

HIS302 – Community History Workshop: in conjunction with Leeds Metropolitan University and Abbey Grange School in Leeds, West Yorkshire

Research Project: Belgian Refugees in Leeds during the First World War



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Between August 1914 and May 1915, approximately 250,000 Belgian Refugees came to Britain. This was the largest influx of political refugees in British history, but today their plight is almost forgotten (Brent, Our Belgian Guests, (internet), available from: [http://www.brent.gov.uk/museumarchive.nsf/Files/LBBA-71/\\$FILE/Our%20Belgian%20Guests%20-%20Refugees%20in%20Brent%201914-1919.pdf](http://www.brent.gov.uk/museumarchive.nsf/Files/LBBA-71/$FILE/Our%20Belgian%20Guests%20-%20Refugees%20in%20Brent%201914-1919.pdf) accessed: 21.12.2011). It is our aim in conjunction with the Project Inspire website, developed by Abbey Grange School, to tell the story of these refugees who found a safe haven in Leeds. The work of Project Inspire concentrates on war and local remembrance in the Leeds area; this is why this study is of great importance. Not only do we aim to bring the Belgian families into the history books, who until now have been largely ignored, but we also wish to celebrate the remarkable work local people contributed in order to help those displaced through German atrocities.

The story of the Belgian refugees who came to Leeds during these turbulent years and the local people who helped them will be discussed throughout. This study provides a unique contribution not only to local history, but also to the displacement of Belgian refugees. Therefore, a substantial number of primary sources have been located and utilised to highlight how the Belgian refugees have been hidden and ignored in secondary literature. Owing to the local nature of this project a number of Leeds archives have been used in order to trace these sources, which range from council minutes and contemporary newspapers, to school logbooks and oral testimony from the descendent of one of the refugees. This testimony provides a unique insight we are unable to gauge from the official sources, which provide very little opportunity to understand how the refugees themselves experienced this period and life in Leeds.

During the early weeks of this project our group met with our sponsor Gordon Henderson and a number of his pupils at Abbey Grange School. In addition, we also placed an article in the Yorkshire Evening Post appealing for anyone who may have information or connections relating to the Belgians in Britain during the war to get in touch. We owe a great debt to the Yorkshire Evening Post and its readers, who provided some key information for this study (correspondence and article included within the appendix, see index).

Although tensions in Europe had been brewing over the last few decades it was after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1914, that these tensions began to boil over and in August 1914 war was declared. As a consequence of the number of European treaties developed in the decades prior to war breaking out, Germany found herself with the threat from both France and Russia. In an attempt to remove the French threat before Russia could fully mobilise, Germany put the Schlieffen Plan into practice and invaded neutral Belgium on their way to France. The invasion of Belgium resulted in a number of atrocities and provided Britain with the moral reason it needed to enter the war. Unfortunately, these atrocities resulted in a large number of murders of Belgian civilians. On the 23rd August 1914, the Germans killed six- hundred and forty-seven civilians in Dinant and on the 25th August, they destroyed one thousand five hundred homes in Louvain. In total, the German Army killed some five thousand five-hundred Belgian civilians in 1914 (Brent, Our Belgian Guests, (internet), available from [http://www.brent.gov.uk/museumarchive.nsf/Files/LBBA-71/\\$FILE/Our%20Belgian%20Guests%20-%20Refugees%20in%20Brent%201914-1919.pdf](http://www.brent.gov.uk/museumarchive.nsf/Files/LBBA-71/$FILE/Our%20Belgian%20Guests%20-%20Refugees%20in%20Brent%201914-1919.pdf) accessed: 21.12.2011)

The Bryce report, which was published in 1915 by Asquith in order to investigate the rumours of German behaviour, stated: ‘we find many well-established cases of the slaughter...of whole families, including not infrequently that of quite small children.’ The report also included reports of women and children being used as human shields by the German troops (Bryce report transcript (1915), (internet), available from <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/transcripts/spotlights/atrocities.htm> accessed: 21.12.2011 Catalogue reference: HO 45/11061/266503). Although the evidence on which the report was based was questionable, the horrors it told had a powerful effect on the rest of Europe and the USA, and sympathy for the refugees who had suffered these unspeakable torments grew (Gatrell, 2008, p.88); thus these atrocities against the Belgians and their country became known as the Rape of Belgium.

