Aid To Our Allies: Cistercians to the Fore in the early months of War.

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Introduction

This article considers two specific ways in which Cistercians offered aid to the Allies of the British during the early years of the First World War. The first to be considered will be the setting up of the hostel to accommodate Belgian refugees in the autumn of 1914, and the second the generous aid from the city sent to the Serbian Relief Fund in the early spring on 1915.

Discussion

While it can be claimed that the whole of the city of Chichester was involved with the war effort in some measure in the weeks following the outbreak of the conflict in August 1914, one initiative sought to reach out a helping hand to some of the civilians affected by the German occupation of Belgium. Two ladies of the city, Miss Dorothy Paget, of Shopwhyke House and her sister, Mrs. Close, of Aldingbourne set up the scheme in an alliance with the Catholic Women’s League and Farm Cottage, Summersdale became designated as the Belgian Hostel at the end of September, 1914. The local newspaper, the Chichester Observer, reported on 7 October that eighteen refugees, comprising members of 7 families had moved in, the youngest being ‘a baby of only three months’. The occupations of the men included those of a carpenter, a cabinet maker and a market gardener, and there were 8 children in total and most had lived in the district of Malines.

Farm cottage had been unoccupied for some time, but the men and women soon set to work making their new home more comfortable, and getting to grips with the rather neglected garden area. The women’s ‘liking for the wash tub’, the newspaper reported, and for making their surroundings homely was considerable! Such domestic and gardening labours were seen by Cistercians as helping the refugees to ‘keep occupied’, in order that they might not dwell too much on the horrors through which their country has gone’. The children’s education was not neglected on their arrival. The first three boys were welcomed to the City Grammar School, where the Headmaster ‘agreed to provide education and books gratuitously.’ Some of the further arrivals were educated at the Prebendal School, including two brothers, John and Constant Vandervelde.
The journeys undertaken by the refugees highlighted their determination to reach a safe haven. The eldest couple present took a circuitous route – from Malines to Termode, returned to Malines, then made their way to Antwerp – the chief centre for despatch to England. Though in good health, Cistercians were informed by the Observer that ‘their sufferings can be imagined when it is remembered that they have been rendered homeless, and that their possessions are confined to the clothes in which they arrived. The generous help of the people of Chichester ensured that aid reached the refugees swiftly, and that Farm Cottage became a haven for the seven families, and others who followed them.

One other initiative which helped our Allies during the first months of the war was in donations of aid to the Serbian Relief Fund. As early as September, 1914 a correspondent to The Spectator noted that ‘Public attention has been concentrated on the western theatre of war, and the part played by Serbia has to a certain extent been overlooked. And yet her military achievements cannot be a matter of indifference to the Allies; for the battles of Jadar and Shabatz have accounted for four Austrian army corps, which would otherwise have been free for employment west of the Rhine, and which might thus have turned the scale against us at the height of the German invasion of France. In practice, if not in theory, Serbia is as much our ally as Russia, and as such is entitled, not merely to our esteem and sympathy, but also to assistance of a more practical kind.’ Serbia had suffered significant destruction, both of its natural and human resources as a result of being involved in wars for the third time in two years by 1914. In desperate straits, the Serbian Red Cross had contacted Red Cross nations abroad and, as a result 370 personnel from the United Kingdom, including 64 doctors, made their way to the beleaguered nation. In January 1915 the English-Serbian hospital was established at Vrnjacka Banja, staffed by the mission team and receiving aid from all over Britain. The Scottish Women’s Hospitals played a vital part too in serving in Serbia. The Serbian Relief Fund, of which Queen Mary was the Patron, was quickly active in meeting the need, a hospital with 600 beds being established in Skopje in November 1914. Notified of the good work being done, Cistercians were determined to offer their support. Langley House in West Street, the home of Mrs. Holland, was the site of the collection depot in the first instance – ‘bandages and bed-clothing’ being among the first things asked for. A meeting at Langley House, chaired by the Mayoress, Edith Garland, and attended by other notable townswomen including Miss Freda Shippam, Mrs Blaker, Mrs Douglas Henty and Lady Turing expressed determined upon sending relief to Serbia ‘at once, in order to alleviate the distress caused by the outbreak of infectious disease’ in the hospitals, causing further distress to patients in addition to the trauma of their wounds. Setting immediately to work, it was decided that some of the stores of the local branch of the Red Cross be immediately dispatched abroad, and that a collection of £37.0.0., taken at the meeting would be spent of the purchase of additional ‘disinfectants, dressings and drugs for Serbian hospitals.’ Items of clothing, bandages, gauze, cotton wool and splints were despatched on the following day and were on the ship bound for Serbia within the week.

Conclusions

It can be seen from the examples of the Belgian Refugee Hostel and the work of the Serbian Relief Fund in the city that townspeople looked beyond the plight of their own servicemen in the Great War. They saw the needs of foreigners displaced by war, and of allies needing
collaborative endeavours to help in serious situations as importantly as matters which directly affected the city’s day to day existence. These examples show a spirit of camaraderie between differing groups of people, and particularly between the city’s womenfolk, to do the best they could for those in obvious suffering.

References

‘Belgian Refugees at Summersdale: A Party of Eighteen Received’, Chichester Observer, 7 October 1914.


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