room and showers, ablution and latrine blocks, a camp reception station (sick quarters), a carpenter's hut and numerous living huts.

Amongst the array of different types of huts that were produced, the best known was perhaps that designed by Major Peter Nissen, a Canadian-British mining engineer who was born in American and moved to England in 1910.[13] In 1916, whilst on active service with the 29th Company of Royal Engineers, Nissen recognised a pressing need for portable huts to provide accommodation near the front line that could be moved as required.[14] He constructed three prototype semi-cylindrical huts of timber and corrugated sheet metal. The overriding design considerations were twofold: minimising the use of materials needed for its construction to take account of wartime shortages, and portability. The final design was a simple structure that was prefabricated for ease of storage, transporting and assembly.

The internal frame of a Nissen Bow Hut comprised wooden purlins attached to T-section steel ribs with hook bolts, which were a feature unique to Nissen Huts (Figure 2). The steel ribs each consisted of three sections bolted together using splice plates. Once assembled, the frame was covered with corrugated steel sheets, with three sheets required to cover the arc of the hut. The walls at each end of the hut comprised a wooden frame with weatherboards nailed to the outside. The interior was usually lined with corrugated iron or hardboard, although asbestos cement sheeting was sometimes used.

The Nissen Bow Hut went into production in August 1916 and was first used in France in September 1916, with at least 100,000 being produced before the end of the First World War.[15] The original design allowed for a hut that was 16 feet wide by 8 feet high (4.88m × 2.44m), built to various lengths in 5 feet (1.52m) sections, although the design was adapted throughout the war to suit different requirements. The design was further modified during the Second World War, when 24 feet- and a 30 feet-span variations were introduced and the length of individual sections was increased to 6 feet (1.83m).[16] More permanent huts often had concrete floors with the ends built of bricks or concrete blocks, and occasionally featured dormer windows and side entrance doorways in addition to the standard layout of a central doorway in the end wall flanked by two windows. They were ultimately used for a wide range of functions in addition to accommodation, including use as churches and bomb stores.[17]

The Curved Asbestos Hut was of a similar design to the Nissen Bow Hut, with 6 feet wide sections that were fixed onto a semi-circular steel frame with timber or steel purlins (Figure 3). The roof was of curved corrugated asbestos sheets with the springing points set within a concrete trough that was raised above the

Figure 2. British troops erecting Nissen Bow Huts in France, taken by John Warwick Brooke in November 1916. This is photograph Q 4597 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums (John Warwick Brooke, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons).

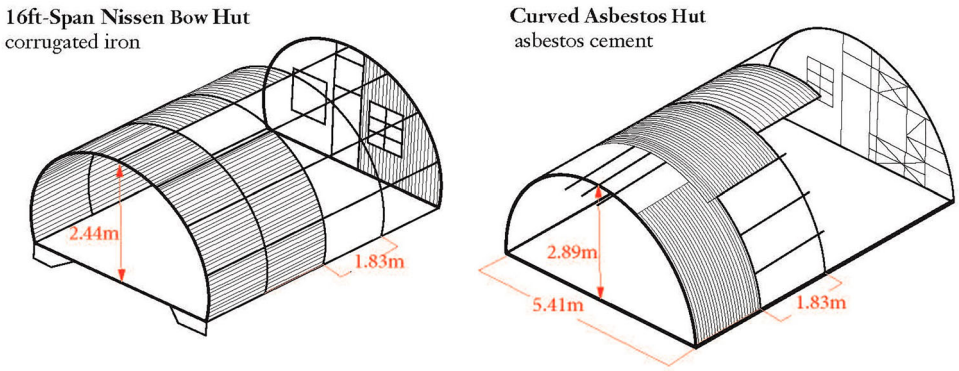

Figure 3. The Nissen Bow Hut and the Curved Asbestos Hut (© University of Salford).

floor. This type of hut typically measured 17 feet 9 in. wide by 36 feet long (5.41m × 10.97m), had brick ends and concrete floors, and was lined internally with flexible asbestos cement sheets. This type of construction was of a permanent structure and was generally used for accommodation.

The Archaeological Survey of the Weston Hostel

The Weston Hostel was intended to house 200–300 prisoners and appears to have comprised 35 huts originally, of which 23 survived to varying degrees in 2019 (Figure 4). All of these huts were either Curved Asbestos or Nissen Bow types, although it was not possible to establish whether any had been built in 1940 to serve the anti-aircraft battery, or if they had all been added to the site when it was converted for use as a prisoner-of-war camp.

