

In French Captivity

Complaints of English Prisoners of Longwy

Based on French Archival Documents

By Anne Morddel, FINS

During the Napoleonic Wars, France retained considerable number of prisoners. They were of two types of prisoners: those captured in various sea and land battles, and those oftentimes referred to as "hostages". The manner in which the latter were captured and treated made them, in the words of Michael Lewis, "a group of people who, quite inadvertently, made history."¹

With the brief peace of Amiens, a number of British citizens went to France, some on business, some for the pleasure of travel, some to settle financial affairs disrupted by the French Revolution, some to study. Early in 1803, war between the two countries broke out again and, almost immediately, the Decree of 23rd May, 1803 (4 Prairial An XI) ordered that all British men between the ages of 18 and 60 then in France or her territories be detained. In reality, all British of both sexes and all ages were detained in a sweep that began before the decree was announced and was maintained until 1814. These "hostages" became known as the detainees, or *détenus*, and included people of all professions and social levels. Entire families were detained, including the elderly and infirm.

Added to these numbers were the thousands of true prisoners of war, the soldiers and sailors who had been captured in battle or taken from ships, and anyone considered a spy. As to how many British in total were in French prisons at any one time seems impossible to determine. Lewis gives a number of 16,000 taken from the Reverend Robert Wolfe, chaplain at Givet and administrator of relief funds for the prisoners.² A count done by the French Ministry of War of prisoners of all

nationalities in 23 prisons gives a total of 17,593 British prisoners of war in the spring of 1814.³

Estimates as to the number of *détenus* seem preposterously low. Lewis gives the number as 500⁴, based on 1810 estimates of British commissioners trying to arrange an exchange, but we have seen over 1,000 files on individual British *détenus* at the *Service Historique de la Défense* at the Chateau de Vincennes in Paris. The historian Didier Houmeau, who is preparing a book on the subject, has a list of over 3,500 *détenus*.⁵ The Duc de Rovigo, in his regular reports to the Emperor, always included a tally of *détenus* at various smaller prisons; with his number hovering at around 5,000.⁶

The prisoners of war came incrementally, while the *détenus* were taken almost all at once. They were placed in more *depôts*, prisons and jails than seems ever to have been fully listed. Initially, the *détenus* were placed in five *depôts*: Valenciennes, Verdun, Givet, Sarrelibre and Bitche.⁷ Prisoners of war were put in whatever facility was close at hand and moved along to larger prisons afterward. After 1806, the *détenus* were officially treated as prisoners of war and the *depôts* of Arras, Besançon and Cambrai, which were already in use for prisoners of war, began accepting them.⁸ A partial list of other places where prisoners were held includes:

- Auxonne
- Bouchain
- Brest

³ File entitled: *Prisoners of War Correspondence*, Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris

⁴ Lewis, op. cit., p.264

⁵ Private correspondence with M. Houmeau. March, 2010.

⁶ Gotteri, Nicole. *La Police Secrète du Premier Empire : Bulletins quotidiens adressés par Savary à l'Empereur*, vols 1-6. Paris, Honoré Champion, 1997.

⁷ Private correspondence with M. Houmeau. April, 2010.

⁸ Private correspondence with M. Houmeau. April, 2010.

¹ Lewis, Michael. *Napoleon and His British Captives*. London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1962. p. 13.

² Lewis, op. cit., p. 264

- Briançon
- Chatellerault
- Dunkerque
- Fontainebleau
- Lile en Prenz
- Longwy
- L'Orient
- Marseilles
- Metz
- Mont Dauphin
- Nantes
- Neuchatel
- Sedan
- St. Denis

