

Bugbrooke and the First World War

Belgian Refugees

In the early days of World War One about a quarter of a million refugees fled to Britain from Belgium following the German invasion. Up and down the country Committees were set up to find accommodation for these refugees and give them help. Various references are made in the school letters to the local "Belgian Committee". It is not clear just what area the Committee covered, but it seems to have included Bugbrooke and one or two other villages. There is reference to refugees coming to Litchborough and Pattishall; and to them living in the Toll House (at Fosters Booth presumably) which seems to have been used as a sort of hostel,

In October 1914 there was a Belgium day held in Bugbrooke. The Ladies of the Committee sold copies of the "Pimpernel" and raised £7 11 shillings. Later in the month there was a meeting of the Committee at the Council School "to consider ways and means of offering a home to a small number of refugees".

The School letters record the following lighter incident: ". . . a lady collector called upon a villager to ask for a weekly contribution to the Belgian fund and explained that possibly a Belgian family would come here to Byre Farm. Whereupon the villager remarked quite innocently – What! Buy a farm. I didn't know there was one to sell."

It is not stated whether a refugee family ever actually moved into Byre Farm. However we know the Committee provided Monsieur and Madame Nathanoff "with a comfortable little home in Kiln Yard". (*The cottages in Kiln Yard have long since been demolished but they were off Ace Lane.*) Monsieur Nathanoff is described as having been a lace seller in Lille (*which is curious because Lille is actually in France though very close to the border with Belgium*). He seems to have spoken quite good English and was befriended by the schoolmaster Frank Wright, who got him to give a talk to the school. Monsieur Nathanoff gave an account to the children of how a family who were friends of his escaped from the bombardment of Antwerp. In the confusion the family were separated but they all managed to get to England eventually though by different routes. The family, which included a newborn baby, were housed in Pattishall. The School letters also record the touching reunion of this family with the Nathanoffs.

A further reference to Belgian refugees comes in a letter from Nurse Eva Moore who tells of a visit to Folkestone where she saw "hundreds of the poor creatures living on boats in Folkestone Harbour as there is nowhere else for them to go". She says she admires the splendid way the people of Bugbrooke have come forward to help the refugees.

Jim Inch for the 100 Years Project