

# Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

## POWS AND REFUGEES

### Italian POWs in South Harting

From *Wartime Memories 1939-45, By the Residents of South Harting, East Harting, West Harting, and Nyewood* (One Tree Books, 1995)

As told by Mrs Phyllis Hosking to Cynthia Bacon

Local labour became scarcer and scarcer but the government organised a scheme whereby Italian prisoners of war could be dropped at the farms from the local POW camp at Billingshurst, collected in the evening and taken back to camp. The Hosking family thought the system more or less like cattle being collected and they did not approve, so they asked if the men might live on the farm. Agreeing to stringent rules, this was allowed and the large former play-room building at the back of the house i.e. East Harting farmhouse, was fitted out with a stove, 3 beds, tables and chairs. The men were very pleased with this arrangement, as at the camp they only had straw mattresses to sleep on – what luxury! They had exactly the same food as the family so that they could see the shortages which were being imposed on the British.

There was a large gathering at the farm in those days: four family children, two Jewish refugee children, two Danish students who had been unable to return to Denmark before the outbreak of the war and a Swiss girl who was acting as gardener at the farm. Of the three Italians, one was 'a little peasant fellow who could neither read or write', one was an intelligent man 'with whom we are still in correspondence', and one was a 'shy, miller's son', but always their response was, when they came for orders in the morning, 'What you want, I do'.

They did all kinds of farm work, helping with the sheep, calves, pigs, poultry and the corn crops. However, they were not allowed to mix with the villagers and were supposed to stay on the farm. Once a month, they returned to Billingshurst to spend their wages of 5 shillings a week which had to be spent in the camp.

The Italians always went 'passeggiata' – strolling about here and there in the evenings – as is the Italian habit. One of their chief pleasures was to catch little birds such as larks, thrushes and blackbirds and fry them. This horrified Mrs Hosking as they would present the birds to her as a great treat and she didn't like to say no.

They had to wear brown uniforms which were patched in certain places, 'where they could be shot at if they tried to escape.' Mrs Hosking disliked that, and when Tullio wanted to go to Church with the family one Easter, she refused to take him in POW dress, so she lent him a suit. Some good soul reported it to the camp and he was withdrawn, put into solitary confinement for one month, 'and it was with great difficulty that we got him back'. When the youngest Hosking child was killed in an accident, Tullio was asked by Mrs Hosking to be one of the bearers of his coffin.

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The Italians were withdrawn from the farm at the end of the war with Italy and German POWs were offered instead. There was a great difference between the two types of prisoner; the Italians would do anything they were asked whereas the Germans did as they pleased. One German put a young horse in a cart saying he knew how to handle him, but he didn't. The horse bolted back to the stable and got stuck in the door with the horse on one side and the cart on the other.

When the prisoners were withdrawn, the Hoskings brought over Latvians who had been in a German or Russian labour camp. They were based in Midhurst.

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