

A short history of refugees in Sevenoaks

With thanks to David Killingray and Matt Ball

The people of the Sevenoaks area have a long history of providing support to refugees fleeing war and oppression.

In 1685, after Louis XIV of France declared Protestantism to be illegal, tens of thousands of French Protestants - the Huguenots - came to England to start again. Some of these were given space in Sundridge and Chevening. Interestingly, the word "refugee" entered the English language with the arrival of the Huguenots.

In the 18th century we know that several African Americans fleeing slavery in the US spoke (and sang) of their trials and troubles on platforms and in pulpits in Sevenoaks.

In the 1850's Robert Owen, philanthropic social reformer and one of the founders of the cooperative movement, who lived his later years at Park Grange (now part of Sevenoaks School – the house at the very southern end of the upper High Street) gave a home to various European refugee politicians, including the Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen.

During the First World War thousands of refugees from Belgium were dispersed across the country, including here in the Sevenoaks area. The Sevenoaks Chronicle described how local people were engaged in raising money and collecting clothes for the refugees already in their midst. On 23 October 1915, the Sevenoaks Chronicle reported a whist drive being held in the Weald for the destitute Belgians Fund, while Mr Frank Robinson let it be known that the cinema was admitting Belgian refugees into the mid-week and Saturday matinee for free. In July 1916 the Sevenoaks Belgian Refugees' Fund stated that since its foundation the Fund had "entirely supported or partially assisted over 80 persons".

Greek children, refugees from Anatolia in 1923, were supported by a group in Sevenoaks. In 1936 clothing was collected in Sevenoaks for Spanish refugees.

In October 1939 there were some 6,000 refugees from Europe in Kent. The Sevenoaks Chronicle reports how in 1938-40 the Sevenoaks District Refugees' Committee was planning the reception of children who were 'victims of Nazi persecution'.

Sevenoaks families gave a kind reception to East African Asians expelled from Uganda in 1972.

And now the Syrian civil war has created the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time.

If you'd like to help support refugees from Syria now living in our community, or know more about what the local refugee support group is doing, please contact Humphrey Pring, chair of Sevenoaks Welcomes Refugees at sevenoakswelcomesrefugees@gmail.com