

# Asylum: Refugees and Mental Health

RECREATION AS THERAPY  
FOR BELGIAN REFUGEES  
IN BRITAIN DURING WWI

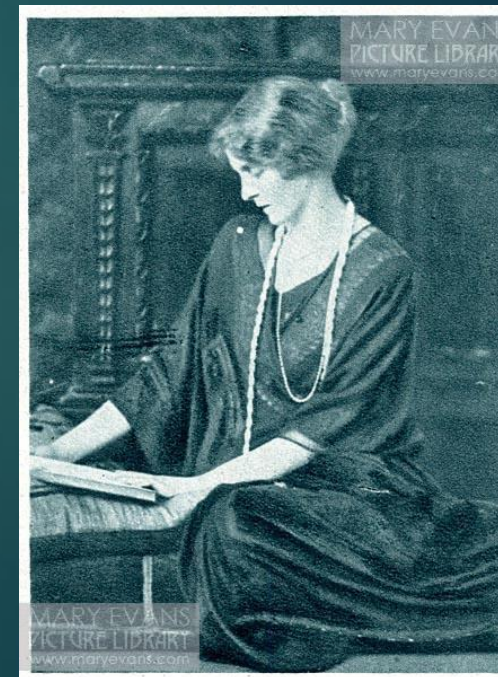
Ute Oswald  
University of Huddersfield



ALEXANDRA  
PALACE



‘Mademoiselle Lawley, I have just sent you a package containing three tablecloths [...] as a token of my gratitude for all the kind things you did for me when I was in England. I would be delighted to be able to do something for you and could for example make some decorative soft furnishings for your living room, such as covers and cushions for your chairs, mantelpiece ornaments, or even soft furnishings for the bedroom. I am entirely at your disposal, for me this is a welcome past-time during these long and dreary winter days (....).These are terrible times which France is going through, as a consequence of this horrible war. We do hope that we will soon see the end of it all, and that everyone will soon be lucky enough to be amidst their family again. E. Claes, 4 January 1918



Credits: TLA; Illustrated London News

# Structure


History of Belgian Refugees  
in the UK 1914-1919

Refugees, Recreation and  
Mental Health

Belgian Refugees in British  
Asylums

Our Project

Concluding Thoughts



History of Belgian  
Refugees in  
Britain  
1914-1919

- ▶ During the First World War, around 1.5 million Belgians fled their homes
- ▶ More than 250,000 made their way to Great Britain
- ▶ Most arrived in London, but many quickly moved on to settle in other parts of the country
- ▶ Lots of positive stories in the press about 'brave little Belgium'



Compilation of images of Belgian refugees, 1914. Source: In Flanders Fields Museum



Belgian Refugees at Alexandra Palace London (1914) Source: Library of Congress



Cartoon representing 'Brave Little Belgium'. Source: Military Museum Brussels

- War propaganda and the discourse of hospitality
- Surge of offers for private accommodation
- Welcome ceremonies and fundraisers
- But then: frictions with hosts, frictions with labourers over working conditions etc.
- Belgians as competitors



Reception of Belgian refugees in Rhyl, Wales, 6 October 1914. Source: Belgian refugees project Rhyl, Toni Vitti



"Britannia with Belgian Refugees" (1916) by Belgian painter Andre Cluysenaar

**THE ALIEN JOB-SNATCHER  
IN OUR MIDST.**

**2,000 Of Them In Bethnal Green,  
Says The Mayor.**

**TAKING THE SOLDIER'S PLACE.**

Bethnal Green Tribunal is angry at the manner in which a large number of aliens, Allied and enemy, are allowed to strengthen their industrial position in the borough without performing military service.

According to one member, no fewer than 200,000 Allied aliens, of military age, are engaged in civil pursuits in this country. It was to provide this number of men that the Compulsion Bill, for married men, was introduced.

"We feel very keenly upon this subject," said the Mayor of Bethnal Green (Councillor J. W. Lewis) to the *Daily Sketch* yesterday. "While our men are making sacrifices the aliens remain and benefit by those sacrifices."

