

Devon Remembers: Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War in Devon 2014-2018

1. Background

In November 2013, initial plans were outlined to commemorate the centenary of the First World War over four years, under the banner of Devon Remembers, with a particular emphasis on the stories of Devon communities and individuals affected by the First World War.

A part time project coordinator, Heidi Watson-Jones, was appointed and over the four years 2014-2018, a group of partner organisations worked together on a range of commemorative initiatives and projects. These included the Royal British Legion, University of Exeter, South West Heritage Trust, Devon Communities Together, Devon Museums Group, DAISI, BBC, Exeter City and Torbay Councils, The Dartmoor Trust, Hikmat Devon (local community multi-cultural support group), 6th Battalion The Rifles, Trade Unions and heritage and local history interest groups.

The Devon Remembers programme was enabled by contributions from the Investing in Devon fund and Members' locality budgets. Members were encouraged to engage with community groups within their constituencies as they researched and learned more about the impact of the war on their local area.

It was the intention that the project provide easily accessible signposting to information and initiatives at both national and local level. These could be delivered by local councils, armed forces, charities, local organisations and heritage groups, schools, churches, communities and individuals. The project would also continue to engage with partner organisations, under the Devon Remembers umbrella, over the full centenary period. This was carried out against the highly publicised national context of remembrance and commemoration of the First World War. The Project Board continued to meet regularly during the centenary period to make useful and important links across the organisations.

2. Devon Remembers Website

A website www.devonremembers.info was created which provided an overview of commemoration projects which Devon County Council and its Devon Remembers partners were involved in and supported. It also gave an opportunity for community groups and schools to share their experiences of events, research projects and other commemorative activities they were involved in, and to signpost to other sources of information and resource.

School curriculum materials and research guidance were commissioned and are available on the website for teachers to use in the classroom.

3. War Memorials Restoration

Devon County Council committed to support local communities to restore or maintain their local war memorials¹ during the centenary period, and a fund of £150,000 was

¹ The memorials often included First World War, Second World War and subsequent fatalities on active ser

established for this purpose from Investing in Devon funds. Following an application round, the Awards Panel, which included the Cabinet Member for Communities, Public Health, Environment and Prosperity, the County Archaeologist, and the Chief Executive of Devon Communities Together (formerly Community Council of Devon), considered the community bids. The grant fund was kindly administered by Devon Communities Together on behalf of the County Council.

It was clear from the applications received that the memorials are deeply valued within their communities, and their restoration would be important to them continuing to provide a focus for local commemorative events over the next four years and beyond. A variety of memorials were being restored, from stone crosses and obelisks to seats and a church clock. Works ranged from replacing worn lettering to the replacement of steps or railings to improve safe access to the memorial. All of the works completed will keep the memorials in good order well into the future. A report listing all 77 of the war memorial restorations achieved across the county has been published.

4. Commemorations at County Hall

Since 2014, an annual commemorative ceremony has been held on Armistice Day at the Bellair flagpole at County Hall. The Chief Executive and Chair of DCC have participated along with students from nearby Isca Academy, many of whom attended in their cadet uniforms. Buglers, from Isca, and in 2018, from 6th Battalion the Rifles at Wyvern Barracks have sounded the Last Post and Reveille which have poignantly resounded through the campus, marking two minutes silence, observed by Members and staff.

Over the centenary period, exhibitions have been displayed during remembrance week in the Council Ante Chamber, kindly lent to us by a partner organisation each year. Devon Remembers has been pleased to host 'Dartmoor Life in the First World War' (The Dartmoor Trust), 'Munitions and Matrons' (Tiverton Museum), 'Stories of Exeter's War Hospitals 1914-1919' (Exeter Local History Society) and 'Food and Farming in Devon during the First World War' (Devon Remembers Heritage Project.)

A ceramic poppy was purchased and is on display in the County Hall Antechamber. This is one of the 888,246 poppies from the breath taking national display 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' at the Tower of London in 2014 depicting the number of British and Colonial servicemen killed during the First World War.

A memorial bench, depicting a 'War Horse', synonymous with Devon, and a battlefield scene has been purchased by Devon Remembers. The bench has been installed within the County Hall grounds to commemorate the contribution of the people of Devon during the First World War.