Many of these were frontier forts designed by Vauban to protect France from invasion. Some -- Arras, Bitche, Cambrai, Givet, Longwy, Sarrelibre, Valenciennes and Verdun – held thousands, while others were local jails or prisons that had to take the overflow, and overflow there was. Commandants constantly complained to the Ministry of War's Fifth Division, which was responsible for prisoners of war, that they could not house all of the detainees sent to them, nor did they have enough guards and gendarmes to police them.⁹ While some of this certainly reads as the efforts by various commandants to excuse themselves when prisoners escaped, (there were 85 escapes from Auxonne in a year¹⁰) the problem was real enough such that, in January of 1806, the construction of a new prison at Maubeuge was suggested in order to cope with the overcrowding.¹¹

Over the years that these internment camps existed, each developed its own character and reputation. Of the larger *depôts*, Verdun is probably the best known, for it was there that lived many of the wealthier *détenus*. Allowed to live in town and encouraged to spend their money, trapped and bored, they soon created an exiles' little bubble of iniquity, where gambling, horse racing and

⁹File entitled: *English Prisoners of War 1806-1815*, Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris

¹⁰ Private correspondence with M. Houmeau. April, 2010.

¹¹ File entitled: *English Prisoners of War 1806-1815*, Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris. Ministry Report dated 4 January, 1806.

prostitution were rife.¹² Those with money lived in comparative comfort, while those without starved.

Bitche had the reputation for being the most feared and harshest of the *depôts*. Nearly all prisoners who escaped from other prisons, if recaptured, (and they very often were recaptured, for to escape a prison was easier than managing to leave France and her neighbouring allies) were sent to Bitche for a time as punishment. One of its earlier commandants, Maisonneuve, certainly was unjust and brutal¹³. The fort, with its dungeons' seeping walls was cold, depressing and formidable. Probably what made it especially horrific was that the worst characters were left to their own devices and primitive concepts of self-government – which involved boxing matches, sometimes to the death – at the deepest level underground¹⁴.

After their release, some of the prisoners of war wrote accounts of their time in France's prisons. The literature on the subject has quite a lot of information about the larger *depôts*, and about conditions there. As it was the practice to move the prisoners and some *détenus* about without warning, abruptly marching them to another *depôt*, many of the writers knew of more than one prison. Verdun, Sarrelibre, Arras and especially Bitche have received much coverage, with Briançon, Givet and Valenciennes not far behind. Lewis neatly summarizes most of these descriptions in a chapter on the *depôts*¹⁵.

Of Longwy, however, Lewis says only that it

*“was a late starter and...never became a large dépôt. It lies well to the north and east of Verdun, on the borders of Luxembourg...Stewart visited...but, not staying long...has little to say...”*¹⁶

Of the contemporary accounts of *depôts*, probably only that of William Story has much to say of Longwy in *A Journal Kept in France, During a captivity of more than nine years, commencing the 14th*

¹² Boys, Captain Edward. *Narrative of a Captivity in France and Flanders, between the years 1803 and 1809*. London : Richard Long, 1828. pp. 40-56.

¹³ Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives*, p. 147.

¹⁴ Ellison, Seacombe. *Prison Scenes; and Narrative of Escape from France, During the Late War*. London : Whittaker and Co., 1838. pp. 84-5

¹⁵ Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives*, pp. 137-168

¹⁶ Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives*, p.158.

Day of April, 1805, and ending The 5th Day of May, 1814, which was published the year after his release. He arrived there in March, 1811, which from his account, seems to be when a *depôt* was established there¹⁷.

*“Longwy is a very strong fortress, and is on the frontier of France. The town is very small and inconsiderable; the principal buildings are caserns, (barracks), which are calculated to contain a numerous garrison...The population is only fourteen hundred, and the number of prisoners, when all arrived, was about fifteen hundred.”*¹⁸

He perhaps did not know that, less than twenty years earlier, the town had suffered a siege and bombardment by the Prussians that lasted three days and ended with the town’s capitulation. There followed three months of occupation by some 2,000 Hungarian and Prussian soldiers, whom the populace had to garrison in their homes and who seem to have spent their time in drunkenness.¹⁹