Recording Methodology

The site was relatively heavily vegetated, affording poor lines of site for conventional land survey, so the latest digital survey technologies were employed to create an accurate plan of the Weston Hostel, with more detailed recording of representative elements. Survey control was established by the insertion of a ring of global navigation satellite system (GNSS) survey stations around the perimeter of the camp and within the central areas. Low- and high-level vertical and oblique photography was then undertaken using a UAV fitted with a high-resolution digital camera. This not only generated views of the camp within the wider setting and allowed the easy identification of demolished hut bases, but also facilitated the production of a detailed orthophotograph plan image of the complex, rapidly and accurately mapping the location of all of the extant huts. The photo-modelling software was also used to produce three-dimensional point-cloud data and rendered mesh images of several of the individual huts.

This UAV-generated survey data was augmented by laser scan point-cloud data, undertaken using a rapid but highly accurate Leica BLK360 laser scanner. Internal surveys were carried out inside representative structures using the laser scanner to produce detailed internal plans and cross-sections of the hut types, with the point cloud being referenced into the Ordnance Survey grid using the control established by the GNSS survey video available online in the Supplemental Material tab online at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03090728.2022.2122680.

Camp Layout

According to the recollections of the landowner, the huts were used as living quarters, wardens' quarters, a recreation room, a kitchen, sitting room and a boiler house. Of the surveyed huts, 13 are thought to have been living quarters originally. Each of

Figure 4. Aerial view of the derelict Weston camp in 2019, looking east (© University of Salford).

Figure 5. Rows of Curved Asbestos Huts that had been used as living quarters, viewed from the west (© University of Salford).

these huts was a Curved Asbestos type, measuring 11.12m long and 5.33m wide, with the sheeting fixed onto steel ribs at approximately 1.83m intervals (Figure 5). Each section of asbestos sheet sprung from a raised concrete trough that extended 0.22m above the internal concrete floor. A hut of similar proportions in the south-western corner of the site, set at a slight angle to the living quarters, is unmarked on a sketch plan produced by the landowner. This plan does show a large living quarters hut and an office and ration store of similar proportions forming the southern part of the camp, but both buildings had been removed prior to the archaeological survey (Figure 1).

Two wardens' quarters were placed on the eastern side of the camp, with both apparently attached to a boiler house originally. These Nissen Bow Huts comprised corrugated steel sheets fixed onto steel ribs at 1.83m intervals. Both huts measured 5.64m by 5.18m, and each had a central dormer in the long elevations with projecting timber reveals and sloping corrugated steel roofs. The brick-built end walls were laid in three-stretcher English Garden Wall bond, and had central doorways flanked by steel casement windows and projecting L-shaped brick side-entry porches (Figure 6). The southern building had been divided into two rooms with a single-skin brick partition and retained a Bakelite switch and light fitting along with the associated rubberised cloth-insulated electrical wiring.

Two extant boiler houses were originally connected to the wardens' quarters by corridors, although these had been removed. The buildings were of similar construction to the adjacent living quarters, with the boilers housed adjacent to the end walls on a steel frame carried by single-skin brick piers. The southern boiler house retained internal brick partitions forming privy cubicles, suggesting that they included ablution facilities for the staff separate from the large lavatory and ablution huts for the prisoners, both of which had been demolished.

A Nissen Bow Hut placed between the two wardens' quarters is thought to have served as a staff room, although it was devoid of any internal features. The end walls were again of brick, with a

Figure 6. The end wall of the wardens' quarters (© University of Salford).

Figure 7. General view inside the kitchen Nissen Hut, showing curved asbestos sheeting (© University of Salford).

central doorway flanked by casement windows. A Bow Hut of similar proportions was placed on the eastern side of the camp, forming a relatively small secondary kitchen, and was joined by corridors at both ends to much larger (11.28m) Bow Huts that formed sitting rooms. The northern sitting room had offset dormer windows in the long walls, and was linked to the kitchen via a corrugated sheet-lined brick corridor with a shallow single-pitched roof of similar sheets. The end walls of the huts to either side were of asbestos panels, rather than brick.

The kitchen provided a good example of the internal construction of the Nissen Bow Huts, retaining much of the smooth asbestos panelling above a 'skirt' of corrugated sheeting (Figure 7). It had a single eight-light dormer window facing westwards into the camp, and appears to have been accessed via a doorway on the internal side of the brick passage to the southern sitting room. This retained offset dormers to both long elevations, the western one housing a doorway that may have formed part of the original accommodation for the gun emplacement to the east. An internal partition of asbestos sheet to the south housed a brick chimney stack with a hearth on its northern face. What were probably living quarters further to the south may have formed a separate smaller common room during the building's later usage.