5. Partner Projects

In addition to the war memorials component, Devon Remembers supported local projects providing a range of community-based and inter-generational commemorative activities.

i. Devon Remembers Heritage Project

A successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund by the South West Heritage Trust enabled the establishment of the Devon Remembers Heritage Project (DRHP). The

Project worked with local communities to give them an opportunity to explore Devon's First World War experience and discover new stories about life in Devon one hundred years ago.

Under the guidance of a dedicated project officer, Kathryn Findlay, and her team, the DRHP coordinated a spectacular programme of events between 2015 and 2018 which involved working directly with 55 local organisations. These activities included:

- a volunteer training programme, upskilling community-based volunteers with research and project skills, to enable them to undertake local research projects on a range of subjects'
- a series of talks and roadshows at venues across the county,
- a major six-month exhibition at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) which featured outputs from volunteer research projects,
- an online archive, and a physical archive at Devon Heritage Centre, which both enable communities to share their research findings, stories and images. Over 6,000 First World War archive records have been catalogued and made available.
- contemporary creative responses with local professional artists involving school children and adults.
- a major commemorative event in Exeter Cathedral to mark the centenary of the Armistice which featured performances of the creative outputs and exhibitions of community research findings.

22 of the fascinating research projects are featured in a publication 'Devon during the First World War'.

ii. University of Exeter/Devon History Society 'Food, Farming and Fishing in Devon During the First World War' project,

This project was funded by Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) First World War Centenary Hub, based at University of Hertfordshire 'Everyday Lives During the First World War'.

This funding ran between Sept. 2015 and Dec. 2016, and enabled the employment of a part-time project officer, James Wallis, to work with 6-7 groups of volunteer researchers in East Devon. The project organised six workshops between Sept 2015 and Nov 2016 where the volunteers spoke about aspects of their research into farming, food shortages, the fishing industry and the problems of labour and conscription. Each session also had input from an academic expert, introducing new research, techniques of researching historical sources, and the wider national context.

This project resulted in the publication of a project booklet 'Food, Farming and Fishing in Devon During the First World War' with essays written by 15 volunteers, with 200 copies distributed free of charge to the public and Devon History Society members.

Devon History Society also organised a conference called 'Oats, Sprats and Barley Bread – Feeding Devon in World War I' at University of Exeter in May 2017, which was attended by over 60 people. Some of the papers given at that event were developed into seven longer articles published in *The Devon Historian*, volume 86, in Oct. 2017.

Many of the project volunteers recruited in this project went on to continue their research as part of the Devon Remembers Heritage Project.

iii. Memorial to the Canadian Forestry Corps, Stover

A memorial was commissioned by Devon Remembers to recognise the contribution of the Canadian Forestry Corps who served at Stover Forest during the First World War. The life size wooden sculpture depicts two members of the Corps along with a horse and is situated beside the Stover Heritage Trail at Stover Country Park.

The project was also able to fund the return of the 'Stover Chair', an oak chair carved by Canadian soldiers during their posting and presented to Stover House in 1919. It was taken abroad, and then to Canada but was returned by Sgt. Charles King of the Royal Canadian Regiment as a gift to Devon. A ceremony was held to mark the return and to unveil the memorial sculpture in September 2018.

iv. Exeter Temporary War Hospitals

Devon Remembers was pleased to provide a grant to the a research group from the Exeter Local History Society which, supported by the DRHP, explored the history of the seven sites in the city used as Red Cross temporary war hospitals. Fascinating stories were discovered about the patients, staff and volunteers who provided treatment and care in the hospitals and wider community 100 years ago. The funding enabled the research group to commission commemorative plaques which have now been affixed to 5 of the 7 temporary war hospital sites.

v. Shrouds of the Somme

In 2016, Exeter's Northernhay Gardens hosted the installation of 'the Shrouds of the Somme', 19,240 shrouded figures laid out on the centenary of the first day of Battle of the Somme in 1916, representing those servicemen lost on that day 100 years ago. The installation prompted an emotional response from visitors who were moved by the impact of the figures.

