

For over two years these 'war wounded' worked twelve-hour shifts, day and night, in conditions of extreme heat producing one and a half million shells – many more than any other Projectile Factory, and were highly commended for their efforts.

With the end of the War in 1918 and the Armistice, the whole enterprise came to a sudden end as the Belgians returned home and the Village in Birtley became a ghost town, the furniture sold at auction and 'the huts' taken over by the local people. The National Projectile Factory was partly sold off but remained in use by various industries until it was opened up again by the Ministry of Defence for the Second World War in 1940 and became the Royal Ordnance Factory. Now owned by BAE Systems, the factory has only recently been moved to Washington and the Birtley factory demolished.



All that remains today [2014] of the Village of Elisabethville are the blocks which were the food store and the butcher's shop [on Devon Crescent], a small piece of the iron railings next to the Fire Station, and the main thoroughfare named Elisabeth Avenue.



Birtley and The Great War Birtley Heritage Group 2014

If you are interested in learning more about local history you might consider joining a local history society or group. Birtley Heritage group meets regularly at Birtley Library.

To discover more contact:

Birtley Library,
Durham Road, Birtley
Chester le Street DH3 1LE
Tel: 0191 433 6101

PICTURES from Archives of John G. Bygate:

Interior of house

Belgian workers in factory

Works Foremen's dwellings

View of Birtley main road South

Three Tuns left/ Elisabethville right

Public Archives are held at Birtley Branch Library,
Gateshead Central Library and
Beamish Museum Resource Centre.

Birtley Heritage Group
Birtley and the Great War 1914-1918 .

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WHO WERE



THE BIRTLEY BELGIANS?

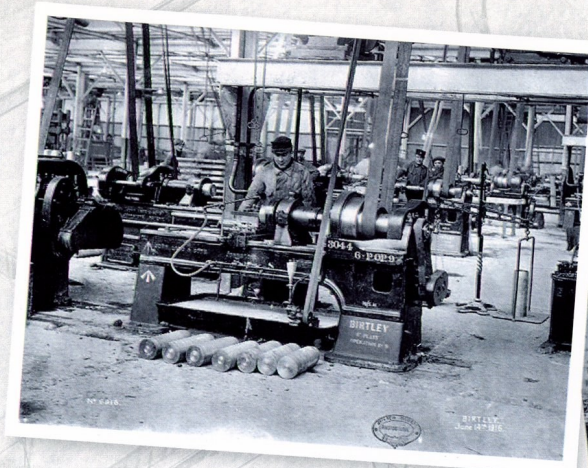


The First World War caused the biggest movement of refugees in history when half a million Belgians fled their country and 7,000 of them came to Birtley. Birtley's First World War experience was unique in that the colony of Elisabethville became the largest community of Belgians in the world – a bit of Belgium here in Birtley.

The story begins in the early stages of the First World War 1914-1918 [called The Great War] when Britain realised its armaments were no match for those being used by the German army.



The British Government began building munitions factories all over the country but had problems finding workers, since most men had gone off to War. It was suggested that perhaps the Belgian Government might be able to help, and the result was that 1,000 skilled Belgian armaments workers were withdrawn from the Front to help train other volunteers, some of whom were men who had been badly wounded and were unfit to return to war, but not unfit to do a job of work. So, late in 1915



several hundred Belgians made their way to a brand-new munitions factory in Birtley, County Durham, to begin their all-important job of making shells to help defeat the enemy.

Over the next months their numbers grew steadily until there were about 3,500 men, but it was obvious that there was nowhere for them to live, and so it was agreed that a Village would be built alongside the factory – financed by the British, but overall control handed over to Belgian management. At the same time both governments set about re-uniting the married men with their families, many of whom had been forced to flee Belgium, so in the course of time a Belgian colony of well over 6,000 people was established within the British village of Birtley.

They called the village 'Elisabethville' after the Belgian Queen. Elisabethville was completely surrounded by

a high fence with the main gate opposite the Three Tuns public house, and passes were needed to get in and out. The village was totally self-sufficient with its own shops, church, school, hospital, police station,

prison, canteens, public laundries and baths and even a cemetery. The houses, or 'Huts' as they were called, were very comfortable even by today's standards – they had wood burning stoves, electricity, and indoor toilets – and were the envy of

Birtley's own residents at the time.

The Belgians had a limited amount of spare time and were banned from public houses in the area and fraternising with the local population, but managed to form literary, musical, dramatic and sporting societies. These societies had one aim – to raise cash for British and Belgian wartime charities.

