

David Frances

The French and American cemeteries.

This is the cemetery for the French prisoners of war, in the war which restarted in 1803, which had been in abeyance for some time. The English got very much the better of this war because Napoleon had been badly knocked about on the sea, the Spanish peninsula and all over Europe, and very quickly French prisoners were arriving here in their hundreds. They were first accommodated on foul prison hulks in Plymouth Sound, there were four of them, but the Admiralty were not at all happy about having these people so close to a naval dockyard, where they could conceivably commit sabotage, so it was decided to build a prisoner of war depot in the wilds of the moor, and Sir Thomas Tyrwhitt, who was the founder of Princetown, suggested that it be built here, it's isolated, he said, it's remote and people would find it very difficult to get away. So here the French were accommodated, about 5,000 of them in five two storey buildings, in appalling conditions, the windows had no glass, the buildings were unheated, there was no lighting, no ventilation and very rudimentary sanitation, so it's quite amazing really how any of them survived at all. And when men died they were, in the first place buried where they fell, a shallow hole would be scraped in the ground, the body would go in and be covered over. In the year 1812 America had been independent of Britain for 29 years, but King George III refused to recognise this, he blockaded American sea ports and ruined their trade, and he pirated American ships on the high seas impressing Americans into the British Navy, so they declared war upon us and war was fought along the Canadian border, down the eastern seaboard as far south as New Orleans. American prisoners taken on the high seas, on the Great Lakes and even on land were shipped across the Atlantic and thrown into Dartmoor with the French. Because they were in there together people assumed that they were allied, which they were not, they were the victims of two entirely separate conflicts; again the overcrowding now reached absolutely appalling proportions, there were about 5,000 French and at least 6,000 Americans crammed into five buildings like fish in a box, and again they died like flies, from disease, privations, poor clothing and all the rest of it, again these men were buried where they fell, but both wars finished in the year 1814 and from then until 1850 Dartmoor prison lay empty.¹ But in 1850 transportation finished and all of a sudden England needed prisons all over the place to contain their criminals who couldn't be sent overseas anymore, so Dartmoor Prison was rebuilt as a convict prison. In 1856 the then Governor, whose name was Captain Stopford had decided to open the prison farm, this, he said, would give the men some gainful work to do, rather than just breaking stones, and give the Prison some degree of self sufficiency, so he squared off the fields and he brought in animals, cows, pigs, goats, sheep, what have you, and in no time at all of course, these animals were rooting around in the ground and digging up bones, thousands and thousands of human bones covered the whole of the prison grounds, it must have been a gruesome site. We don't

¹ According to Ron Joy, *Dartmoor Prison* (2002), in the period between 1814 and 1850 some parts of the prison was used to house quarry workers and farm labourers and other parts were used for workshops.

know very much about Captain Stopford but events would tend to suggest he was a decent man, and he said that this should not be, he said these men were not criminals, they were prisoners of war and it was wrong that they should be desecrated in this way, so he directed that every single grave be exhumed, he brought all the bones together in one place, and he divided them in two, he said, 'These we shall call French and these we shall call American', and he took them behind the prison wall, where we now stand and buried them in two mass graves and in the following year he raised the obelisk over each one, a decent thing to do.