

AN ITEM OF INTEREST FROM THE HERITAGE CENTRE – More a piece of local history

HUNSTANTON AND HEACHAM'S CONNECTION TO POLAND by Margi Blunden

'Heritage' is People



Asia stands beside the restored shrine

Heritage presents itself in many forms. We usually think about it in terms of objects or pictures from the past, or old buildings. My recent encounter with Asia Hutchinson demonstrated to me that heritage comes through people; people who are linked to other people in all kinds of ways.

So often the stories which people tell one another are about the fabric of their lives springing from their beliefs and values. Asia is one of those people and she has a fascinating story to tell which I was privileged to hear.

Asia is Polish and lives in Hunstanton. Her life began many years ago on the outskirts of Warsaw, and, growing up there during communist times she had no idea that her future would become entwined so closely with England.

But there was one man in her family whose life had been altered completely by WW2 and he, like many other Polish soldiers, ended up living in the UK. This was her uncle Lieutenant Ryszard Alwingier who was firstly sent to a Siberian gulag by the Russians, and from there, travelling via Iran, Palestine, Egypt, and Italy, he came to the UK. He settled around Oxford. Driven by his values and love of Poland he has helped numerous Polish people to forge lives in the UK.

This was very significant for these people. And the reason is as follows: loss of independence has been a hallmark for Poland since 1795. This large country suffered enormously at the hands of other countries. It lost its unity and much land until 1918, and then was invaded by Germany on September 1st 1939.

On August 25th 1939, Poland and Britain had signed an agreement promising mutual assistance in the face of invasion. This meant that Britain came to the aid of the Polish by standing up to the Germans, and the Polish Government immediately sent three destroyers to help the British Navy, and later thousands of troops.

Poland only gained independence back after the war in 1945 when it was governed under the influence of Soviet installed communist authorities until 1989 when the 'People's Republic of Poland' became the Republic of Poland, and over the next few years democracy was established.

Loss of sovereignty is at the heart of Poland's history and so patriotism in exile became hugely important to the Poles.

Our story now turns to Asia who trained as a P.E. teacher in Poland; wanting to learn English, she visited her uncle in Oxford. For her this was a life-changing experience and eventually in 1978 she was able to settle in England.

Years later, in retirement in Hunstanton, something happened to her which again changed her focus in life.

She suffered a stroke, and survived it.

She decided as part of her recovery to take on a project – a decision which has had very interesting consequences.

Her project centred on restoring a memorial to the Polish soldiers who helped to protect the people of this part of the North Norfolk coast during WW2.

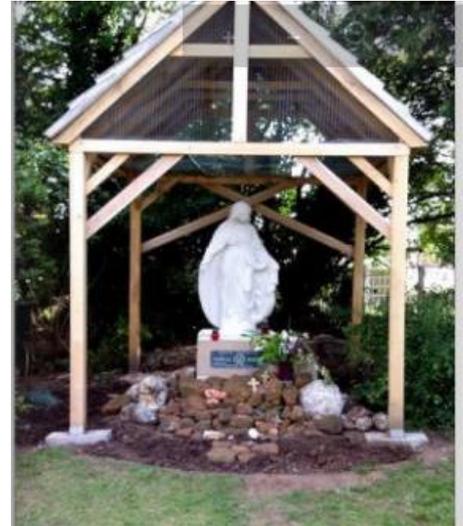
If you go to the Catholic Church in Hunstanton you will find the memorial in the grounds. This shrine replaces the former one, which the soldiers themselves built in the 1940's, but which had deteriorated and fallen into decay. Asia was determined that these men who played an important role in the war-time community should not be forgotten.



A painting of the original shrine



The new shrine as dedicated



Now complete with protection

The more she became involved in her project the more she recognised how important it is to pay attention to, and respect, the past actions of people who have played significant parts in our history. Her own nationality of course linked her directly to the Polish soldiers, and she was in an excellent position to organise support and funds to put the new memorial in place. All of which she achieved in honour of a group of men who, as part of the army in the name of Poland, joined the war effort in this country to help it against the Germans.

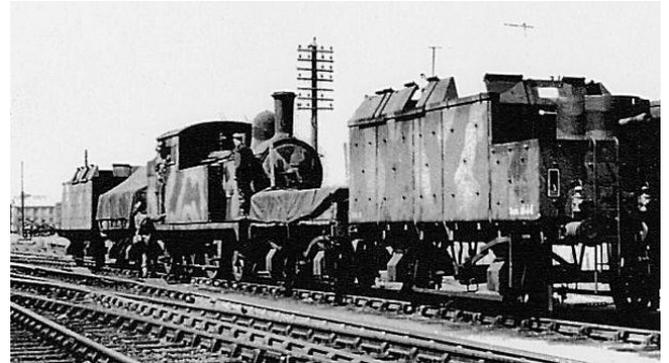
If you don't already know what these men did for us in this community, the narrative is that they arrived in Heacham on 22nd of November 1940. Their job was to run an armoured train

up and down the coast. This train had two carriages for people and a third goods wagon armed with machine guns. Armoured trains had been proven to be effective in previous



military situations in Poland – and the Polish Army (West) – numbering overall around 168,000 troops – were given the job of protecting the whole UK via its rail network and specially constructed trains were used for the purpose.

The people of Heacham welcomed the local Polish troops, and invited them into their homes and lives. This



acceptance meant they quickly became known as individuals, and, in addition to going into schools for assemblies, taking part in local entertainments etc., they attended the Hunstanton Catholic Church.

Because the church only held forty people in those days and there were sixty plus soldiers, the men took it in turns to attend Mass. However, they soon had the idea to build a shrine in the grounds, which meant the priest could say Mass outdoors so they could all be present.

We owe these soldiers, and the largely forgotten significant Polish military contribution to the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany, our thanks. Locally, Asia's cathartic experience of stroke has led the way in reminding, or informing us of a local aspect of WW2 that remains important today.

'Lest we forget' is the phrase most often on our lips on Armistice Day every year.

However it has a gravity of meaning which is embedded in our everyday lives today – to be aware of our history, which is made up of the actions of men and women like ourselves, helps us to appreciate the present and further to inform our current actions.

The group of Polish soldiers have left us a legacy. They are a testimony that

Heritage is People.

A leaflet that contains the story of the restoring of the memorial can be found at <https://peterksc319.wixsite.com/parish-of-kings-lynn/hunstanton-polish-memorial> . It is understood that it was built on the rubble reclaimed from the remains of the original shrine and the statue itself was made in Poland and transported to England.

We hope to have a story about the Polish airmen in Hunstanton cemetery in a future Newsletter.

Margi Blunden is a member of the Civic Society as well as a volunteer in the Heritage Centre. She interviewed Asia Hutchinson in November 2020.

'TILL NEXT MONTH