Through fear many Belgians fled their homes with nearly a million civilians fleeing to neutral Holland, whose population of 6.3 million was swollen by the influx (Gatrell, 2008, p.83). The small Dutch town Sluis, whose inhabitants numbered three thousand, for example, found themselves caring for eight thousand Belgian refugees. This made it ‘impossible to care adequately for all these people, and the majority of them [slept] on straw’ while bitter poverty

prevailed (*Yorkshire Post*, 31.10.14, p.8). During the course of the war, one in seven Belgian civilians had become a refugee (Gatrell, 2008, p.84). Such numbers and conditions resulted in Britain opening its doors and offering sanctuary to these innocent people, as well as a considerable number of wounded Belgian soldiers and officers. According to an official repatriation document written by A. C. Geddes, forty-five per cent of the Belgian refugees in Britain came from the province of Antwerp (Geddes, 1918, (internet), available from: [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk), catalogue reference: CAB/24/72, see appendix IX). The refugees also came from provinces such as: East Flanders, West Flanders, Limbourg and Hainaut. These provinces were Flemish-speaking provinces. Liege, Luxembourg and Namur were French-speaking provinces from which Belgian refugees also fled .

<b>Province</b>	<b>Percentages of refugees from provinces to total of refugees</b>
Antwerp	41.7
East Flanders	6.6
West Flanders	13.4
Limbourg	1.0
Total of Flemish-speaking provinces	62.7
Barbant	19
Hainaut	4.7
Liege	11.8
Luxembourg	0.4
Namur	1.4
Total of French-speaking provinces	18.3

(de Jastrzebeski, 1916, p.142)

However, there are discrepancies in the estimated number of refugees that fled from Antwerp, the largest province from which refugees originated. For example, de Jastrzebeski argues that forty-one point seven per cent of the total refugees came from Antwerp (de Jastrzebski, 1916, p.142). The reasoning behind this can be explained by the German attack on this province on the 28th September 1914, which the Germans occupied until 1918. The

second largest number of Belgian refugees fled from Ypres, West Flanders, in which thirteen point four per cent of the total refugees originated from (de Jastrzebski, 1916, p.142). The reason for the Belgian's fleeing from here can be explained by the battlefield taking place in Ypres during the four years of the Great War.

As part of our research, members of our group conducted an oral interview for more conclusive primary research. Maria, the interviewee mentioned that her mother 'lived in a little town just outside Ainsworth, called Mechalan [West Flanders]' (Maria, Personal Communication, 14.12.11). Maria's mother, Virginia De Coninck, and her family came to Leeds via Alexandra Palace having spent six weeks traveling by foot and ship as did the majority of Belgian refugees. Scenes of people walking for miles with both family and belongings packed on carts were a sight often seen after the invasion. An example of this journey is portrayed in the image below.



(Image 1)

When the refugees initially arrived in Britain a number of them came via Alexandra Palace, which accommodated four thousand, and also via Earls Court Exhibition Hall in London, and Hull. Myers claims that 'the dispersal of refugees throughout Britain was dictated by the need to utilize the support of the 2,000 Belgian Refugee Committees established during the late summer and autumn of 1914' (Myers, 2001, p.155). As well as the Belgian refugees making the awful journey to England, it was then highly unlikely they would settle in their first destination. Many were temporarily housed at either Alexandra Palace, Earls Court or in the port city of Hull before being officially relocated due to the overcrowding of the major cities, i.e. London. The overcrowding led to many local refugees committees offering to provide assistance. Therefore, in the case of Leeds despite the agreement that they would provide support for a maximum of one thousand refugees, the Secretary for the Lord Mayors Relief Fund received the following telegram, "We have been asked to prepare for the large increase

in refugees this week. May we send some more to Leeds? Lord Mayor originally offered for 1,000. We shall be glad to send as many as you can take.” On Monday next 100 refugees are to arrive in Leeds, on the invitation of the Lord Mayor.’ (*Yorkshire Post*, 10.10.14, p.9). This emphasizes the urgency of support and the willingness of local committees needed to extend their local hospitalities due to the unexpected increase in numbers of Belgian refugees.

