Worthing, Richebourg and the League of Help for the Devastated Areas of France

THE REDISCOVERY OF AN ADOPTION

by Sally White

In the aftermath of the First World War the League of Help for the Devastated Areas of France was formed. Its aim was to encourage the adoption of French communities by British towns. The purpose of these adoptions was to provide clothes, tools and other aid to the parts of France that had been battlefields during the war. The founders of the League believed that not only did the British owe a debt of gratitude to the French, but also that such links were the best way to avoid future wars. Worthing was among the many towns that took up the challenge. Led by its formidable Mayor, Mrs Ellen Chapman, it adopted the community of Richebourg l’Avoué in the Pas de Calais which had been virtually destroyed during the war. Links between the two towns persisted for a few years and were then forgotten.

 INTRODUCTION

early 2000 years ago the Roman writer Tacitus wrote ‘they create a desolation and they call it peace’. M. Jonnart, Sénateur for the Pas de Calais region and President of l’Association France-Grande Bretagne, toured his region in 1919 and described it in similar terms. He said there was ‘Before us, not a house, not a tree, chaos, death, in a huge desert’. He was describing the aftermath of five years of war during which his region in particular had been fought over repeatedly until what was left was little more than a muddy desert.

After the Armistice in 1918 millions of people on both sides of the English Channel struggled with their own personal sense of grief and loss. The French also set about the daunting task of rebuilding huge areas of their country. Public mourning and remembrance in Britain focused on the building of permanent memorials in each community, combined with a firm but unfocused conviction that such a war must never happen again.

While many people in Britain felt that the French should be deeply grateful to the British for liberating them from the Germans, there were others who held an opposing point of view. They believed that it was the British who owed a huge debt of gratitude to France. Britain was never invaded and far from sacrificing thousands of people in an altruistic crusade to liberate France, Britain and its colonies were fighting to prevent Britain being invaded and ultimately the Empire from coming under German domination. It can be argued that we were, in fact, using French towns, villages and farmland as a battlefield for goals that were primarily, but not exclusively, in Britain’s interest. It should be remembered that when the Germans advanced in 1918, the French government decided that if it was necessary, they would make an enormous sacrifice and flood the entire Pas de Calais region and destroy the ports of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkerque to stop them being used as submarine bases for an attack on England. Thankfully they were never called upon to do this.

Among those who believed that Britain owed a debt of gratitude to France was a smaller group of people determined to make their remembrance active and enduring rather than concentrating on personal emotion. They believed that in such action lay the best chance of preventing future wars in Europe. It was from this thought that The British League of Help for the Devastated Areas of France (henceforth the League of Help) was formed.

THE BRITISH LEAGUE OF HELP FOR THE DEVASTATED AREAS OF FRANCE

The formation of the League of Help came about through two parallel developments in 1920. The first
of these was the personal interest Lilias, Countess Bathurst took in Passel and Ville near Noyon in the Oise region. Lady Bathurst was an influential woman. Having inherited the *Morning Post* newspaper from her father, she took a keen interest in the paper and had a good working relationship with its editor, H. A. Gwynne, who shared her very conservative opinions. The needs of Passel and Ville were brought to her attention by Gordon Knox, who was the French correspondent for the *Morning Post*. In a letter to Lady Bathurst written in early 1920, Knox commented that she would recognize the area having done a very fetching sketch there before the war.

Lady Bathurst and Mr Knox worked effectively together with Knox sending her details of the types of aid that were needed and Lady Bathurst sending money and goods to the Union des Femmes de France for distribution. He told her that all types of clothes were needed urgently but that corduroy trousers, flannel shirts (in colours that would not show the dirt), rough coats and working boots were a priority. He warned her that French farmers could be conservative and would not work with foreign types of tool. He suggested that she should send money to be spent locally on providing what was most needed. They discussed the types of livestock that were most suitable, Mr Knox writing that ‘you certainly know better than I do how thoroughly appreciative the French are of the value of the goat’. In later correspondence with the Mayor of Passel, Lady Bathurst was firmly told that he had checked what type of livestock most people preferred and had discovered that many had no liking at all for goats and had a strong preference for poultry.

Mr Knox realized that one relatively easy way of helping both the children and their families would be to find a way of providing them with one cooked main meal each day. Between them Mr Knox and Lady Bathurst came up with the idea of providing a canteen for schoolchildren. In March 1920 Lady Bathurst sent out £100 to pay for a canteen to be run throughout the following term. Lady Bathurst was careful to consult the Mayor of Passel about the aid she provided, to be sure that it would be both useful and acceptable to the recipients. Each family in Passel was to be issued with a card on which details of their needs and of the help they received would be recorded. Mr Knox was active in ironing out with French Customs officers a number of problems that arose over the shipments of aid.

From the London office of the *Morning Post* H. A. Gwynne wrote admiringly to Lady Bathurst in April 1920. He praised her efforts and, thinking of stimulating other people to follow her example, he suggested holding meetings in towns throughout the country. He then commented that he wished there were ‘somebody in each town in England only half as active as you are’.

The second impetus that led to the formation of the League of Help came from M. Marcel Braibant, Conseiller Général of the Ardennes. He first made the suggestion that British towns should adopt French communities ‘to give to them such sustained and sympathetic aid and encouragement as a godparent is wont to confer on his godchild’.

