

BELGIAN REFUGEES IN CROWLE, 1914-15

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Amongst our family papers is an exercise book containing the minutes of a War Relief Committee established by the people of Crowle, in the Isle of Axholme in Lincolnshire, on the outbreak of the First World War. My wife's paternal grandfather, Dr William Hendry Mason Alexander, originally from Scotland, had set up as a country G.P. in Crowle and lived at Ahern House. He and his wife were leading lights in this Committee and latterly Dr Alexander was chairman, which is probably why the book passed down to us. (Dr and Mrs Alexander had three sons, but my father in law became a solicitor, and he handled his own father's estate when he died. I have those papers too).

The Minutes of the War Relief Committee in Crowle, which begin with a general meeting held in the Market Hall on 20 August 1914 are hardly the stuff from which bestsellers are made; but nevertheless, I believe there is a human story here of considerable interest.

We tend to think that the First World War began in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand; but, so far as Great Britain was concerned, it began on 4 August when Britain declared war in Germany. This was done because the Germans had violated Belgian neutrality, guaranteed by the Powers (including Prussia) in 1839. In accordance with the Schlieffen Plan, as modified by the younger Moltke, the German Army swept through Belgium in a matter of weeks. Brussels fell on 20 August; Antwerp on October 1914, after a siege of 11 days. As a result of the invasion, around 250,000 Belgian refugees made their way to Britain and the newspapers were filled with stories of German atrocities, which set the tone for the entire war.

The people of Crowle decided that they had to 'do their bit'; and in the late Summer and Autumn of 1914 this meant helping the Belgians as well as their own. A separate sub-committee and a separate fund concerned with Belgian refugees was soon set up. Further, on 1 October 1914, the Committee resolved 'to ascertain if there are any empty houses available for any Belgian refugees that may be sent to Crowle', while on the 15th it was resolved that a sub-committee be appointed to enquire as to what accommodation could be found for them.



The Market Hall in Crowle



British Recruiting Poster, 1914

On 20 October it was decided that clothing collected for the refugees should *not* (as previously agreed) be sent to London, but rather that it should be disposed of by the local ladies who had done the collecting. It was also reported that the Belgian Sub-Committee had made a tour of the town and received several offers to take individual refugees. In addition they had found several houses, 'suitable for housing any Refugees sent here' (there follows a list of 5 such houses). Finally it was resolved to apply to the War Refugees Committee in London 'and ask that 3 or 4 families of 4 to 5 members each be sent here.' And further to ask 'if any orphan children will be allowed to be adopted.'

The request was not made in vain. The minutes for 24 June 1915 record the following payments to Belgian families in Crowle:

De Vos	13/-	per week
De Touch [sic] at Ross' Cottage	14/4d	p.w.
Ditto at Laden's Cottage	12/-	p.w.
Henert	11/9d	p.w.

Meanwhile, fundraising proceeded apace. A concert was held. The Crowle tennis club promoted a whist-drive and there was a 'cake-guessing' competition. A 'cinematograph exhibition' was put on. Mrs Webster gave the proceeds of sale of her scrapbook. Professor Ainsley gave 25% of the gross takings from his lecture. People sold flowers. On 31 October 1914 it was resolved that the Ministers 'be asked to make known from the pulpits what household furniture is required to complete the furnishings of the houses for the Refugees.' This reflects that there were several churches or chapels in Crowle – Anglican, Baptist and Wesleyan. Several adult collectors volunteered and were appointed; but on 5 November 1914 the Committee also voted that 'a number of children be allowed not exceeding four be allowed to collect on the streets for the Belgian Fund on Statutes Day, the choice of children was left with Mr Sanderson'. It is difficult to imagine this happening today!

The sums raised were considered impressive and subscriptions were publicised in the local press. Someone, possibly Dr Alexander - who attended frequent committee meetings in the second half of 1914 and first part of 1915 - pasted some of these reports in the Minute book. On 29 July 1915 it is recorded that the Committee had £110/8s/4½p in the General Fund and £43/7/7½p in the Belgian Fund.

One has to admire the philanthropy; but there are two features of the Crowle minute book which give pause for thought. The first is that the meetings of the Committee peter out in 1915 – there are only three recorded for the second half of

that year. After that there were only two meetings in 1916, followed by three in 1921 and a final one in 1925. What does this indicate? Probably not the death of the original philanthropic spirit, but the dwarfing of it, in comparison with the size of the task undertaken. The War had not ended by Christmas 1914, as many had hoped. The British Army, which stood at around 100,000 men on the outbreak of war had to be increased by around a million, before it was able to take on the Imperial German Army on anything like equal terms. The Crowle Committee was able to help a few individuals on a strictly local basis; but, even if there had been a committee like it in every parish and district in the country, it would have required far more than this to cope with the hundreds of thousands of casualties, widows and orphans generated by the first war in our history to involve almost the whole population..

