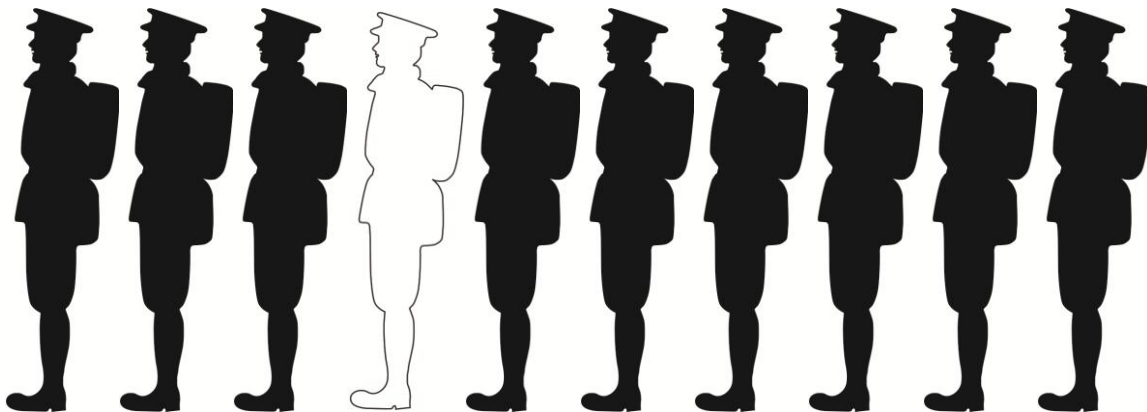


The Great War
Our Community Commemorated

Refugees Come to the Village



Booklet 4: Rod Cameron



Holmes Chapel and District U3A Local History Group

This booklet, fourth in a series about the effect of the First World War on Holmes Chapel, describes the reaction of the residents of Holmes Chapel to the influx of Belgian refugees to this country in the later months of 1914. Three questions are addressed, primarily from newspaper cuttings of the time:

- Why did Belgian refugees come to Holmes Chapel?
- How did the Belgian refugees get to Holmes Chapel?
- What did the Belgian refugees do in Holmes Chapel?

Please note that the full text from most of the newspaper cuttings is available in Appendices at the end of this booklet.

This booklet is dedicated to my Belgian 2nd cousin Jean Pierre whose grandmother Olive was working as a VAD in Stafford when she nursed her future husband, a wounded Belgian soldier.

Ref: Photograph on Front Cover is a non-copyright photograph of Belgian Refugees taken from the Internet

Refugees Come to the Village

1. Why did Belgian refugees come to Holmes Chapel?

At the outbreak of the First World War, the Germans had decided that an expedient route to invade France would be through Belgium. This invasion occurred between the 3rd and 4th August 1914. The Belgian Army was forced to retreat towards Antwerp and prepare a counter-offensive assisted by French and British forces. Liege fell to the Germans on 7th August, with Brussels falling on 20th, and Namur on 27th. Antwerp eventually fell on 10th October by which time the whole of Belgium except south-west Flanders was under German occupation.

During the invasion, the German army committed numerous atrocities against the civilian population of Belgium and destroyed civilian property: 6,000 Belgians were killed, 25,000 homes and other buildings in 837 communities destroyed. 1,500,000 Belgians (20% of the entire population) fled from the invading German army, with over a million leaving the country.

Most French speaking refugees (200,000) fled southward into France. However, Flemish and Walloon speakers crossed over the border into neutral Holland. Conditions in Holland for the Belgians were not pleasant – they were not particularly welcomed by the Dutch; and approximately 100,000 refugees had travelled onwards to England by the end of 1914, with more than a further 100,000 having travelled in 1915.