It is recognised that most of the Belgian refugees were Catholic. This is seen to have stemmed back from the reign of King Albert I, in which the monarchy had deep roots in Roman Catholicism which explains the majority religion in Belgium. Most of the Belgian refugees fled from Flanders, which was a region that was notoriously Catholic. With the majority of Belgian refugees being Catholic this led to Cardinal Bourne putting the Catholic Women’s League in charge of the refugee provisions. Primarily, the Catholic Women’s League nationally dealt with the upper and middle classes, but they also created hostels for the working classes and handled up to ten thousand refugees (Storr, 2010, pp.35-36). As well as nationally, a local effort was made in Leeds shown by the article ‘Leeds and the Belgian Refugees: Preparations for their reception’ from the *Yorkshire Post*. Reverend Butler of Sacred Heart on Burley Road Leeds had two houses fully furnished and was in the process of getting another house ready in September 1914. The clergy showed their support by appealing to their congregation on Sunday for more help and placed focus on family units (*Yorkshire Post*, 17.09.1914, p.8)

Despite the majority of Belgians being Catholic, other local churches and congregations in Leeds pulled together and provided help and assistance to the plight of the Belgians. Although the Quakers were anti-violence and did not agree with the First World War, they opened the doors of their Woodhouse Lane meeting house in order to provide shelter for over one hundred refugees. Additionally, St Margarets Church (now Left Bank Leeds) rented 6 Harolds Place to provide housing for a Belgian family (Personal communication, 21.11.11, see appendix VII).

Leeds had two local relief funds for Belgians; the first was created for those who were still in Belgium suffering under the dire war conditions, The Belgian Relief Fund was established by A. B. Balfour. The fund was centered on helping soldiers, the sick and the wounded still in Belgium. Another fund worked much closer to home, the Lord Mayor's Belgian Refugee Fund was created in order to help gain and administer support for the Belgian refugees who settled in Leeds. Wartime conditions were economically and financially hard for the majority of the public, both natives and refugees. Most of the government's money went towards the war effort and little was left for other endeavors, including supporting newly arrived refugees, a responsibility which was subsequently shared with the public.

The Belgian Refugee Fund was heavily dependent on donations as a source of funds, not only in terms of money but in other everyday items as well. By the use of the local press appealing for help, the people of Leeds rallied around to help the refugees now living within the community. Helen Briggs, treasurer of the central committee, wrote to the *Yorkshire Post* on behalf of the Lord Mayor's Belgian Refugee Committee, telling readers of the success that the local efforts had contributed to: 'we house at the present time 1,200 refugees in Leeds and owing to the magnificent response to the appeal made through the press, furnished houses in all parts of the city have been placed at the disposal of the committee; they have been personally inspected and are most comfortable and bespeak true Yorkshire kindness and welcome.' (*Yorkshire Post*, 14.11.1914, p.5). A great effort was made to house the refugees by the community with local council support, often civilians belonging to local parishes worked together to provide homes for the newly arrived refugees, this was not an unusual experience for the fleeing Belgians.

Once the refugees arrived in Leeds they were often taken to the town hall before they were welcomed by their host families or taken to their homes in the city. Emphasis was placed on housing the refugees in family units, with one family per house, however, sometimes when this was impossible or where there was the use of a larger house then the refugees would be placed in groups of two to three families per house. One example of this was the case of Morley Hall, which is shown below:



(Image 2)

It remains unclear to this day how Morley was able to use Morley Hall for this purpose and public appeals for information to date have so far been unfruitful. What we do know was that the house had become empty since Alice Cliff Scatcherd died at Christmas in 1906 and it was bought to present to the town as a maternity home by Sir Charles Scarth in 1917. Between this period all that is known is that it was used as a living quarters for the refugees housed in Leeds during the years 1914 to 1919 (Leodis, (internet), available from: [http://www.leodis.net/display.aspx?resourceIdentifier=2006112\\_160303](http://www.leodis.net/display.aspx?resourceIdentifier=2006112_160303) accessed 30.12.2011). Of the smaller and more locally funded houses, we have learnt that refugees were housed predominately around the Kirkstall Road area, Cardigan Crescent and Cardigan Street (Maria, Personal Communication, 14.12.11).

