

How Did Britain Handle Its Biggest Wave of Refugees Ever?

In association with BBC Radio 4's drama series Home Front

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Presented by Rachel Shelley, Actor

Initially many Belgian refugees settled in Folkestone and other coastal towns. Not only were these the first places they came to – there were also spare rooms in hotels and private accommodation to house them.

By October 1914, the large number of Belgian refugees were dissipating to communities across the country.

Earl's Court Exhibition Centre, in London, became one of the main reception points. It could shelter around 4,000 refugees at any one time - 100,000 in total passed through.

The War Refugees Committee went on to set up receiving centres across the British Isles in places such as Exeter, Blackpool, Sheffield, Glasgow, Carmarthen in Wales and Monaghan in Ireland.

Many refugees contributed to the war effort, by working in industries such as steel, textiles and agriculture.

After a crisis in shell production in 1915, the British government needed more munition workers. A second wave of refugees, who had fled Belgium for the Netherlands, was now invited to come to Britain and work in the factories.

Many of the refugees couldn't speak any English and to minimise labour unrest, some munitions factories were Belgium-run.

One of the biggest was the Pelabon Works in East Twickenham, South-West London, which employed 2000 refugees.

A large Belgian community sprang up nearby.

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Eventually some streets were almost entirely occupied by Belgians.

In Birtley, in the North East of England, another Belgian-run factory led to the construction of a purpose-built village nearby, where 6,000 refugees lived.

Named Elisabethville, after the Belgian queen, this gated community was under military control and run as if it was part of Belgium.

The village had its own church, school, hospital, butchers and other shops.

Even the currency was Belgian.

And so a little piece of Belgium was created here in Britain.

Photographs courtesy of Getty, IWM, Mary Evans, Topfoto and Royal Museum of the Armed Forces, Brussels

With thanks to Dr Jacqueline Jenkinson, University of Stirling, Christophe Declercq, University College London, and Prof Tony Kushner, University of Southampton.