

The experiences and treatment of aliens in the Mid-Sussex area in the Great War

By

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Summary

This case study covers the regulations that were put into force in the Great War relating to aliens and how these were applied in the Mid-Sussex area, along with some instances of the reception they received. I have taken as the Mid-Sussex area the towns and villages covered by the local newspaper *The Mid-Sussex Times*, (see Appendix for a list of places). All the source material relating to cases and experiences has also been taken from this paper.

Introduction

I decided to concentrate on the treatment of aliens in the Mid-Sussex area because this is where my ancestors and I came from and grew up. The subject matter was of interest because for people of my grandparents generation and before, having “foreigners” living in the area was not very prevalent and consequently of increased interest to them.

Mid-Sussex at this time was a predominantly rural area with the two towns, Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill, and a number of villages of varying sizes with Hurstpierpoint and Lindfield having populations of around 3,000 to Twineham, 276 (1911 Census). Burgess Hill (pop. 5,124) and Haywards Heath (pop.4,851) benefited from the London to Brighton railway line running through them and both had a range of commercial ventures and public utilities with some larger businesses being started in Haywards Heath. Land for housing in Haywards Heath had increased in the early part of the century with the Haywards Heath Building Society providing mortgages for householders. Burgess Hill had a pottery and brickmaking industry due to the prevalence of clay soil.

General situation in the country

David Evans in his book *Teach yourself the First World War*, says:
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'The declaration of war in August 1914 led to a wave of anti-German feeling that sometimes turned to mindless hysteria. People with German-sounding names had their windows smashed and their businesses ransacked, lecturers of German or Austrian origin were abused by their students even if they had long been naturalised British citizens. Many, even if they were old and infirm, were interned and some were even driven to suicide. The writer, DH Lawrence, was insulted because his wife was a member of the Richthofen family; Prince Louis of Battenberg, forced to resign from the Royal Navy because of his German connections, changed his family name to Mountbatten. The Royal Automobile Club (RAC) banned members of German or Austrian origin and it was even considered unpatriotic to own a dachshund dog.'

The country was also affected by spy mania and rumours abounded of German spies with every local newspaper carrying details of local spies and their impending arrests.

The situation in the Mid-Sussex area

Spy mania was indeed apparent in Mid-Sussex with the local newspaper of the area, *Mid-Sussex Times*, reporting as early as its 11 August issue² that within the preceding week the people of Haywards Heath had been 'worked up to a high fever pitch of excitement' by 'fairy tales' about spies. A man had been captured near the Balcombe railway tunnel and brought by the military to Haywards Heath Police Station. He was moved to Lewes, then the 'county' town for the area, where he was interrogated and found to be a Frenchman. He had a tourist map and a 'cycle' and the authorities being convinced he had 'no evil intentions' released him.

However, this situation did not last long with the paper's 'War Bullets!' column in the 18 August issue³ reporting 'that the spy mania fever is dying down'.

In the same issue, the paper, under a headline 'Alien enemies and prohibited areas' published the contents of a proclamation that had been issued which said:⁴

An alien enemy shall not reside or continue to reside either temporarily or permanently in any of the areas specified in the schedule of the Order unless provided with a permit issued by the registration officer of the district subject to the general or specific instructions of a Secretary of State.

It listed the places that were designated as 'prohibited areas' but initially these did not include any towns or villages in the Mid-Sussex area, the nearest places being those covered by Chailey Rural District Council. The penalty for contravening the order was £100 (equivalent today of nearly £10,000) or six months imprisonment.

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It also quoted⁶ the Home Secretary advising of the situation regarding "spies":

Those aliens who were known to be spies were arrested early last week; and though there is at the present moment a clear necessity for taking precautionary measures, the public may rest assured that the great majority of Germans remaining in this country are peaceful and innocent persons from whom no danger is to be feared.

In October the newspaper is reporting that new and 'drastic' measures for the internment of German and Austrian aliens have been put into force with all such aliens between the ages of 17 – 50, or who are suitable for military service, being arrested and sent to concentration camps. These included Germans and Austrians who had registered themselves under the

previous order thus making 'the work of the police much lighter'. The newspaper states that several Germans were 'cleared out' at the Haywards Heath petty sessional district.

