



History:

Topic:	Private Joseph Smith 1891 – 1961
Date of Record:	March 2025
Author:	Nicholas Newman & Don Rooker
Notes:	Joseph Smith was born in Shimpling and was therefore not a native of Hargrave. However he was to marry into the long standing local Wallace family.

The Wartime Story of Private Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith was born in Shimpling and was therefore not a native of Hargrave. However he was to marry in to the longstanding local Wallace family. The Smiths moved several times around the local area during Joseph's early life, which obviously increased the chances of meeting his future wife Hannah, especially as her father Martin George Wallace was innkeeper at the Bull Inn Hargrave from 1893 to 1920. Then following Martin's retirement Joseph and new bride Hannah took over running the inn until 1925, with their two children being born there.

However, it is not the 'Hargrave' period of his life to which this article relates. Instead it is his wartime story that provides the opportunity to relive the experiences of a soldier held captive as a prisoner of war in the Great War. For Joseph was unfortunate enough to probably be one of the first captured in 1914 and the last released at the cessation of hostilities in late 1918.

For further information relating to the wider Wallace family visit the 'Family' Section of this website.

Joseph Arthur Smith (1891 - 1961)

Joseph was born in Shimpling, Suffolk, and was the oldest of seven children born to John Smith (1865 - 1927) and Ellen Hale (1868 - 1951) who were married at Shimpling parish church. Joseph's siblings were Kate Elizabeth (1894 - 1970), Walter William (1897 - 1967), Charles John (1899), Stanley George (1906 - 1970), George Bernard (1906 - 1970), and Bertie James (1909 - 1950).



John Smith

and



Ellen Hale

The Smith family initially lived at Greentree Farm, Shimpling, but moved several times, presumably to find work. The 1911 census finds them at Stonebridge Farm Cottage, Bury St Edmunds; they are then known to be living at Stetchwork Road, Wooditton in 1916 and by the 1921 census they are living at Westley Lane, Horringer.

John was an agricultural labourer and Ellen prior to marriage had been employed as a general servant at 64 Whiting Street, Bury St Edmunds working for Walter Hirst and his family, who was a Tobacco Manufacturer. After leaving school, Joseph joined other members of the family working as a labourer, but his war record would indicate he was a reservist soldier available to be called up in times of crisis.

World War 1 – British Expeditionary Force

With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1914, Britain utilised the home based British Expeditionary Force (BEF), to send to northern France in August and September 1914 to support the left flank of the French armies. The BEF consisted of 90,000 men, horses, munitions and supplies.

At this time the British army consisted of around 125,000 regulars at home, 75,000 abroad and 300,000 reservists, which was far less in comparison to France and Germany who both had a policy of conscription had around 3, 500,000 soldiers each.

The BEF was under the leadership of Field Marshall Douglas Haig later to be nicknamed the “Butcher of the Somme”, due to his perceived outdated tactics which led to mass casualties.

The BEF consisted of six divisions, five infantry and one cavalry. The 2nd Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment formed part of the 14th Infantry Brigade, which in turn was part of the 5th Division, part of the 2nd Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir James Gieson.

It is assumed Joseph Smith was a reservist, as he was called to serve as a Private with the Suffolk Regiment, 2nd Battalion, (Reg. No. 8328). Serving alongside him in the BEF would have been mix of well-trained regular soldiers some with experience of action abroad and reservists. In the case of the Suffolk Regiment there were 998 men of which 563 were regulars.



BEF land in France

The 2nd Battalion arrived at Le Harve in northern France on the 15th August having been transported on the SS Le France and the SS Poland. They camped five miles from the port, and the following evening, marched back to catch a train to Le Cateau. The 1,000 men and eighty horses made the 180-mile journey in 40 cattle trucks, with the officers in carriages, and the field guns on flatbed wagons, the journey taking over 24 hours.

Having disembarked, on the morning of the 21st August as part of the 14th Infantry Brigade, they marched 20 miles to St Vaast and then on the 22nd 18 miles to Homin. Along the way they were greeted warmly by the local French villagers.



