

The Postwar Use of Sawtry/Wood Walton Lane POW Camp for Civilian Housing

Harry Joyce

1. Introduction

This article reviews the use of the Sawtry/Wood Walton Lane Prisoner of War (POW) Camp after the Second World War for the temporary housing of local families. A summary account of the wartime use of the Sawtry POW Camp to house Italian and later German prisoners is included as background to the configuration of the camp.

This article is dedicated to all the postwar civilian residents of the former Sawtry/Wood Walton Lane POW Camp, aka "The Camp".

2. Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the contributions to this article made by John Holliday of Peterborough, Brian Joyce of Sawtry and John Chance of Sawtry.

Sources are explicitly acknowledged for all of the photographs and illustrations contained in this article and these are used herein for private research only.

3. Sawtry POW Camp

In December 1941, an area of farmland on Sawtry Way (B1090) was accepted as a Prisoner-of-War (POW) camp. The location was NGR TL 184 820¹, about 2.5 km SE of Sawtry. A plan of POW Camp 59 - Sawtry/Wood Walton Lane is shown in Figure 1. An Italian POW construction gang was allocated from Camp 26 Barton Field to work with the Pioneer Corps. The camp was designated as Camp 59 - Sawtry Camp, Wood Walton Lane, Sawtry, Huntingdonshire and was opened in 1942 for Italian POWs. The camp was included in the 1945 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Camp list as Labour Camp 59 Sawtry Camp, Wood Walton Lane, Sawtry, Huntingdonshire.

The camp was built on both sides of a main camp roadway, running in a north-easterly direction. The plan of the camp (Figure 1) shows, at the top of the plan, a secure rectangular POW compound with barbed wire fencing with, to the south, a distribution of barracks and administration buildings along the main camp roadway. Some of these barracks and administration buildings were of brick construction and some were of concrete prefabricated construction. These buildings included a guard room, soldiers' billets, foodstores, an officers mess, a canteen, a billiards room and the Camp Commandant's quarters.

The prisoners' accommodation comprised Nissen huts, and wooden huts, with concrete prefabricated slab building for amenities such as cookhouse, ablutions, latrines, etc. There was a camp hospital and chapel. Later, for German POWs, there was a theatre and information room inside huts.

¹ Location within the TL Square of the UK National Grid Reference (NGR)

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show aerial photographs taken by the Royal Air Force (RAF) on the 31st of December 1944 and on the 21st of June 1946. There is little or no discernible change between the 1945 and 1946 aerial photographs, which were taken only about 18 months apart and, in any case, are of relatively poor quality. Both of these photographs show the Camp as it was in the latter stages of the war. It is not known whether the number or distribution of buildings changed significantly during the earlier years of the war, though it is known that the number of Italian prisoners was substantial as early as 1943 (880), or even 1942.

Figure 4 is an undated and unverified photograph said to be of Italian prisoners at Sawtry POW Camp. This was found on an Italian website at Reference 4.

The Sawtry POW Camp had one satellite camp at Warboys and one hostel at Warboys. There was also a satellite camp at Glatton². The precise meaning of the terms "satellite camp" and "hostel" are not known; though these locations housed some of the prisoners under the Camp 59 remit and, presumably, did not have their own Camp Commandant but reported to the Sawtry (HQ) Camp Commandant. The term "Hostel" probably means that prisoners located there were not strictly interned but were trusted. Also, there were a number of billetees on local farms. There are various reports that both Italian and German prisoners worked on local farms, including at Wood Walton and at Buckworth, as well as in the brickyards near Peterborough.

On the 12th of February 1943 there was an International Red Cross inspection, which showed Italian prisoners with a capacity of 880. During 1 – 4 April 1947 there were still 1528 German POWs - 1 officer and 1527 other ranks. During 31 March – 2 April 1948 there were still 1 officer and 766 other ranks of German prisoners. Repatriation to Germany was proceeding slowly. Note that, according to Foreign Office Inspection Reports FO 939-140 for 1946, 1947 and 1948, these total numbers for German prisoners included in the Camp 59 Sawtry roll, included prisoners held at other, nearby, locations under the Camp 59 Sawtry umbrella;

- Warboys Satellite
- Warboys Hostel
- Glatton Satellite
- Orton
- Billettees.