By November refugees have begun arriving in the area and an act of generosity is reported in the 3 November issue⁷ when a house in Birchwood Grove Road, Burgess Hill, is lent by a Mrs Carey as a home for refugees from Belgium. The first arrivals have varied backgrounds including a 'peasant' farmer and his family who have witnessed the carnage in the area they have come from, a diamond cutter and his family who has had his shop in Brussels looted and has had to flee penniless, a mother on her own with a child, two nuns and a little girl who has escaped from a convent. The nuns take charge of running the household under the supervision of a 'house committee of ladies' and three local doctors offer their services free of charge for the period the house is in existence. It also reports that residents of the town 'one and all' have been extremely generous with money, including weekly subscribers to ensure a sum for a period of six months. Supplies of clothing, bedding, provisions, etc., are continually forthcoming.

In November, it publishes, in a small headline⁸
ALIENS TO BE REGISTERED

Aliens (including Belgians) in the Haywards Heath Petty Sessional Division, are expected, under the Aliens' Registration Order, to register themselves at once at the Haywards Heath Police Station.

A situation regarding women is highlighted in an "opinion" published in the 17 November issue⁹ put forward by Sir. V. Horsley. He considers it is 'unjust that a woman marrying an alien takes his nationality while a man, whoever he marries, retains his nationality'.

In the 8 December issue¹⁰ the paper is reporting 'A False Rumour' concerning Mr Magnus Volk who had moved to a house in Hassocks in 1903 with his family. Although born in Brighton, his father, a clockmaker, had come from the Black Forest in Germany in 1851. Magnus Volk was famous for having laid the first public electric railway in Great Britain in 1883 along the Brighton seafront where it still runs today. The paper said the rumour had spread that Magnus had been interned as an alien. The newspaper writes of the 'incontrovertible' facts as to his ancestry and how since the war started he had been employed in constructing the x-ray departments in Brighton's three military hospitals along with how his children and wife are serving this country's cause saying 'such facts as these bespeak true British loyalty'.

In April 1915 the Alien Restriction (Amendment) Order of April 13 is reported in the 27 April issue:¹¹



From now on the newspaper reports, very frequently, on violations of this order. It shows the diligence of the police in enforcing the order but also the lack of knowledge the public appear to have of it and or the understanding of it. This is shown in the case reported on in the 18 May 1915 issue ¹² with a lady in Haywards Heath being summoned for failing to notify the presence of an alien and the alien, a Belgian, summoned for being an alien and failing to register. The lady owning a large house in Oat Hall Road, Haywards Heath had been requested to take in Belgians by the Deptford Belgian Committee. She was keeping these people at her own expense and claimed that the Committee did not inform her that anything was necessary to be done as to registration. The Belgian, in question, also thought that as he had been registered in London by the London Committee, he did not need to register again. Lack of language skills seems not to have helped the situation with following the regulations, the Belgian saying that he had his papers to prove who he was and that he had no desire to break the law. He is fined £1 and the case of the householder is dismissed on the payment of costs, 4 shillings.

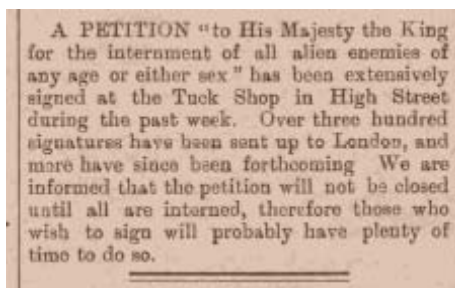
The police superintendent associated with the case comments that the police were experiencing great difficulty with Belgians not notifying them of changes of residence. Every Belgian received instructions printed in English, French and Flemish along with a certificate, but in '19 out of 20 cases' these were not being carried out.

In this issue ¹³ the paper feels its own obligation to provide clear information to aliens and householders with whom an alien is lodging:



In the same issue ¹⁴ the paper reports on the government's plan that all male enemy aliens of military age (17-55 years) are to be interned; women and children enemy aliens are to be deported and naturalised enemy aliens are to be presumed innocent until they are shown to be guilty. Special tribunals are to be appointed for consideration of such cases.

