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Chester



Aliens in Mid Cheshire.

The Story of the Belgian Refugees during the Great War.



By Alan Lowe.

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The story of the Belgian refugees.

A fact that is not widely known is that a few hundred Belgian refugees found their way to Mid Cheshire in the first months of WWI. They were welcomed with open arms at first with the people of the area organising places for them to stay, finding or making clothes for them and putting on shows and entertainment to help pay for their welfare.

But as might be expected that welcome wore thin as the months and years went by, and after an initial rush to organise fund raisers and entertainment for the visitors they slowly disappeared from the pages of the local press only to reappear when they were involved in some minor fracas or a baptism or in two sad cases, funerals.

As many as 250,000 made it to Britain. They came to escape the German hordes who had invaded their country. Many more that had entered Holland for the same reason were denied access to Britain because the Dutch government felt that allowing them to go might affect their neutral status.

In Mid Cheshire they were housed at the Grange in Hartford, (Not the present school but a building further back.) at Wharton Lodge in Winsford (kindly donated by Miss Aspinall-Dudly.) and at Bachelor's Hall in the Avenue at Winnington, the latter thanks to the generosity of Sir John Brunner who also donated £1,000 towards their upkeep.



Sir John Brunner.

Others paid into the fund, some by way of a lump sum, but many others by weekly contributions and virtually the whole of the area became involved in their upkeep in one way or another.



Bachelor's Hall, Winnington.



Wharton Lodge.

The Hall had been built to house workers and was very comfortable accommodation as were the other two buildings. One or two lucky families were found individual properties to live in. The Van Kirckoven's were given a cottage in the grounds of his house in Leftwich by the Manager of Parr's Bank, Mr J. B. Holland. Mr Van Kirckoven (Or Van Kerckoven) was even found employment with Mr J. Southern, a house furnisher of Castle Street. An unnamed family were housed by a Mr E. Dempster in a cottage in his stable yard. Others shared the homes of local people.



Parr's Bank, Northwich.

For the remaining months of 1914 Whist Drives, Organ recitals, "Smokers", concerts and even a "Chrysanthemum Day" were organised on a regular basis to help pay for their upkeep. Mrs. Roylance-Court even gave the proceeds of her little shop to the relief fund. The Belgians were entertained with concerts in many of the local halls and the men were invited to male social clubs for the

evening to play Darts and Snooker etc. They even received invitations to local football games at the Central Ground to watch Witton Albion. At half time collections were made too.

The Belgians in some cases took part in the entertainment; notable amongst these were Monsieur Rene and Madam Alice Van Grunderbuck who were professional artists who had lived in Namur before the war and Madams G. Janssens, L. Vandvstadt, H. Hevvaert, Pierfort, Alice Tyekaert and Monsieur Alfred Duez. Sometimes the Belgian children were entertainers too.

Local people offered assistance on an individual basis. Mr. Peter Eaton of Clifford House on Navigation Road offered to fit up any building no larger than two cottages with gas free of all labour charges for the refugees. Wee Charlie Ashe, a local entertainer offered his services free of charge and Mr. Jack Kenyon organised concerts for the relief fund. One such concert had the Northwich Philharmonic Society under Mr. J. Patterson Shaw as its star attraction. Others offered to adopt Belgian orphans but their offer was declined by the Belgium authorities on the grounds that it would be impossible to say if a child was truly an orphan. Committees throughout the area organised fund raising and acquired clothing etc for the refugees who in turn told of the brutality they had faced from the Germans which of course aroused even more sympathy for their plight. Local councils waved fees for rates, water, gas and coke whilst Brunner Mond donated a house in Anderton to house 5 or 6 refugees.

But by December 1914 there was already discord showing from local people and the Winsford council had to assure people that the refugees at the Lodge were being financed by private donations and not from the rates. At the same time however collections were still being made to give the refugees, particularly the children an enjoyable Christmas and many refugees were invited by local people to their homes for tea. Monsieur and Madam Peeters and their son and daughter, originally from Antwerp, being particularly fortunate as they were invited to be the guests of Mr. J. F. L. Brunner and his wife at their cottage at Sandiway.

