Living Memory – Commemorating the centenary of the Battle of the Somme

Living Memory was a national 141-day project developed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) in 2016 to mark the 141 days of the Battle of the Somme. The idea of the project was to encourage local communities to engage with the war graves in their areas; to remember the ‘Forgotten Front’ (the 300,000 war graves and burials in Britain from both world wars) and to return those servicemen to ‘living memory.’

For me, as Learning & Participation Officer at Royal Victoria Country Park in Netley, the Living Memory project provided an ideal opportunity to engage local schools and raise awareness of the Royal Victoria Military Hospital that once dominated the site. I thought students would be interested to research casualties of the Battle of the Somme who were buried in the Military Cemetery and their findings would be an important contribution to our £3.1 million Heritage Lottery Funded project to bring alive the history of the Hospital.

Information from the CWGC regarding casualties of the Somme buried in the UK listed only one at Netley, although around 133 of the burials in the Netley Military Cemetery date to the period of, and immediately after, the battle.
Our Living Memory project was therefore developed to engage a group of students in researching soldiers buried at Netley Military Cemetery during the period 1st July 1916 – 31st December 1916, looking for evidence of their involvement in the Battle of the Somme to report to the CWGC. As an additional part of the project, it was proposed that students should visit the Netley Military Cemetery to identify the headstones of casualties they were researching, and to map the WW1 graves in the cemetery as this information is not readily available at present.

I initially approached Wildern School through the Head of Humanities, Amanda Warner, having worked together previously on a WW1 anniversary event in 2014 and we agreed that the Living Memory project would work well for a group of Year 11 students in an accelerated History class. Amanda told me the group would be interested in the topic and enthusiastic in their work and I was not disappointed!

I made my first visit to Wildern School in September and delivered a workshop which covered:

- History of the Victoria Military Hospital at Netley in the context of WW1
- Introduction to the Battle of the Somme through photographs and video
- Introduction to the CWGC Living Memory project and their role
- Sources of information and specific online records (e.g. CWGC, Ancestry, Find My Past, Forces War Records and regimental websites)

Information was left with the school about all the burials in the Cemetery from the period of the Battle of the Somme and immediately after (1st July 1916 – 31st December 1916) and students self-selected soldiers to research. Students had different reasons for their choices – for some, it was the soldier’s name that caught their attention, for others it was the nationality or regiment.

By the time I returned to the school in mid-October, the students had already made a good start on researching their soldier and were able to discuss in some detail what they had discovered and what they still wanted to find out. We discussed how to interpret primary sources and infer information, the importance of cross-checking information from different sources and ways of organising the information to support their argument (important if their findings were to be submitted to the CWGC).

On Saturday (yes, Saturday!) 15th October 2016, we led a group of the students on a visit to the Netley Military Cemetery. Students (and school staff) were so keen on the project that they gave up time on a Saturday morning for their cemetery visit, knowing that, as Year 11s, they would not be able to do this in school time. They achieved a great deal in their time on-site, including:

- Locating the WW1 burials in the Cemetery
- Identifying the headstones of the soldiers they had researched
- Recording information from the WW1 Church of England headstones as part of our project to map the war graves.
The timing of the cemetery visit, after students had begun to research their chosen soldier, made it a memorable experience for students, with several commenting that it “felt different” and “more special” to ‘know’ the person and not just read a name on the headstone. It was really clear that the CWGC’s aim to “return those servicemen to living memory” was already being achieved through these students’ work.

My final visit to the school was at the end of October and students used this as an opportunity to collate their research to create individual biographies for the soldiers, supported by documentary evidence. We also made plans for the Living Memory outcome event – a sharing event and commemoration service to be held at Royal Victoria Country Park and Netley Military Cemetery on the anniversary of the end of the Battle of the Somme on 18th November 106.

On Friday 18th November, we held a commemorative event at Royal Victoria Country Park for students to share their research findings with invited guests, including Councillors, members of the Royal British Legion, local historians and members of the local community. The event was attended by 35 people and comprised an exhibition of Wildern School students’ research (biographies of each soldier and the supporting evidence they had obtained), a display about the history of the Victoria Military Hospital, a display of poems written by students from The Hamble School and a round table event for the Wildern students to share their research with guests in small groups.