A local response to the internment of aliens is reported also in the 18 May 1915 issue ¹⁵ with a shop in Cuckfield having raised a petition:



In the 8 June 1915 ¹⁶ issue a case comes to court when a lady is summoned for being an enemy alien, the police having gone to a house in Burgess Hill where they tell a lady they have 'heard' she is a German. Initially she says she was born in Liverpool, but on a subsequent visit as a result of information received from a named informant, she admits she was born in Germany but came with her parents to a 'northern port' when she was five. She did not think that as she had lived in the country for forty years she had to register and considered she was an Englishwoman. The case was dismissed on payment of costs.

Although notices of the Aliens Restriction Order are posted throughout the district another case comes to court ¹⁷ involving a French lady who thinks because she has been living in the country for 30 years she is exempt from registration. Both she and the householder where she is living plead guilty to ignorance of the alien regulations. The cases are dismissed with a caution.

It appears from various cases reported that these notices did not appear to be, or claim not to have been seen by everyone. One man, in his defence, states that as he 'had one wooden leg and the other one lame he

could not get about much'¹⁸ Other reasons given for non-compliance are believing it not necessary if only staying in the area a short time, or exempt if residing in the area before the order comes into effect, to thinking the prohibited area only applies to seaside places.

No one is exempt from the regulations. The paper reports on 6 July 1915¹⁹ of two Belgian boys, pupils at Ardingly College, appearing in court for being in a prohibited area and failing to register. The case is, however, dismissed.

Throughout the rest of July 1915 further cases are reported of regulations being flouted, with both Belgians and French persons, "friendly aliens", being fined, along with boarding house keepers or those they are living with. Even Colonel WH Campion, CB, JP, of Danny, Hurstpierpoint, is summoned²⁰ for failing to notify the presence of a French person in his house thinking it not necessary. The Chairman of the Bench concedes that many people did not know of the regulations regarding registration. He was fined two shillings and sixpence.

In August 1915²¹ the paper is reporting that nationally about 1,000 enemy aliens are being interned a week, that around 6,000 have been granted exemptions and 6,302 have been repatriated including children.

A case comes to court²² of a 21 year old girl, married to a German, who is living in Hurstpierpoint with her mother and living there under her maiden name. She is summoned for being an alien in a prohibited area without a permit and her mother for aiding and abetting an alien enemy to reside in a prohibited area. She is visited at home by the Chief Constable and a Detective Sergeant who put it to her that she has received letters from a German officer on active service. She agrees she has and that they have been censored. The person defending her states she is entirely ignorant of the fact she is an enemy alien and that she is an alien only by statute. The prosecution gives the information that when she was visited she was not wearing a wedding ring. She had been born in Brussels to an English father and her mother came from New Zealand. The girl was fined £10 and her mother £5.

The diligence of the authorities to bring cases for prosecution is challenged²³ when a case of an American lady who has been helping to nurse the war wounded at Haywards Heath Cottage Hospital is summoned when she discovers, on wishing to visit friends in Scotland, it is necessary to register and that she has not done so. The Chief Constable at Lewes orders a prosecution, but at the Haywards Heath Petty Sessions, the person defending the lady described his actions as 'unfair and un-English' and as it was not the first time the Chief Constable had made a prosecution under similar circumstances, he asked the Bench not to encourage him to continue to do so. The paper comments 'we are glad to be able to add that the Bench dismissed the case' and that the Chief Constable 'when the facts of a case are before him it ought not to be too difficult for him to perceive whether the person whose conduct is under consideration acted wilfully or not, and whether any good purpose would be served by ordering a prosecution'

In June 1916 the newspaper reports ²⁴ that the Army Council has had under consideration for some time proposals to allow enemy aliens domiciled in this country to join the British army and that instructions to this effect are being issued. It also reports that the War Office recognises that an alien who renders good service in the Army should receive some acknowledgment of it and therefore arrangements are being made with the Treasury that after the war, if desired to be naturalised they will not have to pay a naturalisation fee.