Story says that some British prisoners were allowed to live in town, as at Verdun, renting rooms in the homes of the residents, for whom that may have been an uncomfortable reminder of the Prussian/Hungarian occupation. He adds that there were escape attempts, as everywhere. He describes the life of those living in town with perhaps a tone of injustice:

*“The houses of the town formed a neat square of about one hundred and fifty yards, within which was the only place that we were allowed to walk...We were mustered three times a day, without any exemption, except in case of sickness. If any person neglected to come, he was taken to the prison for twenty-four hours, where if he slept on straw, he had to pay fifteen sous, and in proportion if he had a bed, &c.”*²⁰

¹⁷ Story, William. *A Journal Kept in France, During a captivity of more than nine years, commencing the 14th Day of April, 1805, and ending The 5th Day of May, 1814*. Sunderland : printed by George Garbutt, 1815. p.

¹⁸ Story, op. cit., p.93.

¹⁹ M.C. *Essai sur l’Histoire de Longwy, par M.C*****, suivi de Considérations Relatives à l’Industrie et au Commerce de Cette Ville, et de Notices Biographiques sur les Hommes Illustrés Qui y Ont Pris Naissance*. Metz : Verronnais, 1829, p. 45

²⁰ Story, op.cit., p. 94.

Little else than this account has been published about Longwy as a *depôt*.

It was common for prisoners of war and *détenus* to write their grievances to French Minister of War General Clarke, the Duc de Feltre. Repeatedly, in letters pleading for larger allowance, permission for a wife or child to be allowed to return to Britain, or for his own freedom, the writer refers to the duke’s reputation for kindness, generosity, humanity.²¹ If this was pure flattery, it was picked up by later writers as fact.²² Whether or not he was kind, people certainly thought there was reason to hope in writing to him, for they did so, and many of those letters are preserved in the archives of the *Service Historique de la Défense* at the *Chateau de Vincennes* in Paris. Among them are three documents which shed a bit more light on the conditions at Longwy.

On 19 February, 1812, the year following William Story’s arrival at Longwy, William Atkinson, prisoner of war, wrote to the Duc de Feltre, asking him to authorize his being allowed to take a walk outside of town. Limited country walks were permitted to trusted prisoners at many of the other *depôts*, but not at Longwy. Recall that Story had mentioned the small town square of “one hundred and fifty yards” which was the only place prisoners were allowed to walk. Atkinson complains of

*“shortness of breath which he in a great measure attributes to the sharpness of the Air of Longwy [depôt] and which indisposition he conceives would be inevitably cured, could he at times enjoy the Country Air.”*²³

In a note in the margin of the letter, the commandant of the *depôt* at that time, Lieutenant Cowley, adds that Atkinson is of good conduct and really is not in very good health.

A few days before Atkinson wrote his letter, on the 1st of February, fellow prisoner Thomas C.

²¹ Individual prisoners’ files from the group of files entitled: *English Prisoners of War*. Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris.

²² Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives*, p. 244.

²³ Quote and image from the individual prisoner file for William Atkinson from the group of files entitled: *English Prisoners of War*. Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris

Baker made a break for it. It seems that the unbearably close watch kept on the prisoners, of which Baker's account is very similar to Story's, was at least one of the causes of Baker's decision to escape.

*"I was quartered in that part of the Barracks known by the name of the Hospital Barracks surrounded by walls and palisades, shut up with Lock and Key, three musters per day, and if by accident one of them was missed, immediately sent to prison. I never set my foot outside of its gates and was as closely confined as at Sarrelibre or any of the Sailors Depôts and it was at the peril of my Life I succeeded in escalading the Ramparts by eluding the Vigilance of the sentinel."*²⁴