As well being provided with homes, the Belgians were afforded a living allowance paid for by the Lord Mayor's Refugee Fund, if they were not already supported by their English hosts. In her correspondence to the *Yorkshire Post*, Briggs was specific of how donations of money were to be handled. She specified that no money was to be handed to the refugees personally; instead all were to be sent to the town hall to be added to the fund, which then were equally distributed. On the date of her address in the paper, the amount of funds stood 'currently at £2437 however they require[d] an additional £55 per week' (*Yorkshire Post*, 14.11.1914, p.5)

Allowances for the refugees consisted of the following: 5s per week for men, 4s per week for women, 3s per week for the first child, 2s per week for each succeeding child and 1s 6d for coal (*Yorkshire Post*, 14.11.1914, p.5).

Food and clothing depots were organised to distribute donated goods, though they were on a different rationing scheme to the financial allowance. All depots were operating from 16 Swinegate with the office open every day for enquiries. The food depot was open every Tuesday and Friday and goods were distributed to individuals as far as supplies allowed. The clothing depot was open Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and distributed donated items of clothing, though despite frequent donations shortages were not unheard of. Articles in the *Yorkshire Post* highlight the Belgian Refugee Committee's appeals for gifts of food due to there being insufficient amounts which had led to refugees being sent home without support. The appeal noted that 36 families, many consisting of 10-11 members, were left without any support. The *Yorkshire Post* wrote in mid-November 1914 that 'the committee feel confident that on the full facts becoming known many friends will gladly contribute to meet the increasing necessities of our Belgian visitors, to whose nation we owe so great a debt' (*Yorkshire Post*, 12.11.1914, p.3).

The influx of Belgian refugees into Leeds did raise the question of employment. Many refugees wished to be able to support their families and Leeds citizens appreciated the Belgians' wishes to support themselves and their community. In October 1914 a sub-committee of the Leeds Belgian Refugee Committee was established to deal with the question of employment for the able-bodied refugees. The committee, housed at the Swinegate office, consisted of a number of prominent local people including: Mr J. B Hamilton, the general manager of the Leeds Corporation; Mr Leslie Owen, who was also the chairman of the Refugees Reception and Allocation Committee; and Mr Owen Connellian, the secretary of the Leeds Trades Council. These three men in particular wished to make the Belgians, many of whom had been trades people in Belgium, self-supporting in Leeds. (*Yorkshire Post*, 22.10.14, p.8). The Kings Mill in Swinegate became the adapted workshop for many until they were able to return to Belgium after the war.

In preparation for not only the Belgian refugees' arrival in Leeds, but also their continued stay, official funds were established and distributed nationally and locally by appropriate

committees to help finance the duration of their stay. Peter Gatrell writes that ‘the arrival of Belgian refugees in England prompted widespread private philanthropy’ (Gatrell, 2008, p.91). In addition, ‘the country was aflame with indignation against the German atrocities in Belgium. The great and spontaneous offer of hospitality in August preceded the arrival of refugee en masse’ (War Refugee Committee Report, 1916, p.3). The War Refugee Committee was a national board established by Dame Flora Lugard, and oversaw general refugee policy while the local associations across the nation often controlled the administration of given financial allowances, food, clothing and employment for those living in their city. It was due to many volunteering groups and committees that Britain was prepared for the refugees as at the time ‘government, absorbed in war work, were not inclined to take responsibility and personal appeals to various departments were for a time fruitless’ (War Refugee Report, 1916, p.4).

Many of the refugees came with nothing and after leaving their homes in Belgium with only the necessities they were able to carry. More than 250,000 Belgian refugees fled to the UK, escaping the fighting of the First World War and all had to be catered for, the escaping Belgians represent the largest movement of refugee migration in Britain’s history, and around 1600 of them took up some form of semi-permanent residence in Leeds (Refugee Week, (internet), available from:

<http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk/Resources/Refugee%20Week/Documents/HistoryofContributions.pdf>, accessed 01.01.2012). It was the responsibilities of local authorities to provide care as many ‘Local committees undertook the maintenance of the refugees drafted to them’ (the second War Refugee Committee Report, 1917, p.2). However, they did receive support from other official bodies, such as the War Refugee Committee which accounted that the ‘sum received from the opening of the fund in August 1914, to December 31st, 1918 [was] £106,443 15s. 3d’ (third and final War Refugee Committee Report, 1919, p.15) and of these funds from ‘September 1917, 150 committees were receiving assistance; at the end of 1918 this number had increased to 174’ (the third and final War Refugee Committee Report, 1919, p.16).

