

The Napoleonic

PRISONERS OF WAR

AT

NORMAN CROSS

By ENID PORTER

The Prison was built in 1796 on land sold by Lord Carysfort. Constructed of wood it was to be in nearly continual use for eighteen years. In the centre was the Block House as the picture on this page shows, with a prisoner on the right begging for food from the guards. The prison was also to be the burial ground for two thousand of its inmates who failed to survive its rigours.

THE year 1793 saw the outbreak of war between Great Britain and the newly-constituted Republic of France which had already, in 1792, declared war on Austria and Prussia. Hostilities were to continue, with little intermission, over a wide area of Europe until the final defeat of Napoleon Buonaparte at Waterloo in 1815 and, as in all wars, many prisoners were to be taken by the contending armies. It was not long before the large numbers of captives seized by the British presented a problem of where to accommodate them. A few existing fortresses — in Scotland, for example, in Plymouth and near Portsmouth — were hastily converted to receive some of the prisoners while hulks, or large battle-ships each capable of holding 900 men, in the Medway and in Portsmouth and Plymouth harbours were able to take others.

By 1796, however, in spite of large sums having been spent on adapting several civilian prisons for the reception of the ever-increasing flow of foreign captives, pressure on accommodation became so acute that it was decided that a new prison, or Depot as it was officially called, should be built.

The site chosen for it was at Norman Cross, near Peterborough on land purchased from Lord Carysfort. It had the advantage of being near the Great North Road and not far from small towns from which supplies could be obtained. The land was well-drained for it rose some 120 feet above the adjoining fenland and it was verified that water could be obtained in plenty by the sinking of wells. On arrival at the ports of Wisbech, King's Lynn or Yarmouth the prisoners could be marched by road to Norman Cross or be conveyed there easily by water via Yaxley, Peterborough or Stanground only a few miles' march away.

Work on this first Depot — a second was begun on Dartmoor in 1805 and on a third at Perth in 1811 — commenced in 1796. Because speed was essential the building was constructed in wood, not the most durable of materials, perhaps, but no one realised that the prison would be needed for as long as 18 years.

In the centre was built the Block House, mounted with guns and surrounded by four strongly-fenced quadrangles or courts separated one from the other by four cross-roads. In each court were four two-storied wooden barracks or caserns, each 100 feet long, where the prisoners lived, sleeping at night in tiered rows of hammocks. Administrative offices and a cook-house were built in the court on the right of the entrance to the prison from the Peterborough Road and in each of the courts were two turnkeys' lodges with, nearby, a Black Hole containing cells for the reception of unruly prisoners. A hospital was later provided in one of the courts and in 1805 a brick house was built for the prison surgeon.

