

Polish Troops in Berwickshire in the 1940s and Wojtek the Bear

Two groups of Polish soldiers came to Berwickshire during and just after the Second World War, the 1st Corps under [General Maczek](#) in 1942, and the 2nd Corps under [General Anders](#) in 1946.

The [1st Corps](#) had been forced to withdraw from Poland to France in the face of overwhelming German force, when Hitler invaded Poland from the West on 1st September 1939. From France, Churchill summoned them to Britain as all Europe was being overrun by the Nazis. Britain stood alone. Over 100,000 Polish soldiers came to Britain, 60,000 of whom guarded the East coast of Scotland around St Andrews, and several thousand came to Berwickshire to prepare for D-Day. The names of 127 Polish soldiers, who died during the fighting in Europe, are commemorated on the Polish War Memorial in Duns Park.

The 2nd Corps came to Britain by a different route. Stalin, Hitler's ally, also invaded Poland, but from the East, on 17th September 1939, murdering 22,000 Polish officers, priests, academics and landowners in [Katyn forest](#), and transporting nearly two million Polish men, women and children to Siberia. However, in 1941, Hitler made Napoleon's mistake of invading Russia, which meant that Russia was now on the Allied side, and all Polish exiles had to be released. Only about 112,000 managed to gather under the eagle eye of General Anders, and made their way from Central Asia to Palestine. Women and children were then given refuge in Kenya, India and Australia, while the men and boys were transformed by General Anders from a starving, unschooled rabble into the elite 2nd Corps, which captured [Monte Cassino](#).

After the tragic Yalta Agreement, in which an aging Churchill and dying Roosevelt allowed Stalin to occupy Poland, thereby preventing Polish soldiers from returning home, where they would have been shot. However, they continued fighting for the Allied cause, and after victory in Europe, many came to Britain, some to Winfield Camp in Berwickshire, near Berwick in 1946.

Accompanying the soldiers was a large, brown bear named [Wojtek](#). He had been exchanged for food as a tiny cub in the Iran/Iraq mountains and adopted by a member of the 22nd Transport Corps. Wojtek was given a soldier's number and a ration of cigarettes, and travelled with the troops as they advanced from Alexandria to Italy, and up towards Monte Cassino. The ancient monastery of Monte Cassino, founded by St Benedict in the 6th century, was occupied by the Germans and was strategically important, as it blocked the Allies advance on Rome. The British, Americans and Canadians had tried and failed to capture it. It was then the turn for the Poles under General Anders, and, after intense fighting and immense loss of life, they were successful. During the battle, Wojtek was seen imitating his soldier friends in the Transport Corps,



Wojtek with his soldier friends

helping them to carry shells from the lorries to the gun emplacements.



current postage stamp

After Polish soldiers were demobilised in 1947, [Wojtek](#) retired to Edinburgh Zoo, where he remained until he died in 1963, aged 21. At the time of his death, he weighed nearly 35 stone (500lbs), and was over 6 feet tall. In 2013, a statue of Wojtek was erected in the Polish town of [Zagan](#), and in 2016 the town generously donated a duplicate statue to Duns, located in Golden Square near the town centre. The unveiling event is described in these two news items: [item 1](#) and [item 2](#).



Wojtek statue in Duns

There is also a bronze statue of Wojtek in the [Sikorsky Institute](#) in London ([museum website](#)), and another in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh.



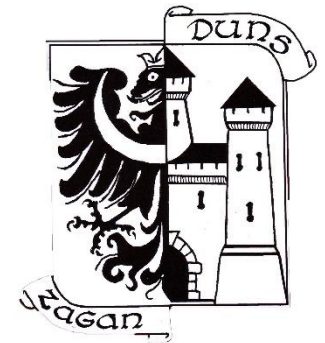
Polish War Memorial in Duns Park

In 1981, a **Polish War Memorial** was erected in Duns Public Park to commemorate the 127 men of the First and Second Armoured Regiments who died during the war. Polish ex-soldiers and the people of Duns paid for the memorial, which was unveiled by their former Commanding Officer, General Maczek. In 2018, a statue of the general was unveiled in Edinburgh in the precincts of the City Chambers, described in this [news item](#).

Some former Polish soldiers elected to become British citizens, married local girls, and made their homes in Scotland. The shared experience during and after the war has resulted in strong links between Berwickshire, Duns in particular, and Poland.

The Duns and District Twinning Association with Zagan in Poland was created in 1994 to promote and foster friendship and understanding between the people of Duns and District and those of Zagan. Duns public library will be able to direct any enquiries to the current Chair of the association.

A paperback book, published in 2006, covers this story in more detail: **“Polish Soldiers in the Borders - 1942 to the present day”** by Brigid McEwen. The book is available to purchase on [Amazon](#).





This article was kindly contributed by Lady Brigid McEwen, April 2020