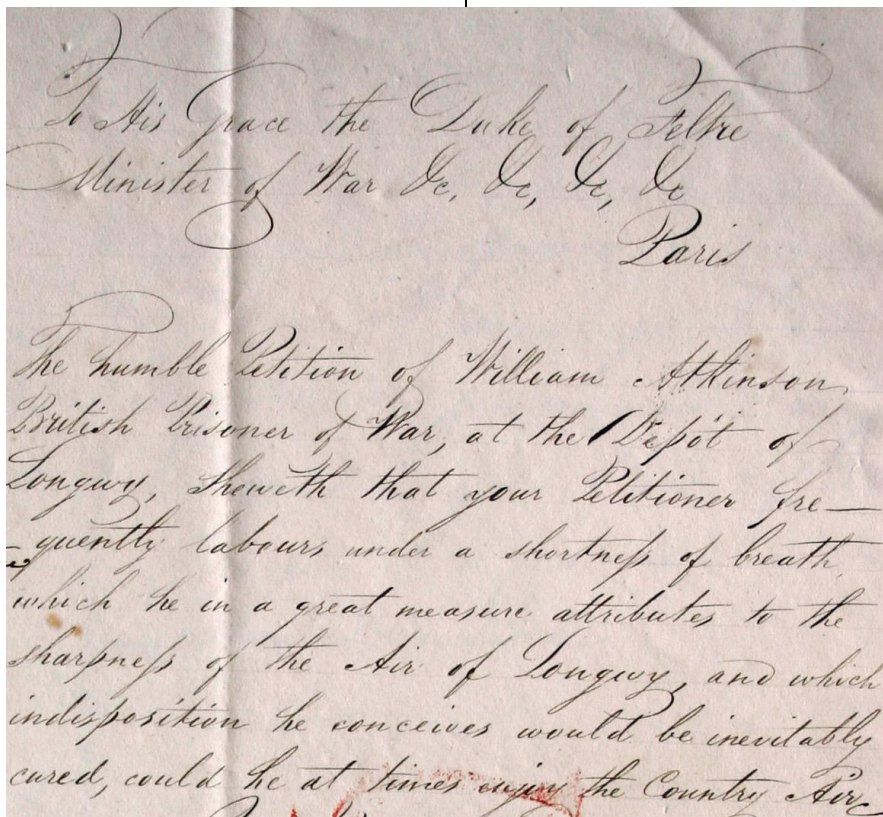
Baker was caught and sent to Bitche²⁵, where he wrote to the duke on the 17th of November, 1813, begging to have his pay restored. With so much intensity and passion as to seem near the breaking point, he further describes the restrictions endured by all at Longwy before his 1812 escape attempt.

"...the prisoners at that place were not allowed to go outside of its gates, they were not permitted to walk on its ramparts, could not take sufficient exercise to promote health, finally they did not enjoy any of the indulgences granted to the parole Depôts. It appears

²⁴ Individual prisoner file for Thomas Baker from the group of files entitled: *English Prisoners of War*. Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris
²⁵ "A list of English prisoners of war at Longwy in 1812". National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Archives. Manuscript no. REC/16. p. 10

*(however strange may be the logic) that they were to be subject to all the paines inflicted on those who should violate their privileges...The Spaniards My Lord however bloody may have been their War with France are better treated then we...."*²⁶

His resounding closure, full of patriotism and defiance, seems also to be full of despair to the point of dementia and exhibits a valiant effort to retain his sense of human decency in the unbearable



conditions of Bitche. An ordinary man imprisoned far from home, his obvious suffering gives eloquence to his hopelessness.