The local press reported that the refugees at the Grange had a goose followed by plum pudding on Christmas Day and that an unnamed family of refugees comprising a mother and four children had been joined by the lady's elderly mother at their "comfortable new home" in Barnton. Amongst the people enjoying that Christmas Dinner were Monsieur Joseph J. H. Leyemberg and his

wife Madeline Josephine, Monsieur Jules Goethalls and his wife, Withmine and their two daughters Rachel aged 22 and Lizzie 15. They too were originally from Antwerp. In fact on a visit to the area Count Goblet D'Alviella vice president of the Belgian senate and Labour leader said he was very pleased that many Belgian men had found employment and he expressed satisfaction in the accommodation provided for his fellow countrymen and women.

Some Belgians did get into trouble over the coming months and years. A licensee in Hartford was accused of giving free drinks to six Belgian women who proceeded; it was claimed, to make a nuisance of themselves.

Alfred Duez aged 22 of Brook Street in Lostock Gralam was charged with unlawfully wounding Fernand Francis Joseph Tierache by stabbing him. Tierache had arrived by train in Northwich with a Monsieur Dumont but had parted from him and gone on a drinking spree with Duez. They argued about who should have picked up an umbrella at the Green Dragon when it began to rain and that was when the alleged stabbing took place in Elm Street. Duez claimed that Tierache had actually stabbed himself accidentally on some railings. His story was not believed by the court but as the wound was not serious the charge was reduced to common assault and he was sentenced to one month's hard labour at Knutsford gaol. Monsieur Frank de Mann acted as his interpreter at the trial.

Later that same year John Baptiste who worked for the Ammonia Soda Company at Plumbley ("Plumley" today.) was found guilty of being drunk in Witton Street. He claimed British beer was much stronger than Belgian beer! He was fined 5/-.

In another case in 1915 two Belgians faced the bench in Northwich. Antoine De Yongh was found guilty of stealing three and three quarter pounds of bacon from Nora Walsh who owned a shop in Renshaw Street and his wife was found guilty of receiving the bacon. Mr. George Pieters acted as their interpreter and they were both fined 5/- and the cost of the bacon.

Meanwhile a little later in the year August Bienfaisant of 14, Station Road Northwich was fined 5/- and costs for assaulting a Mr. Jones at the Ammonia and Soda Works at Plumbley. Mr. Van Roy of Villa Belge in Knutsford acted as his interpreter.

Another case concerned Henri de Mesmacker of Lostock Gralam who was discharged with a caution for being drunk and incapable. Another refugee,

Monsieur De Vree Guilkelimar an employee at the Plumbley Works was found guilty of being drunk in the Lion and Railway Hotel having already been ejected from the Bowling Green Hotel. He was fined 5/-.

Over four months from February 1917 to October 1917 four Belgians faced the courts. Jeon Laberson a salt drawer at a local works was summoned for refusing to obey orders and also with absenting himself from work. He needed an interpreter but on being fined 10/- he said in fairly good English, "I will pay nothing. I only went three minutes early. They let the Englishmen go, but the charge hand does not like me."

Joseph Leyemberg was fined 5/- for smoking in a prohibited area at Lostock Works whilst an unnamed Belgian man charged with not registering showed a sense of humour when asked if he would have the case dealt with in that court. He answered, "I prefer to have it settled to the best of my advantage"!

Finally a more serious charge was made against Helen Amelia Fourdin who was working on munitions. Formerly employed as a domestic by Colonel and Mrs. Mothersill it was claimed she had stolen a lady's mackintosh and other items belonging to Mrs. Mothersill. Originally from Liege her defence counsel told the court that she had trained as a Red Cross Nurse but that her father had refused consent for her to go to France. Her sister had died of ill-treatment at the hands of the Germans and she had been ill-treated too. He also said that her mother had died of insanity before the war. Taking all this into account the court bound her over for six months.

It should be made clear that these cases took place over a three year period and in the main the refugees caused very little trouble whilst they were here.

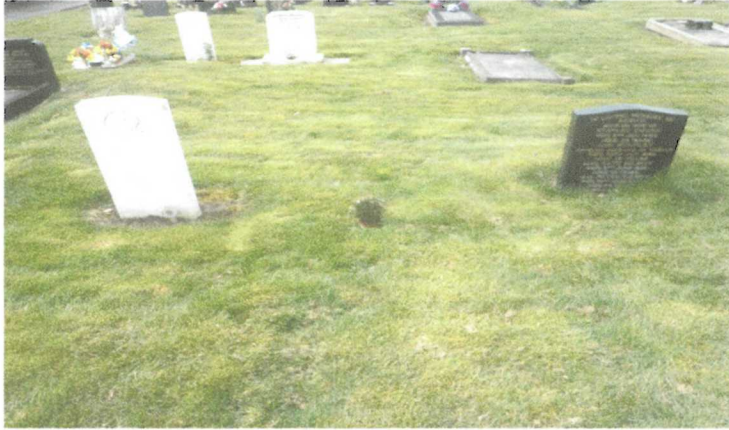
There were three recorded baptisms at the St. Wilfred's Catholic Church in Northwich. Born on the 5th May 1915 and baptised on the 8th was Mary Alice Declerq daughter of John and Mary Declerq (nee Packman.) The Godmother was Marcella Declerq and the service, as were all the baptisms was conducted by local priest Father Cregan.

