

Belgian Refugees; Worthing's "Guests"

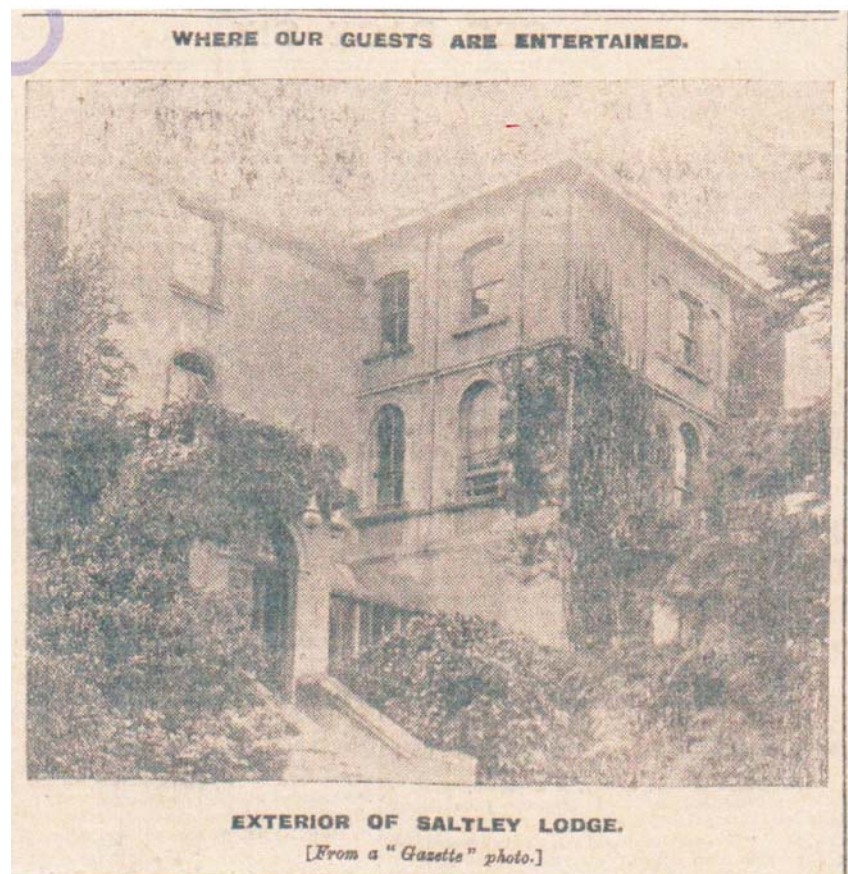


Image from Worthing Gazette 28 October 1914 p6 cols de

by Angela Levy

Belgian Refugees; Worthing's "Guests"

Germany had been hatching plans to invade France for a long time before the First World War.

There was the Schlieffen Plan when Count Alfred von Schlieffen was German Chief of Staff in 1891 and when Helmuth von Moltke succeeded him in 1906 he pursued the same objective.

The small, neutral country of Belgium, sandwiched between France and Germany, stood in the way.

Because of Belgium's position at the centre of the continent, when her neighbours quarrelled, as they frequently had over the centuries, she inevitably suffered and was known as "the battleground of Europe".¹

In 1914, Belgium had a population of about 7.5 million people and was affluent. Her economy was based on trade and industry for she had good iron and coal resources and an efficient railway system.

Germany demanded free passage through Belgium across the plains of Flanders in order to attack France swiftly before her ally, Russia, had time to mobilise.

Belgium refused permission. The Belgian Government was "firmly resolved to repel, by all the means in their power, every attack upon their rights".²

The Belgian King, Albert I, famously said, "Belgium is a nation, not a road!"³

Nevertheless, on 2 August 1914 the German Army marched into Luxembourg and crossed into Belgium on the morning of 4 August.

Belgium had no war plan but, despite being a neutral country, she had a small army of 17,000 field strength and another 67,000 troops to defend the strategic ports of Liege, Namur and Antwerp.

She had gained her independence from the Netherlands in 1839. Britain had guaranteed that independence by the Treaty of London in the same year which she now honoured by dispatching the British Expeditionary Force to support the Belgian Army on 14 August 1914.

The Belgian Army put up a much stronger fight than the Germans expected and the arrival of the BEF further slowed the German advance.

A Russian offensive managed to prevent the Germans reaching Paris.

However, most of Belgium was occupied except for the south western region along the Yser River. King Albert remained here with his army.