"It is true My Lord that I am a Prisoner and in your Power my life is even at your Disposal, yet my Soul is not the less independant. Ten years captivity has taught us to bear sufferings and Deprivations with meekness and

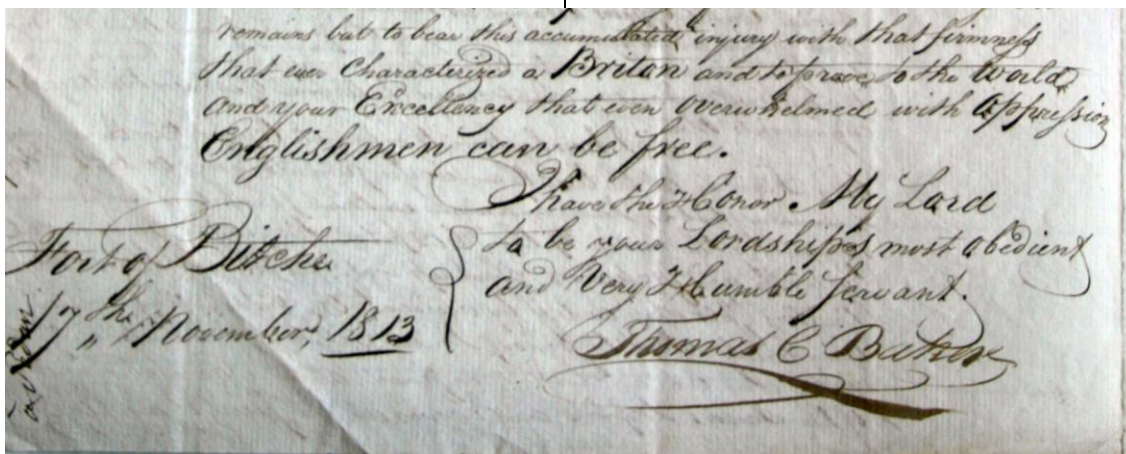
*resignation. Appeals for redress have been ineffectually made to your Justice and Humanity. Even the last Decision of your Excellency carrys the mark of Scorn and Contempt with it towards us...Nothing now remains but to bear this accumulated injury with that firmness that ever characterized a Briton and to prove to the World and your Excellency that overwhelmed with Oppression **Englishmen can be free.**"*²⁷

²⁶ Individual prisoner file for Thomas Baker from the group of files entitled: *English Prisoners of War*. Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris
²⁷ Quote and image from the individual prisoner file for Thomas Baker, op. cit.

Baker refers to a visit to Longwy of a Major Baltazar (probably Balthazar), seemingly an investigation into complaints.

"The arrival of Major Baltazar at that Depôt to enquire into and redress its grievances..." and *"...these grievances have all been represented to your Excellency and no doubt caused the arrival of Major Baltazar to enquire into them."*²⁸

Story makes no mention of anyone coming to the prison to look into grievanc



es, nor does the letter given in its entirety below. Yet it would seem that something brought about the decision to allow proper paroles at Longwy, sometime between 1812 and 1813.

Lewis quotes Vattel in giving a definition of *Parole d'Honneur*:

*"By a custom which reveals at once the honour and humanity of Europeans, an officer, when taken prisoner, is released on his parole, and enjoys the comfort of spending the time of his captivity in his own country, surrounded by his own family: and the side which has released him remains as perfectly sure of him as if it held him confined in chains."*²⁹

To modern minds that have read too much of internment camps, extermination camps and clandestine torture camps, this may seem utterly incomprehensible, a fantasy. Indeed, Napoleon had no time for such gentilities, for under his rule, parole almost always granted prisoners only the rights to live in the town of the prison, to walk within certain limits and, in rare cases, to work.

²⁸ Individual prisoner file for Thomas Baker , op. cit.
²⁹ Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives*, p. 44.

While descriptions of life on parole at Verdun read like parties at Monte Carlo in the 1920s, in most *depôts*, it meant being able to share a crowded room in town, walk in larger circles, and – most importantly – access to more and better food.

Baker complained that he had never had parole. He seems to say that parole was supposed to be in existence at Longwy, but that it was in fact not so.

"It is a notorious fact that there are now several English

officers detained at Bitchu because they would not sign their parole at

*Longwy without enjoying its privileges, and that the signatures of the rest were extorted by threats..."*³⁰

More than a year and a half after Baker's escape attempt, conditions were no better. In emphatic denunciation of the intolerable treatment, on the 13th of October, 1813, more than 120 prisoners (among them William Atkinson) signed a letter of complaint to the Duc de Feltre, which is given here in full.