The numbers of German prisoners held specifically at the Sawtry Camp establishment itself (Camp 59 HQ) varied through 1946, 1947 and 1948 as follows:

10-14 December 1946:	725
1-4 April 1947:	669
1-3 July 1947:	495
26-29 August 1947:	489
14-17 October 1947:	701
10 to 12 February 1948:	422
31 March to 2 April 1948:	275

Some German prisoners elected to stay in the UK after the war and some married local women.

It is a matter of record that the UK treated its Second World War POWs very well compared to other nations, including the US, with very low mortality rates in UK camps. Many Italian prisoners in the UK thought they were the lucky ones ("fortunati") to be held in the UK.

The Sawtry site closed as a POW Camp in 1948.

² This satellite camp is thought to have been at the Conington Airfield, which was known as Glatton Airfield.

4. The Postwar Use of Sawtry Camp for Civilian Housing

After the war the camp was used as emergency housing for local people, probably beginning in 1949. It is believed that these residents were housed largely in the barracks and administration buildings, which were of brick and concrete prefabricated construction. The 1949 Medical Officer of Health Annual Report to Huntingdon Rural District Council (RDC), page 9, states that 19 new houses in Sawtry Way were occupied in 1949. Some Camp residents gave their address as Sawtry Way as early as the 30th of July 1949. The B1090 road, which runs past the Camp site, is in some parts, still known as Sawtry Way. Civilian residents commonly referred to Sawtry Camp as "The Camp".

My older brother, Eric William Joyce, was born at the Sawtry former POW Camp on the 1st of December 1949, so my parents Eric William and Rhoda Monica Joyce must have moved into Sawtry Camp ("Sawtry Way") in 1949. The Joyce family occupied the Camp Commandant's accommodation of two prefabricated concrete huts immediately next to Wood Walton Lane/Sawtry Way (the B1090). I was born at the Camp on the 9th of November 1951. Our family left the Camp to move to 73 Fen Lane Sawtry when I was 3 years old, in 1954 or, more probably, in 1955.

Figure 5 show part of an Ordnance Survey Map of 1952. Figure 6 shows an RAF Aerial Photograph taken on the 31st of August 1954. It is clear that the 1952 Ordnance Survey map does not accurately depict the buildings within the Camp area. From Figure 6, it is evident that, since the 1946 aerial photograph (Figure 3), a number of buildings in the prisoners' enclosure had been demolished. It is also evident that a number of long wooden huts, though to be similar to those built for the Sawtry Land Army Hostel in Slough Lane, Sawtry, remained in August 1954. It is not known if these huts were used as civilian homes or for communal purposes for Camp residents. It is evident that most, if not all, of the buildings in the former camp administration and barracks areas were intact in August 1954. Figure 7 shows a 1954 Ordnance Survey Map of the Sawtry Camp area. This map may have been drawn up after the August 1954 aerial photograph as, in the map, some buildings in the prisoners' area are missing or the Ordnance Survey maps may be incomplete in localised details..

It is not clear precisely when civilian housing at the camp came to an end, but it is likely that this was by the end of the 1950's. Figure 8 shows a 1958 Ordnance Survey Map of the Camp area. The absence of Camp buildings at this time may be due more to lazy map-making, as some Camp buildings actually survive even to today.

Demolition of the buildings in the former prisoners' enclosure probably preceded, or coincided with, the completion of the construction of the Sawtry Petroleum Storage Depot (PSD) in the late 1950's, as is discussed in a Section 5.

A number of personal photographs survive to help us understand more about civilian life at the Camp in the postwar period.

Figure 9 shows my Mother Rhoda Monica Joyce with my brother Eric at Sawtry Camp in 1950. It is not know precisely where in the Camp this picture was taken, but it is not close to the Joyce's own accommodation. In the background is one of the remaining long wooden huts, similar to those built for the Sawtry Land Army Hostel in Slough Lane, Sawtry.

Figures 10, 11 and 12 show three photographs of Camp children. These three pictures are thought to have been taken in about 1953. The small shy boy in the background in Figure 12 might be me (unconfirmed).

Figure 13 shows John Holliday, aged about 3yrs, at Sawtry Camp in about 1957. The location is clearly in the former administration and barracks area (not in the prisoners' area), looking north-east, on the Sawtry side of the main Camp roadway, which can be seen on the right-hand side of the picture. This photograph is particularly instructive in showing the mix of brick and prefabricated concrete construction used for the former Camp barracks and administration buildings.

