THE BELGIAN VILLAGE

ELISABETHVILLE

Birtley's unique First World War experience

During the First World War (called The Great War) Belgian soldiers wounded at the Front and unfit to return to active combat, and refugees fleeing from the advancing German Army were given the chance to work in the newly built National Projectile Factory in Birtley in the North-East of England. They were to manufacture the shells needed in the War to help liberate Belgium from German occupation. Working twelve-hour shifts, the Belgian refugees produced more shells than any other munitions factory in Britain.

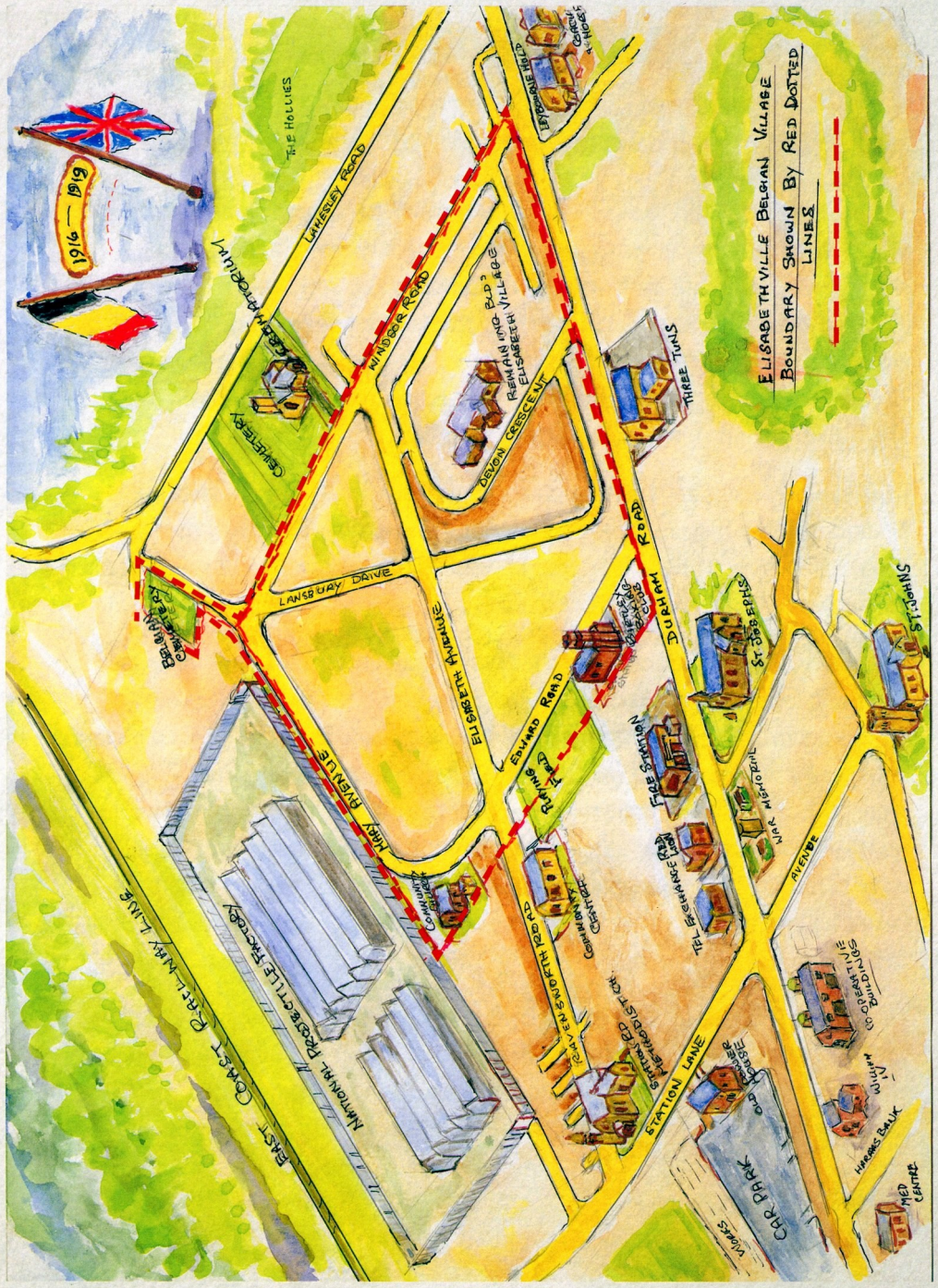
The map overleaf is an artist's impression of Birtley in 2012 and shows the boundary of the Belgian Village outlined in red and the situation of the Projectile Factory which was later to become known as the ROF (Royal Ordnance Factory) run by the Ministry of Defence.

The Village, named Elisabethville after the Belgian Queen, was built especially for the Belgians and was completely fenced in and guarded by Belgian and British police. It was laid out on model lines with hostels for the single men and cottages for families – approximately 1000 two and three-bedroomed houses were built. The houses, known as 'The Huts' had electricity, running water and wood burning stoves – the envy of the local people. In addition, there were barracks, three dining halls, a church, a primary school, a market, public laundries and baths, a police station, a prison, hospital, shops, theatre and a cemetery.

Over 6,000 Belgians lived in Elisabethville between the years 1916 to 1918. After the Armistice the Belgians returned to their homes and the Village was quickly taken over by local people. The school continued to be used until the 1970's and today only two of the original buildings remain as garages and workshops.

Birtley and The Great War
Birtley Heritage Group 2014

heritage lottery fund
LOTTERY FUNDED



Artist: Frank Stoddart. Designed and printed by MOFO Graphic Design, 07783 681945, mark@mofographicdesign.co.uk