

George Kenner (1888 to 1971)

Frith Hill Prisoner of War Camp 1915

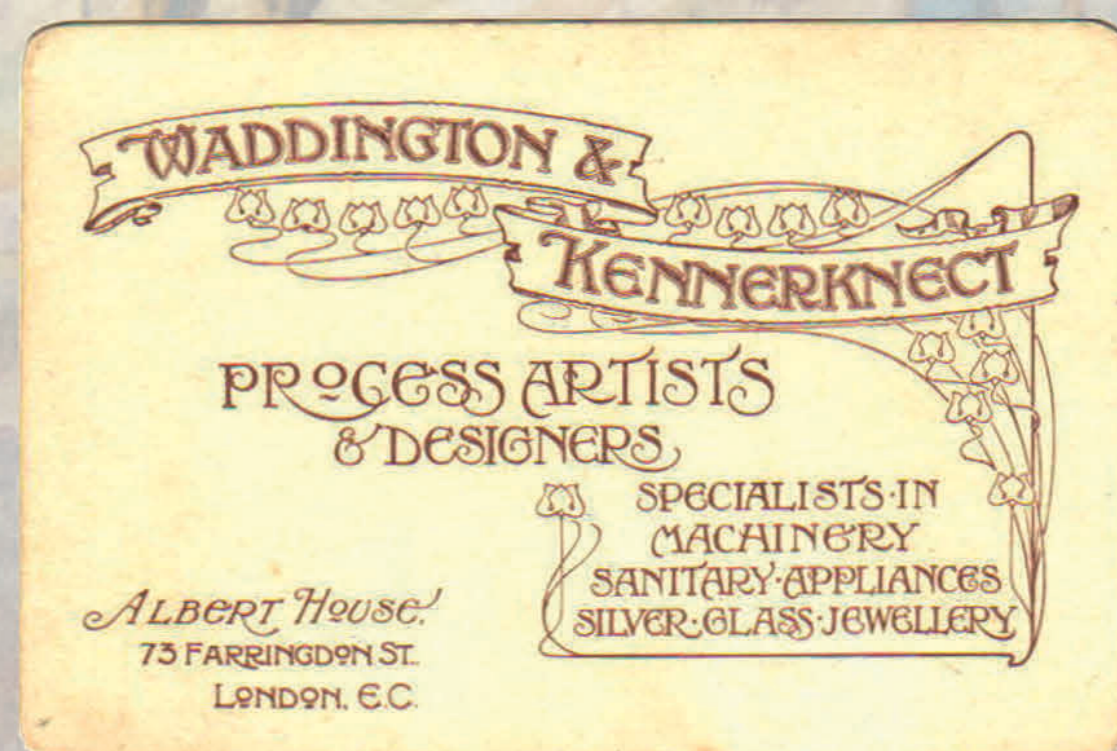
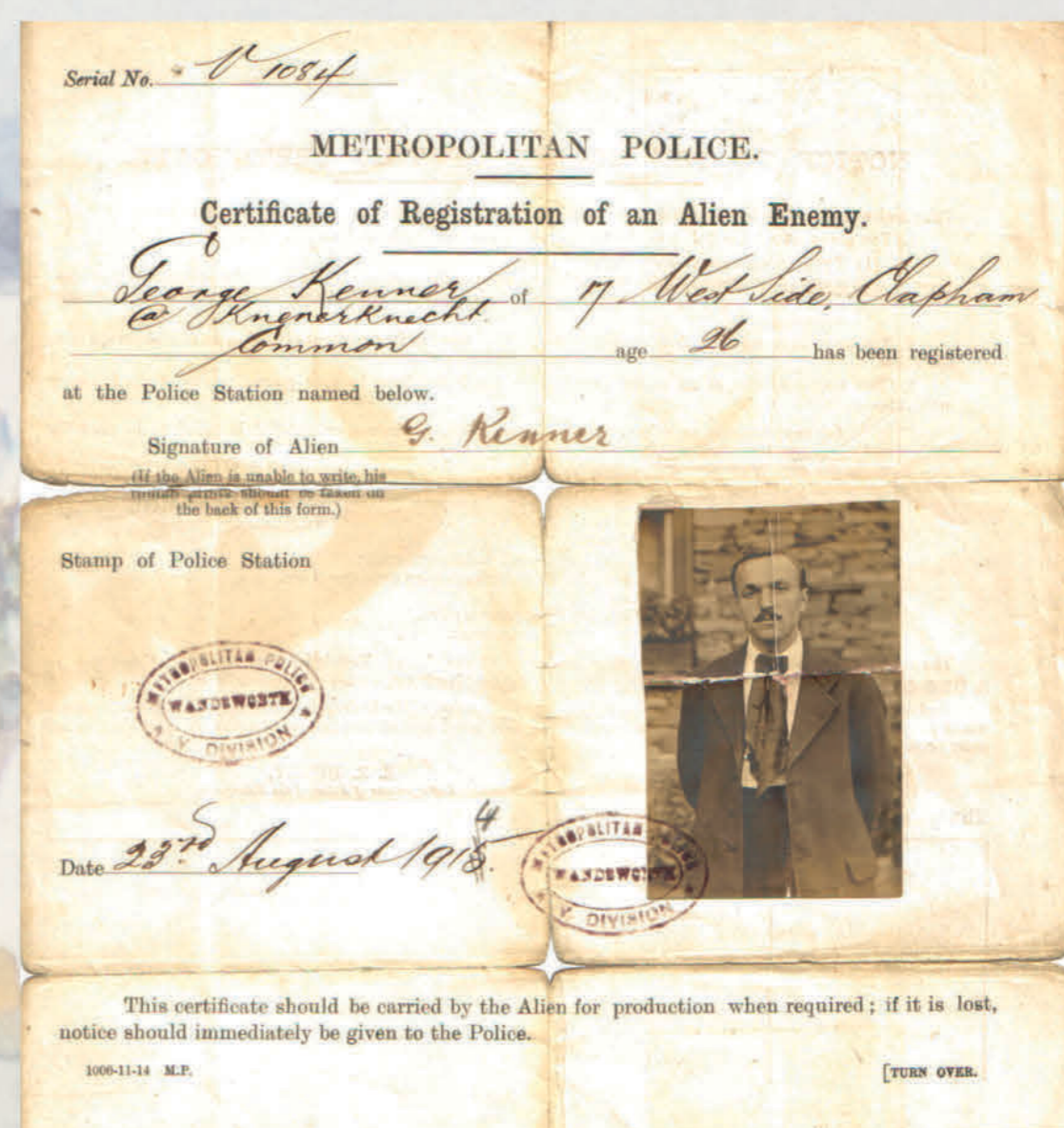
George Kenner was born on 1st Nov 1888, one of 12 children, in Bavaria, Germany. At the age of 22, his love and talent for painting led him to travel to London to study commercial art, eventually setting up a commercial art business in the City with a British colleague.