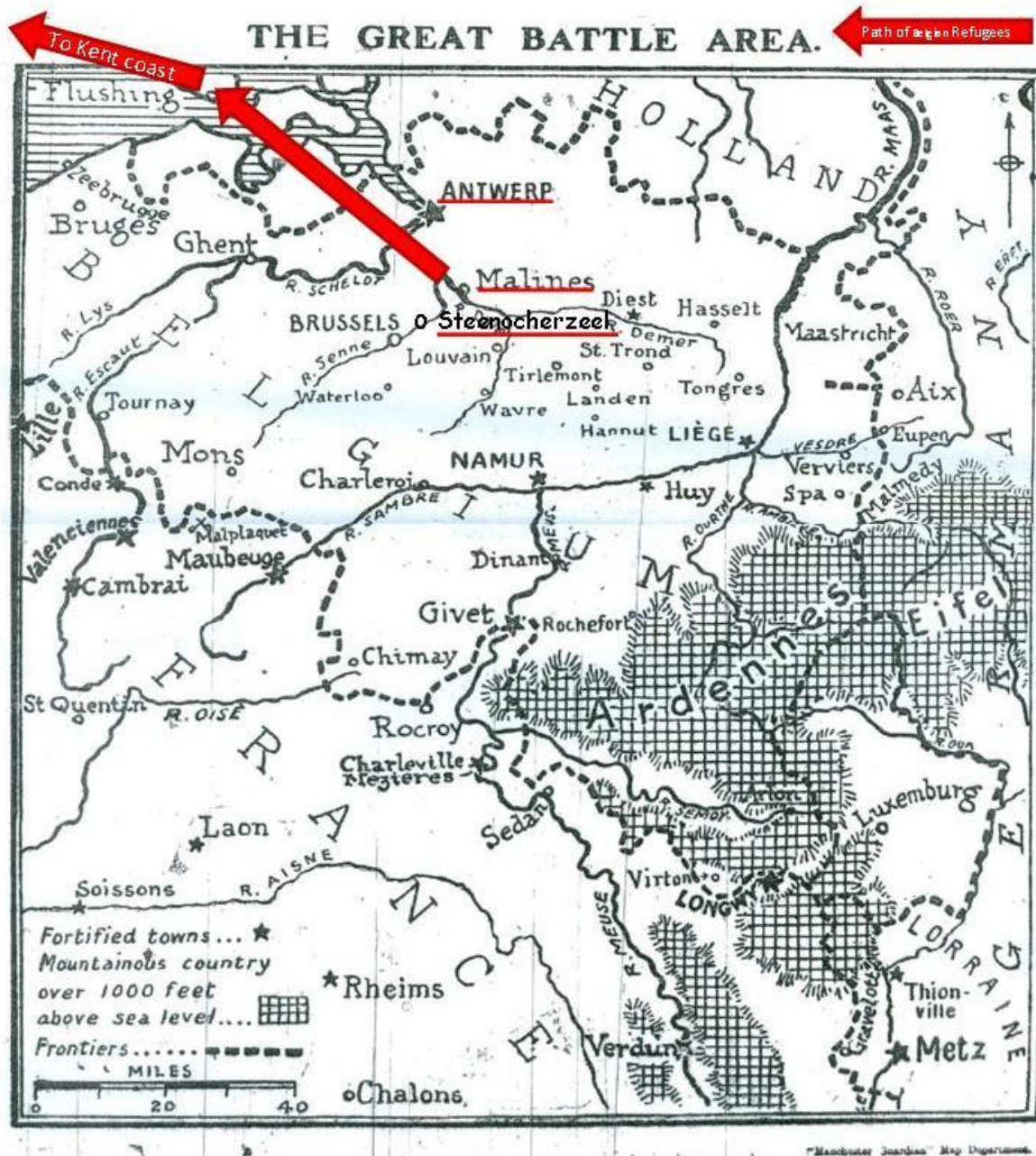


Fig 1: Map of the Battle Area (Belgium) in August & September 1914, showing path of Belgian refugees

At this time, the British people were subjected to a propaganda campaign that painted the actions of the German Army very badly indeed. A Hyde (Cheshire) newspaper reported, “the Prussian hordes swept through Belgium, murdering the inhabitants, and pillaging and destroying its churches and public buildings. Men were ruthlessly butchered, and women and children violated, till the land, drenched with blood, became a shambles and a charnel house.”

The same newspaper reported a public lecture in the same tone. It can be assumed that similar lectures were available to the inhabitants of Holmes Chapel – if not here, within easy reach at Knutsford or Sandbach.

“How Germany Makes War

At a lecture delivered in the Primitive Methodist School, Hoviley Brow (Godley, Hyde), on 28th September 1914, Dr Hulme, who had visited Germany, and was intimately acquainted with many prominent Germans before the war, aroused his audience to an intense feeling of indignation and disgust as he tore away the veil of hypocrisy, and portrayed the hideousness of Teuton ‘Kultur’, showing with lucid examples how the Hun was insidiously working to destroy British prestige, and so become the Dominant World Power.”

However not all the stories were of atrocities, the Crewe Chronicle on 29th August 1914, told the story of a Sandbach man who decided to go on holiday at a most unfortunate time, became stranded in Switzerland, and had a difficult return journey through France during the first weeks of fighting. Mr Poole who was Chairman of Sandbach Council, together with his wife eventually reached Paris as searchlights swept the sky for German airships. In Boulogne they crossed paths with British troops in khaki en route to the front.

But, there are several unfortunate stories reported. For example, the Crewe Chronicle on 12th September 1914 carried an interview with a young Belgian woman who gave a horrific first hand report of the

bombing of Antwerp by German Airships and her escape by coal boat from Flushing to Folkestone.

Such reports encouraged the British to be sympathetic to displaced persons, and they welcomed refugees from the continent with open arms. It will be seen that the 'great and good' of Holmes Chapel collected an impressive amount of funds to aid the destitute Belgians.

2 How did the Belgian refugees get to Holmes Chapel?

The first wave of refugees arrived in Britain at the end of August and others followed continuously through the autumn and winter months. They came to Folkestone, Tilbury and Hull in every kind of vessel and mostly in a great state of physical exhaustion and mental depression. By the end of November 45,000, mostly destitute, refugees had landed in England and a further 12,000 arrived in December. The movement continued through to the Summer months of 1915 but by this time the Belgians were coming from Holland and the numbers were controlled to about 2,000 a month.