To His Excellency Count
Duke of Feltre
Minister of War

May it please Your Grace

The British prisoners of war of the depôt of Longwy, once more presume to call Your Excellency's attention towards their unfortunate situation, which they conceive to be rendered more uncomfortable than it was ever Your Grace's intention it should be, by the interference of one, to whose authority they do not consider themselves

³⁰ Individual prisoner file for Thomas Baker from the group of files entitled: *English Prisoners of War*.

amenable, so long as they conduct themselves in an orderly manner.

The circumstances to which they would at present wish to call Your Excellency's notice what they conceive to be the serious measures of the Commandant of the Town' in ordering them to retire to their respective lodgings at the early hour of half past seven o'clock, and as they know by experience, that, that hour, will be shortly curtailed to seven o'clock, they consider it their duty to address Your Grace on the subject, and to request the interference of that humanity for which Your Excellency is so justly celebrated. When that early hour for retiring was enforced last winter, they submitted to it without openly murmuring, in the hope that time and their good conduct, would have brought about milder measures...now that they have all signed their paroles, that the depot has been for several months undisturbed by desertion [escape], and that it has never disgraced itself by riot (a circumstance among fifteen hundred men well worthy of Your Grace's consideration) they consider such a conduct as utterly subversive of those social comforts which they are persuaded it was always Your Excellency's intention they should enjoy.

They must also beg leave to complain of the conduct of the Patrol (they do not mean to implicate the Gendarmes whose behaviour has always been exemplary and proper in opposition to the others) they consider it extremely oppressive that men passing quietly to their residences should be wantonly hunted down, with inhumanity driven at the point of a bayonet into a dirty cell called the Violon [a sort of holding cell] to pass the night the floor of which is covered with the most nauseous filth, the walls emitting unwholesome vapours from their humidity, and an aperture at the top admitting the free circulation of the cold night air are sufficient to endanger the life the most healthy person, and in one or more instances, persons almost succumbed with cold and in the morning be condemned to a five days imprisonment in the Town jail.

In the exposition of these facts to Your Excellency, they feel a satisfaction in thinking that the Commandant of the depot, Monsieur Reydemorande, will testify the great tranquillity and regularity that have reigned in this depot for a considerable time, and to his assiduous care they are much indebted, as well as to his impartiality and desire to render their situations as comfortable as possible.

That this depot is composed of a mixed body of men they are well aware, but amongst them several hundreds may be found who have seen better days, and who have been accustomed to the comforts of convivial society, to such, such oppression is peculiarly distressing, and the more so as they consider the practice of it to be unauthorized by the direction of the superior authorities.

To Your Excellency, therefore, as the only friend of the unfortunate exile, they are compelled to apply for redress, the well known philanthropy of the Duke of Feltre is the pledge of their request being granted, or at least, of its being impartially considered, and His Grace's urbanity and humanity their assurance of his excusing the length of this address, in which, if any expression be considered as intemperate or assuming, they trust their outraged feelings may be urged in its extenuation.

In the confidence, therefore, that Your Excellency will not suffer their humble comforts to be unnecessarily prescribed, nor their little privileges to be wantonly invaded, the undersigned, representing the whole depot, most respectfully subscribe themselves

Your Graces most obedient and most humble servants

Longwy 13 October, 1813

Stephen Ley	Thos Knowles
Geo. Nidal	
William Carruthers	Robert Wilson
Thos. Cummins	
John Wyatt	Guilford Emery
Matthias Stockman	
Steph. Redman	Joseph Silcock
Thos. Hanson	
John Bowman	A Woodmason
Ben. W. Stephenson	
John Hargrove	Jno Walker
Thos Bownas	
Wm. Mortimer	Ths. Gittins
Rbt. Ben. Foster	
James Quelch	Jno. Bevan
Peter Carlile	
Rich. Bond	Roger Peters
Benj. Walker	
William Harries	John Reis
Wm. Travers	