In November 1916, an English girl married to a German, but who had 'been away from her for a long time' was summoned for being an enemy alien and travelling more than five miles from her residence without a permit²⁵. She pleaded guilty, but said she had only lived with her husband for seven months and could not bring her mind to consider that she was an alien enemy. Again, leniency rules and the case is dismissed, the defendant being told she must get a proper permit.

Further cases are reported in the paper during 1917, one where a Swedish national²⁶ working as a nurse enters a prohibited area without being registered and without having an identity book. A small fine is imposed on this occasion because the person in question is doing 'good work as a nurse'.

Even as late as 1918 lodging house keepers are reported as still not complying with the rules even when their alien visitors are following procedures correctly. As early as 1916 non-aliens have had to be registered if staying at boarding houses but even then some boarding house keepers seem unaware of this. Some aliens also still appear to be misunderstanding or, are not aware of, the rules.

However, an attitude to enemy aliens still remains as shown in this part of a notice published in the 23 July 1918 issue²⁷ by a prospective candidate for a parliamentary bye-election, 1918, to the electors of the Northern or East Grinstead Division of Sussex.

THE ALIEN QUESTION

I am strongly in favour of more drastic treatment of aliens of enemy origin or association, and am prepared to support any steps which may be taken to reduce the number of such aliens at large and see that they are kept under proper control. Enemy businesses ought to be permanently closed, and the whole law of naturalisation revised.

Conclusion

Although the newspaper does from time to time report on cases elsewhere in the country of some heavy-handed treatment of alien enemies such as hefty fines for long-term residents having failed to register and the disallowing of a German not being allowed to change the name over his

shop to a British one, no such cases appear to have occurred in the Mid-Sussex area. In the main common sense seems to have prevailed although, no doubt, there were expressions of anti-alien feeling as shown in the two examples of the petition in the shop and the prospective parliamentary candidate's notice.

Appendix

Places covered by the *Mid-Sussex Times* newspaper (taken from the list as per the Roll of Honour published weekly in the newspaper in the first few years of the Great War)

Albourne
Ardingly
Balcombe
Bolney
Burgess Hill
Cuckfield
Ditchling
Hassocks
Haywards Heath
Horsted Keynes
Hurstpierpoint
Lindfield
Pyecombe
Sayers Common
Scaynes Hill
Slaugham
Staplefield
Streat
Twineham
Westmeston
Wivelsfield

Endnotes

- ¹ David Evans, *Teach yourself the First World War* (Hodder, 2004), p.121
- ² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 11 August 1914, p.8, column g.
- ³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 August 1914, p.7, col. c.
- ⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 August 1914, p.6, col. b.
- ⁵ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 August 1914, p.6, col. b.
- ⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 27 October 1914, p.4, col. f.
- ⁷ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 3 November 1914, p.7, col. e.
- ⁸ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 10 November 1914, p.5, col. e.
- ⁹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 17 November 1914, p.8, col. f.
- ¹⁰ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 8 December 1914, p.4, col. g.
- ¹¹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 13 April 1915, p.3, col. e.
- ¹² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 May 1915, p.1, col. a.
- ¹³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 May 1915, p.4, col. g.
- ¹⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 May 1915, p.2, col. c.
- ¹⁵ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 18 May 1915, p.5, col. c.
- ¹⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 8 June 1915, p.8, col. g.
- ¹⁷ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 22 June 1915, p.1, col. b.
- ¹⁸ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 29 June 1915, p.1, col. g.
- ¹⁹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 6 July 1915, p.1, col. g.
- ²⁰ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 20 July 1915, p.1, col. a.
- ²¹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 3 August 1915, p.2, col. a.
- ²² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 17 August 1915, p.1, cols. a-b.
- ²³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 28 September 1915 p.5, col. a.
- ²⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 13 June 1916, p.2, col. b.
- ²⁵ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 28 November 1916, p.6, col. a.
- ²⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 22 May 1917, p.6, col. d.
- ²⁷ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 23 July 1918, p.8, cols. b-c.

Source List

Books

Burgess Hill History and Guide, 1912 (Burnett & Co, 1912)

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Evans, David. *Teach yourself the first world war* (Hodder Arnold, 2004)

Ford, Wyn. *The story of Haywards Heath* (S.B. Publications, 1998)

Website

www.visionofbritain.org.uk (for census data)