A National War Refugees Committee was formed in London, together with the launch of a public appeal for funds and accommodation. Registration of all Belgians was made compulsory and all men between 18 and 25 were called for military service; by June 1915 over 200,000 Belgian refugees were distributed widely across the country.

Inspired individuals organised local refugee committees in most towns in the country. According to the Congleton Courier, an early local organiser was a Mr Taverner in Congleton who arranged with the National Committee for several parties of refugees to be delivered into the South Cheshire area via Congleton:

"The first 19 Belgians to come to Congleton arrived at the railway station

on the evening of 8th September 1914; they were given a tumultuous reception. Seated in decorated motor cars and a wagonette they formed a procession with police and Boy Scouts heading down Park Lane to the town centre and led by Congleton Town Silver Prize Band and Excelsior Prize Band. At the Town Hall they were held up by large and enthusiastic crowds but eventually they reached West House in West Street where they were to be accommodated by Mr Taverner.”

“Mr Taverner had visited the Belgian Relief Committee office in London to negotiate the details about a week ahead of the arrival in Congleton of the Belgian party. The Belgians were said to be practically all people of a fair social position. These first visitors were quickly moved on to Sandbach.”

On 12th September, a letter was published in the Congleton Courier from a Belgian, Jos Victor, which said that “Basically, although terrible experiences had been encountered by the refugees in their own country, they were extremely pleased by the reception given by the Congleton people, which gladdened their hearts. The kindness extended to them was truly a joy that roused them from their sadness. Thanks were given to the police, boy scouts, the band and all the people of Congleton. He said that the Belgians would never forget it.” It is entirely possible that this was the Mr Victor that later arrived in Holmes Chapel.

Similar scenes were repeated in Sandbach the next day when the group of 19, originally from Antwerp, arrived by motor car. It is entirely possible that the first Holmes Chapel refugee family was in this party. That there was a close connection between Holmes Chapel Belgian Relief Committee and Sandbach can be surmised from the donation of £4 15s 0d made by the Sandbach Committee, and noted in the Holmes Chapel Belgian Refugee Fund statement of Income and Expenditure.

The Crewe Guardian reported on the condition of another group of refugees from Liege as they paused at Crewe Station on their way to

Liverpool. "It was evident that the poor people had left their native land hurriedly and many had nothing but what they stood in. Some had their worldly possessions in bundles. They met with every kindness. Men about the platform filled the pipes of the men folk from their pouches, and many touching scenes were witnessed. Some were able to speak French and these said that they were exceedingly grateful to the English people. One had come from Liege and had been a witness of the brave resistance made there by Belgian troops. He had seen women and children killed by the Kaiser's Hun. Another from Louvain had been captured in his own home but managed to affect an escape."

Belgian families came to Holmes Chapel individually, as homes became available for them. In total, approximately 21 refugees in four families were cared for in Holmes Chapel district by the Refugee Fund between September 1914 and the end of 1915.

However, it should be noted that at least four more Belgian families were supported by individual families in Holmes Chapel, entirely separate from the Refugee Fund.

3 What did the Belgian refugees do in Holmes Chapel?

The first to arrive in Holmes Chapel were the **Pepermans** family sometime in September 1914. They were placed in a cottage on Middlewich Road which had been previously rented to the Holmes Chapel Girls' Club as a meeting place. They had been hoping for a Belgian family experienced in farming, but instead they got an engineer. Since September 1914,"Holmes Chapel has been rendering assistance to Belgians who had been driven from their own country. At first the matter was taken up by a few ladies, and a family of five (the **Pepermans** from Malines) were housed in the Girls' Club cottage, through the kindness of its members, who placed the house at their disposal. Donations were likewise received and the family was kept going for about 2 months".



Photo 1: The Girl's Club Cottage was probably one of four cottages built behind Williams delicatessen shop. Note the remaining door to one of the cottages adjacent to the lamppost.



Photo 2: The rear of the block which probably contained the Girl's Club cottage.

The Girls' Club (a local version of the Girl Guides) furnished the upstairs rooms of the cottage, and also paid the rent. In October 1914, the Holmes Chapel & District Sewing Society provided the family "with 2 pair Flannel knickers, 2 Women's Night Dresses, 2 Girls' Night Dresses, 2 Men's Night Shirts, 4 Boys' Night Shirts". On 29th October, the three **Pepermans** children, Arthur, Maria and John were admitted to Holmes Chapel School though their stay was short. Mr **Pepermans** obtained work at Fodens in Elworth, so the family exchanged places with another Belgian family from Sandbach. The children left Holmes Chapel School on 19th November. Unfortunately the exchange family was too large for the cottage and had to be accommodated elsewhere.

It soon became apparent that more formal arrangements would have to be made. A meeting was held, with the Vicar in the chair, on 20th October. Two Committees were formed. A Ladies Committee to make arrangements for providing for additional Refugees, and to look after them. The following were appointed on the Committee – Mrs Young, Mrs Haworth, Mrs Brundrit, Miss Ramsden, Mrs G T Jackson, Mrs Hulme, Mrs E Massey and Mrs H Bolshaw.