In April 1920 Admiral Sir Charles Dundas wrote to the *Morning Post* on behalf of the Association of Great Britain and France, commenting that the devastation of France and especially the Ardennes region, had been caused by the malice of the retreating Germans as much as by the inevitable progress of a war. He suggested the formation of local committees to organize the adoption of French communities, adding that it was ‘not a matter of relieving beggars but of helping workers to get on their feet again’.

In discussions about the formation of a Committee to bring the League of Help into being, Mr Gwynne wrote to Lady Bathurst on 7 April 1920 commenting on the suggestion that the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, should be asked to take an active role in developing a strategy. Mr Gwynne commented:

> Personally I don’t believe that the Prime Minister, if you and I read his character aright could ever be successful. I think he is an opportunist, and an opportunist never could have a policy. I think he is corrupt, and corruption leads to revolution. I think he is unstable, and instability is the greatest fault of leadership.

In spite of their long-standing antipathy towards Lloyd George, even Lady Bathurst and Mr Gwynne had to realize that his involvement, albeit nominal, would be seen by some people as an advantage. In the end the Prime Minister was asked to become one of the League of Help’s patrons and therefore more of a figurehead than an active participant in the League of Help’s organization.

By June 1920 the British League of Help for the Devastated Areas of France had been formally
established with an office in the headquarters of the Anglo-French Society at Scala House in Tottenham Street, London. Mr Gwynne was busy organizing meetings to further the idea of an adoption scheme and Lady Bathurst quickly added her voice as well as her support to his efforts, speaking at a number of meetings. A meeting of all Anglo-French societies was called to discuss the scheme. The Lord Mayor of London held another recruiting meeting at the Mansion House on 30 June to which he invited all Mayors. He asked Lady Bathurst to be one of the speakers. At this point about twelve large towns agreed to help and Mr Gwynne made arrangements with the carriers Walford for the transportation of donated goods at half their normal freight charge. In September Cirencester agreed to join the scheme to help the villages already under Lady Bathurst’s wing.

The organization of the League consisted of a Committee of Patrons that included Winston Churchill MP, the Prime Minister and the French Ambassador M. Paul Cambon, a Central Committee with a London office and Local Committees set up in all the towns and villages that wanted to participate in the scheme. The costs of the Central Office were initially paid for by a group of friends and later by specific fund-raising events. The Manifesto made it clear that once each adoption had been agreed the Central Committee would take no further part in the arrangements unless specifically asked to do so.

Members of the Central Committee were drawn from the three great Anglo-French organizations: The Anglo-French Society, the Association of Great Britain and France and the Entente Cordiale, but also included individuals such as Lady Bathurst who ‘were known to be both sympathetic and capable of service’. It is clear that they were a group of conservative, mostly upper-class people, who had a very paternalistic attitude to their duty towards ‘needy’ people in France. It is worth quoting briefly from the League of Help’s Manifesto:

The task of restoring the devastated areas of France is one in which we British People are in honour bound to take part. The struggle that scarred the face of Northern France beyond all recognition was waged just as much in defence of British lives and British homes, as if the battle front had stretched athwart Kent and Sussex and as if the thunder of the guns had been audible in Whitehall.

The battlefields had covered 9,810,000 acres. Over 400 towns and villages had been completely destroyed as had 20,500 factories and 75 per cent of the nation’s mines. The League wittingly or unwittingly exaggerated the scope of the French casualties claiming on a handbill that 50 per cent of French men aged between 19 and 32 had been killed (Fig. 1). The scope of help needed was enormous, but the Committee and the French Government were determined from the outset to differentiate between payment for rebuilding, which would eventually be extracted from Germany, and the provision of equipment, perishable goods, livestock and trees. It was these latter items that participants in the scheme were urged to supply.

Goods collected locally were to be forwarded to London or other ports at the expense of local committees. From that point the Central Committee and Walfords were responsible for shipping the goods to France. All consignments were to be conspicuously marked with a prominent label. The French Government agreed to forgo any customs charges and a Captain Ribeaux liaised tirelessly with French railway officials to ensure the smooth and speedy delivery of all consignments of aid. The Central Committee made the suggestion that:

to avoid any tendency towards the pauperization of the inhabitants of the devastated areas, certain of the supplies destined for them should not be distributed gratis, but should be sold at a low cost price. This was only suggestion, not a rule, and it appears that few if any communities acted on it.

The Central Office offered to provide speakers, photographs and ‘cinematographic films’ to towns where people were trying to drum up support. They also encouraged Mayors and other civic leaders to visit France to see the damage for themselves. The French Government was persuaded to provide cars to drive them around in France as they inspected the former battlefields and decided whether or not to adopt a community. It should be remembered that it was not only British communities that adopted devastated towns. Around 150 towns in Southern France that had not been occupied and fought over adopted others in the north that had suffered severe damage.

The League of Help’s First Annual Report, published in January 1921, reported that 59 communities in Britain had adopted 79 towns and
THE BRITISH LEAGUE OF HELP FOR Devastated France

RAILWAYS destroyed ... 2,880 miles
CANALS " ... 992 "
ROADS " ... 52,031 "
FACTORIES " ... 20,500 "
COAL MINES " ... 75 %

Fig. 1. Handbill published by the League of Help to illustrate the scale of wartime devastation in France.