William Gibson	Edw. Rubie
Wm. Cole	
James Sly	Benj.
Vickers	Wm. Boldero (?)
M. Watson	Peter Norman
John Girling	
J. Pratt	Jno.
Sanders	Alex Walis
Tho. Jones	Jas. Laten
Geo. Beaveridge	
Wm. Barber	Wm. Salter
Robert Simpson	
N. Church	Alexr McIver
Thos. Seaton	
Rich. Simms	Fr. Minnett
James Mills	
Edward Mishell	John Venson
Robert Duncan	
John Orleur	John Ritche
John Elliottfnich	
Wm. Brown	Joseph Gibson
Wm. Forster	
Thomas Parkere	John Cook
Wm. Douglas	
Thos. Jameson	Robert Reed
Rich. Conner	
Geo. Cooper	John Findlay
William Woodburn	
J. Graves	George Minnell
Peter Thursby	
Valt. Richards	Wm. Atkinson
Wm. Willcock	
R. Wake	Jno. King
Mattw. Hickling	
Jno. Nicholson	Philip Curtis
Thos. Williams	
D. Finlyson	James Forcyth
Francis Vernell	
Wm. Clark	Henry
Patterson	Alexr. Maver
Wm. Froman	Jas. Miles
Alexr. Roberts	
Dugald M'Gregore	Grench
John Carter	
Danl. Cheovy	Pat Kewley
David Sanders	
John White	Thos. Douglas
Wm. Pettygrew	
Thomas Grant	Alexr. Martin
Jno. Pearce	

Thos. Dixon	Wm. Cumming
Henry Hord	
Thos. Hastings	John Lantesley
Robert Collings	
Jos. Turkell	Alexr. Gray
Willm. Mensforth	
Willm. Evans	Thos. Gaylor
Mich. Harrison	
Geo. Elliott	W. Swan
Joh. Hull	
Rowland Craige	Thos. Gaden
William Hodgson	
Daniel Simmons	Thos.
Henson	Wm. Evans ³¹

They make no mention of the fact that during that same year there had been an epidemic of plague which, "in less than two months [killed] a tenth of the population."³² Their letter does confirm Story's estimate of the number of prisoners in town as being 1500, though some must surely have died of plague as well.³³

Clearly, the culprit and cause of the complaints of Story, Atkinson, Baker and the 120 others, is the unnamed Commandant of the Town, for the authors of the letter specifically exonerate the Commandant of the *Depôt*, Reydemorande, and the Gendarmes. It was he who allowed no walks out of the town square, and it was he who ordered that every prisoner out after curfew be treated with harshness.

Story said that the population of the town numbered only 1400, adding that the inhabitants of the town were "of a rustic nature"³⁴. Yet, examining the historical context, a possible understanding begins. As a small border town, Longwy had recently suffered war and the miseries of occupation by enemy troops. The inhabitants' "rusticity" may have been more exhaustion and trauma. With the arrival of the prisoners, the town found itself again inundated by a greater population of enemy inhabitants forced upon them.

³¹ Quote and image from the file entitled: *Prisoners of War Correspondence*, Service Historique de la Défense, Chateau de Vincennes, Paris

³² M.C. *Essai sur l'Histoire de Longwy*, p. 54.

³³ "A list of English prisoners of war at Longwy in 1812". op.cit. contains roughly 1300 names.

³⁴ Story. *A Journal Kept in France*. p. 93

The Town Commandant was the mayor. His name was Georges-Arnould Guillemard and his father had been mayor before him³⁵. He had held the office previously, in 1791 and 1793, which was the time of the Prussian/Hungarian occupation, and had been in office since 1802. He was in his fifties when Story saw him, and would have been in his thirties during the occupation.