A Finance Committee was also appointed, consisting of the Rev. J H Armitstead, W O Carver, F A Howarth, H J Reiss, B W S Bolland, J T Young, F Johnson, W H Hulme and S Oakes, who acted as secretary. Within a short-time, the members had been "round their various districts asking for 1d to 1s a week towards expenses. Promises amounting to a little over £3 a week were easily obtained ... The difficulty is to obtain suitable cottage or cottages." Two houses were secured for six months. Mr & Mrs Howarth (of Sandiford) and Mr Reiss (of the Hermitage) paid the rent of Bank View, and Mr E Massey provided a cottage on Back Lane (Chester Road).



Photo 3: Bank View cottage on Middlewich Road



Photos 4 /5: The Massey Cottages on Back Lane (Chester Road). All three were owned by Mr Massey. The Belgians resided in one of them.

The **Victor** family of seven from Antwerp, came to live at Bank View. They had been exchanged with the **Pepermans** but unfortunately the Girl's Club cottage was too small for them. And Mr **Gillyns** and his family of four from Steenocherzeel, were placed in Mr Massey's cottage in Back Lane (now Chester Road). Both houses were furnished with donations or loans, and the committee purchased the remainder.

On 10 November 1914, Germaine and Pierre **Gillyns** the sons of Antoine **Gillyns** were admitted to Holmes Chapel School. However, Germaine was moved to Crewe Secondary school on 11 February 1915. The younger Pierre remained at the Primary School.

A third family, the **van Autros** arrived in December 1914 and were housed in the Girl's Club cottage. The five **van Autros** made a total of 16 refugees cared for by the Holmes Chapel Belgian Refugee Committee. Work was quickly found for the men who contributed towards the maintenance of their families.

Mr **Louis van Autro** was interviewed by a journalist from the Crewe Courier on 12th December:

"Refugees from Holland"

The house in Middlewich Road formerly used by the members of the Girls Club is again in occupation of a Belgian refugee family. They arrived on Friday from Holland. Mr **van Autro**, the head of the family told our representative that he was a book-keeper in Antwerp, but ever since the war broke out he had been out of work as his employers who were German Jews packed up and went back to Germany.

He and his family had been living on money which he had managed to save. When it was known that the Germans were going to make a bold bid for Antwerp, he sent his wife and three children over into Holland where they managed to rent a very small cottage of three rooms. He followed later after he had been working with a Red Cross detachment.

The Dutch people, he said, were very hard upon the poor refugees who were placed in stables and warehouses, in fact, anywhere so long as there was a roof. Then they demanded fabulous prices for foodstuffs and lodgings. If a refugee possessed any money it was not long before the Dutch people had it. This was quite different from the English people. Their kindness and generosity had simply astonished all the Belgian people. He had a very poor opinion of the Dutch.

He then went on to relate how he returned to Antwerp after it had been occupied by the German soldiers. Before he could do so he had to wait three days for his passport. He only wanted to go back to his house in order to secure some clothing for his children. Upon entering the town the Germans were fairly orderly, but on going to a friend who kept an Inn he came across two German soldiers helplessly drunk. Seeing him enter the room, they commenced to make a row, and he was obliged to take refuge in another part of the house.

At Flushing alone, over a million of Belgian money had been exchanged for that of Dutch. His family embarked at Flushing for England along with 500 refugees. It was a terrible passage and every minute they thought the vessel would founder. In conclusion he said that if the Germans remained in Belgium he would never go back. He was not going to see his son made a German soldier. He hoped before very long he would be able to find some sort of employment."

Like the others, the children attended the village school until they were old enough to attend the County Secondary School at Crewe. Their fees were waived by the Governors, and the County Education Committee paid the railway fares. George **van Autro** was admitted to Holmes Chapel school on 14th December, but moved to Crewe Secondary on 27th January 1915.

On 6th March 1915, the Congleton Chronicle printed a letter of thanks from the Queen of the Belgians:

QUEEN OF THE BELGIANS MESSAGE TO WOMEN OF ENGLAND

Sent from the Headquarters of the Belgian Army:

“My message to the women of England is one of admiration for their calm fortitude and of gratitude for all they have done towards ameliorating the sufferings which Belgium has been called upon to bear. Through our own trials our hearts are knit to those who also have given nobly of their dearest and best to help keep bright the lamp of civilisation. I ask God’s blessing on the women of England for all they have borne and done, and pray that peace will soon dawn.”

The Girl’s Club and Scouts did their bit by holding an evening of entertainment consisting of – “Farces, Glees and Songs” in Macclesfield Road school building on 7th April 1915.

Receipts	£	s.	d.	Expenditure	£	s.	d.
Collections and contributions	85	9	1	Furniture for Bank View	10	9	4
Contributions from Sandbach Committee	4	15	0	Maintenance	69	9	11
Donations from the Women’s Liberal Association	3	9	6	Railway season ticket for Mr van Autro	7	8	0
Donation from original committee	1	4	2	Rent of Bank View	11	0	0
Contributions for rent of Bank View	11	0	0	Repairing Boots	0	12	11
Proceeds of Hockey Club Entertainment	2	8	2	Cheque Book	0	4	0
Proceeds of Sale of Furniture at Bank view	8	0	0	Balance in hand	17	1	10
Bank Interest	0	0	1				
TOTAL	116	1	0		116	1	0

In the July issue of the Parish magazine, the Belgian Refugee Fund published a Statement of Income and Expenditure from October 1914 to June 1915 which is shown above. The Accounts show a staggering total receipts of £116 1s 0d of which £98 19s 2d had been spent on the Refugees.