5. The Use of Sawtry Camp as Petroleum Storage Depot (PSD) Sawtry

All of the major RAF and United States Air Force (USAF) airbases around the UK, together with key installations such as Atomic Weapons Research (AWE) Aldermaston and AWE Burghfield, are connected to large oil refineries around the coastline using a massive network of underground high pressure pipelines and Petroleum Storage Depots (PSD), referred to as the Government Pipelines and Storage System (GPSS). A pipeline of the GPSS passed through, or close to, the Sawtry POW Camp site. The date of the installation of this underground Pipeline, which is essentially not visible in aerial photographs is not certain, but it is shown in a 1944 Pipeline Chart (see Figure 14) and may have been laid even before the Camp itself was built in 1941/42.

A program of building Petroleum Storage Depots (PSD), supplying RAF stations and other military installations, was initiated in 1950 in response to the Cold War. Sawtry Camp was chosen as the site for the Sawtry PSD, to supply RAF stations and other military installations in the North Cambridgeshire & Peterborough area. It is not clear precisely when the Sawtry PSD, comprising large fuels storage tanks and other facilities, was built, but an RAF aerial photograph taken on the 31st of August 1954 (Figure 6) shows the Sawtry POW Camp prisoner's enclosure (the eventual location of the PSD) still in evidence and there is no evidence of any PSD facilities or construction activity on the site. A picture of John Holliday, a Camp civilian resident, thought to have been taken in about 1957 (Figure 13), appears to show parts of the earthen mounds of the PSD in the background. This implies that construction of the Sawtry PSD began sometime between 31 August 1954 (the RAF aerial photo) and about 1957. It may well also mean that thousands of gallons of aviation fuel were being stored, for some time, a few yards from where families were still living!

6. Sawtry Camp Today

The precise date of the de-commissioning of Sawtry PSD is not known, though this was sometime after 1964 and before 2013. Figure 15 shows the UK Pipeline Network in 1964 with Sawtry PSD identified. A 2013 Ministry of Defence Booklet concerning the sale of the UK GPSS illustrates the GPSS Network, which does not include a Sawtry PSD. Figure 16 shows a 2019 aerial photograph of the Sawtry Camp site, with the remains of Sawtry PSD.

It is believed that, at the time of writing this article, the Sawtry GPSS Pipeline itself is no longer in use.

Figures 17 to 26 show views of the site of Sawtry Camp in 2019. The site was derelict. The GPSS storage tanks and associated facilities were disused. The remains of the earthen mounds of the PSD can be seen in several of these pictures, as well as in Figure 16.

Several of the buildings of the former Sawtry POW Camp - some of brick and some of prefabricated concrete construction - are still standing.

7. My Memories of the Camp

My parents, Eric and Monica Joyce, moved into the Camp in 1949. They were assigned the ex-Camp Commandant's quarters, which comprised one smaller hut and one larger hut, which we referred to as "the Big Hut" and "the Little Hut". In the Figure 1 plan, these are the smaller and larger huts located between the Officers Mess and Wood Walton Lane (the B1090). The Big Hut was similar in size and construction to the prefabricated concrete hut in the foreground of Figure 23. Our postal address, which appears on my Birth Certificate, was 1 Sawtry Way, Sawtry, Huntingdonshire.

My older brother Eric was born at the Camp on the 1st of December 1949. My Dad worked in Peterborough and rode to Peterborough every day on his motorbike. Figure 9 shows a photo of my Mother, Rhoda Monica Joyce (known as Monica) with my brother at the Camp in 1950. The precise location of this picture within the Camp is not known for certain, but I believe that the wooden hut in the background is one of the long wooden huts - similar to the ones built for the Women's Land Army Hostel (and later used for Sawtry Junior/Infant

School) in Slough Lane, Sawtry. As is suggested by the aerial photograph of Figure 6, a number of these long wooden huts remained at the Camp as late as 31 August 1954.

