

# BIRTLEY BELGIANS

The Belmont and Durham Branch of the Society has been collaborating with the Belmont "Their War, Our History" Group to remember the effect of WWI on the people of Belmont and Carville and to commemorate the fallen men named on the village war memorial. Public events have included contemporary entertainment such as the upbeat "Mayor of Durham's Recruitment Evening" and the more sober Somme Commemoration. We have also identified the homes of the fallen and are in the process arranging for memorial plaques to be placed where appropriate.

Another effort has been the publication of a bi-monthly news sheet "The Belmont Times" which reports life in Belmont and Carville one hundred years ago, as recorded in the local Durham newspapers. In addition to purely local events such as fund-raising events, church events, meetings of the parish council and magistrates court appearances other events of wider interest for County Durham and nationally have been included. While reading the Durham County Advertiser of September 1917, I came across the following letter from a subaltern in the DLI regarding his men's concerns on one particular situation back home.

## HOME WRECKERS IN COUNTY DURHAM

### AN APPEAL FROM THE TRENCHES

*From somewhere in France 17<sup>th</sup>  
Aug 1917*

*Dear Mr Editor – At the time of writing we are resting in a barn after the big push, and having a few hours to spare I sat down to read your valuable paper, which was handed to me by a wounded comrade. Being a Durham City lad, and one of the few left, I was naturally eager to peruse its contents and to read about the doings in the old city. I was in the midst of my platoon reading every line, when we came across an item referring to the case of soldiers' wives failing to give notice of alien lodgers. Now at the present time every case of failing to register refers to Belgians, or at least 90% of them. In the "Do You Know" column it mentions that the cases are so sordid that they would be better told in a court where the doors had been closed to "ladies".*

*Just recently one or two of our boys had returned from home, and they brought back information about certain soldiers' wives which is too disgusting to put into print. At the time we were lying in "hell", the only name for it, and waiting to be relieved. When a soldier returns from "Blighty" it is his duty to report to his platoon commander, which was the source of me getting this information. In my platoon the majority of my lads are Durham bred and born, and as brave as lions, and the cases referred to applied to no less than 23 men. What had I to do? Should I tell them or should I leave it to the boys who have just returned! I decided to adopt neither course, which I thanked God for later on. Imagine those brave boys of mine just waiting for death, but with a smile on their faces, fighting*

for those who they thought were true, and whom they loved.

At last it leaked out, but after we had been released, for which I thank God again, for I knew the knowledge of such affairs at home would have made them reckless, and who knows what would have happened. I was passing my men's "billet" the night after, and by what I heard – well – I formed my own opinion, which is this – That if those Belgians are not removed from Durham County by the time my boys come home then God help them. Is there no one in Durham County who will take the matter up and give their attention to such awful practices! It wants someone who will go around these houses where the alien lodgers reside and find out the true circumstances and report to the military authorities, and endeavour to get their wives' allowances stopped.

You may think I am harsh, but let me give you an instance out of many, and judge yourself. We had been on a long march under a broiling hot sun, and had been without water a considerable time. We reached a small village in Belgium, and imagine our delight with the prospects of quenching our thirst and replenishing our water bottles. We rested our men, and sent water carriers to bring the needful. They were away about quarter of an hour, and returned empty-handed, with the explanation that we could get no water as the people said we had plenty of money to pay for it, and they put the well in such condition that we could draw no water. I leave it at that "nuff said". If I had my say in the matter, well a few rounds of ammunition would not have been missed.

As I said before, that is one instance

out of many which have occurred lately. Could the police not be asked to be extra vigilant in this matter and report every week, or is it true that they have orders to treat Belgians leniently? Every day you pick up a paper there is reference to such cases as you mention, and I ask you again, can nothing be done? At Birtley, there is a small army of these home wreckers, who would be more use out here and could easily be replaced by our wounded heroes. I say "God help them when our boys come home" To go a step further and voice my lads' opinion "God help those who are responsible to allow such affairs to exist".

Ask a British Tommy on leave his opinion of the Belgian soldier. Only don't get the answer to be given while anyone is within hearing distance of half a mile. Only recently when I was home, on leave after the Messines battle, I saw girls "walking out" with these Belgian "refugees", as they call themselves, whose fathers if they had been at home would not have allowed them out of doors after nine o'clock at night. Once more I beg your assistance for such "goings on". Again, I met two of my former acquaintances who were real respectable young ladies in pre-war times who had come under the spell of these so-called refugees, and what is the result? I leave you to guess, because it makes my blood boil to talk about such awful things. And still they expect our brave boys to love them when they return. But happily their lovers know of their infidelity. Again this is a case out of many.

Well dear Mr Editor, I don't want to waste your precious time listening to the wails of my poor Tommies, because no doubt, you are fed up, but let me ask Durham folks to

*wake up and stamp out the evil that exists today, both in and around our dear old city. For God's sake and my lads' sake do it. Think of what we go through here and what we expect when we come home.*

*Wishing you and your paper every success, allow me to remain yours sincerely,*

**A DURHAM SUBALTERN**

Durham County Advertiser, 7th Sep 1917, page 3, col. 5

Note: Birtley was unique in the UK for being the location of a munitions factory that was run entirely by Belgian Nationals with the cooperation of the Belgian Government. Following the "Shell Scandal" of 1915, the plan was that Belgian soldiers who had been badly wounded at the front could still serve their country by volunteering to produce desperately needed ammunition. The factory was established near Birtley along with the self-contained town of Elizabethville, which had its own shops, hospital, school, church and was supervised by Belgian Gendarmerie. Production began in 1916 and while the "colony" was being established some of the men were billeted with local families. A full account of the Birtley Belgians is given in *Of Arms And The Heroes* by John G. Bygate (2006) published by the History of Education Project (ISBN 1 870268 44 X)

**John Heckels**  
(member 5973)  
magpie960@gmail.com