The employment bureau in Leeds set out to ensure that in helping the Belgians find employment and use the specialist trades they already had, the position of British workers was also protected. This was to prevent conflict breaking out and that the British would not feel threatened whilst a large majority of the male population were away fighting on the battlefields. From the beginning, Belgian employment was for the benefit of the Belgians themselves (*Yorkshire Post*, 14.11.14, p.5).

Employment was found in the food and clothing industry where the refugees would assist in the day to day running and also with the repairing of clothing and shoes. In Leeds specifically, employment was found at the Leeds Highway Department and various factories which helped the war effort. Refugee, Virginia De Coninck, aged 17 and her 16-year-old sister were sent to work in the munitions in a Leeds engineering firm, George Mann in Hunslet. It was while working here that Virginia met her future husband who was an engineer at the firm. Virginia and her sister were not the only Belgians working in the munitions factories and the refugee workforce became affectionately referred to as the 'Screw Millers'. Further refugees aiding the war effort were also employed at Blackburn Air Drum Factory in Roundhay (Maria, Personal Communication, 14.12.11).



(Image 3)

In November 1914 an appeal was placed nationally by the Belgian consul in London, appealing to men who wished to join the Belgian Army for the remainder of the war. Men were encouraged to contact the Belgian Relief Committee in Finsbury Square London (*Yorkshire Post*, 13.11.1914, p.6). Less than a week later, a further appeal was placed in English, Flemish and French to ensure a maximum response of Belgians (*Yorkshire Post*, 09.11.1914, p.9). An article a few days later highlighted the response to these adverts and a large number called for help, in which 'over a hundred men presented themselves at Mr

Balfour's office' on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1914, with the first batch of volunteers being sent to London the following Monday afternoon (*Yorkshire Post*, 13.11.1914, p.7).

The Belgian refugee children in Britain were put into school once they had settled for the duration of their stay. The British public wanted to contribute towards the war effort and they did so by giving the Belgian children a warm welcome in schools, which was definitely seen as a visible sign of support for the war (Myers, 2001, p.156). The Board of Education Report for the year 1914-1915 supported the Belgian children's positive integration as they reported "favourably upon the friendliness and sympathy with which the Belgian children have been received by their English school-fellows" (Myers, 2001, p.160). This was specifically the case for Leeds in 1914 as 'the whole of the education facilities of Leeds [were] at the disposal of the Belgians' (*Yorkshire Post*, 28.10.14 p.6) and schools such as Kirkstall Road school openly took Belgian children in (Maria, Personal Communication, 14.12.11). The *Yorkshire Post* newspaper noted on the 28th October 1914 that 'there [were] nearly a thousand Belgian children of school age in Leeds, and a much appreciated service [was] being rendered in allowing the young refugees to enter the elementary schools' (*Yorkshire Post*, 28.10.14, p.6). Initially Belgian children were schooled with British children in Leeds, in which 'they [were] not being arranged in separate classes, but [were] intermingled with the Leeds school children' (*Yorkshire Post*, 28.10.14, p.6) and it was in schools, intermixed with English children, that helped a large number of Belgian children learn the English language. For example, the English Virginia's brothers learnt 'they learnt from school' (Maria, Personal Communication, 14.12.11).

In October 1914, Belgian children first started attending St Anne's Catholic Junior School in Leeds, however, during in November 1914 a school for Belgians was opened on Cavendish Road. This resulted in the Belgian classes being withdrawn from St Anne's Junior School (Log Book of St Anne's Junior School 09.05.1884-14.03.1923 p.324). As the St Anne's log book highlights on the 7th November 1914 'the Belgian children are transferred from this school to the "King Albert" school for Belgians in Cavendish Road' (Log Book of St Anne's

Junior School 9.5.1884-14.3.1923 p. 327). Although not all agreed that special schools and classes should be set up for the Belgian refugee children.

An example of this was after the Dewsbury Education committee decided that the Roman Catholic Belgian children should attend a special class at St Paulinus Roman Catholic School. An example of this was after the Dewsbury Education committee decided that the Roman Catholic Belgian children should attend a special class at St Paulinus Roman Catholic School. This saw Councillor C. Brooke assert that because not all Belgian refugee children were Roman Catholic they should remain attending council schools.

