

The '*Landing of the Belgian Refugees*' is probably Folkestone's most iconic painting.

In August 1914 the Germans at the start of the Great War (later known as World War I) advanced rapidly through Belgium; many who resisted the advance or feared what the Germans might do to them deemed it expedient to escape; the safe haven was England, and numerous boats brought them from Ostend across the Channel.

About 64,000 landed in Folkestone, most with only the clothes they stood up in. The mayor, Alderman Stephen Penfold, organised a relief committee; nationwide appeals were made for assistance, and the response was immediate and generous; nearly 50,000 moved on to other destinations within Britain, but the remainder stayed in Folkestone; supplies of food and clothing came from all over the country.

Many were eternally grateful for the support and assistance readily afforded them by the townsfolk; among the refugees were Fredo Franzoni and his Belgian wife; he had established a reputation as a portrait painter and had produced many large works to decorate public buildings in Belgium. Accordingly, he determined to commemorate the landing of the refugees in Folkestone on a massive canvas to be donated to the town.

It is thought that Franzoni executed the painting in Italy, primarily from photographs; if one examines the picture closely, it is apparent that many of the people in the party around Alderman Penfold are looking in different directions, which such a mode of execution may well explain.

He presented the painting to the townsfolk in 1916, and it was initially hung in the local council chamber, along with the collection of mayoral portraits. It was subsequently moved to the Leas Cliff Hall, which was opened in 1926, and sometime later found its way to the staircase hall of the main library in Grace Hill. It is 7ft high by 10ft wide (approx 2m x 3m), in addition to which it is surrounded by a massive gilt frame.

It was at about this time, some 40 years ago, that the painting was first cleaned and restored by Brian Oxley, a local schoolmaster and himself a renowned artist, who was then very much in his prime. He is now an active member of the Friends of the Folkestone Collections, based in The Grand, which has charge of the Creative Foundation's picture and ceramics collection that was formerly in the Metropole Gallery.

During the painting's time in the library it deteriorated somewhat, not only because it was within reach of the passing public in an unsupervised area, but also because it was close to the entrance door and at the mercy of changing weather conditions, not to mention the occasional bird gaining entry and depositing its visiting card. As KCC was becoming concerned for its wellbeing, the picture was removed to store.



- 1 Nurse Wilson
- 2 The Very Reverend Monsignor C Coote
- 3 A F Kidson Esq Town Clerk
- 4 Sir Stephen Penfold Mayor of Folkestone
- 5 Mr Alderman Spurgen Deputy Mayor of Folkestone
- 6 Monsieur A Peterson Belgian Vice-Consul
- 7 Mr Alderman E J Bishop
- 8 W H Routley Esq Borough Treasurer
- 9 Dr Tyson JP
- 10 Canon Tindall Vicar of Folkestone
- 11 Dr J C Carlile DD
- 12 Mr Councillor T S Franks
- 13 Chevalier d' Ydewalle

Many missed its colourful hues decorating the staircase, and were keen to see it returned to public exhibition. As the old mayoral portraits and other large canvasses belonging to the town had for long been successfully exhibited in The Grand, it was agreed that the 'Belgian Refugees' might join them, and a suitable space was found for it in the Dining Room, the largest and perhaps the finest room in the building which would do it handsome justice.

Apart from its accumulated grime and debris, the canvas had stretched and sagged; as attending to this was beyond the scope of Brian Oxley, the restoration work was put out to tender to appropriately selected experts, and has been entrusted to Julie Crick, a experienced specialist conservator from Essex. Rebecca Stockley of Folkestone Library has undertaken the supervision of the painting's restoration, which Kent County Council has organised with a substantial grant from the European Regional Development Fund as part of the 'Treasures Revealed' project.

To execute the work, the painting has been removed to a large store room at the back of The Grand, and most unusually the restorer is allowing public access as the work proceeds. The current timetable for free public inspection may be viewed at:

http://www.grand-uk.com/Belgian_Refugees.html

Special arrangements are being made for schools and groups to visit; more information is available from:

Rebecca Stockley, Project Officer tel: 01 303 715230
Email: folkestonelibrary@kent.gov.uk (attn R Stockley)

The painting had until lately been exhibited with a key identifying the personages depicted. Alongside Alderman Stephen Penfold, who was knighted for his services to the town and the war effort, stands a slim elegant figure who according to the key is the Belgian Vice-Consul. However, shortly after the painting was hung in The Grand, a dealer attending an antique fair produced a portrait painted in 1916 by Franzoni of the King of the Belgians, Albert I – with not only the same face, but also the same uniform! The explanation seems to be that it was deemed politically inexpedient to show the king smartly attired, apparently having arrived first, hence the deception!

And by a remarkable coincidence, during the war the King stayed in The Grand in the apartment directly above where the painting now normally hangs, and used the ferries from Folkestone Harbour to commute to the battlefield.

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