His wife, Elizabeth, opened a hospital and served as a nurse.

The Germans confiscated houses and other property, killing civilians who resisted them and seizing food supplies.

Large numbers of Belgian citizens fled. Some went north to the Netherlands while others went south to France. Some remained in the Netherlands throughout the War, where the Dutch set up camps for the destitute.

More than 250,000 fled to the United Kingdom.



Crowd outside Worthing Gazette Offices
 (from Worthing Gazette 12 August 1914 p6 cols bc)

The Worthing Gazette, whose offices then were at 21, Chatsworth Road, noted in the issue of 12 August 1914 (page 6 column a) that there was a "constant stream of people along Chatsworth-road throughout the afternoon and evening, whilst at night an immense crowd assembled outside our Offices"⁴ to read about the progress of events.

At this time all the forts between Belfort and Liege were intact and only small groups of Germans

had entered Liege.

This news resulted in "the singing of the National Anthem and hearty cheers for the Belgians and the French".⁵

A paragraph appeared in the WG issue of 26 August (6e) headed "Lest We Forget!"⁶ with the news that an appeal had reached the paper for monetary aid for the "brave Belgians". "The Storm of War" (it said) "has once more broken over our brave little Belgium. Her fair fields are trodden down by the tramp of armies: her prosperous industries are at a standstill: her sons are perishing by the hundred on the battlefield."

A relief fund had been recently set up by the Mayor of Worthing, Alderman James White JP, for the support of wives and children of the men of the town who had joined up and the Gazette pointed out in the same article that "Sore as our own need may be, theirs is more than ours".

It concluded with "All contributions should be sent to the Belgian Legation at 15, West Halkin-street, London, SW."

A letter appeared in the same issue from Mrs Ellen Chapman JP, who became the first woman Mayor of Worthing in 1920, in which she objected to the suggested diversion of funds from their original purpose to the relief of the Belgian Refugees as "a breach of faith and therefore impossible".⁷

"An Appeal for the Belgian Refugees" appeared in the WG on 9 September 1914 (6f) from Miss J. Boot, sister of Jesse Boot (Boots the Chemist), who was living at Roseville, Liverpool Terrace, Worthing.

She appealed for clothing for men, women and children. She wrote, "I am confident there are thousands in Worthing whose hearts have been moved with the deepest sympathy on account of the homeless strangers in our midst."⁸

Refugees were already in the United Kingdom, but not necessarily in Worthing at this point.

A week later, Miss Boot wrote again to the Editor of the Gazette thanking all those who had responded but added "We still require more, for the need is great and urgent."⁹ (WG 16 September 6g)

In the 21 October 1914 issue (WG 6c) it was revealed that Mr John Kennedy Allerton, (Worthing Town Clerk 1913-1941) had received a

telegram from London "pointing out that refugees were arriving.....and hospitality was asked for".¹⁰

A Miss Barnett had the names of about a dozen ladies who were willing to receive them. Also, a gentleman had called the WG Office offering to shelter a family not exceeding three in number but regretting he could not afford to feed them as well.

Alderman White declared "there was not a member of the Committee who would not agree that the obligation we were under to the Belgians could not be measured, and we could not do too much for them."

He also thought that "if we at Worthing could see our way to provide accommodation for fifty, let us do it." It did not necessarily follow that the whole would be a cost to the Fund, because he apprehended that among those who came over were people of substance, who would ultimately be able to fend for themselves.

It was agreed that a telegram should be sent to the Local Government Board stating that Worthing would take fifty refugees.

Councillor Whyte had heard that Chichester had provided a house and furnished it simply for their refugees and he thought Worthing, being a larger town, ought to "be able to do something."

The lodging-house keepers, might house a great many.

It was estimated that it would cost about 15 shillings a week for an adult and 6 shillings for a child amounting to about £25 a week for fifty refugees.

Applause greeted the suggestion from Alderman Denton that a separate fund be started and he was willing to subscribe £1 a week for 10 weeks. The WG 21 October 1914 (6d) reported that the Town Clerk had had an interview in London with "someone connected with the Refugees' Committee."¹¹

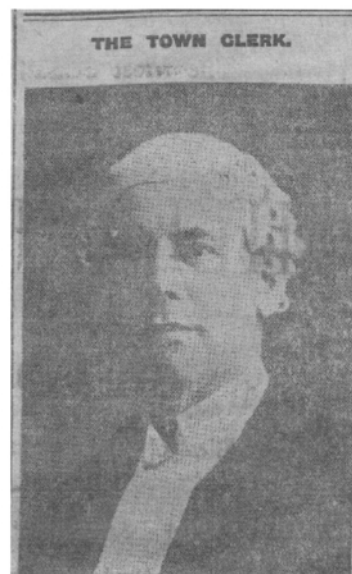
From then on events moved quickly and a telegram was received at 1.30 pm on Saturday 17 October saying that fifty refugees could be expected at Worthing by a train due to arrive 3.20 that same afternoon!