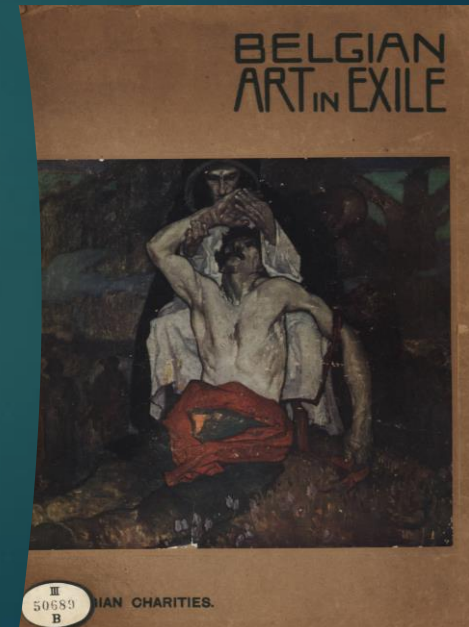
Daily Sketch, 18 May 1916, p. 2

# Life of Belgian Refugees in Britain during the War



Labourers at Pelabon Works ammunition factory, 1917. Source: Private collection Judith Mohoney via Amsab-ISG

- Issued with Identity Books
- Given housing, food, clothes, allowance and jobs
- Many lived together in large (family) groups
- 'Belgian towns' with cafés, shops, schools, etc.
- Belgian newspapers (Flemish and French), networks of Belgian artists performing throughout the country
- Belgian music chapels, theatre companies, sports clubs, etc.





Refugees,  
Recreation and  
Mental Health



# 'An invaluable mental recreation'

## Initiatives to improve refugee mental health in the community



# 'Lightening the Sorrows of Exile'

'An aimless life would have been demoralising to the good folk; whereas useful occupation would tend to preserve their self-respect and to divert their minds from their personal and national sorrows.'

'The Belgian Guests of Bradford'

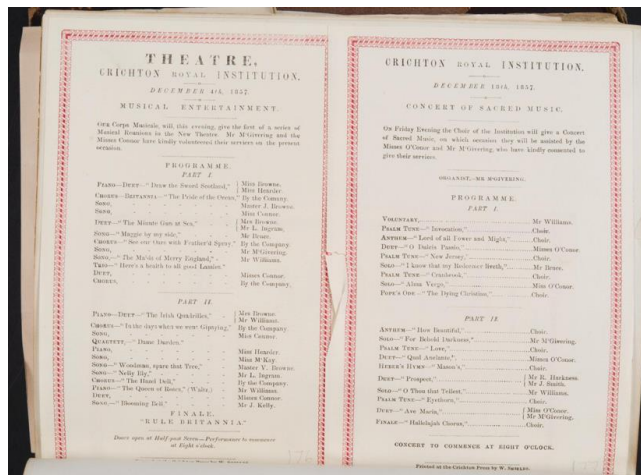
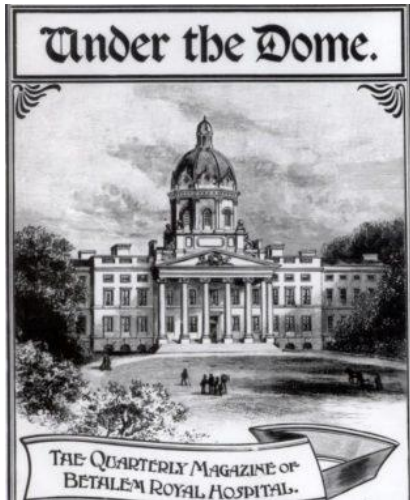
*The Yorkshire Observer*, Saturday, 30 January 1915.