The students, as I knew they would be, were knowledgeable about ‘their’ soldier and enthusiastic sharing their research with our guests. We received some really positive feedback after the event, including an email from local historian and writer Philip Hoare in which he said, “Amazing work by the students. I spoke to quite a number of them and was hugely impressed.” Claire Church, from the Brockenhurst Branch of the Royal British Legion, also wrote to us to say, “How wonderful it was to hear about the lives of some of the soldiers buried in Netley Military Cemetery last Friday! As well as a super display on all the soldiers researched, several pupils from Wildern School had come along to the Empire Rooms at the RVCP to tell us about their research. I spoke to Alice, Charlotte and Jack and it was a pleasure to share in their interest and enthusiasm.”

Following the sharing event, guests were invited to join us at the Netley Military Cemetery for a short service to commemorate the centenary of the ending of the Battle of the Somme and the soldiers researched as part of the ‘Living Memory’ project. Thanks to local historian Dr Simon Daniels, we were able to tell the story of one of the soldiers, James Thursby Roberts, through the reading of letters he wrote to his sister Hilda during the Battle of the Somme. To have these letters, written by a soldier in his 20s, read by students not very different in age, was extremely poignant; Simon Daniels emailed afterwards to say the ceremony “…was certainly one of the most moving which I have attended, and I really must thank you for the effort which you, the teachers and the students put into it.”
From my point of view, the Living Memory project was extremely positive for all concerned; it was successful in engaging young people with the history of the site and the stories of some of the people buried in the cemetery, identified another 10 casualties of the Battle of the Somme buried at Netley and put us in touch with the families of two of the soldiers buried in the cemetery.

The students enjoyed taking part in the Living Memory project. They said they liked, “talking to everyone and sharing with them my research and ideas. This made all the research worthwhile.” The fact that the information they discovered was going to be shared with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission also made the project meaningful, with one student commenting that they liked “knowing that our research made a difference” and another that “it felt good when we found out something new about our person that people didn’t know before.”

Reseaching the soldiers’ backgrounds to get to know them as ‘real people’ certainly had an impact on the students, who commented that, “Finding out that my soldier died fighting in the Somme within the first few days, along with the rest of his bombardier battalion, made me feel quite upset.” And, “I was able to research his life before the war as well as what happened to his family when he went off to fight. By finding this out, it made his story a lot more emotional.”

The timing of this project, at the start of our own HLF project to bring alive the history of the Hospital, could not have been better! I am extremely grateful to Amanda Warner, Tom Hastings and the students at Wildern School for all their hard work on this project and for revealing some of the stories of soldiers treated at the Victoria Military Hospital to a wider audience. Their work will be showcased in the new exhibition in the Chapel and on our project website as well as shared with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

There are many more stories to be discovered and shared (there are over 600 war graves in the Netley Military Cemetery!) and I would be interested in hearing from you if you are interested in taking part in a similar project, either as an individual or as part of a group.

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Wildern School’s Living Memory Project
Commemorating the centenary of the ending of the Battle of the Somme

After initially being contacted by Ursula Pearce at Royal Victoria Country Park, I quickly realised what an exciting and poignant opportunity the Living Memory Project presented. Having already completed their History GCSE to the highest standard a year early, I also knew that I had an exceptional group of 18 Y11 students at Wildern School who would not only work extremely hard on the project, but who would also fully engage with it and appreciate its significance.

The students met with Ursula in early September 2016, and then began to research the different men who may have possibly been involved in the Battle of the Somme. They selected a variety of men based on personal reasons. Some chose men who had the same first or last name as themselves whilst others chose men who had links to similar parts of the country to their own families. Through this work they developed not only their research skills, but also their ability to assess and contrast evidence when they found conflicting information. They also had the opportunity to work as field historians when plotting the graves in the cemetery as they tried to find the graves of the soldiers that they had researched.

As the project progressed, the personal engagement of the students with ‘their’ soldiers also developed and the men became so much more than merely a name on a piece of paper. From my own point of view as a History teacher, I will never forget the moment when one of our students was visibly moved upon discovering her soldier’s grave. Through her work on the project she felt that she could identify and connect with someone from the past in a way that she had not necessarily done before. In her own words, she said that she “knew that his nickname was Jack and that his mother was a teacher and the name of his primary school”. It was moments like this (and there were many more) that highlighted how special the project really was and how far beyond the classroom our students were able to go because of their involvement in it.

I can say with absolute conviction that all of the students involved gained both academically and personally from the work that they did through the Living Memory Project and it will be something that they, and we as a school, will remember with pride.

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