

1914-1918 First World War Centenary commemoration

Refugees in Upper Wharfedale

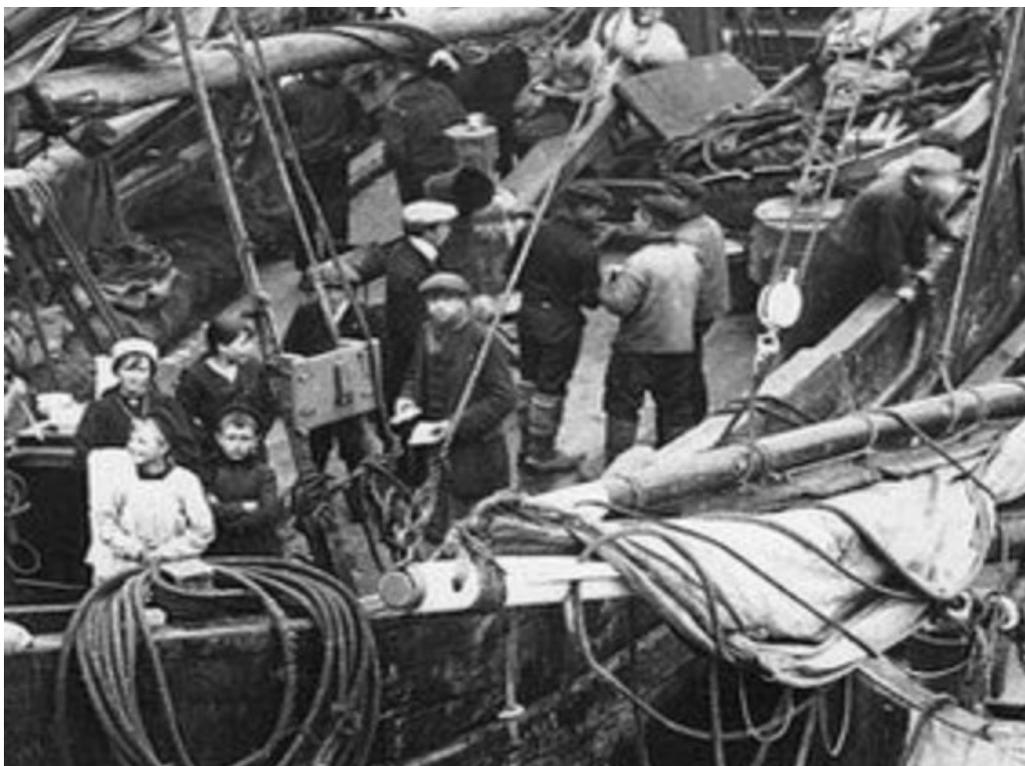
In July 2018 the Upper Wharfedale Arts and Literature Society (UWALS) put on an exhibition of life in the Dales during the First World War at the at the Grassington Town Hall and it was while undertaking research for the exhibition that they discovered the role the Dales community had played in helping refugees during the war. UWALS is particularly grateful to the Devonshire family for allowing access to the family archives.

If you would like to learn more about life in Upper Wharfedale during the First World War, UWALS will be giving a talk at Kettewell Village Hall on (date) at 7.30pm. Entrance is £2.50.

On 19 August 1914, fifteen days after the start of World War One, as German forces cut a swathe through Belgium on their way to conquering France, they invaded the small town of Aarschot. During the assault one of the German commanders was shot in the back and killed and, in retaliation, more than a hundred local boys and men were rounded up and shot. The invaders imprisoned the remainder of the inhabitants in a church while they searched the town's houses, plundered its resources and then burnt the town down.

150 citizens died and 366 houses were destroyed. Most of those left fled the town. In all 160,000 Belgians sought refuge in the UK. The first boats arrived on 20 August 1914, less than a month after the start of the war. From then until the beginning of October between 250 and 1500 refugees arrived **every day**.

Eighteen year old Maud Cavendish, daughter of the Duke of Devonshire was involved with the War Refugee Committee in London and the Devonshire family offered housing and support at Bolton Abbey. Her mother, Evie, Duchess of Devonshire was also part of the co-ordination effort both at Bolton Abbey and at the fam-



In December 1915 the Van Bael family left Bolton Abbey and moved to Colne. There was already a group of refugees in Colne supported by the Belgium Relief Fund and there was access to Catholic education and churches. The Van Bael, along with almost all of the Belgium refugees who sought asylum in the UK returned home at the end of the war.

Then and Now

What is striking is the similarity between the experience of refugees and host communities then and now: the use of terror as a weapon of war; the killing of males who are thought to pose a threat; the gratuitous complete destruction of villages and towns; the days of walking; and the creaky boats crossing the channel all resonate today.

Devonshire family letters show how concerned the family were to do the right thing in an uncertain situation. They worried about being able to communicate with the refugees and whether the refugees would be clean and look after the accommodation or clothing provided: "they are very nice people and keep their rooms and the passages beautifully clean. They were all very pleased with the baths. The baby is looking very much better, all the children have plenty of (donated) clothes for the present and the women are mending some of the old ones". The family also struggled with how best to be welcoming when unsure of what constituted good manners in such a novel situation: "I went to see them this morning and shook hands with them all, I do not know if that is always to be done".



From left to right: Alphons, Maria, Gustaaf and Francis Van Bael

It seems too that the whole of the Bolton Abbey community was involved in helping the refugees. The parish newsletter stated "The inhabitants of our parish are very glad that they are allowed to share in the care of these homeless visitors, by giving clothes vegetables etc. towards their maintenance...the coming of these Belgians amongst us brings the matter home to us, and it is clear evidence of the sad desolation and suffering which always results from war...Let us then do all we can for them while they are here".

Who are we?

The **Upper Wharfedale Refugee Support Group** comprises a network of individuals living in Upper Wharfedale and Littondale who are concerned for refugees and wish to help in some way.

We fundraise, donate clothing and household items, welcome refugees and write to/ lobby elected representatives.

If you have an activity or an event you would like to suggest or would like some help with, or you would like to be included on our mailing list, email us at:

refugees@upperwharfedale.net