

REFUGEES IN RUISLIP-NORTHWOOD

by Karen Spink

When I was looking up something recently in the 1915 Ruislip Parish Ratebook, my attention was drawn to some two-word entries in the column headed Occupiers. They stood out because they had been written in red ink. My curiosity aroused, I made some investigations. It is as a result of seeing those two words 'Belgian Refugees' that the following was written.

On Monday, 3 August 1914, Belgium was invaded by Germany, forcing Great Britain to declare war on Germany and so setting in motion the First World War. By late November 1914, German troops had occupied all of Belgium except for a small corner in the north-west. Nearly one million Belgians fled their country, mostly to The Netherlands, France and Britain.

During autumn 1914, some 200,000 refugees arrived at British ports. On one day alone in October, 11,000 disembarked at Folkestone, which by this time, along with the east coast and much of the south, was fortified by barricades. Together with French, Armenians, Russians and other nationalities, even Americans, the Belgians travelled in special refugee trains to the main London stations where they were met by members of organisations such as the Women's Emergency Corps and the Catholic Women's League.

The scene as a refugee train came in (not always at the expected station) could be chaotic. Belgians already here would be looking for family members. Girl Guides were serving coffee and soup. At the end of the platform sat a man on a raised platform with lists of hotels, boarding houses and lodgings for those who could afford them. People came with offers of clothing and similar necessities. Others turned up hoping to recruit refugees as servants, but were politely told that these were our nation's guests and were not expected to work immediately. From the station, refugees

were taken by omnibus, motor-car or taxi cab to the Aldwych Skating Rink, next to the offices of the Belgian Relief Committee. Here, in this makeshift clearing-house, every refugee was given a registration number before being allowed to leave for hotels and lodgings.

Those refugees who could not afford accommodation were taken to transit centres at Earls Court and Alexandra Palace where they waited for assistance from organisations and committees around the country. Ruislip-Northwood was no exception in offering such help. With the outbreak of war, the recently formed Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council (RNUDC) of 1904 had been unable to proceed with many of its plans for local services and amenities. Its building programme, the Ruislip-Northwood Town Planning Scheme and with it development of 'affordable housing' by, for example, the Ruislip Manor Cottage Society Ltd, came to a virtual standstill. Instead the Council turned to supporting local emergency committees set up as part of the war effort to help families in need.

In Northwood, a group of ladies formed the Belgian Refugees Committee on 14 September, with Miss May Roland Brown in the chair and Lady (Jenny) Rose as Secretary and Treasurer. Miss Roland Brown, founder of St Helen's School, Northwood, had personally witnessed the arrival of Belgian refugees at a former workhouse - St Giles Home, Endell Street, Covent Garden - where one of her former pupils, Nora Woodman, was matron. Subsequently she and some of her pupils, particularly those learning French, went into London to meet refugees off the trains and bring them back to Northwood. It was their endeavour, said Miss Roland Brown, to get 'the better class people'.

On Sundays the Belgians were entertained by St Helen's pupils in the school hall. Sub-committees were formed - Housing and Hospitality to help find local accommodation, Finance for receiving funds, and Stores for clothing.

The ladies of Eastcote were also doing their bit. This letter of appeal from Mrs May St Claire Atkins, who lived at 'The Retreat' in Field End, appeared in *The Ruislip Northwood Courier* on 23 October.

'Sir, - A few ladies in Eastcote are opening at once Southill Lodge (in the village), kindly lent by the owner, Mr R.H. Deane, as a home for a few of the upper class Belgian refugees, who for no fault of their own are stranded upon our hospitable shores. Residents of the village have been most kind in lending furniture, bedding, etc., but we must feed our guests, and also clothe them in many cases, and I appeal to the kind English hearts around and about our district to help us, however small the gifts and donations... We are hoping to give sixteen people home and shelter. Gifts of clothing, furniture, groceries, or donations to Mrs Hall, Fieldend Lodge, Eastcote, or to myself will be gratefully acknowledged by yours very truly...'

The response was encouraging. Many donations were received and offers of other houses came in. Meanwhile Mrs Goschen of 'Sigers', Field End and Mrs Annie Hall at Fieldend Lodge were co-opted onto Northwood's Belgian Refugees Committee, which subsequently became the Northwood and Eastcote Belgian Refugees Committee.

The previous week's *Courier*, of 16 October, had carried an appeal by the Ruislip and Eastcote War Emergency Committee, as a result of which a public meeting was convened in the Church Room, Ruislip on 28 October. Mr F.M. Elgood, JP, Chairman of the RNUDC, took the chair and Miss Roland Brown spoke of the activities at Northwood. Out of this meeting the Ruislip Belgian Guests Committee was set up, with Rev. W.A.G. Gray as Chairman, E. Shatford Ewer (Hon. Treasurer), H.C. Moore (Hon. Secretary) and P. Catchpole (Asst. Hon. Secretary).

