

## **EMBSAY-WITH-EASTBY AND WORLD WAR ONE**

### **BELGIAN REFUGEES**

#### **THE INVASION OF BELGIUM**

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1914 German troops swept across Belgium in a bid to overrun France quickly before the French could fully mobilise.

This was a clear violation of the Treaty of London (1839) by which Britain had promised to guarantee Belgium's neutrality and protect them from invasion.

Britain had no choice but to keep her word, and would not have maintained her international credibility if she stood by. The fear of a German invasion in the event of a defeat of France was also very real.

Nearly a million-and-a-half Belgians (one-sixth of the country's population) were displaced from their homes, some fleeing to France and the Netherlands, and the majority to England.

#### **REFUGEES ARRIVE IN ENGLAND**

It is impossible to know the true scale of the influx of refugees as the unprepared British government were unprepared for their arrival, and record-keeping was initially very poor.

Estimates of those arriving in Britain vary from 200,000 to 225,000.

The British government invited thousands to come over in order to work in the emerging war industries.

In addition about 140,000 Belgian soldiers were sent to convalescent hospitals in Britain. The British government found them a useful propaganda tool – the “plucky” soldiers of a small country who had sacrificed themselves now needed British aid.

#### **PROPAGANDA VALUE**

The refugees were met with a huge wave of sympathy and charity. Their plight was not just a humanitarian crisis, but also of great propaganda value, giving Britain a sense of moral purpose, and a channel for anti-German sentiment.

One of the main justifications for going to war against Germany in 1914 was because of “Brave Little Belgium” – and the atrocities which the invading army committed, whether in reality or alleged.

The refugees also provided a useful focus for civilians, desperate to make themselves useful and contribute to the war effort, and prove that England was the very opposite of the “murderous Huns” and militaristic Prussians. For opponents of the war the refugees was also a focal point for humanitarian work.

#### **REFUGEE WELFARE**

It was left to a voluntary body, the War Refugees Committee (until the government was able to step with financial assistance in August 1916, and eventually took it over), to mobilise help, through a network of thousands of local committees. Most refugees were processed through transit camps such as Alexandra Palace and Earl's Court in London, before being sent to new homes across England.

The organisation was headed by Lady Lugard, and although she was eventually pushed into a minor role by the government representatives on the committee, it was her undaunted determination, relentless pestering of the authorities, and administrative skills that launched the great work of the WRC.

**Many thousands of these families and individuals were “adopted” by towns and villages across the country,** and initially welcomed with open arms, showered with gifts and practical help in the form of homes, furniture, and food parcels.

In some places special villages with their own shops, factories, school, and churches, were built to give them employment, shelter and a sense of community.

French-speaking Belgians (about a third of the refugees) were preferred as house guests because they were perceived to be more civilised and the language could be understood by those who had studied French, whereas very few English people could speak Flemish.

So while the French-speakers were allocated to private homes, and up-market towns like Harrogate and Ilkley, the Flemish speakers were sent to work in the factories & mills of Huddersfield, Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield.

## REFUGEES IN YORKSHIRE

About 10,500 Belgians were sent to live in Yorkshire, most heading to Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford to work in munitions factories. A large number were also employed at Rowntree’s chocolate factory in York.

Among the first to arrive were wounded soldiers most of whom were treated at the 3rd Northern General Hospital, Sheffield.

## REFUGEES IN CRAVEN

The first refugees to arrive in Craven were welcomed at **Bolton Abbey**:

*“His Grace [Duke of Devonshire] 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 numbers 24, including three children. They were conveyed to the Hall in carriages and were there welcomed by Lady Blanche Cavendish, second daughter of the Duke and Duchess.”*

(Craven Herald, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1914)

Many others followed, and were accommodated in Skipton, Silsden, Draughton, Crosshills, and elsewhere across Craven.

## REFUGEES IN EMSBAY

*“On Wednesday evening a public meeting was held in the British School to decide what provision could be made for the reception and maintenance of a Belgian Refugee family in the village. ... there were about sixty residents present ... The request for subscriptions was met by a most hearty response, and in a few minutes a guaranteed weekly sum of £1 7s 4d was promised in addition to goods. A great quantity of furniture was also forthcoming, and it is presumed that the committee will have the house ready for occupation by the middle of next week.”*

(Craven Herald, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1914)

*“Distress Committee. – .... Mr. Anderton reported that the governors of the Skipton Grammar Schools had agreed to admit the Belgian boys and girl, free of cost, and also to provide them with dinners. The matron (Miss Heron) also reported that Mrs. Sugden had voluntarily made the necessary garments for the Belgian refugees. – The secretary reported that Mr. Lewis Phillip and Mr. J.W. Phillip were arranging a concert, the proceeds to be devoted to the Belgian Refugee Fund.”*

(Craven Herald, 4<sup>th</sup> December, 1914)

## The Slock Family

**Oscar Slock (44)**, his second wife Catherine Elodie Degauw, and their children: Urbain Honore (16), Rosalie Josephine Celina (13), and Louis Charles (12), were welcome to Embsay in November 1914.