To house Worthing's "guests" as they were called, Saltley Lodge, in Broadwater Road, had been freely put at their disposal for six months by

Mr J.H.Hagger.

Rapid preparations had to be made for their arrival for, as the WG article put it, "at midday there was not a stick of furniture in Saltley Lodge but it was made tolerably comfortable by the time night came round."

Six charwomen had given their services freely, a hospital nurse was on hand in case she was needed, several tradespeople



Mr. J. Kennedy Allerton
 (Worthing Gazette
 13 January 1914 p3 col 2)



Saltley Lodge, Broadwater Road, Worthing
 (photograph by the author)

had given generous help and many residents provided food.

The refugees were met at the railway station by members of the Sub Committee which comprised Miss Edith Barnett, Councillor Whyte, Mr Dixon, Alderman White, Councillor Ellen Chapman, Miss Wilgress and Mr F. Martin.

Only about sixteen or eighteen actually slept at Saltley Lodge, the rest were taken in by private residents.

The refugees were mainly Antwerp shopkeepers and their families driven from their homes with not more than thirty or forty francs and the clothes they were wearing. Their property had been taken and their homes destroyed.

The Belgian families were adamant that they would not be separated from one another and would not allow a child to be billeted away from the family.

The Refugee Fund currently stood at £200. The Mayor appealed for subscriptions to be paid to the Municipal Offices with cheques and postal orders made payable to the Worthing Belgian Refugee Fund. He also said that, when notified, he would arrange for the collection of donated furniture and clothing and he stressed that offers of coal and provisions would be "highly appreciated."

According to the WG of 4 November (5d) Mr W.J. Endersley was the person most active in collecting donated furniture. Messrs Osborne & Co., Messrs Jordan & Co., Messrs Peters & Co. and Mr Francis Tate had put their horse-drawn and motor vans at Mr Endersley's disposal. Many owners of private cars, also had offered their services.

The story of a Belgian refugee who came to the area from Holland, related in the WG of 28 October (7ab) gives some idea of their general suffering. Mr G.W. Witman arrived in the middle of October 1914. He had been in the service of Lady Maud Barrett at Rustington but had returned to Belgium in June 1912 and opened a restaurant in Verviers on the outskirts of Liege.

When the Germans reached Liege and met resistance they began destroying properties. Mr Witman's wife was visiting friends in a nearby village. He went to find her and saw that conditions were even worse there, the place being completely sacked and burned. Moreover, the Germans had shot more than a hundred men in front of the women. Mr Witman found his wife but on their way home he was taken prisoner. Four days later he got away and after many hardships was reunited with his wife at Verviers, which was now in German hands.

They waited for an opportunity to escape to Holland. A friend obtained passports to Maestricht and at 3am they set out in a cart. After several hours they were stopped by two Germans in a car who demanded to see their passports. The officers took them, tore them up and dropped them in the mud.

Unable to travel further the Witmans returned to Verviers. Undeterred, Mr Witman found another friend to provide a passport for himself allegedly allowing him to travel to Aubel, a town 9 miles from the Dutch border, on the pretext of buying potatoes, which meant he could take a cart.

He hid his wife under sacks and they made their way through some woods to Maestricht. They travelled by boat to London and from there to Littlehampton to the home of Mr Frank Flavia in New Road.

In the WG of 28 October 1914, one of their reporters described a visit he made to Saltley Lodge. Initially, he found it difficult to gain entry. A notice on the door announced that "The house is not ready for visitors of any description. Will people bringing gifts kindly place them on the garden mats, when they can be dealt with by the Committee in charge."

A true reporter, he wrote "something more formidable than such a prohibition as this is needed to repel a newspaper investigator" ¹² and with perserverance he found Miss Bowen, one of the ladies in charge, who made him welcome.

She told him that fifty-six Belgians were being cared for in Worthing, including two Flemish nuns.

