

North Sea Camp

North Sea Camp prison has been in the news recently but its past is more fascinating than its present

WORDS: Stephen Blyth PHOTOGRAPHS: Judy Theobald

It was reportedly a sunny morning on 31st May, 1935, when a farm worker looked up from hoeing a field near Boston, to see a surprising sight. A group of around thirty men and boys were marching vigorously along the road which led to Freiston, uniformly dressed in dark-blue shorts, grey, open-neck shirts and sturdy boots. They were led by a rather tall man of military appearance. His name was W W Llewellyn and he was to be the governor of the as yet unbuilt North Sea Camp. With him were his staff and around twenty lads in their teens.

In just one week, they had marched the 110 miles from Stafford to The Wash, sleeping overnight at Uttoxeter, Derby, Nottingham, Birmingham, Grantham, Sleaford and finally Boston, which at this time had a population of 25,000. Staff are reported to have said the march was a happy experience which welded the group together on their way to a new beginning. There is no record of the prisoners' reaction! The governor is also reported to have said: "The increase in prosperity of agriculture and the growing use of the docks by timber importers, are reflected by the prosperous look of the town and its liveliness and readiness to absorb new ideas, such as the camp."

North Sea Camp was built near Freiston, half a mile north of the River Witham, contained between the high banks of low-lying land which surrounds the wash. It is sheltered by an ancient wall of earth which extends from the mouth of the Witham for a few miles

north, towards Skegness. It was locally known as the 'Roman Bank' or 'Roman Wall' and protects the farmland on the landward side from flood by the sea.

Between the wall and the shore of the wash was a considerable area of salt marsh on which only sea lavender and

otherwise and the last day of May, 1935, the tents were erected where the lads and staff would live together until the first hut was completed in October.

During that first winter, the living accommodation was completed and work on the marsh begun. At this time, the salt marshes varied in width between a quarter and three-quarters of a mile and the high-water mark was on the 'Roman Bank'. They were composed of rich alluvial silt, overgrown with a variety of marsh vegetation, broken by innumerable creeks and pitted with shallow pools caused by aerial bombing practice. An engineer called Lands was in charge of the reclamation work. The boys called him 'Stakey Lands' (not to his face though). He was of thin, angular appearance and was frequently engaged in driving in stakes to mark the line of the wall or the limit from which soil could be dug.



Boys undertaking the back-breaking work of creating the new sea wall

other coarse vegetation grew. These marshes, inundated by the sea at spring-time, were not suitable for any kind of agricultural purpose.

Local gossip said the government bought the land for £3 an acre when agricultural land was then worth at least £100 an acre. Clearly, there was potential for a profit to be made if a wall could be constructed, economically and without the use of machinery. This would keep out the sea and enable the reclaimed land to be farmed and built on. The locals considered this would be an impossible task due to the high speed of water in the numerous creeks during spring tides. But the government thought

Housemasters and boys dug the land. Strong steel trolleys were lashed on rails and pulled up a ramp to the top of the new sea wall where the trucks were emptied to add to the height and width. The work was measured by the engineer each week and the gangs of inmates, of which there were three, were paid according to their efforts. Wages ranged from sixpence (two and a half pence) to ninepence which they could spend on sweets, cigarettes, hair cream, etc. On occasions, the rails on which the trolleys ran, had to cross creeks and a bridge had to be made out of stout barks of timber. Occasionally, these bridges collapsed or the trucks overturned, dumping all the earth into the creek. These incidents were annoying



The reclaimed land is used to produce food for the prison service



One of the original huts still in use today

but added variety to the day and were often a welcome respite from the heavy toil.

From time to time, special problems arose when the wall had to cross large creeks. A local contractor supplied bundles of brushwood faggots and when the tide was out, these were laid in the creek with great speed. It was a race against time and tide to complete this job before the sea flooded in. Work progressed, but slowly, year after year.

Progress and the work completed by each gang was hard to measure. The amount of soil removed could be easily calculated but there were many other factors to consider. For example, the distance from the wall to the area of digging varied, and this was all covered by the tide in the early part of the day. Another gang may have been employed turving the side of a wall to prevent erosion. This, of course, led to inmates complaining about their wages. One boy is quoted as saying: "Last week we had eightpence for an easy job, this week sixpence for a hard one." Nevertheless, they realised the harder they worked, the better the reward.