BEF marching through Le Cateau

Battle of Le Cateau

On the 23rd they moved in to the line on the Mons-Conde Canal west of Mons. Initially in reserve the 2nd Suffolk Regiment moved forward losing three men killed that day.

Holding the line for 24 hours the BEF then retreated the 25 miles to Le Cateau, in the face of far superior numbers of the German First Army. The 2nd Corps commander General Horace Smith-Dorrien decided to make a stand to allow the remainder of the BEF to retreat to Saint-Quentin. It is likely his men were also exhausted and unable to outrun the enemy, so engagement was inevitable.

The 14th Brigade including the Suffolks were told to hold their position. Intense German shelling from around 5am on the morning of the 26th August led to major casualties, and the German infantry then advanced at 10am, reaching the Suffolks position around midday.

In hastily constructed shallow trenches the effect of the British rifle fire and machine guns was devastating. They tenaciously held a hill above the town from the west, allowing the 5th Division to be extracted. The order to disengage and retreat was given but it was too late for the Suffolks, who despite resisting several German infantry attacks supported by heavy artillery, were outflanked and overrun at around 2:30pm. A memorial to their heroism is positioned on the site and in remembrance of the 720 casualties, that they suffered, killed wounded or captured.

It is at this point that Joseph goes missing, but it is not until a report in The Times newspaper on 31st of October 1914, that his situation is somewhat clarified with his status listed as of 19th September 1914 being 'Casualty – Missing'. He was one of 2,600 taken prisoner. This part of the 7,812 British casualties suffered in the action, of which 1,200 were killed.

Joseph Smith – Prisoner of War

Eventually on the 19th January 1915 Joseph is confirmed as being a prisoner of war (PoW). On his return home he was to explain that he had been wounded and that on his capture he had been operated on without anaesthetic. Unsurprisingly with this and other wartime experiences, Joseph held an intense dislike of Germans for the rest of his life.

Following initial treatment, probably at a field hospital, Joseph was transferred to a camp at Gardelegen, Altmark east of Hanover.

(The camp is also infamous for the Gardelegen massacre in World War 2 when 1,016 mainly Polish prisoners used as slave labour were assembled in a barn, shot and burned by locals under the supervision of the SS.)

Joseph was able to send and receive postcards to his family during his incarceration. The example below is from October 1916 from Gardelegen camp shortly before his transfer to camp at Merseburg, near Leipzig, also in Saxony, in eastern Germany.



Postcard from Joseph Smith to his mother from Gardelegen Camp

The rear of the postcard reads:

Gardelegen, 10th October 1916

Dear Mother, first a few lines hoping they will reach you all at home, quite well as it leaves me nicely at present. I am moving from this camp tomorrow for Merseburg, so please when you write again, address it so, but put my company on, as I do not know if I received letter from you yesterday, pleased to hear all are well, and also one from Katy and good to hear she was well again. Mention this camp to Mrs Rolerson, at the vicarage. Will write again soon with love Arthur.

Joseph was known by his middle name Arthur, hence him signing off using that name.

Once he had been moved to Merseburg Camp, he then sent a further postcard to his mother in Wooditton, that provided a photo of camp life.



*WW1, Merseburg PoW Camp, Germany – postcard
from Private Joseph Smith to his mother at Wooditton*

Life in Merseburg PoW Camp

The camp was designed for 10,000 non-officer personnel as they were housed in separate camps. However, as the war progressed Merseburg became severely overcrowded mainly with French soldiers, but also British, Australian, Russian and Arab servicemen.



Merseburg PoW Camp, Saxony



Canteen (to rear)