2018 saw the display of a total 72,396 shrouds at locations across the country including Exeter (The Trench) and at London's Queen Elizabeth Park. 'The missing of the Somme' depicts the servicemen whose bodies were never recovered from the Somme battlefields, and are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial in France. Devon Remembers was pleased to be able to provide support for this project.

vi. Royal British Legion

Devon Remembers provided a grant to the Devon Royal British Legion which enabled the purchase of 'silent soldier' figures, placed at Exeter's Wyvern Barracks and displayed in other locations across Exeter to raise awareness of the Legion's work and the centenary year of the Armistice.

vii. National Digital War Memorial

A national bid to the Arts Council by the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) to create a National Digital War Memorial was awarded £196,000. Devon was one of 10 library services involved in the project nationally, focused on Cullompton where the Hayridge hosted workshops and activities that enabled local people to explore what the First World War meant to them through community workshops. Artists were commissioned to capture these experiences, working with members of the community to produce pieces of creative writing, music and dance performances.

Devon Remembers Heritage Project, Shrouds of the Somme and National Digital Library Memorial are projects in which Devon's contribution has received national attention and provided a template for such activities in other parts of the country.

6. Lessons Learned

The Board considered the key observations and lessons learned during the commemoration period, mindful that in due course activities to commemorate the centenary of the Second World War will begin to be planned. Some of the key issues highlighted, through the experience of partner organisations during their First World War research and commemoration projects, are as follows:

- Clarity around the expectations for Devon Remembers helped to provide focus to the project. Providing signposting and opportunities for networking of partners, rather than organising events per se, and the administration of the war memorials restoration grants have been successful approaches to help bring people and groups together and provide links to further information sources and research tools.
- The leadership and resources provided by Devon County Council have been instrumental in the success of the project. DCC has acted as a county-wide co-ordinating body, liaising with the Unitary Authorities, and the Parish Councils, and its input has provided most of the continuity and organisation on which the success of these projects has been based. The commitment of DCC to providing consistent, and very high quality, administrative support, and consequently a consistent point of contact for community engagement throughout the period, was the key to ensuring successful partnership and co-ordination.
- The continuity of membership of the Project Board over five years has been a particularly important aspect, both from within DCC, and from partner organisations. Strong networks have been established because of sustained connections, rather than sporadic involvement or one-off links.
- The centenary commemorations have facilitated links between organisations that were not previously connected (particularly for the Royal British Legion, Wyvern Barracks and University of Exeter).
- There was a recognition that 'back to basics' research had been fundamental in discovering local stories, set against what was previously a generally accepted 'national picture' of significant historical events of the war. A focus on real, individual stories engaged the public interest and in so doing led on to the broader, national narratives.
- Keeping the focus on Devon's story and local experience was important. The story of those who did not go to war was as important as the history of the servicemen who fought and those engaged in military operations on the front line.
- There was an understanding that in the context of collective remembrance, the First World War conflict inevitably means different things to different communities depending on their heritage. Ensuring diverse community involvement was important to capture the breadth of experience in Devon 100 years ago.
- There was a recognition that large, externally funded county-wide projects have had high targets for volunteer engagement. A significant number of these volunteers needed to be confident to build capacity to engage hard to reach, or non-traditional groups which funded project staff would have been unable to achieve alone.
- Visible, concrete outcomes for communities (war memorial restorations, and the installation of war hospital plaques) have been welcomed and have been successful in galvanising communities to work collaboratively and for skilled craftspeople to get involved. Rescuing structures that might otherwise have deteriorated beyond repair, and publicly highlighting the heritage of important First World War sites across Exeter is itself a lasting memorial.

7. Benefits for Local Communities

Many communities, local history groups, schools and other organisations embraced the national movement to commemorate the First World War centenary. It was a unique opportunity for everyone to learn more about the impact that the First World War had on their families, local people and places.

There was keen interest to research, understand and commemorate, and Devon Remembers was able to help signpost, share stories uncovered and support communities to find their own way to mark the centenary, and build a legacy of knowledge and resource for generations to come.

Cllr Roger Croad

Cabinet Member for Communities, Public Health, Transportation and Environment
Lead Member, Devon Armed Forces Covenant
Chair, Devon Remembers Project Board
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