I was born at the Camp on the 9th of November 1951. I remember being in my cot in the Little Hut when I was very ill with Whooping cough. I also remember being in the Big Hut on the occasion of my brother's birthday. Our parents had bought him a toy car with a flashing red light on it, which he pushed along the floor. I have some memories of walking around the Camp with my Mum and of visiting a friend of hers who lived in a nearby hut. This friend may have been Mrs O'Boyle. I remember going with Mum to meet my brother Eric off his school bus, close to the junction of the B1090 (which ran past the Camp) and the Great North Road (A1). I also have a number of memories of going with my Mum to Whitehall Farm, where she worked as a domestic servant. I was left on my own quite a lot to play in the grounds of Whitehall and I have a number of very fond memories of those occasions. I also remember quite well going with Mum as she worked in the fields close to the Camp with other women. I think her tasks were potato picking, turnip collection, sugar beet hoeing and the like. The tractor driver was Mark Dewberry and I remember riding on his tractor and often riding on the trailer.

One distinct memory I have from our time at the Camp was when my brother and I joined a small gang of boys playing close to the hedge between the Camp and the B1090, on the Sawtry side of the Camp's own roadway. One boy (I do not remember who) threw a piece of metal rod or the like at a passing workman's van. I was terrified when the van stopped and one man came over to us and told us we would be in deep trouble if we did anything like this again (or words to that effect).

We left the Camp in 1954 or 1955, when I was 3 years old. This was probably in 1955, as I remember the weather was not cold. I don't remember us actually leaving the Camp, but I clearly remember us arriving at our new home at 73 (it might have been numbered as 3 at that time) Fen Lane, Sawtry on the back of an open lorry with all of our belongings and our dog Peg, who had lived with us at the Camp.

Sawtry Camp families names I can recall from memory or from baptism records, newspaper clippings and with the help of John Holliday are: O'Boyle, Sweeney, Holliday, Green, Nicols, Coster, Keeble, McGowan, Lockhead, Armitage, Kent, Tony Cafferkey, Ford, "Coley"?.

8. References

Wartime:

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4. Website: "Prigionieri militari nella Seconda guerra mondiale tra Italia e Inghilterra. Storia e Memoria [Military Prisoners in the Second World War Between Italy and the United Kingdom; History and Memories]" <https://e-review.it/malice-prigionieri-militari-nella-seconda-guerra-mondiale-tra-italia-e-inghilterra>

Postwar:

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6. Baptism Records for All-Saints Church, Sawtry
7. Book: "About Wood Walton", John Chance, 1996
8. In the Dark: Fuelling the Cold War; The Post WW2 History of the United Kingdom's Largest Petroleum Pipeline and Storage System; Presentation by Tim Whittle, Youtube
9. Booklet: Legislation to Enable Sale of the Government Pipeline and Storage System. Ministry of Defence 2013
10. Website:
<https://www.systonimages.co.uk>
Photographs of the site of Sawtry Camp (Copyright: ©2019 Martin J Richards BA(Hons) ARPS)

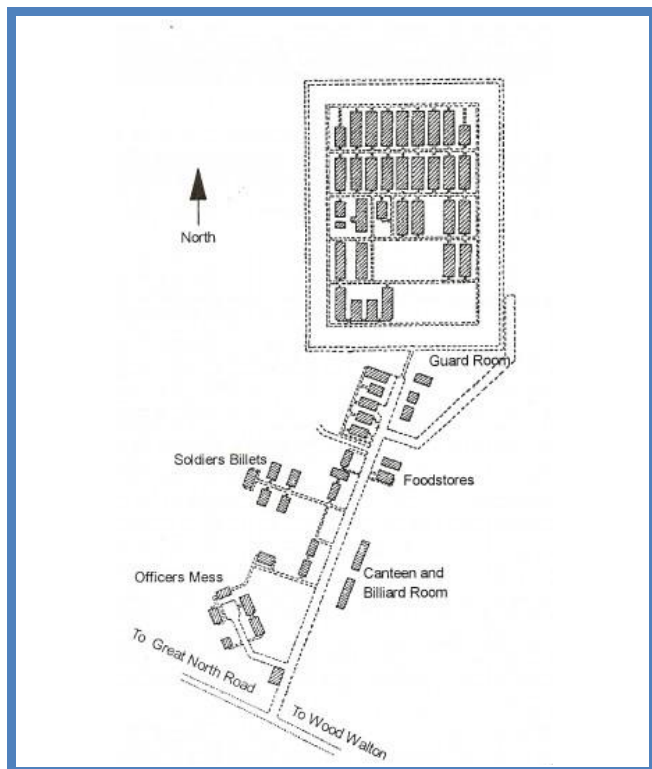


Figure 1: Plan of POW Camp 59 - Sawtry/Wood Walton Lane
Source: John Chance



Figure 2: RAF Aerial Photograph taken on the 31st of December 1944
Copyright: The GeoInformation Group