The above map shows in a graphic form what would have happened in this country if the war had been fought here instead of on the other side of the Channel. On a map of France the devastated areas are shown, those entirely destroyed being indicated in black, while the badly-damaged districts are shaded. On this map one of England is super-imposed, and it will be seen that the ruined territories of France would, in England, have stretched from Dungeness across the whole of the Thames Estuary between London and the neighbourhood of Sheerness and Southend, and then spread north-westwards in a belt covering many of the most important industrial districts of the Midlands and Lancashire, passing finally over the sea off the Westmorland coast.
villages in France. However the Committee was keen to note that industrial unrest in post-war Britain had hindered fund-raising efforts. Lieutenant-Colonel Powney ‘had traversed the whole of the devastated areas and furnished a valuable report of their immediate needs’.Lady Bathurst was referred to repeatedly as Passel’s ‘fairy godmother’. The writers of the report commented that:

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Most participants chose to adopt towns where members of their local battalion had died. Doncaster, however, chose to adopt St Léger on the grounds that the St Leger horse race had been run in Doncaster since 1760. Early adoptions included Verdun and certain devastated villages in the Meuse valley, which were adopted by the City and County of London, Arras by Newcastle, Eton by Eton and Aire by Ayr. Other towns taking part within the first year included Keighley, Plymouth, Bradford, Oxford, Hove, Bexhill, Hastings, Blackburn, Evesham, Edinburgh and Llandudno. There was some support for the scheme in the British Empire; for example, Sydney, Melbourne, Montreal and Mauritius all adopted French towns. Worthing’s adoption of Richebourg was being formalized at this point. Lewes was also reported to be considering joining the scheme but never did.

On 24 November a meeting of mayors of towns participating in the scheme was held at the Guildhall in London. It was a useful occasion for the exchange of information about the help that had already been sent to France. Lord Derby, who had just given up his post as British Ambassador in France, urged the importance of ‘concentrating on some useful building which shall stand for all time as a witness of the sympathy of a British town’. His advice had a serious impact on projects that were funded. It was, however, a contradiction of the principle expounded in early publicity for the League of Help, which had stressed the importance of providing
objects rather than buildings because the German government was due to pay for the physical reconstruction of towns through reparations.

Fulsome thanks from the Mayors and officials of some of the French towns were quoted in the report. One is worth quoting here. The Curé of Hérmiès wrote to the Mayor of Huddersfield:

Your Mr Engineer Chesterman, like Moses in times of old, under the influence of his magic wand, has caused to burst forth in a good place from the midst of our ruins a source of water, limpid, pure and abundant, which our poor people have not been accustomed to drink since our wells were demolished and contaminated by the war. Waves of harmony, the delicious music of a spring of living water — these are more than enough to make us forget our past misfortunes and to give us back the taste for life.22

There cannot be many local authority officers who have been likened to Moses.

In the following year the adoption of 97 French communities by 75 British towns was announced in the Second Annual Report. However, the Central Committee was again at pains to comment on how strikes in England had limited what the League could achieve. The most unusual adopters were the Leicestershire Farmers Association and the Combined School of Hairdressers. The report is tinged with disappointment that more towns had not chosen to participate.23

The City and County of London raised over £20,000 without ever resorting to a public appeal. As well as their main committee they set up a Ladies’ Committee presided over by HRH Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll. They held a number of fêtes to raise money. A visit by M. Poincaré and Marshal Pétain to the Ladies’ Committee was mentioned in the report and part of M. Poincaré’s speech was quoted. He said that:

The French people, who, from amidst their ruins, see you come to them with a smile and outstretched hands, know full well that your hope is not to compensate them for the immense losses they have suffered, but they like to recognise in your adoptions and gifts a token and an emblem of British Friendship. A single adoption on your part can do more for the union of our two countries than many political conversations; and as the union between our two countries is one of the surest conditions of universal peace... 24

Describing some of the year’s activities the report describes visits by groups of schoolchildren from Newcastle and Edinburgh to their French counterparts with whom they had been corresponding for two years. Keighley, Newcastle, Bradford and Maidstone, Worthing and a few other towns had also entertained groups from their adopted towns. The report then noted that ‘The importance of such visits cannot be exaggerated ... intercourse between the young people of the two countries must always be looked upon as most valuable propaganda for the friendship of the two nations’.25 Various French groups had visited their adopters in Britain. In September 1921 the French Government invited mayors of towns which had not made adoptions to visit the devastated areas and this invitation was accepted by about 40 mayors.

In some cases local authorities made considerable donations themselves as well as or instead of, collecting from the general public. These civic contributions were most common in the north of England. Worthing was one of those that decided not to make a contribution from civic funds. Some of the donations were the expected threshing machines and other farm machinery, apple trees (from Worcester, Canterbury and Maidstone), clothes, tools, seeds, toys and books. A number of towns including Exeter, Doncaster and Maidstone helped to pay for the restoration of their adoptees’ water supply.26

Some authorities were more imaginative in choosing what aid to give. Blackburn paid for a bridge over the Somme at Péronne, to be called Le Pont de Blackburn. Bradford Corporation donated the interest on an investment of £4000 to Bailleul for a period of five years to help set up a trade school. Bristol provided houses for war widows and their children in Béthune. Burnley pledged to give £200 annually for five years to the villages of Miraumont, Courcelles and Colincamps. Appropriately enough for the home of building societies, Halifax gave an interest-free loan of £5000 for five years to Metz-en-Couture. Newcastle sent 150 pigeons to Arras (to compensate for all the birds that had been killed to stop them being used to send messages during the war) and also provided £12,000 in cash. Paddington sent a harmonium to Neuville-Vitasse. Worcester sent £655 to Gouzeaucourt, part of which was spent on a windmill and the remainder on books, ‘suitably inscribed’ and annual prizes for schoolchildren to be called the ‘Prix Worcester’.27

In some cases the types of gift sent reflect the
level of damage in the selected area of France. The lack of even the bare necessities of life in some areas is illustrated by the way that Blackpool concentrated its efforts on sending clogs, boots and clothes to Neuve Chapelle.