# MORAL TREATMENT

Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>  
Century

Belief in the  
curability of insanity

Patient occupation  
(work, religion,  
recreation)



# ASYLUM RECREATION



Belgian Refugees  
in British Asylums

# Belgian Refugees in British Asylums

240 Belgian refugee patients

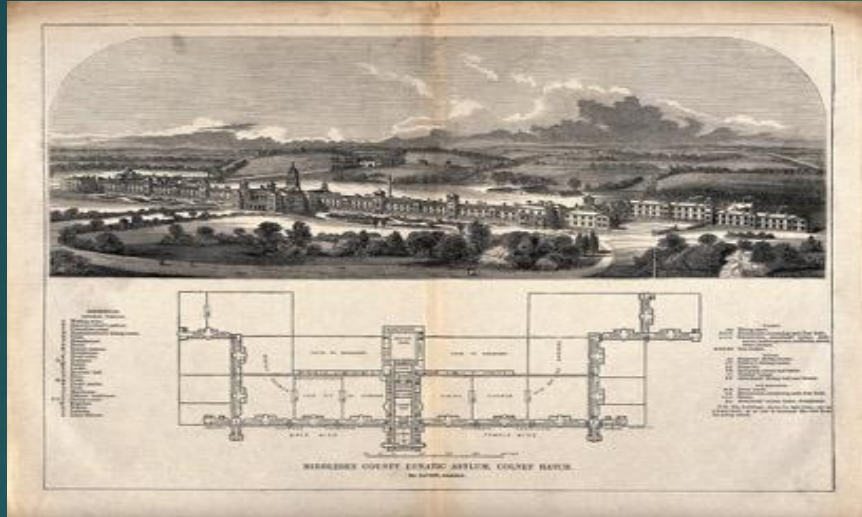
The youngest aged 13 and the eldest 80, but mostly between the ages of 25 and 55

Causes ranging from war worry and prolonged stress to syphilis and puberty

Diagnoses usually noted as melancholia, mania, delusional or confusional insanity, or dementia.

Admitted to over 30 asylums, but 2/3 of these patients were in Colney Hatch in Middlesex (now Greater London)

# COLNEY HATCH ASYLUM

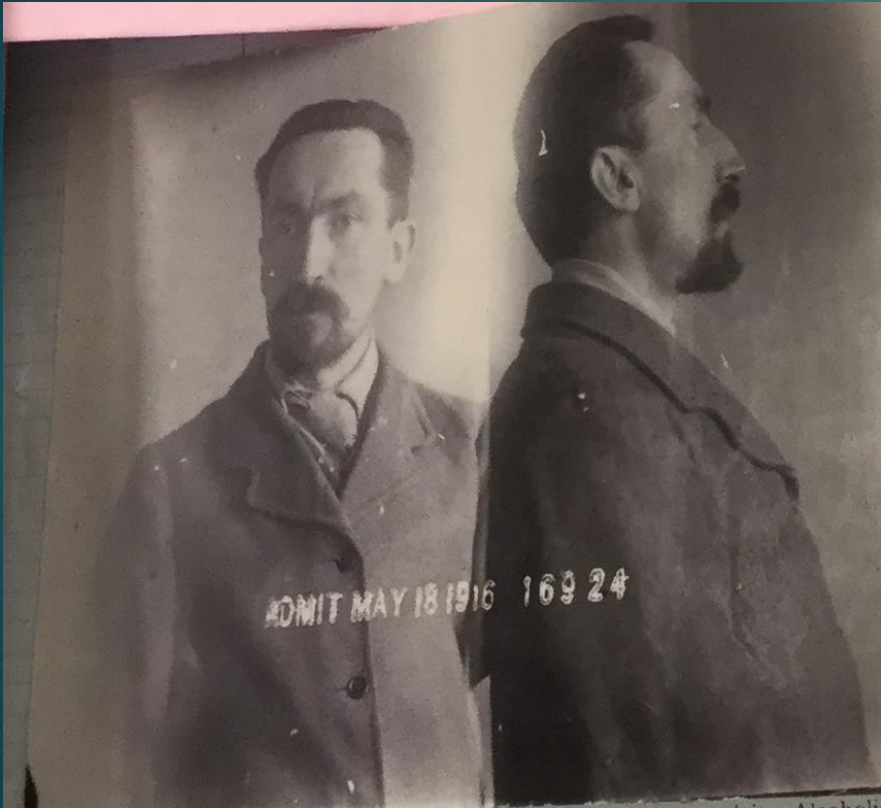


Credit: Philafrenzy



Annual Summer Fête and Sports Day, late 1890s  
Credits: TLA

# Guillaume C., 40, Commission Agent for the Sale of Ore



- Admitted Colney Hatch 3.5.1916
- Diagnosis: delusional Insanity
- **'Speaks several languages; spending time in reading'**
- **'Still spends all his time reading and writing'**
- **'Collects books and puts them in his pocket'**
- Discharged not improved 12.2.1917 and repatriated to France