Mrs Ellen Chapman, who spoke fluent French, also showed him round. There were seven bedrooms at Saltley Lodge. One was occupied by a family of four with seven or eight in another and a married couple with three small children in another. None of the "guests" could speak English and some spoke only Flemish.

There were a dozen or so children, the youngest being about 20 months old. Most of the refugees were tradespeople with the exception of one leading Antwerp lawyer.

They received three meals a day - breakfast, dinner and supper. Mr F.W Mitchell had provided several free meals and Mr F. Stubbs promised to supply fish for fifty every Friday.

Those involved in the practical day-to-day care at Saltley Lodge, provisionally for the next six months, included Mr J.H.Hagger, the owner of the house, Councillor Ellen Chapman, Mrs Chard, Miss Napper, Mrs Hinxman, Mrs Thurger, Mrs Rowse, Mrs Ewen Smith, Mrs Randall and Miss Bowen.



Mrs Ellen Chapman
 (A Millenium Encyclopaedia of Worthing
 History by d. Robert Elleray ALA FLS)



Miss Marion Frost
 (www.westsussexpast.org.uk)
 PP/WSL/P002825

Three of the ladies looked after the housekeeping, three had the care of the furniture and three were responsible for the clothing.

Although the occupation of the majority of the refugees was humble it did not mean that they were dull or uneducated.

They spent a great deal of time in Worthing Library, which prompted the Librarian, Miss Marion Frost, to put a printed notice outside, in French, to say that they could use both library and museum free of charge. The Belgian newspaper, L'Independence Belge, printed in London, was provided and closely read.

There were a number of gifted musicians among the refugees. It seems they had not

expected Britons to be a musical nation. After they attended one of Mr Winwood Mansfield's Chamber Concerts at St.James' Hall, Montague

Street, in October they were so delighted with the performance that they said as much to him, which resulted in several being engaged to perform in future concerts.

There began a full programme of fund-raising events.

The Worthing Brotherhood held regular Sunday meetings at St. James' Hall. On 8 November 1914 at 3pm there was "Patriotic Open Meeting" in aid of the Belgian Refugee Fund. The speaker was Mr G.T. Apps of Chichester. The French and Belgian National Anthems were sung by Madame Kensters and Mademoiselle Yvonne Ployarte, respectively. These two ladies appeared, for a time, in Mansfield concerts. Mr George T Paine of Northcourt Road would receive any donations.

Mrs Guy Mitchell arranged two concerts for 28 November, one at 3pm and another at 8pm at the Literary Institute. This was not for the refugees but for money to be shared between the Women's Work Bureau and Soldiers' Recreation Rooms. However, several Belgian artistes had been specially engaged to perform at the concerts.

Unfortunately, some people took advantage of the overall impulse to give money when appealed to. A letter appeared in the WG (19 Nov 5f) from a correspondent, (unnamed) who told how, seated in a public building, he/she had been approached by a woman carrying a tray which contained small items such as flags for wearing on a coat or dress, and a collecting box. She appealed for support for the Belgian Relief Fund. Asked for her



Collecting for Belgian Relief in Worthing
www.westsussexpast.org.uk
 PP/WSL/PC008750

authority, she produced the business card of a Canadian Shipping Company in London. When the prospective donor pointed out that it had no bearing on the matter, the lady quickly departed. The letter writer sought out the manager of the public building who said that the woman had shown him a letter entitling her to receive four shillings in the pound for whatever she sold.

The Gazette editor in his reply denied knowledge of the case but said it was "obviously desirable" to be sure that money collected was properly used and it was not necessary to pay a 20% commission on money collected for essential purposes.¹³

In another incident, an alms

box specifically for the Belgian Refugee Fund at a Roman Catholic Church had been broken open and the contents stolen. As the box had not been emptied for over two weeks it was thought that a considerable sum had been taken. (WG 9 December 1914 5d)

Meanwhile, fund raising went on. A Chrysanthemum Day was organised by Mrs F Roberts, Mrs F.C Neale and Miss E.M. Putt. The Mayor appealed to growers to contribute flowers, not just chrysanthemums, which several

Worthing ladies volunteered to sell in the streets, at the Town Hall and at other venues. (WG 4 November 1914 4f)

In December 1914, the WG reported that Mr and Mrs R. Gaston Wittman had organised a thank-you entertainment at the Lamb, Rustington, in return for the welcome they had received. Mr Wittman was moving to Barrow-in-Furness where he had found employment.