Early in May 1915, Mr **Victor** and his family left Holmes Chapel. They moved to Oldham where he had been able to find work “at his own trade”. In the Parish Magazine, the Oldham Refugee Committee is reported to have taken him and his family under its care.

In July 1915, the Holmes Chapel Belgian Refugee fund reported “The families of Mr **Gillyns** and Mr **van Autro** still remain with us, and we hope that through the kindness of the inhabitants of the Parish we shall be able to make them happy and comfortable until such time as they are able to return to their own country.”

In August 1915, Mr **van Autro** and family departed the Girls’ Club cottage and went to live with relatives in Paris. Mr **Gillyns** and his family also left shortly afterwards in September 1915. The Girls’ Club was able to advertise in the Parish Magazine, “The Belgium Refugees have left. The Club house cottage is back for meetings. The Club will begin its 4th year of existence on October 7th. Girls over 12 welcome.” The crisis was over.

In September it was reported in the Parish Magazine that Mrs Carver, via the Holmes Chapel and Cranage Sewing Guild had sent “clothes for Belgian refugees to E Crosfield Pearson esq.” Edgar Crosfield Pearson and his family, were living in Broughton, Salford in 1911, with him working as a solicitor. One of his claims to fame is that he was Winston Spencer Churchill’s election agent. Whether and how he fitted into the local or national structure of the Belgian Refugee support system remains to be seen. He might just have been a personal friend of the Carvers.

That completes the history of the Belgians that were supported by the Holmes Chapel Belgian Refugee Fund. However there were several other families that were supported by individual families. Unfortunately there appears to be no further recorded information available to name any of these refugees:

It is reported by the 1910 Land Tax Surveyor who submitted his comments in 1914 that a Belgian refugee family were resident in Dr. Picton's property in Sadler's Close. They were staying above his coach house and stable in a bedroom and sitting room.

The Crewe Courier on 24th October 1914 reported that Sir Walter Shakerley of Somerford Hall, who was "the Hon Colonel of the 7th Cheshire Battalion is also sheltering a Belgian family."

The same Crewe Courier also reported that Mr & Mrs Howarth of Sandiford Holmes Chapel have prepared their shooting box at Davenport for a Belgian family. In the following week's edition it was reported that a Belgian refugee family has been placed in Mr F A Howarth's Shooting Box at Davenport near Holmes Chapel.

There is also mention of another "(Belgian) family of seven at Home Farm, Jodrell, Holmes Chapel".

An indication of how alien the British were to the Belgians, and vice versa, can be seen from a story taken from *The Countryside at War 1914-1918*. "Five Belgian soldiers were staying at a country house after being discharged from hospital. After two days they courteously inquired how much longer they would have to drink our terrible English medicine with their breakfasts. This was strong tea they had been given, and when Coffee was substituted for it, smiles wreathed every face". Perhaps this "disparity" explains why despite all the efforts made by the villagers, the refugees seem to have vanished away without leaving any trace, as soon as they were able to?

However this was not the last contact Holmes Chapel had with Belgium. A Belgian lady resided in the village after World War II, although she was not related to any of the refugees from the First War. She came to the village after marrying her British husband, and in later years was seen working in the Chemist in Holmes Chapel dressed in traditional Belgian clothing.

Should anyone know any further information about the Belgians in Holmes Chapel, please do not hesitate to get in touch ...

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Ch 3 Belgian Refugees 1914-19, p 18

An unknown publication describing Hyde in the First World War. *Chapter II – Succouring Homeless Belgians*

Congleton Courier, various editions

Crewe Guardian, various editions

Crewe Courier, various editions

Holmes Chapel Parish Magazine, 1914 & 1915

Holmes Chapel Primary School, Admissions Log

Report of the surveyor for the 1910 Land Tax, comments being
completed in 1914

The Countryside at War 1914 – 1918

APPENDICES

Newspaper cuttings from local newspapers. Issues from 1914 & 1915:

1. Local Hyde Newspaper – North Cheshire Herald?
2. Crewe Courier (CC) & Crewe Guardian (CG)

APPENDIX 1. Local Hyde Newspaper – North Cheshire Herald?

A typical newspaper clipping is taken from a History of the First World War in Hyde: “the Prussian hordes swept through Belgium, murdering the inhabitants, and pillaging and destroying its churches and public buildings. Men were ruthlessly butchered, and women and children violated, till the land, drenched with blood, became a shambles and a charnel house.”