However, the Mayor of Dewsbury, Alderman J McCann, said ‘the children squandered about in different schools would simply be curiosities for the time being’ (*Yorkshire Post*, 07.11.14, p.5). The concern for the Belgian children’s welfare caused some such as the Mayor of Dewsbury to feel that the Belgians would never be able to fully integrate into ordinary elementary schools, nor would they benefit as they would be seen as ‘curiosities’ by the British children, therefore segregation would benefit them more. (*Yorkshire Post*, 07.11.14, p.5). As the war progressed and the months passed many parents began to worry for their children’s education. In the short term British schools and the British curriculum would suffice but when the end of the war seemed a distant hope, parents’ attentions turned to what their children were learning. It was claimed that the British curriculum could be damaging to the Belgian children and therefore Belgian schooling seemed a more positive option as they would follow the Belgian curriculum, which would be more beneficial to the children once they returned home after the war. The Admission Register kept for Leeds Catholic College School emphasises that the local schools were not seen as a viable long term solution as many of the students remained there for only one academic year, with most leaving in 1915 (Admission Register: Leeds Catholic College School, pp.438-450)

Not only did the Belgian refugee children encounter a warm welcome from the British public, but all the Belgian refugees as a whole did. An explanation for this can be seen by the hatred the British had towards the Germans. An example of the British hatred towards the Germans can be shown by the way they treated the Germans that were in Britain. Maria explains how a German butcher on Kirkstall Road was disliked because he was German and was deported (Maria, Personal Communication, 14.12.11). The alleged German atrocities, in which 5,500 civilians were killed by the German army in Belgium in 1914, were seen as justifications for

the British politicians, such as Beresford, for the harsh measure bestowed upon the Germans who were in Britain. However, this support towards the Belgian refugees occurred due to the British government feeling guilty for failing to guarantee Belgian neutrality (Knox and Kushner, p.48).

This led to the contrasting efforts the British made towards the Belgians in Britain, in which sympathy was employed as part of a moral war against the Germans (Knox and Kushner, 1999, p.47). 'The arrival of Belgian refugees in England prompted widespread private philanthropy' and the War Refugee Committee made use of the 'hospitality lists' which were drawn up before the outbreak of war. This was in anticipation of an Irish civil war (Gatrell, 2008, p.91). By February 1916 a total of 69 Belgian relief charities existed. The exiles found support in their search for housing, food, clothing and employment (Panikos, 2010, p.279) and 'they appear to have failed to encounter the more widespread manifestation of racism except on occasions such as the First World War when Belgian refugees became symbols of fairness at a time, however, when Germans in Britain had virtually come to symbolize evil' (Panikos, 2010, p.280).

A prime example of support shown in Leeds can be seen by a letter sent from Mr William Harvey, on the behalf of the Pontefract Lane Quaker Adult School, to Mr A Balfour, the Belgian Vice-Consul of Leeds, 'stating their readiness to give hospitality to 30 Belgian women and children on the school premises' (*Yorkshire Post*, 16.09.14, p.8). Another example of the British public in Leeds showing philanthropy towards the Belgian refugees can be seen from a diary of a 15 year old girl, Eleanor Ruth Dent, who amongst others helped a group of respectable Belgian refugees. She wrote about how the Cloughs gave their large empty house they had on Burley Street called Blackmoor to the refugees. This house was mainly used for the Belgian army and many of the neighbour helped look after the refugees. Mrs Hawkins was the cook and her husband was the general man, Madam Verheyen was the housemaid and Eleanor's mother took on the role as housekeeper. By November 1914, the house had become a fully operational house for the Belgians. Eleanor's diary showed she had

a sense of loyalty and high regards for the Belgians as she describes them as very much human (Knox and Kushner, 1999, pp.54-55)

The most frequent public reaction to the plight of Belgian refugees was one of sentiment and sympathy. Eleanor had a sympathetic response to the Belgian refugees but this was not true of everyone in Burley. However, this was not always the response from all those who lived in Burley. Eleanor wrote about an encounter she had with Mrs Prothero, a local prominent woman, who described the Belgian soldiers as drunkards and described their ill-treating of the donkey among other things (Knox and Kushner, 1999, p.55).

