



## Belgian refugees

A plaque over the fireplace in the entrance hall records “*Belgian refugees were entertained in this Mansion by the residents of Ilford from November 1914 until April 1919*”.

Council minutes show that in response to a request for the borough to receive some Belgian refugees they agreed to offer Valentines Mansion on 12 October 1914. It is also clear from newspaper cuttings that Barking and East Ham were also establishing homes and raising money to assist the refugees at this time.

It is hard for us to appreciate the feeling of outrage felt in this country when the German army invaded Belgium. The local Guardian of 11 December 1914 reported that a Whist Drive had been held in aid of the Belgian Relief Fund. Local MP and JP Sir John Bethell was reported as saying “The people of this country were doing all they could to give a hearty welcome to the Belgians. They had been cruelly treated by the Germans. They had not declared war on Germany, all they had done was to simply resist the German Emperor and his Army, when they invaded Belgium.” Reports of some of the atrocities make grim reading.

Two other council minutes show just a glimpse of the Belgians’ time at the Mansion when in February 1916 they asked for additional facilities for laundry and washing (agreed), and later in the year the council made a request to the Hon. Secretary of the Belgian Refugee Committee for Ilford asking them to find ways of reducing the amount of electricity supplied to the Mansion (future economies were promised).

However by March 1918 the number of Belgian refugees at the Mansion had dwindled to 21, mainly women and children, who were re-housed by the Belgian Refugees Committee. This enabled the Mansion to be used by sick and wounded soldiers.

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*One of the Local Studies Librarians, Pat Heron, recently came across some documentation showing Valentines Mansion as a military hospital during WWI and she has kindly written the following short article for our newsletter. A full version of her findings is available to read at the Local Studies Library.*

## Valentines Military Hospital

Valentines Mansion was requisitioned in March 1918 as a convalescent home and reception area for sick and wounded soldiers. This temporary military use arose from the pressing need for a convalescent home for wounded soldiers, freeing up the 60 military beds at Ilford Emergency Hospital for casualties requiring more intensive nursing care.

Like other such hospitals, Valentines was supervised by a joint national Red Cross/St John Ambulance committee, and staffed by VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurses. These had been recruited and trained locally since the beginning of the war by Mr Magnus, the Divisional Superintendent of the local St John Ambulance Brigade. His wife, Mrs Maud Beatrice Magnus, became the first Lady Superintendent of the Ilford Nursing Division, and organised all the VAD nurses, first at the Emergency Hospital, subsequently at Valentines. The Mansion became a 50-60 bed “Auxiliary Home Hospital”, “used for patients not seriously ill”.

In response to a public appeal by Mrs Magnus, local freemasons undertook “to raise a fund to furnish the whole of the wards with the necessary furniture, etc., at a cost of about £300.” In this they were successful, and so the dedication of Valentines Mansion took place on the afternoon of Saturday, 26 October, 1918, with a spectacular display of civic, military and Masonic pomp. The hospital was then declared open as an annexe of the Ilford Emergency Hospital, although it seems that patients had been admitted before the official opening.

Little is known as yet about the staff, patients and routines of the hospital. Some of the nurses were suffragettes; some of the patients were Welsh miners, the patients were probably not officers, since the Emergency Hospital had been for lower ranks. We know that “the patients could be moved right out of the wards into the park”, and that discipline was strict. Local people were encouraged to visit the patients, and those fit enough to go out and about were generously entertained at private houses and public functions.

After a year the military presence at both sites was rapidly scaled down. On Friday, 14 March, 1919, the Hospital Governors received a letter from Col. N. Barrow, the O.C. General Military Hospitals, Colchester: “It has been decided to close all auxiliary hospitals as early as possible, and I shall be glad if you will kindly let me know what date it will be convenient for you to close your hospital.

The Ilford Recorder, in a piece headed “Closing of Valentines Mansion as a Military Hospital”, relates that: “On... (24 March, 1919) an enjoyable evening was spent at Valentines Mansion by the members of the St. John Ambulance Brigade, nursing and men’s divisions, numbering in all 53, as a wind-up to their four years’ war work. There were entertainments and commemorative presentations, enjoyed by all, until at last, with votes of thanks and the singing of Auld Lang Syne, “eight happy months spent at Valentines” came to an end.

NB Although it was closed as a military hospital during March 1919, a part of Valentines Mansion was retained for use as a temporary children’s hospital.

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Thanks to Ian Dowling for references from Council Minutes: see Valentines Park: A Century of History; to Ms Grembowicz, St John Ambulance Archives; and to Emily at the British Red Cross Archives.

The Library & Museum of Freemasonry has no record of this episode, apart from a couple of references in the contemporary Masonic press: any readers with connections to Langthorne Lodge (No.1421) or Lothbury Lodge (No. 3612) are requested to search any known Lodge archives, and contact us please!

*There is a wealth of information about the whole of Redbridge at the Local Studies Library and the staff are always pleased to help with any enquiries.*

*Pat Heron at the Local Studies Library*