Some towns insisted that a lasting monument to their generosity be created. This often took the form of the renaming of a street or square in the adopted town. Poix du Nord was given a new Town Hall to be called Keighley Hall and a newspaper article added a rider that ‘it may be hoped that the inhabitants of Poix will be instructed in the correct pronunciation of Keighley’. A board commemorating the adoptions was set up in the Imperial War Museum.

No references to the organization of the League of Help after 1922 have been found although local committees no doubt continued to work for a while longer. It is likely that once the initial impetus was over, enthusiasm waned quite quickly. A few British towns have since made formal twinning arrangements with the towns they had adopted.

**WORTHING AND THE LEAGUE OF HELP**

Worthing’s involvement with the League of Help and all knowledge of Richebourg l’Avoué (hereafter Richebourg) seemed to have been forgotten until the author came upon a few faded cuttings from Worthing newspapers dated 1920–21 which reported fund-raising efforts to help the village. Tracking down further information was a lengthy process (Fig. 2).

It quickly became clear that Worthing’s involvement was largely due to the commitment of one woman, Mrs Ellen Chapman. She was a remarkable lady, a life-long Conservative, a Magistrate who campaigned for Votes for Women and who is said to have hunted her Pekinese dogs across the Downs in a pack, like beagles. In 1914 Mrs Chapman was asked by Worthing Borough Council’s Selection Committee to stand as Mayor, all members senior to her having refused. She agreed. In full Council the vote went against her selection by 16 votes to 1, which raises the question of what happened to the votes of the Selection Committee who had proposed her in the first place. She refused to back down, stating that ‘the post is mine by right of seniority. If I were a betting woman I would bet on myself’. She said that there was opposition ‘simply because I am a woman. But don’t you think that the average woman is quite as capable as the average man? If I were to be born again and had my choice, I would not be a man’. She certainly would have disagreed with Lady Bathurst who believed that women were inferior to men and should never have the vote. Up to that time there had been four female mayors in England. They had all been a great success and had been asked to stay on for a second term. A petition was drawn up by the councillors who opposed her selection. With the outbreak of war her fate was sealed. Worthing was certainly not ready to have a woman Mayor during a war. Alderman Whyte was brought out of retirement to be Mayor and Mrs Chapman had to wait until 1920 to be elected. She was then Mayor for two successive terms.

In September 1920 Lord Derby, the British Ambassador in Paris, wrote to Worthing Borough Council (as he did to Councils throughout Britain) inviting the Borough to support the League of Help and to adopt a stricken town or village in Northern France. At a meeting of the Borough Councillors on 26 November the Mayor reported that she had been sent information about several French towns which would be suitable for adoption by Worthing under the League of Help scheme. Richebourg was considered particularly suitable for adoption by Worthing since many men from Sussex had died and were buried around the village. The Council resolved to accept the invitation. Mrs Chapman was delegated to ask the Mayor of Richebourg how Worthing could help.

Later that month Mrs Chapman wrote to the Worthing Gazette announcing that a public meeting was to be held to discuss the proposal. She added that:

As a method of showing our sympathy with their terrible sufferings and conveying our unbounded admiration for their inflexible courage and determination against the cruel and ruthless invader, it seems to me that Worthing should not lag behind other towns in assuming a certain responsibility towards the rehabilitation of a small town or village now struggling to rise again from the ruins — that is all that is left.

She added that France was making great strides in reconstruction but that:

nevertheless the devastation and ruins still left to be dealt with must be seen to be believed...
and we, in England, who have not felt the cruel clutch of the ruthless invader upon the hearths and homes might well feel that in helping such a cause we are making a most appropriate thank offering for the memory of those who fought and died for us.\textsuperscript{33}

Mrs Chapman told the Council that the scheme would be regulated by the French Government and that goods rather than money were needed. She stressed that the French Government was rebuilding the destroyed villages and charging the costs to Germany and that the League was anxious to provide more immediate practical assistance.\textsuperscript{34} At that point in time nearly 30 towns or districts had been adopted including Bray-sur-Somme by Eastbourne and Boulon by Hove. Worthing was among 50 or so more municipalities that were showing a serious interest in participating in the scheme.