And so the activity of the citizens of Crowle, no matter how enthusiastic, proved insufficient; and the Committee certainly ceased to meet. At the end of the War, there seem to have been various abortive proposals as to what to do with the remaining funds which had been raised. Eventually in 1925, when Dr Alexander was in the chair, the Committee voted to amalgamate the General and Belgian Funds, and dissolve both; and at the same time, a worthy recipient had been found for the residue- a Mr Arthur Parkin, an ex-serviceman, 'who had been unable to work for fifteen weeks and would not be able to do any work for a further six months... a married man with six children attending school and not in receipt of a pension.' As chairman Dr Alexander agreed that this was a genuine case; and it was resolved to pay Arthur Parkin a pension of £2 per week, 'until the fund was exhausted.' The last entries in the book record various payments to him of £4, £2 and £1. Then silence descends.

The other reflection prompted by the Minutes is that, sadly, the Belgian refugees who were welcomed to Crowle do not seem to have quite lived up to the expectations of their hosts in every respect. What else is one expected to conclude from the following doleful resolutions, so carefully recorded in Dr Alexander's Minute Book?

On 6 May 1915 the Belgian sub-committee asked a Mr Chapman 'to try to find some work for the youth Victor De Vos', noting emphatically that 'it was *very* desirable that he should be found some employment'. Unfortunately on 3 June 1915 Mr Chapman reported 'that Mr Johnson declined to find V. de Vos work' and Mr Smales added that 'Mr Lovelace was giving him 3/- a week and that he thought no other person would employ him.' Further, it was now resolved that since the De Vos family as a whole apparently had an income of 30/- a week 'no further

contribution be made' to that family; and even that no flour be supplied to them. (The committee must have regretted their decision to impose this last 'cap' on benefit, since it was rescinded on 24 June).

On 26 August the Committee 'thought that J. Des Touches [sic]¹ should do some kind of work and it was resolved that his name be submitted to the Labour Exchanges at Doncaster, Goole and Scunthorpe'. Further we find the extraordinary resolution that the Belgian refugees at Mrs Laden's cottages 'be required to do their own house work and be [within?] the house by 10 pm.' This was not harsh, compared to the treatment which the Germans were meting out in Belgium; but at the same time, a de facto curfew may have seemed cruelly ironic to Des Touches, in the country they had fled to, to escape oppression.

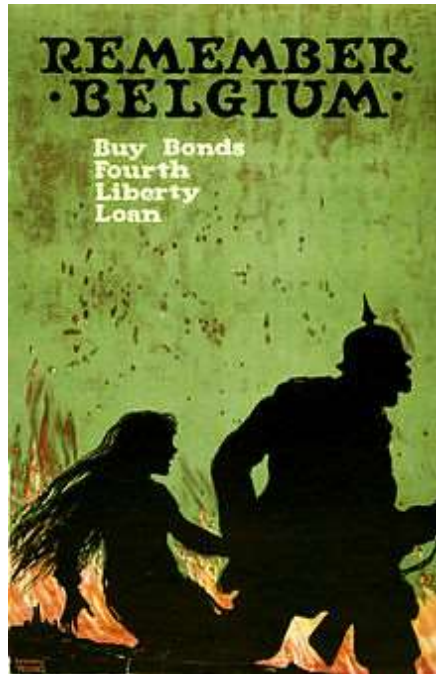
For their part it may well be that the Belgians did not altogether like being in Crowle, or at least that they would have preferred to be elsewhere. The petering out of the minutes in late 1915 would suggest that they were no longer living there, at least not at the expense of the Crowle Committee. Moreover there is some evidence that some of them moved away of their own accord. Possibly they were not so destitute, or at least not so lacking in resourcefulness, as they had originally been thought to be? We can imagine the reaction of those present at the meeting on 7 January 1915, when Mr Smales announced that Madame Schools had left Crowle and was now at the Carlton Hotel, Shrewsbury. Imagine that, she preferred Shrewsbury to Crowle! (And Madame was even able to afford a hotel, by some means or other).

Likewise some feathers may have been ruffled when on 28 October 1915, the Reverend Smith announced 'that Madame Des Touches had informed him that her husband, who had been released from the his duties in the French army owing to an affliction of the eyes, and who is not well at present, but who had been provided with employment by the authorities, desired her and her family, along with her two sisters-in-law, to go to Paris, as he would then be able to live with them. It had also been definitely fixed that her eldest son John, who was to be in Paris by December 15th in connection with military service.' As a result Madame Des Touches was 'desirous of leaving Crowle, if arrangements could be made, by November 23rd'; and 'wanted to know if this committee could see its way clear to pay the fares of the party to London...' Paris indeed!

Nonetheless, the Committee voted to comply with her request. Madame des Touches said that she 'very highly appreciated the hospitality and kindness shown

¹ Possibly Madam Des Touches's eldest son John, referred to subsequently.

to her and her relatives by the committee and townspeople generally', and Father Smith also 'tendered the thanks of the guests'.



American poster trading on German atrocities in Belgium



Monument presented by the people of Belgium to the people of Britain (1920)
Victoria Embankment, London