The second child was baptised on the 20th November 1915 having been born on the 7th. This child was Charles Joseph Gerard Van Hove son of Charles Augustus Van Hove and his wife Henrica Van Hove. (Nee Verhosaris.) The Godfather was Tossanus M. J. Van Hove.

The third and final child baptised was Augustinus Verburgh who was born on the 5th November 1915 and baptised on the 28th November. He was the son of Paul and Emilinar Verburgh (Nee Dubuy.) The Godfather was Vincentius Dubuy and the Godmother Speransa Dubuy. (It should be said that "Tossanus," "Augustinus," "Emilinar," "Vincentius" and "Speransa" were the Latin version of Belgian names.

There were only two recorded deaths amongst the refugees during their stay in Mid Cheshire, both of young boys. On February 14th 1915 Frans Buyskens aged ten the son of Monsieur and Madam Buyskens died of peritonitis. The funeral, grave and oak coffin were paid for by Sir John Brunner and amongst the mourners were his parents and siblings, Madams Neilsen, Gaunsens, Verboerens, Forgan, Jarmay and Schadd. Also present were some Belgians employed by Brunner Mond and Company. The local Catholic priest Father Gregan officiated. He was buried on the 15th February 1915.

On the evening of 8th of June/morning of the 9th, another ten year old boy died. His name was Henri Joseph Borghys and he was born in Ostend in July 1904. He had been undergoing an operation at the Victoria Infirmary when he died. Again Sir John Brunner paid for the funeral which took place on the 10th June. He was buried in the same grave as the other Belgian boy. Those present were his father, Monsieur Borghys and his sister and brother, who resided with the deceased at Bachelor's Hall, Monsieur and Madam Deschepper, his Uncle and Aunt who resided at Tarporely, Madam, de Peuter and Miss de Peuter, Miss Emma Bignon and Miss Charlotte Bignon, Madam Graff, wife of Colonel Graff who was in the Belgian army, Madam Ollard, Madam Graff's mother, Madam Schadd, Monsieur Neilson Verhoeven and Monsieur and Madam Van Hore. Also present were Father Gregan and Dr. Russell Forgan who represented Brunner Mond and Co. in the absence of Mr. R. B. Lucas, Mr John Davies, who was in charge of Belgian children and scholars from Winnington Park School. (The children carried floral tributes and wreaths in accordance with Belgian custom.) Mr and Mrs Platt, caretakers of Bachelor's Hall, Madame Hynan, Mrs Hughes, Mrs Stelfox, Madam Jarmay and Monsieur and Madam Verhoeven. This time a Belgian priest, Reverend Father Y. Loos officiated. (Father Y. Loos would win the Croix de Guerre later in the war.)



The unmarked grave of Frans and Henri.

Though money was still being donated, Cheshire had donated over £10,000 to the Belgians still living in Belgium and more to those over here, it was clear by 1916 that most people were losing interest in them. As an example reporting on an accident involving a local and a Belgium, both badly hurt, the paper names Mr Eyes but not the Belgian. In fact after Christmas 1917 the Belgians totally disappear from the pages of the local press apart from reports that in one area of Belgium of 10,000 houses less than half were still standing after the war and that in August 1919 they were still burying the dead.

The Belgian government were eager for the refugees to return as soon as the fighting stopped and the British government even more eager; so much so that it offered free passage to the refugees but only if they went straight away. By 1920 90% had returned home though there was no mention in the local press of their going, presumably they returned in small groups rather than en masse.

It is I suppose only to be expected that the initial compassion shown to the Belgians dissipated as time went by but it is a sad fact that it is now an almost totally forgotten piece of local history. The boys buried in our cemetery have been forgotten and unmarked for over 100 years but thanks to the many people mentioned below that is no longer the case and the boys now have a beautiful headstone to mark their place.

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