In addition to newspaper articles, it was fairly common for “experts” to travel round and give talks; for example this newspaper cutting was also published in a History of the First World War in Hyde:

“How Germany Makes War

At a lecture delivered in the Primitive Methodist School, Hoviley Brow (Godley, Hyde), on 28th September, Dr Hulme, who had visited Germany, and was intimately acquainted with many prominent Germans before the war, aroused his audience to an intense feeling of indignation and disgust as he tore away the veil of hypocrisy, and portrayed the hideousness of Teuton ‘Kultur’, showing with lucid examples how the Hun was insidiously working to destroy British prestige, and so become the Dominant World Power.

Dr. Hulme’s statements were not mere heresay (sic), for he had talked to German military officers, business men, and manufacturers: and had discovered, beyond a shadow of a doubt, they were all inspired by the same determined purpose, and were prepared, if possible, to accomplish that purpose whatever the cost. Some of the German atrocities upon unfortunate and helpless Belgians which he described

were absolutely diabolical. He told of a Belgian who saw every member of his household murdered before his eyes by the Germans, ... children mutilated ... ; of Germans having entered a place as 'members of the Red Cross' armed with revolvers and knives, and murdered people as they lay in their beds. And, worst of all, he related that 550 inhabitants of the Belgian town of Dinant were taken into the public square, and in batches of 110 at a time, were blown to pieces by the Germans with field artillery, some of the victims being old men over eighty, and some children under five.

Some of the horrible incidents narrated by Dr Hulme had been told to him by actual eye-witnesses. It is well that the people of Hyde should understand the character of the Teuton, and bestial brutality of the Hun; and then they will be better able to realise that Britain and her allies did not enter the war without adequate reason, and that the gallant lads of Hyde who have fought and fallen in the war have not given their lives in vain. If the barbarous German jackboot could have swept over England as it swept through Belgium the fate of thousands of our women and children would have been quite as horrible as that of the Belgians."

APPENDIX 2. Crewe Chronicle and Crewe Guardian

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 29 Aug 1914

Flight from the continent

- Sandbach Gentlemen's Experience

Mr A E Poole, chairman of the Sandbach council who along with his wife has been stranded in Switzerland has kindly given an account of his experiences. The first signs of war Mr Poole states, were at Belgium while travelling to Switzerland. Their trains were "held up" for about five hours by troops, as a precautionary measure. They little thought then that the war would be so wide spread or they would have certainly considered returning to England immediately.

However, they remained at Lucerne for eight days after which time they determined along with 20 others to try their luck to get through to Paris in one of the few trains still running.

By this time, the French mobilisation had been completed, and what encouraged them was that some English and Americans had succeeded in reaching Paris. They prepared themselves for a tedious and trying journey and trusted to fate. For 16 days they had been without letters or English newspapers. The only papers available were strongly German biased, scrappy and unreliable.

On August 18th at 4:34 am they left Lucerne with a good stock of provisions. For a distance of 120 miles to Geneva they travelled fairly comfortably except for the stoppages at every station. The railway lines, bridges, level crossings were all strongly guarded by finely built Swiss soldiers. Above 400,000 Swiss soldiers had been mobilised. Geneva was reached at 4:50 in the afternoon after having changed previously at Berne. They were then conveyed to the frontier town of France. Here they had to leave the train to be examined by customs officials, passports being produced, examined and stamped by the French authorities. Being in French territory every precaution was being taken all along the route. At 9:30 they arrived at Ambereen where they disembarked again only to be told the unpleasant news that there would be no train until 1:30 am then next morning. Altogether there would be 400 tourists stranded at this very small village. Not permitted to remain on the station, as the line was being used for military purposes, they were obliged to pass the rest of the night walking the country lanes. Fortunately the evening was very fine and pleasant.

The experience over, they again scrambled for a seat on the departing train. Before steaming out of the station another train filled with German-wounded soldiers drew alongside. At the awful sight many people fainted.

The journey now was becoming very tedious, but the soldiers who were everywhere treated “John Bulls” people very courteously.

At one small station, where there was a Red Cross base, the soldiers gave them black coffee and sugar, served in glasses. In recognition of this kindness they patronised the collecting boxes for the wounded soldiers. At noon on Thursday August 20th, they arrived at Dijon an important railway junction. A train was boarded here for Paris and at 9:20 pm they entered the French capital. Search lights were sweeping the sky for any possible German airships. Paris itself was practically deserted. The streets and boulevards were all very quiet, rather different than when they were here at the time of the visit of King George last April. At 4:30 next morning they prepared for the journey to the French seaport of Boulogne. On reaching the port they were proud to see a large number of khaki troops, and they were given a rousing cheer.

When about to embark on the boat the English tourists scored over the Yankees a little, as the order was given “All British subjects first”. This caused much merriment, and the Yankees joined in good humouredly, the passage across the channel was pleasant, and all that was seen of the British fleet was a torpedo boat. On Friday at 7 pm they entered London, and they came to Sandbach at noon on Saturday.

Crewe Guardian

Friday 11 Sep 1914

Refugees in Sandbach

Few Sandbach folk will forget the spectacle they witnessed in High Street on Wednesday night when a party of 19 Belgian refugees – homeless and penniless – were brought into the town in search of a resting place. They were kindly treated, for the hearts of the Sandbach folk went out to them in their pitiable plight.

They are from Antwerp and have travelled to England via Flushing after a period of great anxiety and horrible suspense.

