

## Empire

# Chinese Labourers in Newhaven

Read this article to learn about Chinese Labourers in the First World War.

1915 was the [worst year of the war](#) for Britain and France. The British Army had suffered many casualties in previous battles and the war seemed no closer to ending. At the start of 1916, the British Army needed men so much that they [introduced forced recruitment through conscription](#).

However, the Army did not just need soldiers, they also needed men to work in supply depots and ports both in Europe and Britain.

The French Army first decided to use Chinese men as workers in May 1916. They hired 40,000 Chinese men to serve with their army and hundreds of Chinese students to [serve as translators](#). Shortly the British followed suit by creating a recruitment base in the British colony of [Weihaiwei](#) (now the city of Weihai, Shandong Province, China) in October 1916.

China was a neutral country at the time and citizens were forbidden from fighting in the war. Working as labourers however, was permitted and around 95,000 men would join the British during the war.

Life in the Chinese Labour Corps began under terrible conditions with men sailing across the Pacific Ocean and then [travelling for 6 days across Canada](#) in sealed trains. By the time they sailed across the Atlantic and then journeyed by train down the length of Britain, many of the men who had set out from China had died.



Every man who joined the Labour Corps was assigned a number that replaced their name for the duration of their service. Whilst translators were on hand to explain orders to the men, British officers referred to each Chinese labourer by the numbered wristband they wore and it was also carved onto the headstones of those men who had died.

Men who had joined the Labour Corps lived under the restrictions of Military Law and were contracted to work for 3 years. As a result, groups of Chinese labourers continued to work on the abandoned battlefields in 1919 and 1920 long after the soldiers had left and returned home.

Duties for men in the Labour Corps included digging trenches, filling sandbags, building huts, repairing roads, loading and unloading vehicles and munitions, and even cooking.

The port of Newhaven was a key supply point on the East Sussex coast. Chinese Labourers became a common sight in the town as they worked on the dockside and handled the train-ferry to Dieppe.

China officially declared war on Germany in 1917 after a [U-Boat sunk the French ship Athos](#) at the cost of 543 Chinese lives. Britain and France also promised China that they would ensure that Chinese land held by the Japanese would be returned to them if the war was won.

During the negotiations at the end of the war, [this promise was not kept](#) and, as a result, the Chinese refused to sign the [Treaty of Versailles](#) which brought about the





end of the war and dictated the terms and cost that Germany and its allies would have to pay.

Most Chinese labourers returned home in 1920 with a small number remaining in France.

Official statistics suggest that around 2,000 men of the Chinese Labour Corps lost their lives but modern estimates place the actual number at around 20,000.

### Questions

- 1) Why did Britain need Chinese labourers?
- 2) What duties did Chinese labourers perform during the war?
- 3) When did Chinese labourers return home?



## Images



Figure 1: Chinese Labourer at Boulogne. Image courtesy of Brighton & Hove Black History Group





Figure 2: Chinese Labourers at Boulogne. Image courtesy of Brighton & Hove Black History Group







Figure 3: Chinese Labourers loading ammunition. Image courtesy of Brighton & Hove Black History Group





Figure 4: A Chinese grave at Le Quesnoy, France. From the collection of Chris Kempshall