At the end of December 1914, Mr Arthur B Malden gave a talk at St. James' Hall entitled "Brave Little Belgium, Before and During the War". The WG reported that the subject was "dealt with in a most instructive and acceptable manner."¹⁴ (WG 23 December 6f)

From the very start of 1915 it was obvious that enthusiasm in Worthing for the plight of the Belgian Refugees was dwindling.

During the period I am writing about (August 1914 to April 1915) I found no reports of lawlessness among them or any abuse of the hospitality extended to them and the townspeople were as generous as ever.

It was just that there were too many deserving causes appealing for the money available. There was only so much sympathy and money to go round.

In the WG issue of 20 January (3a) a message appeared from the Town Clerk stating that the "Belgian Refugees Committee will not be responsible for any Debts contracted by Belgian Refugees, unless incurred pursuant to a written order signed by the authority of the Committee."¹⁵

Naturally enough, the Gazette's own Tobacco Fund was the one that, week after week, received the most intense coverage though they now sent their gifts to Belgian as well as British soldiers.

There were still some fund-raising events. A Progressive Whist Drive, arranged by the Mayoress, Mrs J. White, was to be held at the Heene Church Room on 6 April. The tickets cost 3s 6d each, announced in WG 17 February 6e.

Popular Whist and Bridge Drive was held at Mitchell's Restaurant where 22 players sat down to 18 tables and raised £8 for the refugees.

The War Relief Committee met in the Town Hall in March and the Town Clerk, Mr J. Kennedy Allerton, revealed that "certain persons who have made promises of subscriptions to the Fund in public have not redeemed those promises."¹⁶ He regretted that several letters sent to these people had had no effect. (WG 17 March 1915 6cd)

The Fund, which included help for the refugees, currently stood at £1,659 13s 5d with £37 7s outstanding but reliably expected to be paid.



Barnwell Brothers Nursery, Worthing
www.westsussexpast.org.uk
 PP/WSL/P003386

Administration of the Fund was 35s a week and £10 was paid out each week.

News was given about the refugees. One former shopkeeper, who once had a large business in Belgium, was now employed by Messrs Barnwell and his job was potting plants.

Three other men wanted to be employed but understood too little English. There had been efforts to encourage them to

join the Army, without success.

All those who had found employment were contributing to their maintenance and therefore less of a drain on the Fund.

The Mayor said, "It is to their credit that they contribute towards their keep."

Another man was learning "motor driving" and not yet earning much so the Committee agreed to let him have "a few shillings for his pocket" during his training.

It is obvious that the Belgians were not scroungers or cadgers but proud and responsible people who were grateful for Worthing's help but would rather be independent and return home as soon as possible.

A letter, in French, from a Belgian woman was forwarded to the Gazette by Mr A.H. Tucker, Secretary to Worthing Hospital, and published on 7 April 1915 (WG 3c).

Madame (no surname given) wrote that she was deeply appreciative of the treatment her daughter received at the hospital. She had had an operation and was now fully recovered. The mother very much regretted that circumstances prevented her being more generous – she had enclosed a donation which appeared in the hospital's monthly report as

"Thank-offering £4."¹⁷

Information Sources

Articles quoted throughout from the Worthing Gazette between 12 August 1914 and 7 April 1915

¹ History of Belgium www.en.wikipedia.org viewed 1 December 2013

² World War 1: Belgium www.histclo.com/essay viewed 26 November 2013

³ World War 1: Belgium www.histclo.com/essay viewed 26 November 2013

⁴ Worthing Gazette 12 August 1914 p6 col a

⁵ Worthing Gazette 12 August 1914

⁶ Worthing Gazette 26 August 1914 p6 col e

⁷ Worthing Gazette 26 August 1914 p6 col e

⁸ Worthing Gazette 9 September 1914 p6 col f

⁹ Worthing Gazette 16 September 1914 p6 col g

¹⁰ Worthing Gazette 21 October 1914 p6 col c

¹¹ Worthing Gazette 21 October 1914 p6 col d

¹² Worthing Gazette 28 October 1914

¹³ Worthing Gazette 19 November 1914 p5 col f

¹⁴ Worthing Gazette 23 December 1914 p6 col f

¹⁵ Worthing Gazette 20 January 1915 p3 col a

¹⁶ Worthing Gazette 17 March 1915 p6 cols cd

¹⁷ Worthing Gazette 7 April 1915 p3 col c