

## Stamford and the Belgian Refugees

### *The Invasion of Belgium*

Belgium had a population of 7.5 million. It was a prosperous country with an economy based on trade and industry including a steel industry and coal and iron but imported food. The major ports were Antwerp and Ostend.

Germany planned to conquer France quickly. As the border was heavily fortified they planned to avoid the French fortifications by invading neutral Belgium as part of the Schlieffen Plan to capture Paris quickly. This act was seen as a violation of International law as Belgium was a neutral country. Belgian neutrality had been respected in the past and Britain had guaranteed Belgium independence with the Treaty of London in 1839.

The invasion took place on August 4th. King Albert, declaring that Belgium was a country not a road, led the Belgian army which resisted the invasion. The first battle in Belgium was at Liege (August 5-16th). This delayed the German progress and gave the British time to send a British Expeditionary Force to Belgium to join the Belgian army. It was small but highly professional. (The British did not have a large army and depended on the Navy as a main line of defence.)

Although the Germans were stopped, they had overrun Belgium which remained in their hands for the rest of the war. Over a million refugees fled the country, a quarter a million to England. War Refugee Committees were set up to cope with the refugees.

### *Events pertaining to the refugees in Stamford in 1914*

#### October 16<sup>th</sup> (Stamford Mercury)

An appeal is made by Mr Samuel, President of the Local Government Board for hospitality which is urgently necessary for town and country organisations to provide accommodation on a considerable scale and is asking for places to take 50-100 or more. He also appealed for individuals to offer care, The Belgian refugees tell an awful story of savagery which compelled them to flee from Mekelen, a manufacturing town of 60,000. On Sunday September 27<sup>th</sup> after German bombardment the whole town lay in ruins. It was then occupied by German soldiers. Refugees fled to Welhem where they stayed for 3 days and nights then that town was invaded and they went to Antwerp and were shipped to Harwich.

#### October 23<sup>rd</sup>

A crowded meeting was held at the Town Hall to consider the maintenance of the refugees attended by the Mayoress, the Marchioness of Exeter, Countess Villiers, the Countess of Ancaster and other prominent residents. The Mayor hoped that everyone would do all they could and they needed to think of expenses. Mrs Edmonds had offered furniture and the Mayor had bought 9 beds and 16 blankets and would make the gift up to £20. The estimated cost of maintenance was 7/- per week. Mr Halliday and Reverend Rogers advised proceeding cautiously as many of Stamford's own residents might need help before the war was over. Mr Coulson said that the town could be divided into districts and ladies appointed to collect weekly subscriptions. The Roman Catholic priest asked if they could get French refugees as he did not understand Flemish. The Mayor proposed that they proceed with arrangements for 20 and appointed a committee. The Mayor said that gifts of clothing, bedding, furniture and linen were acceptable.

Satisfactory arrangements were made with the owner of Eversley House School, Mr R.G.Evans.

This commodious dwelling has been furnished for the reception of the refugees. Large quantities of

bedding, furniture and household requisites have been given or loaned by the townspeople. The gas company undertook to supply gas free of cost and the Urban Electric Company would supply electric light at 2d a unit instead of 5d.

A letter to the Mercury suggested that a quiet reception be made as he had already noticed a lot of schoolchildren peering through the windows of Eversley House as if something in the nature of a freak show was taking place.

Villages were participating too. Easton had a house available. Collyweston planned to make a weekly collection. Folkingham had a scheme for entertaining and accommodating a number of refugees. Duddington and Ryhall also offered support.

#### October 30<sup>th</sup>

The Belgian Refugee fund had £389 in the bank. Mrs Pepper of Red Lion Square collected 2040 pennies. Madame Matilde Dorzou was put in charge of Eversley House, which had been fitted up to house about 30 refugees. The first party of 30 including a banker, an accountant and the postmaster of Louvain arrived on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and was met at the station by the Mayor and Mayoress, the Town Clerk and Reverend Father West, the Honourable Mrs Geoffrey Pearson and Mr Orlando Edmonds. Brakes conveyed the refugees to Eversley House where they were addressed by the Mayor. Ten more refugees arrived on Saturday evening. They attended mass each morning. The light and gas company supplied fuel on special terms. Drs Greenwood and Attenborough were in attendance.

#### November 6<sup>th</sup>

£462 has been paid into the Relief Fund. Another party of refugees were expected and preparations were made at a house on Broad Street, formerly occupied by Mr Hassan which brought the number of refugees up to 60.

#### November 13<sup>th</sup>

Relief Fund £493

To avoid difficulties at Eversley House two families left for Manchester.

#### November 20<sup>th</sup>

A whist drive raised £8 10s 6d for the refugees.

#### December 6<sup>th</sup>

A party arrived but soon moved on. Peasant classes arrived to occupy premises at 18 and 19 Broad Street

#### December 11<sup>th</sup>

Relief fund £689

#### December 18<sup>th</sup>

It was agreed that empty houses occupied by refugees should not pay rates.