Oscar was a saw mill foreman, who spoke both French and Flemish. The family had fled from Louvain to Ghent, but the German advance, and the loss of all their savings, forced them to travel to Folkestone.

After 5 days in London, and over two weeks in Colne, they were allocated to Draughton with several other families. They were finally sent to Embsay.

Embsay were asked to take in another, but appeared to have decided that one family was quite enough.

A Ladies’ Committee welcomed them on their arrival in Embsay, and the village turned out to greet them with a tea party.

The Slock family settled in well – often taking part in village social events:

“A concert ... in aid of the Embsay distress fund, was given in the Wesleyan Schoolroom .... *Mr. Slock and Masters Slock* (Belgian refugees) also contributed to the evening's entertainment. ... *Mr. Slock* entertained the audience with a song about an umbrella, in his own language, his gestures being more expressive than his words to those present. *The Masters Slock* sang the Belgian, French and British National Anthems, and also joined in the chorus of “It's a long way to Tipperary,” sung by Miss Conway.”

(West Yorkshire Pioneer and East Lancashire News, 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1914)

In July 1915, Oscar may have been the “Belgian gardener” at Embsay Kirk, mentioned (but un-named) as helping a child who had been hit by a motor car on Kirk Lane. This same gardener also tended one of the Embsay allotments.

The children attended Ermysted's and Skipton Girls' High, but as soon as he was old enough, Urbain returned to Belgium to join the army – his eventual fate, and of the rest of the family, is unknown.

Some refugees returned to Belgium after a year or so, while others remained in Britain until the Armistice of 1918. In the end, 90% were repatriated.

But some were never able to return.

### The Belgian Refugee at the Sanatorium

**Leopold Joseph Van Duyboden** was a young Belgian refugee who had been “adopted” by the Wesleyan congregation at Walton-le-Dale near Preston.

He was a medical student, and he may have come to Embsay to help out in the Sanatorium at Eastby.

Or, he may have come as a patient – he died at the Sanatorium in November 1917, from tuberculosis, with which he had suffered for 2½ years.

He was 21 years old.

$\frac{1}{14}$ H 10/- was the unpaid	Leopold Joseph Van Duyvenboden No. 507	A Belgian who died at the Eastby Sanatorium Certified under the Burial Laws Amendment Act 1880 by D. Ariott	Dec 1 <sup>st</sup> 1917	21 years	Charles V
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Burial Register entry for Leopold Van Duyvenboden

(St Mary the Virgin Church, Embsay-with-Eastby)

Leopold was buried in the churchyard at St. Mary's, Embsay, where his little gravestone is inscribed:

“To the memory of Leopold Joseph Van Duy Venbodn died November 28th 1917 aged 22 years. Belgian refugee since February 1915 late guest of the Walton le Dale Wesleyan Congregation.”



*Leopold's gravestone inscription (as revealed using Reflectance Transformation Imaging photography)  
(photographed by Alan Williams, 2018)*

## EASTBY SANATORIUM

For reasons that are unclear, the number of patients being treated at any one time at Eastby was declining rapidly, yet tuberculosis was still a major killer disease.

A new lease of life was given to the Sanatorium with the appointment of a remarkable woman, Dr. Catherine Arnott, as the chief medical officer, in 1914. She ran the Sanatorium (purchasing it outright in 1921) until the 1940s, taking in up to 84 patients (all boys) at any one time.

The daughter of Surgeon-General Sir Francis Schott, the redoubtable Catherine was a militant suffragette (Her sister Harriet was a suffragist, J.P. and well-known charity worker in Coventry). She had previously worked in a lunatic asylum, a poor law infirmary in Camberwell, London, and in South Africa, treating miners with lung disease. She died in October 1942 at Eastby, and was buried at her family home in Scotland.



*Boys and staff at Eastby Sanatorium (un-dated, probably 1930s)*

*Dr Arnott is probably the white-haired lady seated in the middle*



*Eastby Sanatorium (un-dated photograph)*  
(source: <http://old.hedley-francis.co.uk>)

*Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)*