The public meeting on 6 December went well in spite of a disappointingly low attendance. The Mayor presided over the meeting that was addressed by a number of speakers including the Worthing MP, Lord Winterton, and Admiral Sir Charles Dundas (from The League of Help). Sir Charles spoke of the need for France and England to remain friends in the future. He said that the French press had raised objections to the scheme and that the British knew that the Germans were trying to create a rift between France and England. He added that the French had grounds for annoyance with England: ‘we charged them £15 a ton for coal while paying less than £3 for it ourselves. We also put 50 per cent ad valorem tax on wine!’\textsuperscript{35}

Another speaker, Captain Twine, said that Richebourg was a small town about one and a half miles north-east of Festubert and one mile south of Neuve Chapelle. He explained that during February, March and April 1915, the front line was held there by troops including the 2nd and 5th Battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment. Both of these battalions were in the unsuccessful attack of 9 May. Referring to the fighting around Richebourg in May 1915, Captain Twine said that when the troops went over the top the German barbed wire had not been cut in spite of assurances that it had. Caught on the wire ‘there they were sniped and there their bodies lay until the grass grew over them’.\textsuperscript{16}

On June 30 1916, the day before the enormous Somme attack, the 11th, 12th and 13th (Southdown) battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment were driven back after suffering 1500 casualties and leaving 400–500 men killed or missing. The dead included 12 sets of brothers. Sergeant-Major Nelson Carter, a cinema door attendant from Hailsham, was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for exceptional bravery under fire. The events which took place at Richebourg on the 30 June 1916 may have been recorded by historians as a minor diversionary attack, more locally 30 June came to be known as The Day that Sussex Died. In the five cemeteries around Richebourg 2624 British soldiers were buried.\textsuperscript{37}

Earl Winterton said that all 423 houses in Richebourg had been destroyed (Fig. 3). Before the war the population of Richebourg had been 2065. By 1920 only 1000 had returned. Earl Winterton proposed the resolution formally adopting Richebourg and helping in rehabilitation. He said that the union would no doubt be difficult as the French and English often disagree politically, but that by helping, Worthing would lessen the chance of future friction.\textsuperscript{38}

The adoption of Richebourg was agreed unanimously, and a provisional Committee set up. The Mayor opened the Fund by offering to donate £50. Earl Winterton promised £20, Colonel Randolph, £10 and by the end of the meeting £100 had been pledged. Within days donated clothing was being accepted at the Council Offices in Tudor Lodge. The Mayor’s fund-raising campaign was thoroughly endorsed by the Worthing Gazette which added that although ‘charity rightly begins at home, it should not end there’.\textsuperscript{39}

The offer to adopt Richebourg was forwarded to its Mayor, M Boulainguez, who quickly wrote to Worthing expressing his council’s gratitude and pleasure. Addressing Mrs Chapman as ‘My Dear Sir’, he went on to write:

There was great joy in our community when I had the honour and pleasure of making it known that an English town had adopted Richebourg l’Avoué. Already in the Council meeting of December 27\textsuperscript{19}, I have been instructed to convey our sentiments of thanks to the generous population of Worthing. I shall be obliged, dear colleague, if you will interpret our desires and convey our sincere thanks to the representatives and the Councillors. You ask me, dear friend, when I can give you an interview. I am entirely at your service, but for safety it will be necessary to warn me of your arrival two or three days in advance. If
your generosity would offer us some clothes, I can assure you that it would be appreciated, for the misery is great in our devastated cities.40

Fund-raising events, of the sort that had become common during the war, quickly got under way. One of the first was a combined Fancy Dress Carnival and Whist Drive which was held at the Steyne Hotel. It was described in the Worthing Gazette as ‘the success of successes thanks to that Prince of good fellows, Mr J. O. Kordina, the proprietor’41 who had organized the whole thing. Over 200 people attended, mostly in fancy dress, and raised £32. The Mayor, Mrs Chapman, apparently wore a fetching mauve evening dress and her chain of office. It fell to her to judge the fancy dress competition with the assistance of several gentlemen. The Worthing Herald dutifully noted not only the categories and the names of the prizewinners but also the names of the people who had donated the prizes. The same attention to detail was applied to the prizes for the whist drive. Six 1000-candle-power lights had been installed in the ballroom and once or twice when they were switched on they caused all the other lights to fail. This apparently added to the fun of the evening. A Mr Buckley caused much amusement as he was dressed as Man Friday complete with a live goat and went around collecting money in a small petrol can.

In February 1921 the Deputy Mayor, Alderman J. Farquharson Whyte and Councillor Mercier went to Richebourg at their own expense to assess for themselves what help was needed. Mrs Chapman was sick and could not go, but translated the text of the Maire of Richebourg’s speech that the others brought back. In his speech M. Boulainguez had said: ‘how can we tell you of the misery and suffering which we have had to endure in the dugouts left by your soldiers and of the privations which those who first returned had to endure?’.

Captain Mercier reported that M. Boulainguez had had a large farm before the war. He had been called up in 1914 and taken prisoner in September of that year. He was in a good position to explain just how important the provision of agricultural tools was. Captain Mercier mentioned the need to provide agricultural implements and commented
that although there were bound to be differences between French and English tools the French would quickly adapt to whatever they could be sent. Captain Mercier added that:

I never heard a grumble. The people struck me as being very cheerful and it means something to be cheerful under their conditions. Perhaps their spirit could best be described by saying that they are dignified in misfortune. I wonder if Worthing could exhibit such a spirit under similar conditions. We are undoubtedly helping people who deserve to be helped.42

At the meeting to report on the visit Major Fox, from the Central Committee of the League of Help, said that it was:

a good old principle of British charity that it was the duty of the poor to help the poorer; and he would like to urge that, even if they were poor, it was their duty to help those who were poorer in France.43

The Deputy Mayor told a reporter from the Worthing Herald that he had been enormously impressed by the efforts the French were making to rebuild their lives and to start to work the land again. He felt that it said a lot for the inhabitants of Richebourg that although most of them were still living in army huts of one kind or another, the first building they had rebuilt had been the school. It was built of locally-made bricks and was attended by 84 local children. He described the Mayor and the schoolmaster as appealing to him as 'splendid types of Frenchmen'.44 The French had clearly gone out of their way to lay on suitable entertainment for their visitors, but none of the group commented on the fact that the French had expended much of their scant food supplies on providing the first lunch to have been eaten in the local cafe since the war.