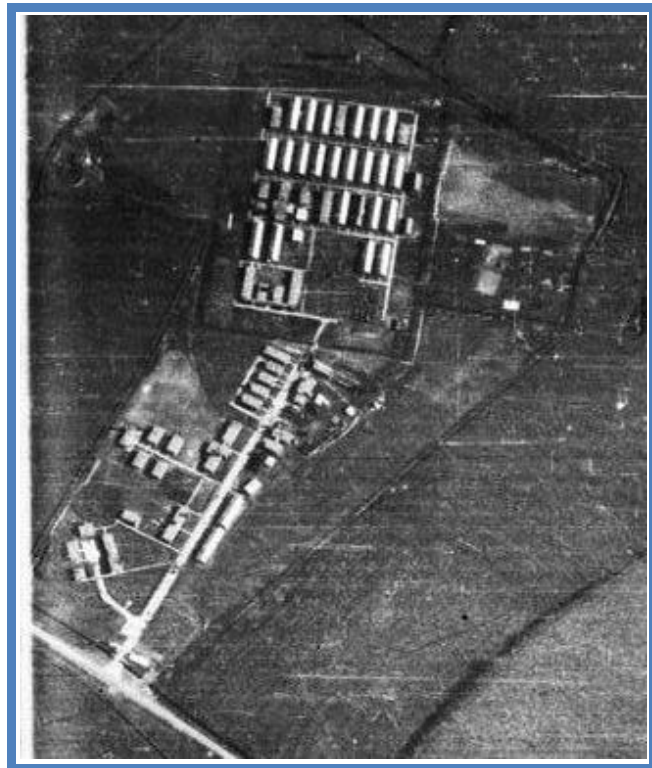


Figure 3: RAF Aerial Photograph taken on the 21st of June 1946
Crown Copyright



Figure 4: Italian Prisoners at Sawtry Camp (Undated, Unverified)
Copyright: Unknown



Figure 5: Ordnance Survey Map 1952
Crown Copyright



Figure 6: RAF Aerial Photograph taken the 31st of August 1954
Crown Copyright

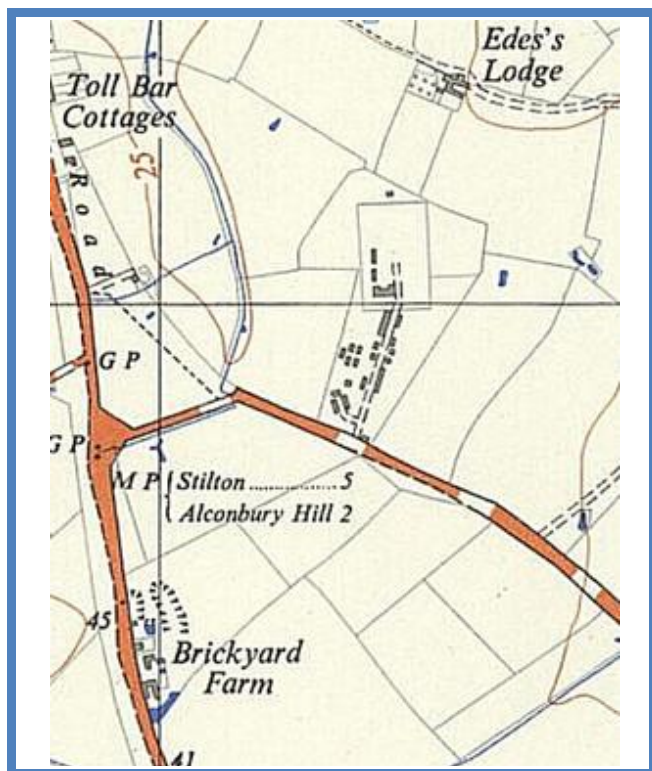


Figure 7: Ordnance Survey Map 1954
Courtesy: National Library of Scotland



Figure 8: Ordnance Survey Map 1958
Crown Copyright



Figure 9: My Mother Rhoda Monica Joyce with my brother Eric at Sawtry Camp in 1950 Source: Brian Joyce