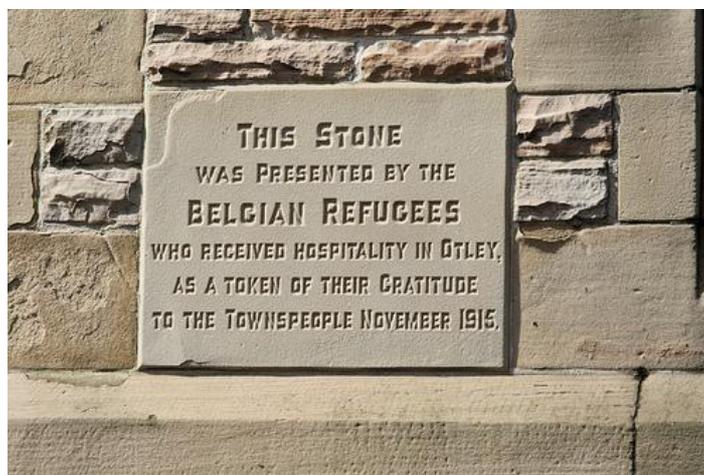
After the war ended, November 1918, the Belgium refugees residing in Leeds and across England now faced a very difficult decision, whether to return home, unsure of what they were returning too, or stay in Leeds, a place ultimately not their home. Official government policy was quite strict on the matter, swiftly communication to the Belgium government the terms for the return of refugees, and it was agreed that from January to February 1919, England would return an estimated ten thousand refugees per week. (Geddes, 1918, p.3) The motive behind such transition was perhaps nationalistic as thousands of returning male soldiers, the majority of whom were working class, would need not only jobs within the industrial centres but space to live. The following justification and outlining of policy comes from the official governing body in Whitehall, London, who argue;

‘after four years of exile it is of great and urgent importance to remove these large bodies of unemployed foreign workmen and their families from great industrial centres where their presence in districts already overcrowded is likely to cause grave friction and trouble with the British workers, and to destroy the good feeling and harmonious relations built up since their reception as refugees in the autumn on 1914’ (Geddes, 1918, p.3)

Locally many of the refugees housed in Leeds returned to their roots in Belgium, including Maria’s mother’s family, with the exception of Virginia herself, who despite facing her own hardships, chose to remain in Leeds for some time after her family left, staying with her English husband. However, despite her initial choice Virginia did eventually return to Belgium, for despite the support of her husband, she found permanent life in England without

her family exceptionally hard, so together they made the choice to return to Belgium and to Virginia's family and stayed there for some time.

Many local refugees felt indebted to the small communities that took them in and many showed their gratitude by bestowing their hosts with official gifts to the areas for all. A prime example of the physical form of the gratitude of the Belgian refugees is a stone plaque which has been built into the stonework of the Jubilee clock in Otley market place, and image of which resides below;



(Image 4)

Today the plaque serves as a reminder of the kindness and generosity displayed by ordinary people of Otley towards the Belgian Refugees during the First World War, and also commemorates an important part of local history.

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Interview:

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Newspaper articles:

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*Yorkshire Post* 17.09.1914, article 'Leeds and the Belgian Fund: Preparations for their arrival', p.8

*Yorkshire Post* 16.09.1914, article 'Leeds and the Belgian Fund: A Suggestion for Seaside Lodging Houses', p.8

*Yorkshire Post* 10.10.1914 'More Belgian Refugees for Leeds', p.8

*Yorkshire Post* 13.10.1914 'Belgian Refugees in Leeds: Great Public Welcome', p.7

*Yorkshire Post* 22.10.1914 'The Question of Employment for Belgian Refugees', p.8

*Yorkshire Post* 28.10.1914 'Belgian Children in Leeds Schools', p.6

*Yorkshire Post* 07.11.1914 'Belgian Children and Dewsbury Schools', p.5

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Images:

Cover Image: Self-created

Image 1: NW Belgian Refugees 02 (online image), available from: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/photos/refugees.html>, accessed 02.01.2012

Image 2: Image of Belgian Refugees outside Morley Hall in Leeds.(online image), Idois online, ID 2006112\_160303, copyright David Atkinson Archive, Class No. Morley M 623 [http://www.leodis.net/display.aspx?resourceIdentifier=2006112\\_160303](http://www.leodis.net/display.aspx?resourceIdentifier=2006112_160303) , accessed 21.12.11

Image 3: Image of women inside the Munitions factory in Leeds

Inside the factory, (online image), available from:

<http://www.barwickinmethistoricalociety.com/4746.html>, accessed 01.01.2012

Image 4: Image of Otley clock tower plaque (online image), available from:

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