The Deputy Mayor stressed that from what he had seen, the people in Richebourg were fully deserving of help. The school’s 84 pupils had three teachers and greatly impressed the visitors who said that Worthing should aim to replicate their pupil-teacher ratio. No-one in Richebourg spoke English, but the teacher promised to tell his pupils about Worthing and the geography of Sussex. He asked for postcards of Worthing to put up in the new school. All kinds of help were needed urgently. Richebourg was in a primarily agricultural area with very good soil. They had worked hard to level the land and needed agricultural tools, seeds, seed potatoes, clothes and household utensils. The delegation had stressed to the people in Richebourg that the level of help would be governed by the fact that ‘Worthing was not a wealthy town due to taxation, unemployment and other post-war causes’.45

At the end of a meeting to promote the scheme in March, Mrs Chapman said that it had been:

with considerable pain that she had heard the objection raised by some that this movement should not have been taken in hand when they had so much distress at home.

She added that:

Nobody could deny that we had troubles of our own but had England been in the position of France today we should have been very grateful if she had extended the hand of friendship to us.46

The report of a special service at St Paul’s Church in the Worthing Gazette of 23 February quoted the Vicar, the Revd E. J. Cunningham, who had said:

it needed but little insight ... to realise that two nations like France and England could not but have divergent interests. And so they welcomed anything that would bind the two countries together with a tie that would rise superior to any little jealousies or differences of opinion. Treaties drawn up by diplomats and the smooth words spoken in the Council Chamber might do much to knit the two countries together; but it was only by the personal touch of a personal affection for each other that the future peace of England and France could be surely guaranteed.47

The report of the service concluded by saying that: There was a collection for the Fund, and Miss Irene Compton, who has so often distinguished herself in this direction and who was dressed on this occasion to represent England and France, had a very heavily laden box.48

In the weeks that followed there was local opposition to the scheme by some people, but others donated both goods and money. In March the Worthing Herald published a report on what had already been sent to Richebourg. In December six sacks of clothes and blankets worth £45 had been sent. These were followed in February by three sacks of clothing and three cases of household utensils, garden implements etc. as well as two sacks of seed potatoes and vegetable seeds. Early in March four sacks of clothing, boots etc. had been sent. By April over £500 had been raised. This was more than any other
participating town in Sussex had raised.49  

In April another Fancy Dress Ball, this time by invitation rather than ticket, was held in Warne’s Hotel on the seafront. Miss Queenie Howard’s Orchestra from London provided the music to which the 160 guests danced. Once again prizes were given for the best costumes in a number of categories and for the best dancers. An Australian visitor, Miss Constance Austin, sang the Marseillaise and the Mayor was handed £59 in a case of treasury notes to go to the Richebourg Fund.50  

In June Mrs Chapman visited Richebourg, making Arras her base during her visit. She reported that on the 18-mile drive from Arras to Richebourg she did not see a single house. In the school a girl of eleven read an address saying how much they had loved the English soldiers who were there during the war. She added that they felt less lonely when they remembered that far away friends were thinking of them and caring for them. The devastation was even worse than the Mayor had expected as the area had suffered from poison gas attacks as well all the other damage. She was given lunch in the little shack with a felt roof where the Mayor lived. The simple wooden chairs and table they used were the only furniture in the room. She also visited the cemeteries around Richebourg and saw the rows of simple wooden crosses that filled them.51  

In July M. Paul Boulainguez and his son Charles came to Worthing as guests of Mrs Chapman. They spent several days in the town and attended various events including a reception for all donors to the fund held at Tudor Lodge. M. Boulainguez made a speech of thanks, which was reported in the Worthing Gazette alongside a photo, which showed him at the time of his capture by the Germans. He said that it had given him much pleasure to accept the invitation to be in Worthing, which had had compassion on their miseries, and of its great charity had offered to help to set up their homes once more. He went on to say that the various things that had been sent to Richebourg had been a source of great joy to the poor victims of the terrible war and had given back much courage to those who could not but regard the future with despair.52  

On the Sunday M. Boulainguez laid a wreath at Worthing’s new war memorial. In a short speech he said that he considered it a sacred duty to render homage to those sons of Worthing who died for their country and now lay under French soil. He said that some names were dearer to his people than others and spoke about how lovingly people around Richebourg had nursed English soldiers during the war. He said that the children of Richebourg boasted of the valour of the British soldiers that they had known. He wished that the people of Worthing could have seen the jealous care with which their men were nursed as this might have brought a little consolation to them in their grief. In response Captain Mercier said that he was sure that M. Boulainguez had endeared himself to all their hearts by his very courteous bearing and his very ardent and sincere gratitude to the town of Worthing for what they were doing for his village.53  

After his return to France he sent a letter of thanks which said:

How I love to carry my thoughts back to Worthing. How I long once more to see that beautiful town of yours, with its wide and well-kept asphalted roads, its fine seafront and its splendid hotels. All these delighted me and I often think that I have left Paradise to return to hell.54  