They were received at Victoria Station, London and cared for by the Red Cross Society. Through the kindly influence of a Congleton gentleman they were sent on to that town so many as could there find a house stayed, but this group of 19 were sent in motor cars to Sandbach, and Foden's Band who speedily assembled and met them in Congleton Road and then headed the procession to the fountain in High Street, playing enlivening music. It was intended at first to billet them in the Town Hall but sympathetic residents came forward in large numbers to find shelter for them in their homes.

Mr Taverner who accompanied them from Congleton addressed the large crowd assembled and expressed the hope that these poor people could be properly provided for. More were expected, mostly children – probably orphans – and he hoped that those who took them would keep them until the war was over, and then, if their parents could be found, hand them over.

There is but one lady who can speak English and whilst she is a stranger to the party she acts as an interpreter. Talking with a "Guardian" reporter, in broken English, she said she had left her two children in Antwerp. For two weeks she had slept on the coal in the cellar afraid of succumbing to the horrible practice of the Germans of dropping bombs from airships. She had seen four people killed in this way, and the people were living in mortal dread of them. She was very thankful to her new found friends and so were the others, even if all they had left was what they stood up in.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 12 Sep 1914

Sandbach: Interview with a refugee

- Conversing with one of the refugees, a young married lady from Antwerp who is being cared for by Mr & Mrs H Ferrand, Congleton

Road, our representative learned a sad story. Speaking fairly good English, she said she boarded, along with several hundreds of people a coal boat at Flushing bound for Folkestone. In the scramble to get on board four ladies fell into the water and were drowned. The boat was simply packed. Her husband and one son were fighting at the front, whilst her two other children were still living with her father and mother at Antwerp.

She expected they would come to England shortly, and she hoped she would be able to join them very soon. She then went on to relate how for several days before leaving Antwerp they had slept and lived in the place where they kept the coals (meaning the cellar) because of the bombs which were being dropped by the German airships. One bomb which exploded in the street actually killed twelve people. The Kaiser she said could not take Antwerp because of the Belgian soldiers and their fortresses. He then intends to burn the place by those awful airships. Further in the interior, the homes of many were being burnt down and the people had nothing left. She liked England very much because the people were so very good and kind. She hoped before very long she would be able to earn her own living. Five years ago she resided for a short time in London, her husband being employed in a large tailor's shop.

- The seven refugees who have been taken by Mr Jackson of the Pitts, include father and mother, three children and their two grandmothers. The two last named escaped from a home in Belgium similar to a workhouse in England.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 26 Sep 1914

Preparing for Refugees

The members of the Holmes Chapel Girls Club are busily engaged converting their clubrooms in Middlewich Road into a comfortable house for a Belgian family. Household utensils are being given by the

inhabitants [of HC] and the house will be fully furnished. The club is sparing no pains towards making the place bright and cheerful. It is their wish to secure a family which has been used to farming. The local Liberal Women's Association has decided to devote this year's subscription towards the maintenance of this home.

Crewe Guardian

Friday 16 Oct 1914

Belgian Refugees at Crewe

Five Hundred Belgian Refugees who had travelled from Antwerp via Dover, making their way to Liverpool where homes are being provided for them, passed through Crewe station yesterday afternoon. They were welcomed by the Mayor at the request of the local Government Board who provided refreshments for them. They arrived at Crewe about 2:40 pm the train drawing up along a reserved portion of No 3 Platform. Huge hampers of food and urns of coffee and tea were brought from the refreshment rooms and large numbers of helpers including members of the platform staff gave each one a package containing bread, butter and cake. Each child was given a packet of chocolate and each man received a packet of cigarettes.

It was evident that the poor people had left their native land hurriedly and many had nothing but what they stood in. some had their worldly possessions in bundles. They met with every kindness. Men about the platform filled the pipes of the men folk from their pouches, and many touching scenes were witnessed. Some were able to speak French and these said that they were exceedingly grateful to the English people. One had come from Liege and had been a witness of the brave resistance made there by Belgian troops. He had seen women and children killed by the Kaiser's Hun. Another from Louvain had been captured in his own home but managed to effect and escape.

The children seemed happy and quite contented with their lot. They waved handkerchiefs whenever an English friend made an appearance. Everyone seemed anxious to shake hands and many souvenirs were exchanged.

After a stay of about half an hour the train moved off and fluttering handkerchiefs were seen from the windows until it disappeared round the bend of the line. Later another train with 200 refugees passed through the station en route to Manchester, but did not stop.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 17 Oct 1914

Belgian Refugees at Crewe

Yesterday (Thursday) two trains of Belgian Refugees arrived at Crewe station on their way to Liverpool. In the first train there were 700 men, women and children, and the Mayor and Mayoress gave them a hearty welcome. The train remained in the station over half an hour during which time the refugees were sumptuously fed. Cigarettes and chocolate were freely dispensed, and as the train glided out the refugees heartily cheered their hosts and hostesses. The second train did not stop at Crewe. Every arrangement for the comfort and convenience of the party was made by Mr F G Cooke the Stationmaster and Mr Travers the assistant stationmaster.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 24 Oct 1914

Holmes Chapel: Shooting Box for Belgians

* Mr & Mrs Howarth of Sandiford, Holmes Chapel have prepared the shooting box at Davenport for a Belgian family.