Figure 10: At Sawtry Camp in about 1953. (From L to R. Len Holliday, Roy Nicols, Philip Green, Thomas Holliday, Christine Holliday, Doreen Holliday. Copyright: John Holliday



Figure 11: At Sawtry Camp in about 1953. (From L to R. Roy Nicols, Christine Holliday, Roy Green, Len Holliday, Philip Green, Thomas Holliday & Roy Nicols. Copyright: John Holliday



Figure 12: At Sawtry Camp in about 1953. Thomas Holiday on the left with Philip Green. The small shy boy in the background might be Harry Joyce. Copyright: John Holliday



Figure 13: John Holliday aged about 3yrs at Sawtry Camp in about 1957. Copyright: John Holliday

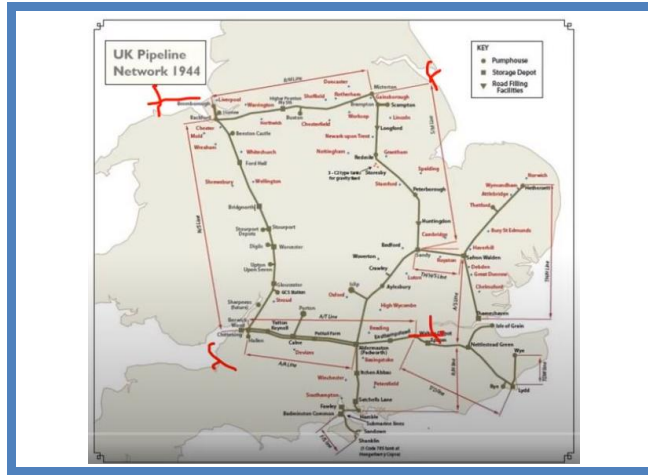


Figure 14: The UK Pipeline Network in 1944 Crown Copyright

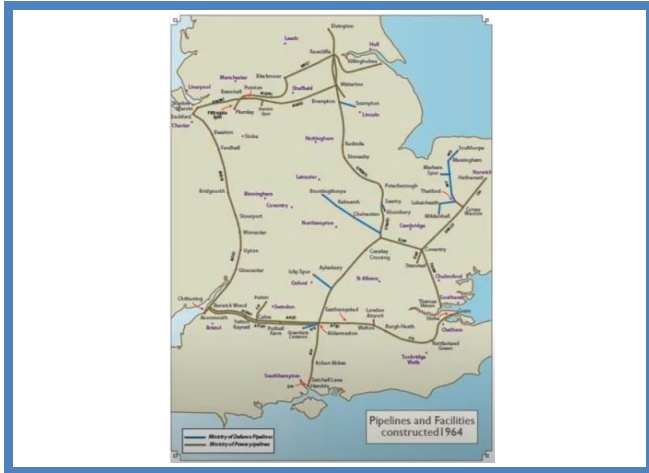


Figure 15: The UK Pipeline Network in 1964
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Figure 16: Remains of the postwar use of the Sawtry Camp Site for PSD
Sawtry - 2019 Copyright Infoterra & Bluesky



Figure 17: Remains of Sawtry Camp (Looking North) - May 2019
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Figure 18: Remains of Sawtry Camp (Looking North East) - May 2019
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Figure 19: Remains of Sawtry Camp (Looking North) - May 2019
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Figure 20: Remains of Sawtry Camp (Looking North) - May 2019
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Figure 21: Remains of Sawtry Camp (Looking North) - May 2019
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Figure 22: Remains of Sawtry Camp - May 2019
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Figure 23: Remains of Sawtry Camp - Original POW Camp Prefabricated Concrete Buildings - May 2019 Copyright: ©2019 Martin J Richards BA(Hons) ARPS (Systonimages.co.uk)



Figure 24: Remains of Sawtry Camp - Original POW Camp Brick Building - May 2019 Copyright: ©2019 Martin J Richards BA(Hons) ARPS (Systonimages.co.uk)



Figure 25: Remains of Sawtry Camp - Original POW Camp Prefabricated Concrete Buildings - May 2019 Copyright: ©2019 Martin J Richards BA(Hons) ARPS (Systonimages.co.uk)



Figure 26: Remains of Sawtry Camp - Original POW Camp Prefabricated Concrete and Brick Buildings - May 2019 Copyright: ©2019 Martin J Richards BA(Hons) ARPS (Systonimages.co.uk)