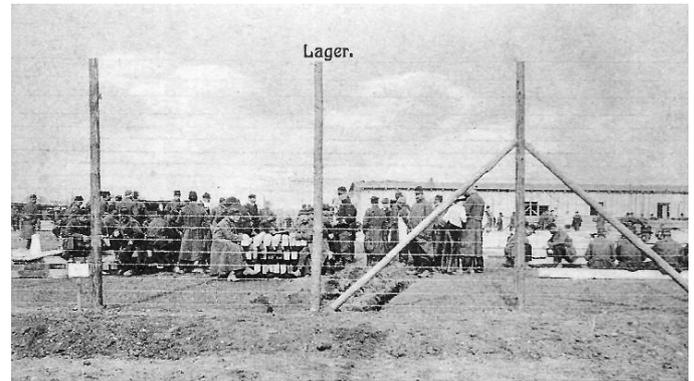
Russian soldiers playing dice

By May 1915 when the camp was visited by the Red Cross, there were already 12,995 internees. This meant that the huts that were meant to accommodate 150 prisoners were already overcrowded. With insufficient bunk beds, some had to sleep on benchtops or straw on the floor. For 'comfort' they were given sawdust filled palliasses. There was limited other furniture with just a table, chairs and a stove.

Initially general health was good with only a few cases of Tuberculosis, and inmates were reasonably well fed with three meals a day including a protein element coming from sausage, herring and cheese. Further in to the war and rations were less nutritious with reports of a diet of soup consisting of potato peelings, beans, beets and codfish. The blockade of Germany from November 1914, meant that food available to their own frontline troops and the general population was in short supply.



French Medical Soldiers



Store

Food parcels therefore became more and more important, but natural resentment of the part of the German guards whose own rations were restricted, often meant that food was spoilt, under the excuse of package inspection to avoid illegal goods entering the camp, perhaps to be used for escape attempts.

Prisoners who suffered most from lack of nutrition, were the those who were forced to take part in daily offsite work parties and subject to hard labour at local factories, quarries, mines and on the land. Although it must be remembered that German prisoners of war held in the UK were similarly required to work.

The other health issue was hygiene, with the camps being built quickly toilet provision was a secondary consideration. Latrines consisted of boards with holes in, similar to rural privies at home. Below would be a pit requiring regular emptying by prisoners, and with a clay subsoil these would often overflow in wet weather and would create a stink in the summer months. Insanitary conditions and overcrowding led to outbreaks of typhus and cholera.

Transmission of lice between prisoners was also a big issue in all camps, and attempts to limit spread by those running the camps was limited. For instance records relating to the Merseburg Camp indicate it took until June 1915 before de-licensing of the camp blankets occurred for the first time.

Inevitably deaths would occur in camps and neighbouring cemeteries were opened. It would be a matter of honour to their fallen comrades that the soldier community would take charge of the burials. Psychological issues were also not uncommon, although precise numbers of suicides are not recorded.

The main complaint of the Red Cross visit to Merseburg the following year was the punishment regime, which involved solitary confinement sometimes in darkness. Also occasionally tying the miscreant to a stake or stretched from a beam for several hours.

A visit by the American Embassy in Berlin in December 1916 reported back that numbers had now risen to 19,839, nearly twice the original capacity, with around 340 being British, They were served by their own medical officers and a British chaplain from Berlin. It was also noted that the British unlike

others seemed to have a full set of uniforms essential in the cold winters. Prisoners were also required when wearing their tunic to display armbands with roman numerals indicating their hut number. Also on arrival they were issued with camp dog tags in addition to their own service dog tags.



PoW Camp Merseburg - examples of camp issued arm bands and dog tags

The camp also had its own currency made up of 1, 5, 10 and 50 pfennig notes, which were earned through working and could be spent on 'luxuries' from a cafeteria to supplement food parcels. There was also a concert hall and for a small entry fee they could watch entertaining camp variety shows put on by the prisoners themselves.