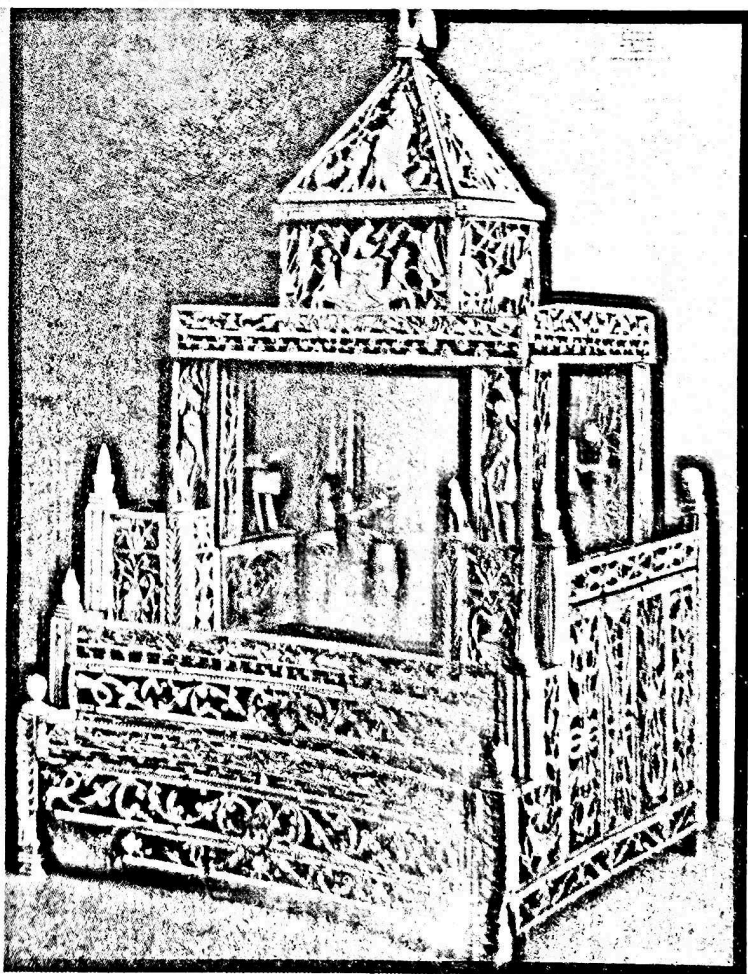
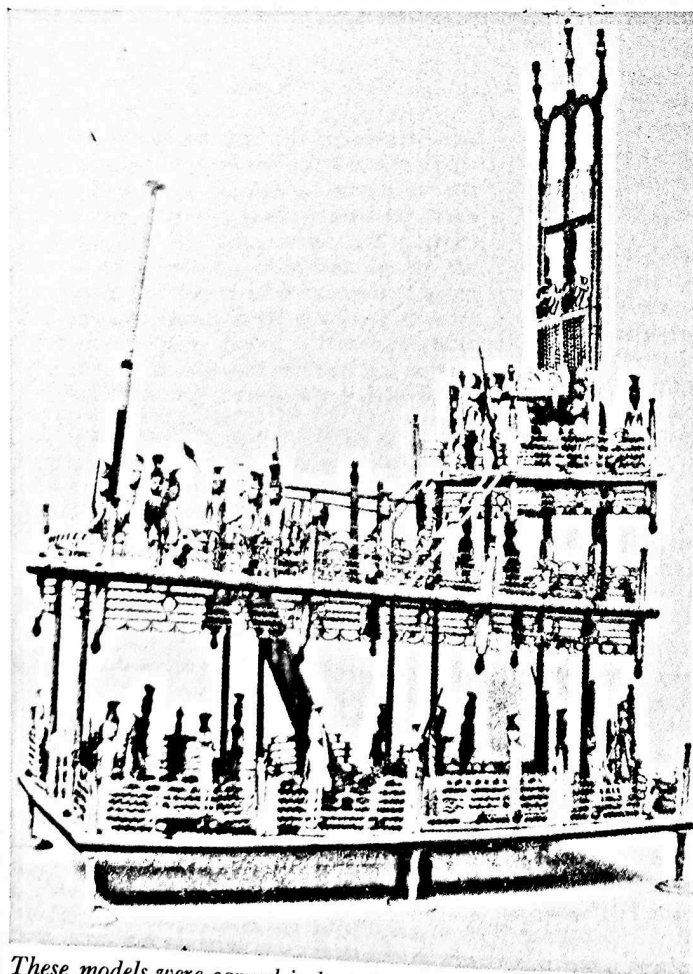
Surrounding the whole prison was a stout fence which in 1807, following an attempted mass escape by 500 prisoners, was replaced by a high brick wall. This boundary fence was lined, on the inner side, with sentry boxes manned day and night by armed guards. Barracks for the accommodation of the officers and men in charge of the prisoners were built outside the boundary together with a hospital and houses for the Barracks Master and the Prison Superintendent. A field on the west side of the Great North Road was purchased for use as a cemetery; during the

occupation of the Depot nearly 2,000 prisoners were buried in it.

Although the buildings were not completely finished the first prisoners arrived at Norman Cross on 7th April, 1797. The majority of them were Dutch sailors captured by Admiral Duncan in the Battle of Camperdown; later in the war the occupants of the Depot were, for the most part, of French nationality and their numbers varied from an average of 500 to, on occasions, as many as over 6,000. The comparatively small caserns were, therefore, grossly overcrowded and the men were forced to spend their waking hours outside in the courts which, too, must have afforded far too little space.

The writer George Borrow has left us, in *Lavengro*, an impression of Norman Cross which he received when, at the age of nine, he spent two years there with his father who was a Lieutenant in the West Norfolk Militia then quartered in the Barracks. He describes the prisoners' caserns

"with their blank, blind walls, without windows or grating, and their slanting roofs out of which, through orifices where the tiles had been removed, would be protruded dozens of grim heads, feasting their prison-sick eyes on the wide expanse of the country."



These models were carved in bone by Prisoners of War at Norman Cross. The guillotine on the left and the model theatre on the right are both in the Peterborough Museum.

He writes of the food: "*Rations of carrion meat, and bread from which I have seen the very hounds occasionally turn away.*"

Borrow, however, was writing forty years after his stay at Norman Cross and his recollections of the prison fare were not strictly accurate. The amount and quality of the food supplied to all prisoners-of-war were strictly prescribed by the government and the diet, consisting of meat, bread, cheese, beer, butter, peas and green vegetables, was wholesome though it may not always have satisfied the appetites of hungry men. The prisoners were allowed to appoint their own committee to be responsible for seeing that the rations were up to standard. From November 1797 until 1799 this committee could not even blame their captors if the food or the cooking was unsatisfactory for it was agreed between the British and the French that their respective governments should be responsible for feeding their own prisoners, and the cooks were to be chosen from among the prisoners themselves.

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No such arrangement, unfortunately, was made for clothing the men. The French refused to supply clothes even though their agent, appointed to look after the welfare of prisoners, wrote to Paris in 1797 to report that a third of the men at Norman Cross were ill because they were so ill clad.

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Discipline among the prisoners was maintained by a code of rules under which attacks on the turnkeys, damage to the buildings, fighting and quarrelling were punishable by the loss of half a day's rations, by close confinement or by the forfeiting of the offender's chance of being exchanged for any English soldier or sailor taken captive in France. The men had to answer to a daily roll call and had to take turns in keeping the prison premises clean.

