

WW1 Belgian refugees in Airedale

In the summer of 1914 the Schlieffen Plan, only plan Germany had for fighting a war in Europe, required a lightning attack on France through Belgium. This was intended to knock France out of the war before Russian forces could be fully mobilised¹.

On August 2nd 1914 the German government requested free passage for its forces through Belgium. The Belgian government refused and invoked the 1839 Treaty of London. Under the terms of this treaty, Great Britain was required to act as guarantor of the perpetual neutrality of Belgium, and guard that neutrality in the event of invasion².

On the evening of August 4th the British Ambassador to Berlin had a final conversation with the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, advising him that if Germany did not agree to respect Belgian neutrality, Britain would declare war on Germany. Bethmann-Hollweg refused and at the end of their discussion asked whether³:

... just for a word – "neutrality," a word which in war time had so often been disregarded – just for a scrap of paper Great Britain was going to make war on a kindred nation who desired nothing better than to be friends with her.

Britain declared war with Germany at midnight on August 4th. Belgium severed diplomatic relations with Germany and Germany declared war on Belgium. German troops then crossed the Belgian frontier and attacked the city of Liege⁴.

As the Germans overran Belgium, refugees started to come to this country; the eventual total would be around 250,000 – the largest ever single refugee flow from one country to the UK⁵. We know from newspaper reports of the period, that a number of these refugees came to the Craven area and stayed here until 1919.

The first arrivals – end of September 1914

The Craven Herald reported the arrival of the first group of Belgian refugees, at the end of September 1914. They were provided with rather luxurious accommodation⁶:

Belgian Refugees at Bolton Abbey

The Duke of Devonshire's Yorkshire residence at Bolton Abbey is now being used for a different purpose from that which was expected seven weeks ago, when preparations were being made for the visit of the King for grouse shooting. His Grace has lent Bolton Hall as a temporary home for Belgian refugees, a party of whom arrived on Tuesday night. When they alighted they received a hearty cheer from a group of spectators. The party numbered 21, including three children. They were conveyed to the Hall in carriages and were there welcomed by Lady Blanche Cavendish, the second daughter of the Duke and Duchess.

After the fall of Antwerp – 10th October 1914

In October, as the Germans pressed further into Belgium and took the fortified city of Antwerp⁷, the number of refugees coming to this area increased dramatically.

At least 150 came to Keighley during the second half of the month, where arrangements for accommodation were led by W.A. Brigg, of Kildwick Hall, who was the mayor of the town⁸. Brigg would continue to promote the work of local Distress Relief Committees to provide support for the refugees throughout the war, even after he stood down as mayor in 1916.

The townships of the Aire valley also did their bit. Crosshills seems to have acted as a dispersal centre⁹, and by the end of the month there were groups in both Cowling and Cononley.

Cowling refugees

The Keighley News reported on the Cowling arrivals¹⁰:

Arrival of Belgian refugees

On Saturday evening last five Belgian refugees arrived at Cowling from the Ebenezer School, Cross Hills. The Cowling Distress Relief Committee decided a week or two ago to work with the Glusburn District Sub-committee with regard to the refugees, and so late as Thursday week it was decided to ask for five of the refugees from Cross Hills to be sent to Cowling. Although a house was then to prepare and to furnish by Saturday afternoon last, a house at Scar View has been very neatly furnished by a host of willing workers. Every article for convenience and comfort was quickly offered.

From around this time, for much of the rest of the war, both the Craven Herald and Keighley News would include columns in Flemish headed "For Our Belgian Guests".

Cononley refugees

The headmaster of Cononley school, John Holdsworth, noted the arrival of Belgian refugees in the village in the school log book on October 26th 1914¹¹. These are likely to have included Mlle. Jeanne Delafaille, a school teacher, who came to the village with her father and subsequently taught at the school¹².

Crosshills refugees

Belgian refugees may have begun to arrive in Crosshills as early as August 1914.





The Crosshills refugees, with Fred Whitaker (kneeling right)

Throughout the war their well-being was looked after by Mr. Fred Whitaker, who came to be known affectionately as “Uncle Fred”.

In February 1919, Fred Whitaker was presented with a gold watch and chain by the people of township inscribed²⁰:

Presented to Mr. Fred H. Whitaker by the inhabitants of Crosshills and District, in recognition of his good work on behalf of the Belgian refugees and the wounded soldiers at Morton Banks Hospital during the war, 1914-1918.

Were there refugees in Farnhill and Kildwick ?

It seems that there none of the Belgian WW1 refugees stayed in Farnhill or Kildwick. This may seem surprising, given the influence of W.A. Brigg on the two villages and his role in Keighley, but it probably reflects the comparative lack of employment opportunities locally. New arrivals seeking work in the area in 1914 would be have been better served locating themselves in one of the more industrialised townships, such as Sutton or Crosshills.

However, there are just a couple of small pieces of evidence, entries in the school log book from October and November 1914, made by the headmaster Thomas Appleby, that suggest initial plans may have been made for the children of some of the refugees to attend Kildwick School¹³:

Oct 21st 1914 A number of Belgian Refugees, including a teacher of French, accompanied by Mr, Fisher who acted as interpreter, visited the school this afternoon. The children sang for them and gave three hearty cheers. They were also interested in the work of the infants.