The largest surviving structure on the site was a Nissen Bow Hut that was 7.32m wide and just over 27.4m long, although originally it had a total length of 34.4m (Figure 8). The western end of the hut had been removed, reducing its length to the position of an internal brick partition, although its original extent could be discerned from the concrete base and a couple of steel ribs that survived in place. Despite its increased size, the hut still comprised steel ribs at 1.83m intervals. The hut originally formed the main recreation building for the prisoners, and was divided into several sections by brick-built internal partitions. The demolished western end was purportedly used as further living accommodation, whilst the central area had two brick corridors and several internal partitions, forming smaller rooms within the main hut. The northern of these had a row of sinks below wide

Figure 8. Aerial view of the recreation room, looking north-west, with living quarters beyond (© University of Salford).

Figure 9. Detail of the remains of the sinks against the northern wall and the open drain set into the concrete floor (© University of Salford).

windows with a drainage channel cut into the floor leading to a drain, suggesting that this had formed a laundry area (Figure 9).

The eastern part of the hut appears to have formed the main recreational room of 16.8m length, lying directly to the east of a double doorway and entrance lobby in the south wall that had a projecting dormer similar to those elsewhere (Figure 10). The south wall of the main room also retained two double-width dormer windows, with a narrower window at the eastern end. The north wall had a further pair of double-width windows, flanking a narrow doorway affording access to the four huts used as living quarters to the north and the demolished lavatory block to the north-east.

None of the other buildings shown on the landowner's sketch plan survived, including a large U-shaped central block that apparently incorporated the main kitchen and dining room, a ration store and a sick bay. The footprint of the concrete bases of these huts were visible on aerial photographs taken with a UAV during the survey, and appear to have been set much narrower than shown on the sketch plan. The footprint of a north-/south-aligned ablution block between the two western rows of living quarters was also visible from aerial photography (Figure 4). The camp also included a football pitch and a volleyball pitch for recreation in the grounds, but no physical remains of either area were visible at the time of the survey.

Post-war Use of the Camps

The surrender of Italy in September 1943 triggered a change of approach to Italian prisoners of war, who were offered a choice of become 'co-belligerents' or 'non-co-operators'. Co-belligerents would be paid more for any work that they carried out, gained chance of early repatriation and would be under a far less secure regime; by the end of the war in Europe, 63% of the 154,000 Italians volunteered to work as co-belligerents.[18] Non-co-operators would effectively continue to operate as prisoners of war and be held under relatively secure conditions.

The majority of the Italians had been repatriated by 1946, although a considerable number remained in Britain and continued their civilian role as rural workers. By that time, British agriculture had become heavily reliant on prisoners of war labour with an estimated 20% of agricultural work in Britain undertaken by German prisoners; whilst there was an initial reluctance to employ them for labour, 70,000 Germans were working in Britain by March 1945, and many were not repatriated until 1948 due to the shortage of labour.[19] An estimated 24,000 prisoners of war decided to remain in Britain after the Second World War.[20]

Most prisoner-of-war camps remained active in their original role until 1948. Many were cleared after that date for a variety of reasons, although some former camps, particularly the purpose-built ones, were handed over to the administration of several county agricultural committees who ran them as hostels for farm workers. Many of these farm workers were the very same men who had been held in them as prisoners, but who elected to remain in Britain rather than be repatriated. These hostels often continued to function as such well into the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a few examples even continuing

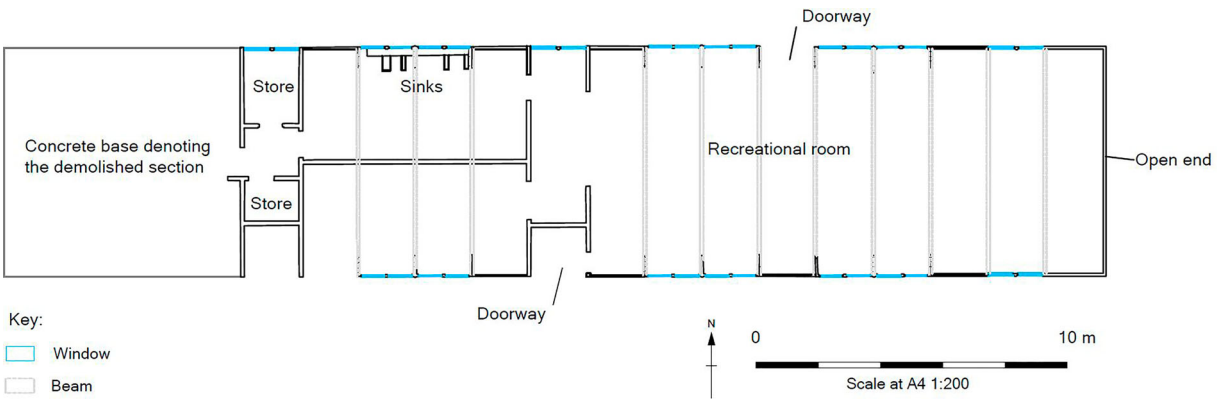

Figure 10. Plan of the Nissen Bow Hut used as a recreation room (© University of Salford).