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Internal squabbles between the prisoners must often have been difficult to quell in the closely-packed courts and caserns and fights and duels, with resulting deaths, were not uncommon. A root cause of a great deal of trouble was the gambling in which most of the prisoners indulged in order to while away the monotonous days. Some of the men received regular sums of money from their families and friends in France and these they spent on extra food and on games of chance. Their companions, however, who received no such remittances and who could not resist the temptation to gamble, either begged money off the public at the prison gates or sold their clothes, their bedding and even their food for stake money and this so affected their health that many of them fell easy victims to the epidemics of typhoid and other diseases which, from time to time, raged through the overcrowded prison.

It was partly to assist the maintenance of order and discipline by relieving the boredom of prison life that the British government allowed the prisoners to make articles and to sell them in markets set up in the courts of Norman Cross. Another market, the principal one, was held, sometimes daily sometimes weekly, from six o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon, near the eastern gate of the prison. Here traders from the surrounding neighbourhood brought clothes, food, tools and materials needed by the prisoners for their work, and many other goods to sell, and here the prisoners sold their own work. Sometimes men who were short of money would buy food and other items and re-sell them, at a profit, to their wealthier companions.

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Visitors to the Peterborough Museum will have seen the wonderful collection of some of the articles made at Norman Cross. From bones saved from their meals, obtained at the cookhouse or from traders attending the markets, the prisoners made decorative work-boxes, apple scoops, tooth picks, exquisitely carved models of ships, of a theatre, of the guillotine and a host of other objects. They fashioned flowers and wreaths from gilt and coloured paper, made small articles of horn, decorated tea caddies and boxes with paper mosaic, made wonderful pictures in straw marquetry and, for a time, made straw hats and bonnets. One or two of the men even turned their ingenuity to forging bank notes, helped by the fact that the prison guards were unable to keep the huge number of prisoners under constant and close supervision.

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The manufacture of straw hats and bonnets was soon forbidden because it competed with that carried on by workers in Bedfordshire and other nearby counties who had to pay the heavy government tax which the prisoners escaped. Later even the making of straw plait, in which the French excelled, was similarly prohibited. The prisoners, however, ignored the ban. They continued to make the plait and smuggled it out of the Depot with the help of the people in Stilton and elsewhere and even of the soldiers in the Barracks, for the plait could be sold at a good price to the Luton and Dunstable hat makers. Even the exiled French Bishop of Moulins who, for a time, lived in Stilton and ministered to the spiritual needs of the prisoners, connived at his servant engaging in the illicit trading of straw plait.

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In *Lavengro* George Borrow, again recording his childhood memories of Norman Cross, writes of the "straw plait hunts", of the ruthless search for hidden plait and

"worst of all, the accursed bonfire, on the barrack parade, of the plait contraband, beneath the view of the glaring eyeballs from those lofty roofs, amidst the hurrahs

of the troops, frequently drowned in the curses poured down from above . . ."

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In all fairness, however, it must be allowed that the prisoners held in high regard the man, Captain John Draper, who, as the Agent of the prison, was most concerned with seeing that the order forbidding the sale of straw plait was observed. When he died in 1813 they erected, at their own expense, in St Peter's Church at Yaxley, a memorial tablet on which they recorded "their esteem and gratitude for his humane attention to their comfort."

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Ever-present in many of the prisoners' hearts must have been the hope of, one day, being able to escape and there were many attempts made, singly and *en masse*, to get out of Norman Cross and thence to the East coast where a way of returning to France might possibly be found. Some attempts failed, some succeeded; some men were recaptured before they had got clear of the prison, others had to suffer the heart-break of being arrested when they had managed to get as far as the coast. Until his death early in this century, at the age of 96, an old fenman from Southey in Norfolk used to relate how his father, as a young man, helped a young French countess to rescue her sweetheart from Norman Cross as well as several of his friends. An escape route was planned for relays of prisoners across the fens to the coast where small boats conveyed the Frenchmen, under cover of darkness, home to their native land. These boats arrived well-laden with kegs of brandy — gifts which the fenmen by no means found unwelcome! The prisoners were each provided with a split goose feather; on showing this — an ancient symbol of a fenman's sworn oath — to any native of the fens each escaper was assured of instant help.

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In March 1802 a treaty of peace was signed at Amiens and preparations were made for all prisoners-of-war to go home. By the end of April Norman Cross was empty and in the January of the following year the Depot was let. The tenant remained there for only six months, however, for in May war broke out again and, until 1814, over 122,000 foreign prisoners were brought to this country, many of them to Norman Cross. It was not until 19th August, 1814 that the last man left. The prison buildings were then pulled down, much of their material being sold and later re-erected in Peterborough, Stilton and nearby villages. Today the traveller to Norman Cross can read on a stone monument the history of the prison and can reflect on the misery and despair which must have been suffered by the thousands who once occupied this unhappy place; he may, perhaps, spare a moment to remember those to whom death came before they saw again the land in which they had been born.