

## THE GREAT ESCAPER

The aristocratic and ambitious Leutnant Otto Thelen had joined the German Army Flying Corps before the war. In late 1914 he served as an observer in Flieger Abteilung 5, but his flying career came to an early end on 22<sup>nd</sup> November when his Albatross aircraft was forced down by Lieutenants L.A. Strange and F.G. Small of No. 5 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, using an experimental and unauthorised Lewis gun mounting.

In an incident recorded in the Official History of the War in the Air Vol I, Thelen crash-landed near Neuve Eglise with 20 bullet holes in his aircraft. The British officers landed nearby to claim their prisoners and saw that “the German observer... took little notice of them; as soon as his machine had landed he jumped out of it, and dragging the partner of his dangers and triumphs out of the pilot’s seat, knocked him down, and began to kick him heavily about the body.”

The frustrated Thelen was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Donington Hall in Lincolnshire, where he met a naval officer, Leutnant Hans Heyn, it was a double scandal, a prison camp not only lavish enough the inmates had servants - but also the scene of the only successful escape from the UK.

Questions were asked in the House of Commons, newspapers carried indignant articles and correspondents were dispatched. During World War One, Donington Hall became a byword for easy living and lax security.

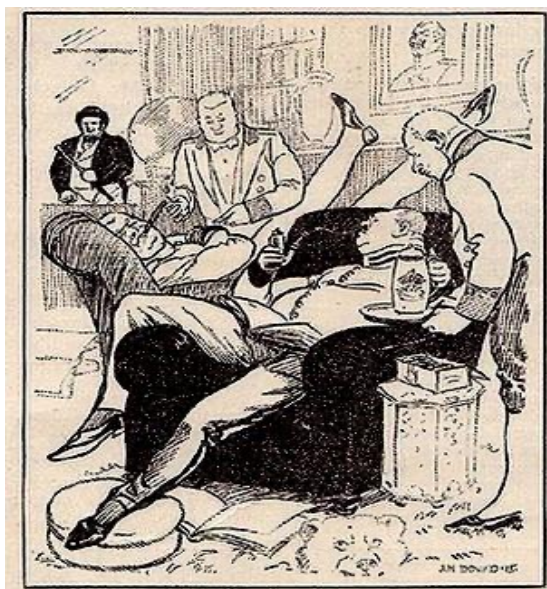
Set in hundreds of acres of landscaped deer park, the mock Gothic stately home on the Leicestershire/Derbyshire border had been turned into a detention camp early in the war.



Intended as a Maximum Security Prison, it was ringed by two barbed wire perimeter fences more than 6ft (1.83m) high - the inner one electrified - with wire traps, watch towers searchlights and a guard house.

More fundamentally however, it was a camp for officers. And total war or not, officers on both sides were guaranteed a certain level of treatment by international treaty.

One of Donington's most striking features was its 90-capacity dining room, based in the old library. "It was all laid out with silver service cutlery and table cloths, rather like a posh hotel. "There was a good menu with a choice of options and there was a good wine list - but they could also send home for wine and other things.



The local post office had to put extra staff on because so many parcels were sent from Germany. And of course, they were all waited on by German privates and corporals, who were billeted in huts in the grounds. One wouldn't call it luxury perhaps, but it was certainly great comfort - and the contrast with the soldiers at the front could hardly have been greater.

On top of this were homely rooms, games of football, cricket, tennis and skittles and a relaxed regime where "the commandant did everything he could to alleviate our hard lot" according to one prisoner.

New arrivals were welcomed with a guard of honour and every Friday the prisoners were lined up to be given a cash allowance - direct from Germany. Another inmate, the spy Franz von Rintelen,

recalled holding his own "wake" following false reports he had been shot. "The canteen overflowed that evening, and the orchestra played Chopin's Funeral March. "I drank both red wine and champagne and praised the Lord," he wrote.



The papers got wind of the conditions and - fuelled by tales of brutality in German camps - called for action. Pressed during a debate in parliament on excessive privileges at the camp, Mr Harold Tennant, the Under Secretary of State, insisted the sale of alcohol was restricted to "light wines and beers" but could not confirm whether quantities were limited.

The arrival - and subsequent departure - of dashing pilot Gunther Pluschow only added to its notoriety. "He was a one man air-force for the Kaiser in China but had to flee. In disguise he made his way to the then-neutral US, became something of a celebrity and then tried to return to Germany but was captured in Gibraltar.

"He had mixed emotions when he saw Donington Hall. First of all he was surprised by the quality and the standard he found there but immediately began to plan his escape.



"He looked around noting weaknesses in the fences and felt this was a place he could get out of."



The 29-year-old's impression was confirmed when he saw a deer work its way through the wire. He then spent time planning his move and teasing useful information out of the guards.