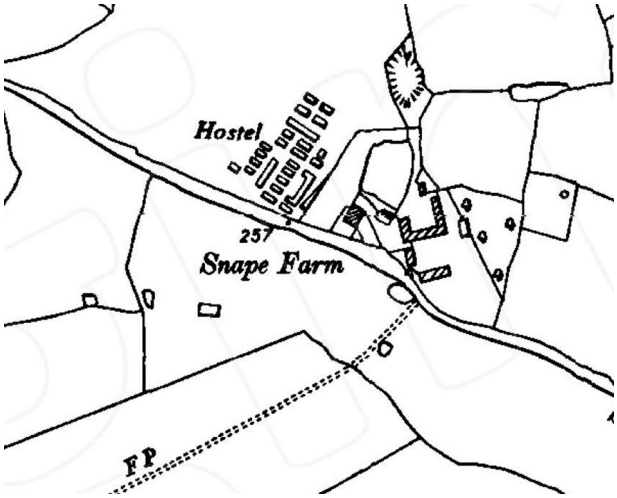

Figure 11. The layout of the Weston Hostel shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1950.

into the 1980s as foreign student hostels, such as Concordia Camp at Brigg.[21] The Weston camp is annotated on the Ordnance Survey map of 1950 as a 'Hostel' (Figure 11), and whilst the footprint of the buildings are shown on the following edition of 1962 the site is no longer named, suggesting that it had fallen into disuse.

The redundant Weston Hostel was returned to the owners of the neighbouring Snape Farm and the buildings were put to low-grade agricultural use, initially as grain storage and latterly as more generalised machinery and hay storage. The buildings were subject to minimal, if any, maintenance during this period, although some remodelling in concrete blockwork was completed. This prolonged usage has assisted the survival of this and several other camps, but the lack of maintenance means that the overall condition of the surviving structures is poor. The tenant farmer retired in 2005, and most of the fixtures and fittings inside the huts were sold at auction, together with a number of objects that had been made by the prisoners of war.[22]

Conclusion

The remains of the Weston Hostel represented a relatively rare survival of a compact prisoner-of-war camp that was constructed originally as accommodation for an air battery associated with the defence of Britain in the early part of the Second World War. As such, it is somewhat atypical of a prisoner-of-war camp of the period, although the nearby Boar's Head Camp at Walgherton similarly originated as an anti-aircraft battery that was established as part of the defence of Crewe.[23]

Prisoner-of-war camps formed an important role that is often overlooked in the narrative around the Second World War. The manual labour that they provided was vital to the agricultural war effort, and helped to provide food in the years immediately after the war and eventually bring an end to rationing. Many former prisoners opted to stay in the renamed hostels rather than returning to the struggling post-war economies of Italy and Germany. This model of cheap imported farm labouring became an integral part of the British farming economy, surviving well into the 21st century.

The Weston Hostel utilised two of the main hut types that were used on military installations during the war and for an extended period subsequently. The nature and function of the buildings meant that they were only ever intended as temporary structures and so survival outside retained military establishments is increasingly uncommon. Most of those that survive have been re-purposed into farm stores and are generally in a poor state of repair. Little remained of internal fittings in the Weston huts, but the main communal areas were heated by fires, with boiler houses providing hot water to ablution blocks and kitchens. Electric lighting was provided to each hut and the provision of sockets and desk lamps, observed mainly in the wardens' quarters, may also reflect an improvement of living standards following the end of hostilities and the rebranding of the camp to a hostel for labourers who were free to leave.

Whilst the Weston Hostel was omitted from the assessment survey carried out by English Heritage in 2003, another nine camps for prisoners of war were identified. Five of these were classified as base camps, including those at Crewe Hall, Marbury Hall near Northwich, Dunham New Park, Toft Hall near Knutsford and Madeley Tile Works, with work camps at Tarporley, Nantwich, Walgherton and Ledsham on the Wirral (Figure 1). All of these sites have been cleared, with the Weston Hostel being the last to survive. Whilst the buildings that occupied prisoner-of-war camps are evocative of the story they tell, they are of little architectural merit and it is almost always impractical economically to retain them within regeneration schemes, except within a museum context, as was undertaken at Snape Farm with the dismantling and relocation of two of the huts to the Sywell Aviation Museum, Northamptonshire, in 2006.

Notes

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Chris Wild has more than 30 years' experience as an archaeologist and heritage professional, specialising in the recording and interpretation of historic buildings and structures. He was the Built Heritage Project Manager at Salford Archaeology within the University of Salford when the survey of the Weston Hostel was carried out, and is currently Director of Raven Heritage.