In March, 1936, there were frequent cold, wet winds blowing from the east, but the rule was 'work must go on'. Only once in those early years was there a report of that tradition wavering. The rumour was that the engineer telephoned the governor and told him the conditions were so atrocious the boys could stand it no longer. They were handing in their spades and coming back to camp. Llewellyn told him to stay there and said he would be bringing the staff to join them at work. No one was dressed for work on the marsh but they met the boys and Llewellyn simply said: "We have all come to join you." The boys turned around without saying a word and returned to work. Later the staff looked at the damage to their clothes and shoes but the tradition had been upheld.

The boys, aged between seventeen and twenty-one, were brought from a catchment area stretching from Bridlington in the north to Chelmsford and Colchester in the south and inside a line to the west going down from Glosop. They would normally have been unemployed. In general, levels of literacy and numeracy were low, but so also was physical fitness, work experience, spiritual awareness, standards of hygiene and manners. All these needed upgrading.

Daytime classes assisted with literacy and numeracy problems and evening classes were compulsory for all. These were staffed by teachers who by day were members of the local mainstream education system. Smoking was forbidden in the camp and this, combined with hard work, games and runs around the sea bank perimeter, raised the levels of fitness and self-esteem.

In 1963, the camp changed its role. The borstal closed and it was redesignated as the only open senior detention centre in the country. The reclamation work continued with the introduction of draglines, which enabled the bank to be built at a faster rate without the use of muscle power.

The Criminal Justice Act of 1982 introduced a variety of sentences between three weeks and four months – a far cry from the stability of the 1930s when each inmate stayed for at least one year. The short sentences laid extra pressure on the staff who were not only concerned that tasks should be completed, but also that high standards of health and safety at work were kept. After all, the marsh parties used a narrow-gauge railway and heavy equipment. On the farm, complex



Above: The men and boys of the original camp marching towards their destination in 1935; Below: One of the new blocks which opened last summer



machinery was employed. To a lad, normally unemployed, straight from the street in an urban environment, health and safety must have been a foreign language. He had to learn quickly to survive intact.

In 1985, the reclamation work was complete. About 970 acres were successfully enclosed and the sea was kept at bay more than a quarter-of-a-mile from its former boundary, the 'Roman Bank'. An arable farm worked on a traditional four-year rotation system occupied 600 acres and a further 150 acres were levelled, drained and put down to a four-year lay of grass and clover. This was later used for silage, hay and occasional grazing for the ninety heifers and more than 700 sheep which added valuable humus to the soil. A herd of 500 pigs provided

organic manure as well as meat for the prison service generally.

Work experience was introduced and came in the form of a normal working day which was part of a fully structured programme beginning at 6.30am, ending at 9pm, with lights out at 10pm. The main employment was on the farm and the sea defences, since the North Sea was forever attempting to overrun them and reclaim its own. Contrary to popular belief, there was no lying in at weekends. The stock needed feeding, the harvest tended and brought in, greenhouses ventilated and irrigated. And all this along with the busy camp routine, including the busy kitchen, daily cleaning and inspections every weekend.

North Sea Camp provided food for distribution throughout the prison system, thus easing the financial burden on the taxpayer. The camp farm distributed produce including barley, wheat and potatoes for use as seed by every other prison farm in the system. Work continued on the sea bank, ensuring the sea could not break through onto the reclaimed land.

Due to a change in penal policy, the detention centre closed in October, 1987, and North Sea Camp opened as an adult male Category D prison in July, 1988.

In 1992-3, the crops grown were increased to include cauliflower, brussels sprouts, onions and several varieties of potato. The farm yielded five tones per acre of cabbage, six tons per acre of onions and fifteen tons per acre of potatoes.

Until June, 2002, the prison was certified to hold 297 prisoners. The accommodation still comprised pre-fabricated single-storey huts which were converted from the original dormitories into mainly two-bedded cubicles. There were two main units, north and south, each having its own facilities, with television, association, wash rooms and showers. Many cubicles were fitted with in-cell electricity during 2001 allowing televisions to be rented from the prison at a fixed weekly rate. Mains radios were available free

from the church.

There is a programme of football and cricket fixtures against outside teams and the well-equipped gymnasium is also the setting for selected inmates to host a local special needs group and senior citizens' events.

In June 2002, the first single room, two-storey, forty-bed unit was installed. This was used by inmates on the resettlement programme who were sent to work in the local community on normal work for up to five days a week. A second unit was installed and fully functional on 1st July.

North Sea Camp enjoys a unique and proud history; the current emphasis on resettlement and integration into the community is finally fulfilling a seventy-year-old vision. □