

# Belgian Refugees in Tiverton during the First World War

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The German invasion of Belgium, between August and October 1914, led to the flight of thousands of Belgian civilians to England as refugees. The refugees were first sent to Exeter and then distributed to towns and villages in Devon. By the end of the war, the people of Devon had helped some 8,000 refugees. The first Belgian refugees began to arrive in Tiverton in October 1914.

Tiverton's Mayor during the First World War, Alfred Gregory, who was also editor of the Tiverton Gazette, recalled that:

*Between the autumn of 1914 and spring of 1919 the number of refugees in residence in Tiverton varied considerably. Sometimes there were as many as sixty here – chiefly women and children; sometimes as few as a dozen. Among the first to arrive I remember a Doctor of Medicine with his wife and daughter from near Namur; a widow lady and her daughter, a teacher from Brussels; an elderly man, a retired postmaster, with his widowed daughter, and two grand-daughters (Jeanne and Judith); a fisherman and his family, received as the guests of Messrs. Heathcoat and Co's. workers; and half-a-dozen labourers, for all of whom employment was soon found, some of whom stayed here permanently.*

The Western Times of 10th July 1917 reported that a 'Belgian refugee has been married at Tiverton Registry Office to an English girl'. It is believed that descendants of the family may still live in the Tiverton area.

Most of the refugees that returned home were gone by early 1919, but there remains a rather sad footnote. Willij Verlaecke, aged just seven, died in 1915 and was buried in Tiverton Cemetery. It is thought that the Verlaecke family returned to Belgium at the end of the war - but there will always be a part of them that remains forever in Tiverton.