It may have been fear of the past being repeated that caused Guillemard to try to keep such a tight control over the British prisoners invading his town, or it may have been a misplaced revenge on the British for what the Prussians and Hungarians may have done. In either case it seems pitiable, and the man came to a pitiable end. Again, William Story tells the tale.

Guillemard called a town council to be held after yet another escape from prison, apparently under the noses of the authorities:

*"...hundreds of English assembled, and laughed so in the face of the commandant of the town, which put him in such a violent rage, that he went home, took ill, and died soon afterwards."*³⁶

As six other people died on the same day (1st of January, 1814)³⁷ it seems more likely that they all, including Guillemard, died of disease, perhaps the

³⁵ Private correspondence with M. Alain Ducreuzet, archivist at the Mairie of Longwy, April, 2010.

³⁶ Story. *A Journal Kept in France*. p. 96

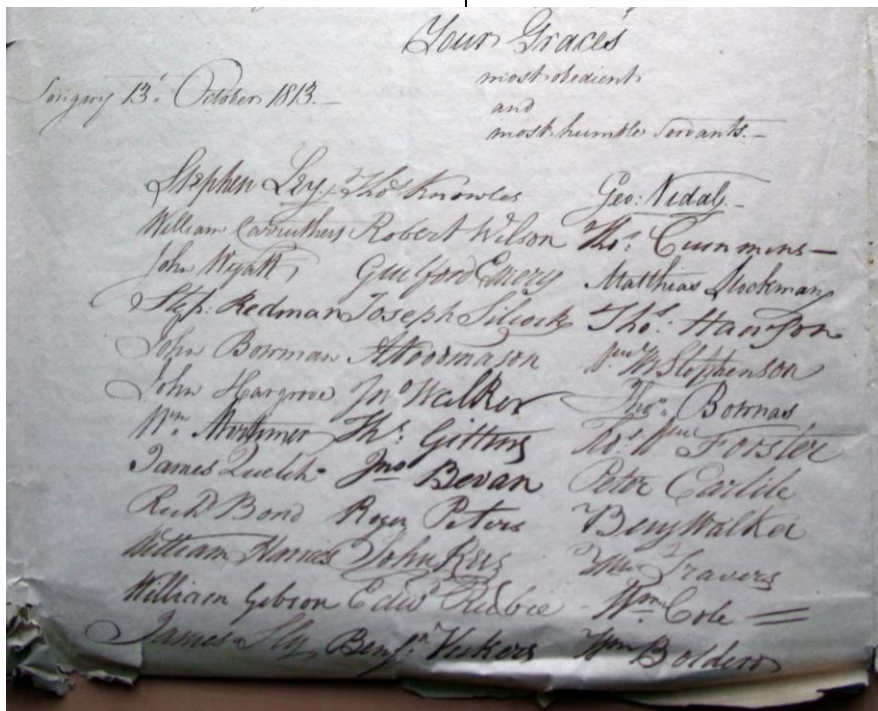
³⁷ Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths (Etat Civil) for Longwy for the year of 1814. Registration numbers 1-6 for 1 January, 1814. Website of the Departmental Archives of Meurthe-et-Moselle, <http://www.archives.cg54.fr/archives/>. 3 April, 2010.

plague again, though "violent rage" would not have helped him to recover.

Five months after Guillemard's death, William Story was released, along with all the prisoners. It is not known if Thomas Baker survived penury in Bitche, or if William Atkinson got enough clean air to survive. Surely many of the 120 signatories of the October 1813 complaint made it home to describe the sufferings of their imprisonment.

The townspeople of Longwy had more suffering in front of them. No one then could know it, of course, but after the defeat of Napoleon and

after the British prisoners would all leave, Longwy would endure yet another invasion by the Prussians. This time they would stay for three years.³⁸



³⁸ M.C. *Essai sur l'Histoire de Longwy*, p. 96.