When not working he travelled around the country by bike and train. In August 1914, whilst on holiday in the Lake District, the First World War broke out. Under the newly passed Alien Restriction Act, he was instructed to register as an enemy alien. On returning to London, being a German resident in the capital felt very different – he was expected to remain quiet in public and to not travel more than 5 miles of his residence without a special permit.

On 7th May 1915, the Lusitania, an ocean liner, was attacked and sunk by a German U Boat. 1,195 passengers and crew were drowned. A resulting public outcry demanding the interment of all Germans followed and George decided to pack a few personal items and return to Germany. However, he was arrested the following morning and on 12th May boarded a train that took him to Frimley.

"Torn out of my studies, leaving the business to my partner, with about 70 countrymen on covered trucks, we were taken to Waterloo Station. About 350 men had gathered there. Patriotic songs resounded and good humour abounded in general. At last we continued on our trip, and not one of us knew where to, but after two hours ride the train stopped at Frimley, and we marched into uncertainty" (George Kenner)

Frith Hill Camp in Frimley, was one of the first camps to be made ready to take civilians arrested under the Alien Restriction Act. It opened in September 1914 and housed both civilian internees and prisoners of war. A reporter from The Times on a visit to the camp saw *'Uhlans, still in their riding breeches and spiked helmets; infantry in blue-green uniforms, and sailors in their navy tunics; intermingled with civilians. The civilians were still in the same attire they had been wearing when arrested, some were in dinner jackets'* (Nic Nicol – unpublished manuscript, 2000).



The camp housed 200 sleeping tents plus a hospital division, post office, boot maker, tailor, barber, canteen, open kitchen, meeting tent, provision tent, bathing tent and a wash house. The YMCA also erected a tent for divine service and recreation. Up to 10 men slept in the tents and on arrival, each prisoner was kitted out with a knife, fork, spoon, dish, towel, kitchen soap, 3 blankets and one straw mattress with pillowcase. Conditions were bad with overcrowding, dysentery outbreaks, flooding and unpleasant odours. By 1918 there were 5,000 men interned and still sleeping in tents (many without boards). The prisoners were put to work helping to build the extension of Bisley railway line from Pirbright camp to Blackdown and helped in the local agricultural fields. When not working, George remembers;

"From 2 to 4 we roamed through the woody surroundings where we could overlook the military manoeuvre country of Aldershot with its dug outs and trenches and shot down trees. The English troops who had finished their training often passed by our camp, loudly singing on their march to reach the front" (George Kenner).

George turned his craft to good use, painting the British Commandant's wife and daughters. This gave him unique access to the British Officers' part of the camp, outside of the main barbed wire section. He was given permission to paint views inside and outside of the camp, creating a unique and accurate account of camp life from May to September 1915. With the increase in German prisoners of war, George with other civilian internees was moved to other camps around the country – first to Alexandra Palace (29th Sept 1915) and then in June 1916, moved to Knockaloe Camp on the Isle of Man. Here he was one of 30,000 other civilian prisoners and was reunited with his brother Benno, both remaining there until the end of the war.

George returned to Bavaria, Germany as part of a prisoner exchange programme. He met, and subsequently married, Margaret Bohne (also an artist) in 1920. After 2 of his 3 children died due to malnutrition he and his wife emigrated to the USA along with their remaining 5 year old son, settling outside Northeast Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1927). His daughter Christa was born in 1937. Meanwhile George had begun a successful career as a self-employed commercial artist. He unexpectedly died in July 1971 at the age of 82. It is thanks to Christa and local historian, Nick McCormick, that 100 George Kenner paintings have been returned to England, being distributed between Surrey Heath Museum, the Imperial War Museum, the Bruce Castle and the Manx Museum on the Isle of Man - *"He was too humble to have acclaimed them (the paintings and his Journal) himself, although I'm sure he would be delighted to know that they are now getting the recognition that they deserve"* (Christa Bedford).

Images

Top: George Kenner at Frith Hill PoW Camp
 Middle: Alien Enemy Certificate
 Bottom: George Kenner's Business Card
 Left: Painting of Frith Hill Internment Camp