Mrs Chapman’s efforts for Richebourg continued with unabated enthusiasm and in December the Worthing Herald reported ‘that no portion of her public duty has afforded the Mayor more complete gratification than the practical help she has been enabled to extend, with the support of the inhabitants, to Worthing’s adopted town of Richebourg’.55 Twelve cases of goods were sent out to Richebourg in time for Christmas and the contents included toys for the children. M. Boulainguez wrote to thank Mrs Chapman and Worthing for the gifts adding that

We thank you for them with all our hearts. According to your wish we shall distribute the toys to the children on Christmas Eve. Already I see the joyful faces of the little ones when they receive them! Very little pleases them, and I know they will bless those who have sent them such generous gifts.56  

In January 1922 Mrs Chapman attended an international congress of civic representatives in Paris. The congress was held under the auspices of the League of Help with the intention of creating an international association of mayors or other municipal representatives. Part of the thinking behind this congress was that it would only be through promoting and maintaining a thorough knowledge of each other that nations would be able to avoid future conflict.
Mrs Chapman’s trip did not start well. The promised boat to Calais did not exist and she and her secretary had to embark for Boulogne instead. They then suffered further delays owing to ‘the usual difficulties with the Customs authorities on the other side of the Channel’. Confusion over train times added further to their delays, but she did reach Paris in time for the congress. Other British Mayors present included those from Oxford, Portsmouth, Doncaster and Halifax. During the congress meetings were presided over by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the President of the French Republic and the Home Secretary. Because Mrs Chapman spoke French with some ease she was asked to respond to the speech of welcome on behalf of the delegates. Meetings were held between British Mayors and those representing communities in the devastated areas of France. This latter group included M. Boulainguez from Richebourg. A trip to Rheims was organized for those of the delegates who wanted to go. On her return to Worthing Mrs Chapman was quoted in the Worthing Gazette as saying: ‘I thought Richebourg was sad enough, but the wanton destruction of property at Rheims, seen after the lapse of three years, is if anything worse’. She was particularly shocked by the state of the Cathedral especially since, while they were there, there was a huge noise as the vibration of their voices caused a block of stone to fall. After three strenuous days at the congress the Mayor and her secretary, Miss Lucas, needed two days in Paris to recover from their exertions. On her return she told the Worthing Gazette that the French knew that the Germans were already hiding guns and munitions and preparing for another war. She added that although the war might not come in her time, the danger remained for the rising generation.57

Fund-raising in Worthing went on until early 1923 although the amounts raised diminished steadily with the passage of time. The links that were meant to last forever, tying Britain and France together were quickly forgotten. It would be intriguing to know how many of the towns that participated in the scheme have maintained their connection with their adopted communities in France and to see how many of the streets, squares and buildings that were re-christened in honour of their English adopters have retained their names.

A visit to Richebourg in 1994 revealed the information that the Mayor’s wife, Mme. Helle, was the granddaughter of M. Boulainguez who had been the Mayor at the time of the adoption. She remembered her father and grandfather talking about their visit to Worthing. In 1994 there was still a clog-maker in his 90s, M. Senechal who lived just outside the town and who eagerly recounted tales of the adoption and said how much they had appreciated the packages of tools that had been sent from Worthing. He knew of an old man who still had the toy that he had received.58 In 1994 local children were still taught about the adoption, to recognize where the front line had been, and about the sacrifices made during the First World War by the ferocious Bengal Lancers, the enormous Sikhs and the Gurkhas whose graves lie in carefully tended cemeteries around the town.

A FRENCH VIEW OF THE ADOPTION

In spite of a search of the town’s archives by the former Mayor of Richebourg, M. Helle, very little has been found to illustrate how the individual citizens of Richebourg felt about the adoption of their community by the distant English town of Worthing. Most of the references in the Richebourg archives relate to the arrival and distribution of consignments of goods from Worthing. It has proved equally difficult to assess the attitude of the French authorities.

The adoption was announced to the people of Richebourg in December 1920. The Parish Magazine of the church of St Laurent in Richebourg recorded, almost as an afterthought, that ‘The town of Worthing (England) has decided to adopt Richebourg l’Avoué’. There was a unanimous vote of thanks to Worthing.59 In the following January the Mayor informed the Council that a delegation from Worthing would be arriving the following Sunday. Debate followed about how the bundles of clothes etc. that had been received should be distributed. The main point of discussion was whether they should be given evenly to all the inhabitants or reserved for those in the greatest need. The decision was made to distribute all the aid evenly to everyone in Richebourg.60

At a meeting of the Municipal Council on 15 August 1921, the Mayor, who was also the President of the Municipal Council, gave an account of his visit to Worthing. He said that he had been made very welcome by the authorities and that the population was clearly very sympathetic. The Council agreed to send a letter of thanks to Worthing.61
The last reference to the adoption in the Richebourg archives dates from 30 December 1921. It reported the receipt of a letter from the President of the Association of Mayors of France inviting M. Boulainquz to attend a meeting between the mayors of France and the mayors of the allied nations which would also be attended by Mrs Schapman [sic].

CONCLUSION

Worthing is not a remarkable town. It has always been quite conservative and inward-looking. There are still a surprising number of people who have never been north of London or west of Portsmouth. I assume that people in Worthing in the 1920s were no more or less charitable than people in other towns and in fact Worthing collected less money under the League of Help scheme than many other participants. Certainly, unlike some towns it took the decision that the Council itself would not make a contribution to the Richebourg fund. However, there was a powerful group within the town who had a strong belief that it was their duty to help people in distress, particularly if they were not under their noses in Worthing and especially if they could be judged deserving of such help.