Northwood

The first Belgian refugees in the Ruislip-Northwood area were a party of nine from Malines (Mechelen) who had escaped by night from German custody after four days of forced labour digging trenches. They arrived in Northwood on 25 September 1914. By 13 November there were 63 Belgians in Northwood, 37 of whom were living as guests in residents' homes. The other 26 were accommodated in five properties: 'Melville' and 'St Albans' in Chester Road, 'Felday' in Roy Road, a house and shop that became known as 'Brussels House' in Maxwell Road, and rooms over a shop in Church Road (possibly at the top of what is now the High Street near Emmanuel Church).

At Oaklands Gate, where the RNUDC held its meetings, a spare room was made available for the Belgians to use as a clubroom, with heating and lighting provided, and Northwood Golf Club opened its Smoking Room for their use every evening except Sundays. Additionally Mr E.A. Ryder, whose draper's shop at 9 Maxwell Road was one of the first to open there, lent a room as a storage depot for donated clothes. In December, the RNUDC provided another room at its offices for Mr H. Atkinson, MA, to hold English classes for Belgians.

There was assistance, too, for those providing refuge, as the RNUDC Minutes reveal. Towards the end of 1914, the Council's Assistant Overseer submitted a recommendation that premises entirely occupied by Belgian refugees should be excused from paying rates and this was implemented in 1915 (see **Fig.1** - Table of Dwellings).

Dwellings known to have been occupied by Belgian Refugees from 1914

	Owner	Occupier	Rates excused
<u>Northwood</u>			
'Melville' Chester Road	W.P. Edwards	W.A. Roland	* #
'St Albans' Chester Road	W.A. Sargant	D.O. Heath	#
'Felday' Roy Road	F.W. Carey	Mrs Harriet Lister	*
'Brussels House' 2 Maxwell Road	Wilson's Executors		*
Rooms over shop, Church Road	Messrs Hill Bros., Builders (?)		* #
<u>Eastcote</u>			
'South Hill House' High Road	R.H. Deane	Ronald H. Walker	* #
'Park Farm' Field End	R.H. Deane	Kenneth Goschen	
'Eversholt' Cuckoo Hill	J.A. Trythall	Arthur De Lissa	
<u>Ruislip</u>			
'Rosemead' Sharps Lane	T. Charles	Charles Iggulden	* #
3 Manor Close	Ruislip Manor Cottage Society		* #
2 Park Way	Ruislip Manor Cottage Society		* #
Vicar's cottage, Bury Street	Rev. W.A.G. Gray	Rev. W.A.G. Gray	

* 1/2 year ending 31 March 1915
1/2 year ending 30 September 1915

Fig. 1

Eastcote

As Mrs St Claire Atkins described in her letter to the *Courier*, Southill Lodge (South Hill House), now known as The Old Shooting Box, (Fig.2) was made available for refugees by Eastcote landowner R.H. Deane. Part of his Eastcote House Estate, it had been let to Ronald H. Walker but, probably owing to the war, had become vacant. Mr Walker's name is struck out in the Ratebook and replaced in red ink by the words 'Belgian Refugees' – one of six such entries in the Ratebook.

A large house, South Hill House had a drawing-room, dining-room, kitchen and scullery, four bedrooms and dressing-room upstairs, and three attic bedrooms. There were also three WCs (one outside) and a bathroom with hot and cold water. It may have been in poor condition (needing external and internal repair, according to a Valuation Inspector's Report in 1911) but it must have been with great relief that Eastcote's first Belgian family arrived there.

All 19 members of the same family – father, mother, 10 daughters and seven grandchildren – had travelled in their small fishing boat from Ostend to Lowestoft, a journey which took two and a half days, and then spent the next 10 days, with no change of clothing, at Alexandra Palace waiting to be housed.

Mr Arthur De Lissa of Mistletoe Cottage, Cuckoo Hill lent his ready-furnished cottage 'Eversholt' to four refugees from Malines who had moved seven times in Belgium in their flight from the Germans before finally escaping to England from Antwerp.

Mr and Mrs Goschen furnished Park Farm, Field End, which they leased along with their own home 'Sigers', to four Belgian guests who arrived on 28 October. Mr Deane, in addition to lending a house, gave a donation of money and a ton of coal.



Ray Preedy 1908

Fig. 2 – South Hill House, now known as the Old Shooting Box, Eastcote High Road



Fig. 3 – 3 Manor Close, Ruislip

Mrs Bennett Edwards of Haydon Hall also gave money, while the ladies of the Wesleyan Chapel, among them Mrs Lavender of Ivy Farm, Wiltshire Lane, busied themselves making clothes and woollen undergarments for the children.

By 13 November there were 27 Belgians in Eastcote.