During rain storm on the night of 4 July, Pluschow and an accomplice managed to hide from inspections, then simply forced their way through the fences. Despite being badly cut and having no identification, the pair made it to London undetected.

While his comrade was recaptured, Pluschow, after days of sleeping rough, found a ship going to the neutral Netherlands. As it sailed he swam out to it, climbed a rope and hid in a lifeboat. When it docked he dodged customs checks and stepped through a staff exit - and into legend as the only person in either world war to make it from a UK prison camp back to Germany.

### **Escaped German Prisoners.**

One of the prisoners who escaped from Dorchester last week and was recaptured at West Hartlepool on Monday, was Hans Heyn, who was the pilot of a German seaplane which fell into the North Sea.

Of the two officers who escaped from Donnington Hall on Saturday one was the well-known German pilot **Otto Thelen**, of whom the following description has been circulated by the police authorities at Scotland Yard:



*"**Otto Thelen**, German Flying Corps, aged 25, height 5ft. 7in., stiff build, weather-beaten features, somewhat sallow complexion, grey eyes, fair hair, slight scar on left part of forehead, caused by a burn, clean shaven, wearing knickers and stockings of greyish material. Speaks English with a foreign accent."*

The excavated earth was dumped in the many rooms in the cellar complex. In the early morning of September 18<sup>th</sup> 1915 they escaped and the military authorities offered a reward of £100 for their capture. The two men managed to get to Chatham in Kent and actually board a ship bound for the continent before they were discovered and arrested on the 23<sup>rd</sup> ult.

Subsequently they were sent to Holyport Prison Camp outside Maidenhead but again attempted escape, this time tunnelling 34 feet from the prison bathroom. They were caught when a guard saw one of them sawing up floorboards while the other played the harmonica "vigorously" to deaden the sound. As punishment the pair were sentenced to nine months' imprisonment at the Military Detention Barracks at Chelmsford Prison and driven there with an armed escort.

### **Sentence on Lieutenant Otto Thelen**

At a military court at Maidenhead on Tuesday, Lieutenant **Otto Thelen**, of the German Flying Corps, was sentenced to nine months' detention in the military barracks, Chelmsford, for attempting to escape by tunnelling from Holyport prison camp. Lieutenant Thelen was rescued from a sinking aeroplane in the North Sea and had previously escaped from Donington Hall.

#### **German Officers get out of Prison – Chelmsford Sensation (Laughing at the Locksmith)**

Considerable excitement prevailed in an around Chelmsford on Sunday by the news of the escaper of two German Officers, Prisoners of War, from Chelmsford Prison, now used as a detention barracks.

A description of the two men was speedily circulated and soldiers and military, regular and special police were engaged in the man-hunt all day long. The German Officers, however, kept their liberty from 24 hours and were finally caught by a party of the Army Cyclist Corps in the neighbourhood of Basildon between 5 and 6 o'clock on Monday morning.

The two prisoners were Lieutenant Otto Thelen aged about 32, height 5ft. 9in., cleanshaven, dressed in German Army uniform, with dark brown boots; and Lieutenant Emil Lehmann, aged about 24, height 5ft. 7in. slight dark moustache, dressed in German Naval uniform with brass buttons and heavy boots. Both men speak English fairly well and were supposed to have money.

#### **Dummies in bed.**

The escape appears to have been as clever as it was daring. Rumours, of course, are rife but it is understood that by some means or other, the prisoners became possessed of a key, which was lengthened, it is said, by splicing so that the doors could be opened. The locks on the cell doors were secretly and cleverly removed, and substituted by imitation locks made of blackened cardboard to avoid the suspicion of the armed sentry who at intervals walked along the corridor.

This would also prevent the noise of undoing the locks at the time of escape, in case of any alarm, however, the prisoners had placed dummies in the beds, arranging for some hair from the mattresses on the pillow to resemble at first glance a human head.

In each of the cell doors there is a small peephole through which the guard may glance and see that all is well within. Once in the corridor the prisoners would have to pass through an iron gate, which is generally kept locked and guarded.

By some lucky chance they got past this barrier, their key apparently serving the well, and after passing through two other locked gates they reached the open prison yard. It is assumed this was in the small hours of Sunday morning. Having acquired a pretty good knowledge of the geographical surroundings, they left the main entrance to the gaol behind them and made for a small gate leading to some garden ground near the chaplain's house to Sandford Road. This door also was opened and the escaped men moved off into the fields.

A man who was early rabbiting on a farm on the opposite side of the navigation, saw a man's face in the hedge, but paid little regard to this. A little later he saw two men together at the spot but thought nothing of the fact until later in the day, when he heard of the escape.

It appears that the escaped men walked as far as the Kings Head meadow in the heart of Chelmsford, and there borrowed a boat belonging to Mr. W. J. Greenwood and crossed to the other side, there taking to the fields in the direction of Galleywood, towards the Thames.