As shown in several speeches quoted in this article, belief that recipients of charity must be deserving of it was central to the work of the League of Help. It was also widely held by the class of people who involved themselves in a wide range of charities at this time. The period following the First World War was a difficult one for countless people. It would be easy to assume that the charitable impetus that led to the adoption of Richebourg was unique in the history of Worthing but it was not. There were collections for farmers whose crops had been flattened by particularly large hailstones and money to pay for soup kitchens for the poor. More equivalent to the adoption of Richebourg were the links that were forged with Brynmawr in South Wales in the late 1920s. Brynmawr was in an area which had been devastated by pit closures. Most men were unemployed and hundreds of children were suffering from malnutrition. The Rotary Club, the Council and the Society of Friends collaborated to help Brynmawr, sending money for shoes and clothes, bringing hungry children to Worthing for a holiday and young adults to Worthing to work in the hospital or as servants. With a foretaste of much modern-day collecting, so many toys were sent off to Brynmawr that the Mayor wrote to Worthing to ask for fewer toys and more tools and clothes.

The course of the League of Help’s efforts and the way in which the adoptions faded into history are paralleled by many a modern appeal. We give as they did while the images are fresh in our minds and then move on to the next project and the next. In the 1920s, as now, there were more committed pockets of help where fund-raising and support continued after the initial impetus had faded away. The modern twinning of British towns with the communities they adopted after the First World War show just how important these links can remain.

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NOTES

The letters and papers of Lilias, Countess of Bathurst, are the main archive of papers relating to the League of Help. They are held in the Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections in the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds hereafter (BLUL). 1990/1/2031–2051.


4 BLUL 1990/1/2031. All the correspondence relating to Lady Bathurst’s involvement in Passel and Ville and the League of Help is in BLUL 1999/1/2031. Letter from Mr Knox to Lady Bathurst 24 March 1920.

5 BLUL 1990/1/2031.

6 BLUL 1990/1/2031. Letter from the Mayor of Passel to
Lady Bathurst in 1920 (precise date not given).
7 BLUL 1990/1/2031. Letter from Mr H. A. Gwynne to Lady Bathurst 7 April 1920.
8 BLUL 1990/1/2032. Manifesto of the British League of Help (For the Devastated Areas of France) 1920, 2.
10 BLUL 1990/1/2031. Letter from Mr H. A. Gwynne to Lady Bathurst 7 April.
11 BLUL 1990/1/2031. Letter from Mr H. A. Gwynne to Lady Bathurst 3 June 1920.
13 BLUL 1990/1/2032, 1.
14 BLUL 1990/1/2032, 1.
15 Map with statistics produced by Capt. L Ribeaux for the League of Help and shown in Fig. 1.
17 BLUL 1990/1/2032, 4.
19 BLUL 1990/1/2037, 5.
20 BLUL 1990/1/2037, 6–10.
21 BLUL 1990/1/2037, 10.
22 BLUL 1990/1/2037, 12.
24 BLUL 1990/1/2040, 4.
25 BLUL 1990/1/2040, 6.
26 BLUL 1990/1/2040, 7–17.
27 BLUL 1990/1/2040, 11.
28 BLUL 1990/1/2040, 6.6.
29 Cutting from an unidentified and undated newspaper held in file labelled ‘Ellen Chapman’ in the Reference Section of Worthing Library.
31 Letter reported in the Worthing Gazette, 6 October 1920, 6.
32 Worthing Borough Council Minutes 26 November 1920.
33 Worthing Herald 27 November 1920, 1.
34 Worthing Herald 27 November 1920, 1.
35 Worthing Herald 11 December 1920, 1.
36 Worthing Herald 11 December 1920, 1.
37 Evening Argus 2 November 2000, 18–19.
38 Worthing Herald 11 December 1920, 1.
39 Worthing Gazette 12 January 1921, 3.
40 Worthing Herald 15 January 1921, 1.
41 Worthing Herald 22 January 1921, 9.
42 Worthing Gazette 16 February 1921, 6.
43 Worthing Gazette 16 February 1921, 6.
44 Worthing Herald 12 February 1921, 1.
45 Worthing Herald 12 February 1921, 1.
46 Worthing Herald 12 March 1921, 7.
47 Worthing Gazette 23 February 1921, 6.
48 Worthing Gazette 23 February 1921, 6.
49 Worthing Herald 12 March 1921, 7.
50 Worthing Herald 9 April 1921, 3.
51 Worthing Gazette 22 June 1921, 5.
52 Worthing Gazette 27 July 1921, 6.
53 Worthing Gazette 27 July 1921, 6.
54 Worthing Gazette 10 August 1921, 6.
55 Worthing Gazette 28 December 1921, 6.
56 Worthing Gazette 28 December 1921, 6.
57 Worthing Gazette 8 February 1922, 6.
58 M. Sénéchal, pers. comm.
60 Minutes of the Richebourg Municipal Council 20 January 1921 (sections provided in photocopied form by the Mayor of Richebourg).
61 Minutes of the Richebourg Municipal Council 15 August 1921 (sections provided in photocopied form by the Mayor of Richebourg).
62 Minutes of the Richebourg Municipal Council 30 December 1921 (sections provided in photocopied form by the Mayor of Richebourg).