PoW Camp Merseburg - Currency Notes



PoW Camp Merseburg - Concert Programme

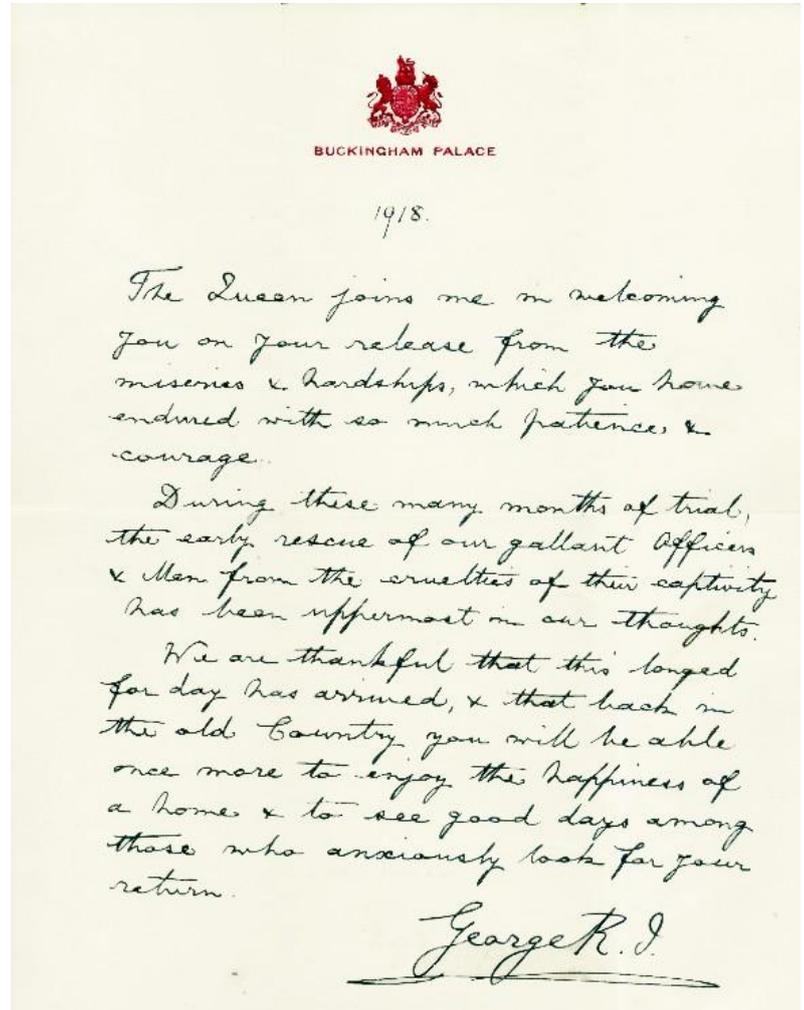
The camp was also visited by a local photographer, and some of his photos were made in to postcards that prisoners could send home (see examples above). The postal service was deemed adequate by the Red Cross inspectors and inmates were also allowed to send two longer letters a month to loved ones at home. These went through the German censors word by word, but they often did not pick up on hidden codes.

Initially the German captors thought that separating the nationalities would be necessary to avoid friction, but it appears that in general they got on well together. Indeed an international Society was formed with only the Germans excluded.

Whilst the war ended on the 11th November 1918, it took until well in to December before many prisoners were repatriated via Copenhagen. Before leaving many were given a postcard supplied by a Leipzig printer showing a young woman holding a red flag, and a printed leaflet entitled 'A Parting Word' extolling the virtues of a new postwar Germany.



Camp issued release postcard



Letter issued by King George to returning POWs

All PoW's arriving home received a pre-printed letter from King George thanking them for their courage, fortitude and endurance and hoping that they could settle back at home with their loving families.

It reads:

The Queen joins me in welcoming you on your release from the miseries and hardships, which you have endured with so much patience and courage.

During these many months of trial, the early rescue of our gallant Officers and Men from the cruelties of their captivity has been uppermost in our thoughts.

We are thankful that this longed for day has arrived and that back in the old Country you will be able once more to enjoy the happiness of a home and to see good days among those who anxiously look for your return.

George R.J.

(The site of the camp Merseburg remained and became the World War 2, Stalag IV-B housing 30,000 prisoners-of-war of which one in ten died.)



Returning Home and The Future Ahead.

Joseph would have been repatriated by the end of 1918, and by the time of his marriage to Hannah, they had taken over the running of The Bull Inn in Hargrave from her parents, Their two children were born there. However after five years they had moved to Bury St Edmunds. There they ran a Newsagents and Tobacconists in Sparhawk Street for several years before retiring to Cambridge.

Nicholas Newman – March 2025

Initial material provided by Don Rooker grandson of Joseph Smith.
Additional material acknowledged:
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