At the start of the First World War in 1914 many people from Belgium began to leave to escape the conflict in their country. Eventually, around 250,000 Belgians arrived in the UK as refugees during the War. It was the largest single influx of refugees in British history.

Belgian refugees usually received a friendly welcome when they arrived. In Lancaster, when a group of Belgians arrived at the train station in October 1914 they were taken to straight to a reception with the mayor at the Town Hall.

The Belgian refugees settled all over the country. Some lived in special villages that were built for them. In these villages they set up their own schools, churches, shops and newspapers. Most Belgians, however, lived with local families or in shared houses with other refugees. They integrated into the local community, attending local schools and working for local employers. Local residents and the Belgian refugees worked, lived and socialised together recognising that the war called for joint efforts to defeat their common enemy.

Irma Daems was a young girl from Antwerp in Belgium who escaped to Lancaster with her parents and two younger brothers in 1914. They lived in a house in Morecambe with 12 other refugees. Irma went to school in Lancaster. In 1917, she wrote about her journey from Antwerp to Lancaster in the school magazine.

In her story, Irma describes the difficult decision to leave her country. She says how terrible it was to see Antwerp destroyed by bombs and she describes her family’s difficult journey to get to the UK, by foot, by train and by boat.

At the end of her story, Irma says she is grateful to the people who welcomed her as a refugee and that she hopes to return to her country when the war is over.

Most Belgian refugees did return to Belgium after the war ended in 1918 and today not much is known about people like Irma and their experiences.