

# The Finmere Record

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SATURDAY, 25 MARCH 2000

FREE



*The Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, has not—as far as we know—visited Finmere. But Agatha Christie’s diminutive and fastidious hero has helped us solve the mystery of Finmere’s “little Belgian refugees.”*

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### The Little Belgian Refugees

In 1920, Agatha Christie published her first detective story, *The Mysterious Affair At Styles*, in which she introduced Hercule Poirot. The Belgian detective has since become one of the nation’s best known fictional detectives. Christie described Poirot’s fastidious dress and manners:

*[Poirot was] an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound.*

Why did Christie choose a Belgian for her hero? There was a group of Belgian refugees living in a house near her residence. She used this house as the model for “Style House.” Poirot solved the murder during a visit to the house. He was visiting because the owner “had kindly extended hospitality to seven of my country people who, alas, are refugees from their native land.”

The identification of Christie’s inspiration for Poirot has helped solve a puzzling entry in the log book for Finmere school:

*11 January 1915. School re-opened [after Christmas]. Admitted a little Belgian refugee. Elodie Struff. 8 years old.*

In this edition of the Finmere Record, Andy Boddington tells the story of Finmere’s “little Belgian refugees.”

### The Assassination in Sarajevo

The world was shocked, but not surprised, by the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on 28 June 1914. The Archduke was the nephew and heir of Franz Joseph, Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Ferdinand was in Sarajevo to carry out official engagements, following military manoeuvres in Bosnia. Political tensions in the region had been high for some time, with the Serbian people seeking freedom from what they regarded as an oppressive empire. Threats to life were commonplace but Ferdinand was not deterred from travelling in an open car.

Unfortunately for him, five Serbs and a Bosnian Muslim were set on assassination. In their first attempt, they lobbed a bomb at Ferdinand’s car but it bounced off, injuring an aide in the following car. Later, as Ferdinand was being driven to visit the casualty in hospital, the chauffeur took a wrong turning. As he reversed, Gavrilo Princip stepped from the shadows and fired with a revolver. The Archduke’s wife died instantly and Ferdinand succumbed ten minutes later.

### The Escalation to War

On 28 July 1914, after much delay and confusion, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia. Germany supported the action and, following mass mobilisation of Russian troops, itself declared war on Russia and France.

Aiming to reach France quickly, Germany demanded permission to march through Belgium. The Belgians refused and the Germans invaded. Britain insisted that Germany withdraw but it rejected the ultimatum. Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August.

During August and September, the Germans organised systematic massacres of the civilian population of Belgium. Thousands of civilians fled and refugees began to arrive in Britain.

Belgian refugees near Audenarde in 1914



## ***The Tragedy of Belgium***

From *The Buckingham Advertiser*, 17 October 1914:

*Never, surely, in the history of the world, has a nation suffered worse horrors than Belgium. Driven into a war with which she had no concern, in order to preserve her honour and independence, she has been harried, sacked and ravaged by the Germans with a ruthlessness that would disgrace a race of barbarians...*

*Whole towns and villages have been burnt or shelled to the ground. Cathedrals, churches, town halls and museums, buildings sacred and secular ... have been deliberately and wantonly destroyed ... A once smiling country has been ruined almost beyond hope of recovery, and its people, those that have not perished by the sword, have been exiled into Germany, or have fled in their thousands, destitute and broken-hearted, to other lands.*

*Meanwhile, there is a grave duty developing on the friends of Belgium ... Thousands of people in Britain are prepared to entertain the overflow of refugees, for nothing has touched the hearts of Britishers so much as the bravery and fortitude of the gallant little nation who had to withstand the first brunt of the attack by the War-mongers of Europe.*

### **Refugees Arrive at Bicester**

Britain took the plight of the Belgian refugees to its heart. On 16 October, the Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council, Mr WH Ashurst, wrote to *The Bicester Herald*:

*A telegram from the Secretary to the Local Government Board informs me that a large number of Belgian refugees are now arriving in England and that offers of hospitality for them are needed ... Any persons able and willing to receive refugees should communicate with the War Refugee Committee, General Building, Aldwych, London.*

Halls Brewery announced that it would accommodate 24 refugees at the George Hotel, Bicester. The *Herald* reported their arrival on 6 November:

*Bicester accorded the Belgian Refugees an enthusiastic welcome to the town last (Thursday) evening ... Rain was pouring down but this did not damp the enthusiasm of the cheering throng ... The refugees number 17 in all and were, until the Germans destroyed their belongings, well-to-do people in Diest ... Had it not been for heroism of the people of Belgium, our country would have been seriously menaced and it is up to the people of Bicester to prove their thankfulness.*

### **The Millennium History of Finmere**

**Work on the new history of Finmere is progressing well and we expect to publish in the autumn. We hope to announce details of publication in the May newsletter. If anyone has any photographs or material we have not seen, please contact Andy Boddington.**

## **“Belgian Day” at Buckingham**

On Saturday, 7 November 1914, the pupils of the Royal Latin School, Buckingham organised a “Belgian Day” to raise funds for the refugees. A large Belgian flag flew from the school flagstaff and a huge poster in Belgian colours, prepared by the older boys, was fixed to the school gates.

The pupils made thousands of badges in Belgian colours and the boys manufactured money boxes. The badges were sold throughout the town, by women volunteers during the morning while the pupils were at school, then by the pupils themselves. The Buckingham Advertiser reported:

*Such was the success of the scheme that it was difficult to meet a person who was not wearing one of the badges.*

The Belgian day raised £25 1s 5d (worth £1550 today). This was given to the Buckinghamshire War Refugees Committee, which was responsible for fifty-seven refugees housed in the town and surrounding villages.

### **The Refugees in Finmere**

In Oxfordshire, like Buckinghamshire, refugees were housed in the towns and villages. Mrs Slater in Hethe housed sixteen Belgians from three families. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find detailed information about the refugees in Finmere.

In September 1914, the Reverend Henry Trower, the Rector of Finmere, gave a gift of clothing to the Buckinghamshire War Refugees Committee. A few months later, the school log book records the arrival of “a little Belgian refugee.”

*11 January 1915. School re-opened. Admitted a little Belgian refugee. Elodie Struff. 8 years old.*

Elodie remained in Finmere for just three months:

*15 March 1915. E. Struff has left the village, her name has been removed from the registers.*

Elodie may have been an orphan or with her family, possibly sheltered by the Rector or one of the wealthier families in the village. In the autumn, a second refugee, R. de Greave, was taken in:

*15 October 1915. Admitted a little Belgian refugee to the infants.*

*14 July 1916. Attendance good except the little Belgian girl.*

*30 October 1916. R. de Greave has gone away.*

The Belgians did not return to their ravaged country until after 1918.

### **Acknowledgements**

The link between Poirot and the Belgian refugees is described by Ivor Slocombe in *Local History News* (Winter 1999). My thanks also to the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, Oxford Archives and Buckingham Library, and to the *World War One Archive* at the University of Kansas for the photograph of the refugees. (Retrieved 18 March 2000 from [http://www.ukans.edu/~kansite/ww\\_one/photos/bin02/imag0157.jpg](http://www.ukans.edu/~kansite/ww_one/photos/bin02/imag0157.jpg)).