#### **In civilian clothes**

With the hue and cry, the fugitives must have hidden most of the day and made the best use of the dark hours to go across country in a southerly direction. Evidently they troubled the roads very little, for when caught their clothes were very dirty and wet through up to the waist. With the heavy ground mist, the grass and hedges would be quite wet until some time after sunrise. A passing motor car was commandeered and into this the captives were driven back to their old prison in a rather dejected condition.

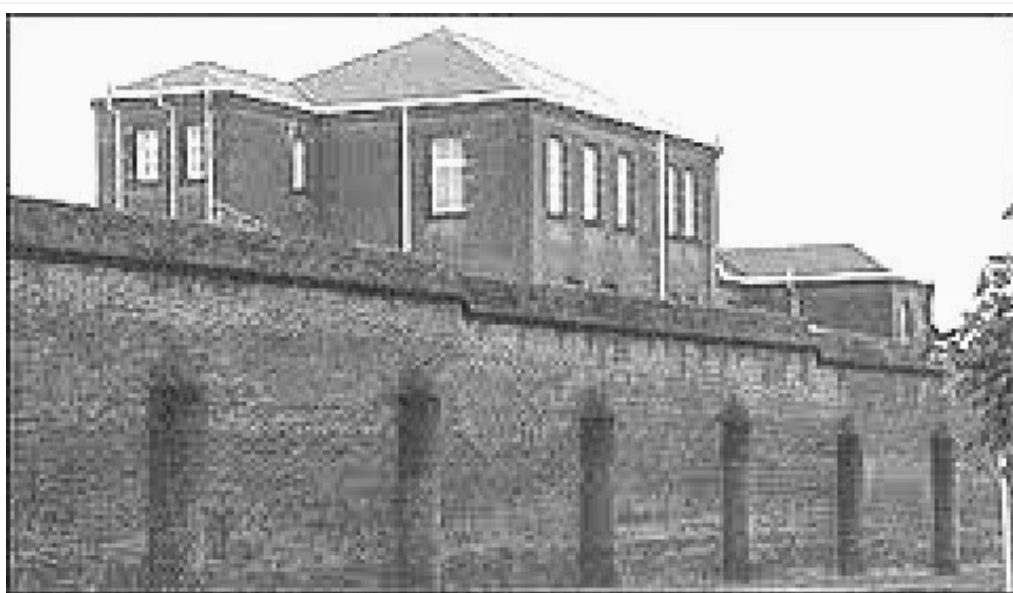
"We were confident" said Thelen, "that we could get out of the country. Our plan was to hide by day and travel by night. We were making for the sea, and once there we were sure of getting on board ship."

They had no money with them, and the only food they took from the gaol on their escape was a little tinned beef and a few biscuits. They also had a fair supply of chocolate.

When the prisoners were recaptured they were apparently wearing civilian clothes. Inspection, however, showed that Thelen, in an airman's uniform, had cut his doubled breasted tunic and his high collar, fastening them down with pins etc. that it represented an ordinary lounge coat. Lebann had also cut off his brass buttons and otherwise interfered with his naval uniform that it was not unlike a civilian coat. Both men also wore ordinary looking cloth caps

It is supposed that Lieut. Thelen is the master of escapes. He was imprisoned at Donington Hall in the first place. He escaped in September 1915. He got into the cellars under the Library, and dug down under the foundations of the outer walls with an old poker and a broken garden trowel. After many weeks work he and another prisoner who was in the adventure had made a shaft eight feet deep.

They then struck, longitudinally under the easier defences of Donington Hall and got clear away. They were caught on a vessel bound for the continent. In February 1916 Thelen and another prisoner attempted to escape from a camp near Maidenhead. One sawed through the floor of a hut while the other played a mouth organ to deaden the noise of the saw. For greater safety Thelen was returned to Chelmsford Detention Barracks, and a third time escaper, only to be captured again.



Chelmsford Military Detention Centre

Chelmsford held both British and German servicemen who had been convicted in the military courts. The wooden huts and wire fences of the run-of-the-mill camps elsewhere were here

replaced by solid buildings and high walls, with the county police headquarters and an Army training ground across Sandford Road and a former military airfield behind.

Thelen and Lehmann were moved out of Chelmsford and sent to Sutton Bonington camp, in Nottinghamshire. In September 1917 after tunnelling fifty yards in three months, they led twenty-two fellow PoWs in a mass escape. They were all recaptured. Thelen survived the war and was eventually returned to Berlin, via Holland, in 1919.

### Conclusion

An overall assessment of the life of internees in Britain between 1914 and 1919 would describe it as relatively comfortable. Instances of deliberate mistreatment were rare. The British state in the main fulfilled its obligations under the Hague Convention. But this relatively good treatment did not prove of much comfort to those individuals incarcerated in a British concentration camp. Isolated from their families, they had to find new temporary meaning for their lives, desperately looking forward to the end of their captivity.

