**20 Folkestone: Belgian WW1 Refugees**

As many as 250,000 Belgians from all layers of society sought refuge in Britain after the fall of Antwerp on 6 October 1914. The initial refugee population in Folkestone has been estimated at 15-20,000 in 1914, falling to 1,500 by mid-1916.

Many were exhausted and few spoke English. Fishermen are likely to have been among the first to meet the refugees at the harbour, where they were medically examined and those who were going straight on were offered food and hot drinks by a group of ladies from the town. The remainder were lodged overnight (a number of them at the Old Harvey Grammar School), usually without charge. On departure the refugees were sent to London for ‘allocation’. Nursing provision in Folkestone had a reputation for being excellent and local maternity homes set a high standard for hospitality during this time.

In July 1915 Folkestone declared a ‘Belgian Day’ to coincide with the Belgian national holiday. Some shopkeepers put up signs to say that French was spoken and a ‘literary circle’ was set up for locals and refugees to come together. The Folkestone Refugees Committee and the Baptists’ Women’s League sent out regular supplies of clothing to those who needed them, while schools waived initial fees in order to provide education for the children. The War Refugees Committee was set up in 1914 and received 1,000 letters in one day in response to their appeal for hospitality for women and children.

Belgian refugee Fredo Franzoni’s painting ‘Landing of the Belgian Refugees’ was presented to the town as a token of thanks in 1916.

Adapted from an exhibition in [Folkestone Museum](https://folkestonemuseum.co.uk/) curated by Maddie Pettit in 2018.