Nov 17th 1914 A little Belgian girl (a refugee) came to school today. The children were interested in the Flemish names for various objects.

Fund-raising for Belgian charities – 1915 and 1916

Throughout the war fund-raising events and collections were carried out locally, to raise funds for the refugees arriving in the area and, later, to provide support for displaced Belgians within Belgium itself.

In September 1915, at a meeting organised by W.A. Brigg in the Institute, Thomas Appleby is reported to have said¹⁴:

... that the village was perfectly willing to receive a Belgian family with some little help from the Glusburn committee, but the arrangement had not been successful. Now was their chance to help. He moved that a house-to-house visitation be arranged ... Mr. Albert Kitson seconded the resolution, which was carried.

The results of this collection are not known, but a collection for the “Belgian Famine Fund” made in Farnhill and Kildwick during May 1916 raised £3-15-6d¹⁵.

The following month possibly the largest fund-raising event was staged by the mayor and mayoress of Keighley at their home, Kildwick Hall, on behalf of the “British Society for the Relief of Wounded Belgian Soldiers”¹⁶. The entertainment was provided by a concert-party of musicians who had travelled from the unoccupied part of Belgium – many of them displaced from occupied cities such as Antwerp, Liege, and Namur.

The audience included Belgian refugees from Keighley, Sutton and Cononley who “enjoyed the various items by their own countrymen and countrywomen, sung in their own tongue”.

The post-war return to Belgium

On Wednesday 5th February 1919, those Belgian refugees who had not already left began their journeys back home.

The newspapers reported departures from many of the local townships, including Keighley, Steeton, Cononley and Crosshills¹⁷. Many of the refugees, including those from Silsden, made their farewells at a gatherings held in their honour¹⁸:

SILSDEN – Farewell to the Refugees

The departure of the Belgian refugees from Silsden on Wednesday would doubtless recall in the minds of many people the exciting and pathetic scenes witnessed in the town in January 1915, when the first contingent of refugees arrived. At that time probably few of the refugees thought they would be destined to remain over four years in England. It can be safely said that the interval has passed more smoothly than could have been believed in those dark days.

The majority of the Belgians had faced their misfortune with a very fine spirit. All capable of working have been engaged in local factories, and whatever occupation they have taken up, they have done their work in an efficient manner.

The majority of the refugees were anxious to return home ... On Tuesday they were entertained to tea at the Parish Church school by members of the Relief Committee. After tea the opportunity was taken of presenting each of the refugees with a souvenir as a memento of their stay in the town ...

Six families have been in Silsden, and each family was allowed the choice of a present which was to be of use on their return home. The Van Stretaghan family's choice was a timepiece ... Mr. and Mrs. Meave and Mr. and Mrs. Drupil and family shared a Singer sewing machine ... The other families' choice was in the form of blankets, clothing and tablecloths ...

The 11:13am train pulled out of Kildwick and Crosshills station and the refugees left to face an uncertain future.

Postscript

A surprising number of postcards of Cononley have been found in Belgium in recent years, including one showing the New Inn which was sent by John Holdsworth on 7th December 1915 to someone serving with the Belgian army. Written in English it explains that an Xmas parcel had already been sent (on the 2nd) and he hoped it had arrived safely; it concludes with “best wishes for Christmas and the New Year to you and all your comrades”.

Other Cononley postcards show views of the village annotated in French. These show no signs of having been sent through the post were most likely included in letters home written by refugees¹⁹.

Can you help us further ?

Do you have any further details of the refugees that came to this area during WW1 ? If so, please email us at history@farnhill.co.uk

Acknowledgements

The staff of Kildwick School kindly allowed us to view the school log book from the WW1 period. Information on the WW1 refugees in Cononley was collated from various sources and supplied by David Gulliver. The photographs and news report from Crosshills were provided by Freda Topham and the Keighley and District Digital Archive.

References

1. The First World War, A.J.P. Taylor; publ. Hamish Hamilton, 1963
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_\(1839\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_(1839))
3. https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Origin_of_the_Term_%22A_Scrap_of_Paper%22
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_invasion_of_Belgium
5. <http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/100-years-ago-britain-welcomed-belgian-refugees/>
6. Craven Herald, 29th September 1914
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Antwerp_\(1914\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Antwerp_(1914))
8. Keighley News, 17th and 24th October 1914
9. <https://www.sutton-in-craven.org.uk/g1914BelgianRefugees.asp>
10. Keighley News, 31st October 1914
11. Cononley School log book, 1910-1953
12. The History of Cononley: An Airedale Village, Trevor Hodgson and David Gulliver; publ. Kiln Hill, 2000
13. Kildwick School log book, 1907-1922
14. West Yorkshire Pioneer, 17th September 1915
15. Keighley News, 27th May 1916
16. West Yorkshire Pioneer, 9th June 1916
17. Keighley News, 8th February 1919
18. Craven Herald, 7th February 1919

19. Belgian Refugees in Cononley 1914-19 – notes on recorded facts; unpubl. Provided by David Gulliver

20. West Yorkshire Pioneer, 7th February 1919