Ruislip

Initially Ruislip's help was with donations of clothes, which were sent up to Aldwych, but in November Mr W.J. Collins made available 'Rosemead' in Sharp's Lane, a house owned by his builder partner Thomas Charles. Mr Collins paid the rent and furnished it with donated and borrowed items. A sub-committee of the Belgian Guests Committee was dispatched 'to select' a family and the lucky new occupants were Monsieur R. Hottat, his pregnant wife, their son, two daughters and a servant. They arrived on Wednesday, 18 November and in December Madame Hottat gave birth to Albert Georges Francois Lambert Hottat, one of the first Belgian refugee babies born in Ruislip-Northwood.

Rev. W.A.G. and Mrs Gray made their cottage next to the Vicarage in Bury Street available for a family of four, and a Mr Grenfell in Kingsend Avenue offered his house.

Two of the cottages built for the Ruislip Manor Cottage Society (mentioned above) were made ready. These attractively designed cottages, built to provide accommodation for people of small or modest means, were very up-to-date with bathrooms and WCs. Newly built 3 Manor Close (off Manor Way) (**Fig. 3**) and 2 Park Way (adjacent to the public footpath, formerly the old ridgeway) provided pleasant homes for refugee families.

Fund-raising and entertainments

Much fund-raising went on and there were numerous social activities to help the refugees. Concerts were held in church halls, Ruislip Debating Society ambitiously staged a popular comedy of the time, 'Caste' – the *Middlesex & Bucks Advertiser's* review was rather uncharitable, but commended the £10 raised – and Ruislip Tennis Club donated money raised at their whist drives. By the end of 1914, the Northwood and Eastcote Belgian Refugees Committee recorded that £1058. 5s 10d had been received in donations and subscriptions.

On 26 December, the Belgians were treated to an English Christmas, with a visit by Father Christmas, at a party in St Helen's school hall. An omnibus went round the district to collect them, there was a Christmas tree decorated by school pupils – boarders unable to go home for the holidays – and each Belgian received a present. Mr Atkinson, who had been teaching the Belgians English, now taught them the delights of English party games such as musical chairs.

The total number of refugees received in Northwood and Eastcote to the end of 1914 was 133. Of these, 18 had returned to the Continent, 37 had moved elsewhere in

HELPING THE BELGIAN REFUGEES.

More Arrivals in the "Advertiser" Area.



Middlesex & Bucks Advertiser
13 November 1914

England, while of the remaining 78 there were 46 in Northwood and 32 in Eastcote. About £16 a week was paid from the Committee's funds in assistance, with employed Belgians receiving a reduced allowance. Of the 19 men only six were unemployed: four aged between 50-70, one wounded man and one awaiting Belgian call-up. Of the 38 women, 15 were in employment. There were 21 children, five of them newborn.

No such statistics seem to exist for Ruislip.

A familiar story

Not everyone was sympathetic to the refugees however, despite the attempts made to bring the 'better class' of foreigners to Ruislip-Northwood. Lady Rose reported that there had been daily grumbles from local people who could not understand why able-bodied Belgian men were not serving in the war. In many cases the simple answer was that the refugees did not know at first where to join up. Despite Lady Rose's letters to the Belgian Legation and the Local Government Board with details of the Belgians in the area, it still took time for the authorities to respond. Ultimately many of them did enlist.

There were more serious problems in London after the initial enthusiasm for the refugees. "Everyone was Belgian mad for a time," one Londoner noted, but in May 1916 there was a riot in Lillie Road, Fulham with hundreds of

English people gathering in the street, smashing windows and damaging shops run by Belgians. There were complaints that the Belgians were lazy, ungrateful and even immoral. The 'Belgianitis' of 1914 had quite abated.

As the war continued, demands on local emergency committees to find funding for other things increased, and there is less mention of the Belgians. Two VAD hospitals opened in Ruislip-Northwood to treat the wounded: one at Tudor Lodge, home of Annie Hall, the other in Northwood in the Presbyterian Church, to which much of Miss Roland Brown's energy was diverted.

Although it is known that many Belgians suffering from TB were treated at Mt Vernon Hospital, it is unclear how long the refugees stayed in this area. No reports were issued between 1916 and 1919 'owing to expenses of printing'. A report issued in 1919 indicated that the first eighteen months were 'the most eventful', and that 'since then our Belgian friends have worked for their livelihood and supported themselves until one by one they departed to other fields of work, to the war or to Belgium'. One of them, known only as Berthe, who was brought to Northwood by Miss Roland Brown, worked till the end of the war as a cook at St Helen's School.

On 4 May 1919 a letter was published in the British press from King Albert of Belgium to King George V, thanking the British people for their hospitality to the refugees during the war. In response King George expressed joy that these Belgians had now been repatriated, concluding: "We have admired their patient, cheerful acceptance of changed circumstances, and are thankful that their exile is ended." Little did His Majesty realise that the 1914-18 war was not the so-called war to end all wars, and that in 1938, with Germany again on the march, this country would see another influx of Belgian refugees. Once more some of them would be received in Ruislip.

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