* The family which is being cared for by the members of the Girls Club will be able to support themselves very soon, as the man has been found work at Messrs Fodens Ltd, Elworth.

* Another family of seven are at Home Farm, Jodrell

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 24 Oct 1914

Soldiers at Somerford Hall

On Monday, about 20 wounded Belgian soldiers arrived at Somerford Hall the residence of Colonel Sir Walter Shakerley. For a week they have been treated in Manchester, and now by the generosity of Sir Walter they will spend their period of convalescence in beautiful country. The journey was made in motor cars from Manchester. Mr J Monaghan, who was in charge of the Holmes Chapel Red Cross was in attendance. Of the ladies section, Mrs F Lee and Miss Bolland were on duty the first night.

Sir Walter who is the Hon Colonel of the 7th Cheshire Battalion is also sheltering a Belgian family.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 24 Oct 1914

Disappointed crowds at Nantwich

Some hundreds of people assembled at the railway station yesterday. They were anticipating the arrival of Belgian refugees. The train by which they were expected however, did not bring them and the disappointed crowd dispersed.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 7 Nov 1914

Pithy Pars

- This week Holmes Chapel has sent over 400 articles to headquarters for distribution among the soldiers
- A Belgian refugee family has been placed in Mr F A Howarth's Shooting Box at Davenport near Holmes Chapel.

Crewe Guardian

Friday 20 Nov 1914

Sandbach: The Belgian Refugees

Four of the Belgian refugees who are being lodged in The Cottage, Sandbach have left for Holland in order to be near their own homes. They express themselves profoundly thankful to the people of the town for their whole-hearted hospitality and kindness.

A family of five refugees have been brought to the Cottage from Holmes Chapel as one of the male members has been engaged at Messrs Foden's works. Four of those at Sandbach have been sent to Holmes Chapel.

Crewe Chronicle

Saturday 12 Dec 1914

Holmes Chapel: Refugees from Holland

The house in Middlewich Road formerly used by the members of the Girls Club is again in occupation of a Belgian refugee family. They arrived on Friday from Holland. Mr van Autro, the head of the family told our representative that he was a book-keeper in Antwerp, but ever since the war broke out he had been out of work as his employers who were German Jews packed up and went back to Germany. He and his family had been living on money which he had managed to save. When it was known that the Germans were going to make a bold bid for Antwerp, he sent his wife and three children over into Holland where they managed to rent a very small cottage of three rooms. He followed later after he had been working with a Red Cross detachment.

The Dutch people, he said, were very hard upon the poor refugees who were placed in stables and warehouses, in fact, anywhere so long as there was a roof. Then they demanded fabulous prices for foodstuffs and lodgings. If a refugee possessed any money it was not long before the Dutch people had it. This was quite different from the English people. Their kindness and generosity had simply astonished all

the Belgian people. He had a very poor opinion of the Dutch.

He then went on to relate how he returned to Antwerp after it had been occupied by the German soldiers. Before he could do so he had to wait three days for his passport. He only wanted to go back to his house in order to secure some clothing for his children. Upon entering the town the Germans were fairly orderly, but on going to a friend who kept an Inn he came across two German soldiers helplessly drunk. Seeing him enter the room, they commenced to make a row, and he was obliged to take refuge in another part of the house. At Flushing alone, over a million of Belgian money had been exchanged for that of Dutch. His family embarked at Flushing for England along with 500 refugees. It was a terrible passage and every minute they thought the vessel would founder. In conclusion he said that if the Germans remained in Belgium he would never go back. He was not going to see his son made a German soldier. He hoped before very long he would be able to find some sort of employment.

Booklets in this series produced by the Holmes Chapel U3A Local History Group:

1. Holmes Chapel before the War
2. Village People 1914 – 1918
3. The Men Who Went to War
4. Refugees come to the village
5. Beating the Drum – Recruitment and Communication
6. The Community Response
7. Feeding the People
8. Rationing During the War
9. Rules and Regulations
10. Education
11. Life Goes On
12. Holmes Chapel at the End of the War

For copies of booklets see web site
www.holmeschapelhistory.co.uk

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WW1 and Holmes Chapel & District U3A

In 2011 the Holmes Chapel & District University of the Third Age (U3A) was set up in the village and one of the activities under its umbrella was a local history group. This attracted people who had been involved in research in the past as well as some new volunteers eager to learn more. After an initial period of encouragement and training for the newcomers it was decided that the group would work together on a topic - The Story of Holmes Chapel and district during the First World War.

This is one in a series of booklets describing different aspects of life in Holmes Chapel and district before and during the First World War. A full list of the booklets is given on the inside of this back cover.

Research Group Members in 2014: Bill Barber, Cath Cameron, Rod Cameron, John Clowes, Peter Cotton, John Cowburn, Stella Freer, Gwen Hayhurst, Barbara Jackson, Lynda Kappes, Val White, Janet Yarwood.



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