

“THE UKRAINE MEMORIAL, MYLOR BRIDGE, CORNWALL”

The War in Ukraine, (or should it be called ‘Special Operations’), has given former ROC members much to think about. Is WW3 imminent ? Will nuclear weapons be used in Europe ? Will chemical weapons be used ? Some members say ‘bring back the ROC ?’. Then there are the daily reports of bombing, shelling and missiles. War is cruel. It always produces refugees. How many are fleeing Ukraine now ? 2.5 million ? But this is not new. Another generation, maybe your father or your grandfather, can remember when Ukrainians came to Great Britain before.

Nine miles south of Truro and one mile north of the Cornish village of Mylor Bridge is a little known memorial. Head east along a minor tree lined road as if going to the famous Pandora Inn. But go straight on at the cross roads heading for Greatwood Quay. After half a mile on the left is an imposing memorial. It is block built, painted bright white, with a stone cross on top. The monument was erected in this quiet spot in 1948 by a group of Ukrainians who had been living and working in the area in the post-war era. The cross is as much a symbol of their gratitude for their escape from persecution and the safe refuge they had found in Cornwall, as it is of their strong Christian faith. It is thought that the memorial is unique in the UK, having been put up by people involved at the time.



The Ukraine Memorial is on the north side of the road to Greatwood Quay, north of Mylor Bridge.

After the collapse of Nazi Germany, there were an estimated 11 million displaced people in Europe, they were communities that were unable or unwilling to return to their homes. After WW2, the UK found itself with a severe labour shortage, and in the latter half of the 1940s, the European Voluntary Workers scheme (EVWs) invited people from all over Europe to come to Britain to provide a much needed boost to our workforce. Some 200,000 of these EVWs were resettled in Britain and in the period 1947 to 1950, almost 21,000 Ukrainians were brought to the UK from mainland Europe. Recruitment began in the spring of 1947, and Ukrainians were among the first nationalities from which recruits were sought.

WW2 had brought about a strong independence movement in the Ukraine but in neighbouring Russia a communist regime was exerting its influence and control. As a consequence many of the Ukrainian nationalists had been rounded up, imprisoned and even executed. Thousands of Ukrainians fled their country to seek refuge in other parts of Europe including Britain. The refugees were accommodated in hundreds of hostels throughout the country. These were of various types, including former military and POW camps, wartime industrial and agricultural hostels and new hostels converted or built after the war.



The plaque on the memorial records Ukrainian escape from Russian Communism, refuge in England dated 7 June 1948.

Several hundreds of Ukrainian men, women and children thus found themselves in Cornwall after fleeing violent persecution by the communist regime, which had been installed in their home country by the Soviet Army.

The Cornish contingent of refugees were housed in a former prisoner of war camp located about 1 mile north of Mylor Bridge. Near the camp there was a WW2 Control Bunker for a Heavy Anti-aircraft Gun Battery, the remains of which can still be seen. Around 1947/48 Ukrainian families moved into the empty POW buildings and stayed there for about twelve months. The men found work on the local farms, in the mines and as gardeners, taking the place of the Cornish men that had never come home. The women looked after the children and some took in sewing work. As a devout Orthodox Christian community they built themselves a make-shift chapel on the site and local Catholic priests would visit to hold services for them. As time went on the refugee families gradually moved out of the camp, finding more permanent accommodation in the surrounding villages. Many refugees remained in the Mylor area for the rest of their lives, marrying local men and women.

In early 1948 the refugees decided to build a memorial near their hostel. They chose a pretty spot only a few metres off a small road. The memorial had three plinths with a tall cross within a cross. A slate tablet on the base plinth carried the message 'This symbol of faith in God was erected by Ukrainians, who escaping from Russian Communism, found refuge in England. 7 June 1948'. On a summer's day in 1948 three Roman Catholic priests blessed a Nissen Hut chapel and the memorial at a former prisoner of war camp near Mylor, Cornwall.

60 years after the memorial was erected, in June 2008, a service of rededication was held at the cross. Amongst the crowd that attended were many of the grandchildren of those original Ukrainian families who found safety and welcome in Cornwall more than seventy years before. Among the 150 people attending were Basil Jesynowycz, Hryhovi Kowalczyk, Mike Halyk and Ostop Hladkynsky, who ran the Mylor Refugee Camp. They spoke of the tremendous kindness of local people towards the strangers in their midst. The families had a strong Catholic faith and organised services in the chapel.



Lawrence and Chris Holmes visited the memorial in March 2022. Because of the current war in Ukraine, local people had placed a Ukrainian flag and many daffodils in bunches and in vases on the memorial. A small stone said 'Peace'.

In March 2022 Lawrence and Chris Holmes visited the memorial. It was quiet, no others were there. They found the memorial under the roadside trees surrounded by bright growing daffodils and other wild plants. Many people had laid bunches of yellow daffodils on the memorial. A Ukrainian flag of blue and yellow was laid on the bottom plinth and the slate tablet with inscription made poignant reading. A small boulder had the words 'Peace' painted thereon. It was hard to imagine this beautiful corner of Cornwall many years ago was once home to a people whose country was under attack yet again. Lawrence and Chris stood quietly amongst the yellow flowers by the memorial, they thought of 1948, and of the bombs and shells in 2022 in war torn Ukraine.

By April 2022 Cornwall was again opening its doors, homes and generosity to numerous Ukraine families seeking a home in the county. The sequence of persecution, escape, a safe refuge is being repeated !