## Emily S., 33, no occupation stated

- Admitted to Colney Hatch 7.8.1918
- Depressed and miserable; persecutory fears of Germans following her; well-educated
- **'Cheerful and occupying herself with books and writing. Mentally improving'**
- **'No longer depressed and full of schemes for the future. She is going to lecture on arts'**
- Discharged 20.9.18 relieved into care of mother

## Rachel C., 38, Milliner



- Admitted to Colney Hatch on 12.1.1916
- Depressed, confused, lethargic
- **'Occupies herself with needlework** or ward duties'
- 'Less dull and more willing to converse'
- 'Brighter, employs herself', out on four-week trial.
- Discharged 22.9.1916 recovered

eat or sleep, whereas she both eats and sleeps well and would if allowed purloin other patients food. She is in poor health, has cardiac disease. (sd) S. J. G.

April. 12 Less dull and moving about freely, more willing to converse, but she has recently had an idea that she is a donkey, occupies herself, needle work or ward duties. Health improving. cty. H.

29 Transferred to Hard 14. cty. H.

# BETHLEM HOSPITAL



Image credits: Wellcome Collection; Bethlem Museum of the Mind

**Cesarine van G., 56,  
no occupation stated**

- From Alost
- Admitted to Bethlem 9.1.1915
- Cause: the War
- Diagnosis: melancholia
- 'Picks at her fingers until they are sore'
- Discharged uncured 28.3.1917

Oct 8<sup>th</sup> 1915. Still agitated depressed and  
asking to go home. She knits indefatigably.  
Her bodily health is fairly good. R.B.  
Nov 8<sup>th</sup> 1915 Patient remains the same. R.B.  
Dec 15 1915 No change. R.B.

**'She knits indefatigably'**

## Berthold S., 29, Clerk

- Cause: Zeppelin raid in Antwerp
- Admitted to Bethlem 9.6.1915
- Diagnosis: depression
- **'He occupies himself in writing, reading, drawing, conversing and playing games'**
- **'Continues to improve and goes out for walks with an attendant'**
- Fortnight's leave
- Discharged well 23.2.1916

July 25<sup>th</sup> He continues to improve. J.S.  
Aug. 15<sup>th</sup> He gets up, occupies himself  
in writing reading drawing conversing  
and playing games. He says his  
attacks of depression are less frequent  
and less severe. J.S.  
Sept 23<sup>rd</sup> He continues to improve and  
goes out for walks with an attendant. J.S.  
Oct 22<sup>nd</sup> Still improving. attacks of  
depression much less marked. J.S.  
Nov. 21. Condition unchanged. J.S.  
Dec. 22. Has enjoyed a fortnight's  
leave. J.S.  
Jan 22<sup>nd</sup> 1916 Pt is doing well. R.S.  
Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> 1916 Discharged well. R.S.

# OUR PROJECT

## Asylum: Refugees and Mental Health

- ▶ Our public engagement work has a strong creative element.
- ▶ We will work with partner organisations such as Alexandra Palace, The London Archives, the Mental Health Museum in Wakefield and In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres to co-produce activities based on our research, such as an exhibition designed with refugee service users and a theatre production for schools.



# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Some of our findings challenge the 'discourse of hospitality' extended to Belgian WWI refugees, warm welcomes being juxtaposed with growing tensions and even unrest.
- Belgian refugees' mental health deteriorated for various reasons, and they were cared for both in institutions and local communities.
- Creative activities (as part of recreation and occupation) for mental wellbeing were provided for Belgian refugees within institutions as well as in the community.
- These were imbued with economic, managerial and therapeutic benefits.
- As we move forward, we will work towards a more rounded understanding of extra-institutional and non-medical care.