WElling WILL REMEMBER THEM

Centenary First World War Project Evaluation

Linda Clayton
Introduction

“Three years ago we started out as ‘individuals’ to take part in a project about complete strangers, all we had was their names and the fact that they died 100 years ago. What a journey we have travelled.”

Research Volunteer

Before 2013 our community knew little about the men on our war memorial. We had lost our connection to the men who died, and our Act of Remembrance had become a reflection on the futility and loss in war, and a respectful reading of their names.

Our WElling WILL REMEMBER THEM project has enabled us to remember again the actual men, of how they lived and how they died. They are no longer just anonymous ‘bit players’ in a global war, but our own local casualties, our own local heroes, once again.

Over the last two and a half years we have researched the stories of 120 men who died, of survivors and also the community they left behind. We have made these stories accessible through our new website, an exhibition, a book, in workshops and talks to the community.

Our volunteers, both those involved in research and the workshops, have been fantastic. Enthusiastic, dedicated and a great team. It’s been a wonderful journey together but also an emotional one as we have got to know our men and what they endured. But we can now remember them properly.
The start of the project – recruitment of volunteers

The first task was to engage volunteers from the local community to help carry out the project. We advertised in the local libraries, on the internet, the local newspaper, schools and community groups.

We invited all those interested to a launch meeting where we explained about our Charity and the project. We also wanted to make the evening educational and invited Kirsty Macklen, Collections Manager at Bexley Heritage Trust, and Dr Peter Catterall, a published historian, to speak at the meeting. Kirsty gave a presentation about the First World War artefacts held by the borough and Peter gave his first talk of the project about the First World War. These were really well received and set the scene for the rest of the project, where we strived to deliver the best experience we could to all those involved in the project.

There were 18 Research Volunteers and over 40 volunteers in total involved in the project. Some of these were recruited as the project progressed.

“As a group, we volunteers come together often for various reasons and friendships have been formed.”

Some of the Research Volunteers at the British Library researching newspapers

“It's been a great experience: I’ve loved being involved, learning new skills, passing on and sharing research and enthusiasms, making new friends, and generally feeling part of the whole WW1 commemorations: it's opened up a whole new field of interest for me, as it was a piece of history that I knew little about before working with the EWT.”
Research begins

We organised training sessions, run by Bexley Local Studies and Archives, where volunteers were shown how to use Ancestry and other research websites and how to access other resources.

Volunteers were each given a number of names to research. As the work was solitary, we strove to bring them together as a team and produced early newsletters and held regular get-togethers where we could share resources and ideas. The group bonded and they became mutually supportive with their research.

The volunteers wrote up the stories of their men for our website which were gradually uploaded as they were finished over the next year.

Our research also included trips to the British Library, to search through the local newspapers.

“Being part of the project has meant a great deal to me and has given me something to be proud of. It came at a point when I was looking for more meaning in my life and has by far exceeded any expectations of what I would gain from being involved.”

“After retiring from a lifetime of work in a busy environment I became a different person, I became shy and a feeling of being useless. This project has helped me become the person I was - using my computer skills to research a group of soldiers and sailors in their military career and learning about their private lives and families. I’m not sure what I expected when I said yes to helping but I know I got something completely different.”
Trip to Ypres

Among the researcher were two battlefield enthusiasts who had made many trips to visit war graves and memorials, and who offered to lead a weekend to Ypres. The Research Volunteers were enthusiastic and keen to go.

We put a programme together to visit the battlefields, graves, memorials and museums in and around Ypres and approached the Heritage Lottery Fund to ask if some of our budget could be reassigned for the trip. This was agreed and we hired a minibus and also took a car. We took photos for our website, learned more that we could add to the stories of the men and gained some understanding about what the men had gone through. It further enthused the volunteers for the project and deepened the group’s bond.

Such was the experience that, in 2015, we went to visit the Somme for a weekend, funded by the volunteers themselves.

“\nThe highlight for me was when a group of us went on a three-day trip to Ypres in April 2014. I found this to be a very humbling experience, seeing for yourself the rows and rows of white crosses in the many beautifully kept cemeteries. To find the grave of one of our men or their name on one of the many memorials and to be able to leave a poppy behind in remembrance. To go to some of the battlefields and to stand and try to imagine just how it must have been for them.”
Many of the men who died had attended Foster's School in Welling. The school still holds the original Admissions Register for the period, full of valuable information for our research.

The school had originally planned to devote a week to the project. However, when the teachers started to plan the learning they found that there was a wealth of activities that could be undertaken for the children to learn about life during the war, both for the men who fought and on the home front. As a consequence, the head teacher decided to devote the summer half term for all children in Years 5 and 6 to the project.

The children undertook research about the men who had attended their school. They also learned about the reasons for the war and what life was like at the Front and at home though a range of literacy, art and design and music activities. They learned about war memorials and built their own models. Other activities included cooking war-time recipes and digging a trench. The school put on an exhibition of their work at Central Library, Bexleyheath.

A highlight was a visit from Bexley Heritage Trust who took along a number of items for the children to handle. These included medals, maps, ration books and a certificate given to children who packaged Christmas presents for soldiers fighting overseas. The children were given cotton gloves and shown how to handle objects and learned how they are cared for in museums.

“They already knew a lot of facts and were very enthusiastic.”
Kirsty Macklen, Collections Manager, Bexley Heritage Trust
One of the Year 6 teachers wrote: “The children have really engaged with this project and learning has covered most of the curriculum areas. They were excited to undertake original research into source documents to uncover information about the soldiers who attended Foster’s School. This has been fed back to the East Wickham and Welling War Memorial Trust and has been invaluable in helping to build up the stories of the soldiers who attended Foster’s School. Some of the children had been completely unaware of the First World War, and many had confused it with the Second World War before they undertook the project. Particular highlights were the sessions run by Bexley Heritage Trust when they handled and learned about artefacts from the First World War and also when they built their own war memorials. The children worked enthusiastically, especially as they were able to relate their learning to past pupils of the school, which gave a poignancy to their activities. The fact that members of the school took part in the world war, put in context for the children the depth of history that Fosters has within, not only local society, but also the impact during the world war. We feel that they will have a real understanding of the meaning of the centenary of the First World War. The teaching staff and pupils alike have thoroughly enjoyed being part of this wider community project.”

The children visited our War Memorial and held their own Remembrance ceremony. They learned hymns from the time, read the names of the men out and found out about the significance of war memorials.
We worked with a professional web designer to create a new website, which includes an online war memorial of the men from our area. There is also a History section which includes stories of survivors.

As the researchers finished writing up stories of the men, they were uploaded onto the online war memorial. We have so far been contacted by five family members of soldiers who are on our memorial. In addition, we have been contacted by other researchers who have found useful information on the First World War on our site.

“We’ve […] found the ‘end-product’ the website, a wonderful resource for us to use at work, and to encourage other local history researchers who visit the centre to try; they’re always impressed by it.”

Bexley Local Studies and Archives

36,000 hits on the website since its launch in November 2013

“It is hard to find information concerning those that died with him and their families. Finding this site has given a glimpse into one of them. Thank you for providing such comprehensive information.”

“My 6-year-old grandson has looked at the site and wanted to know what it was all about. He was then able to have input at school when the war was discussed last November.”
Welling in the War - Workshops for Families

We ran three sessions aimed at Key Stage II children plus an adult family member to learn about the war within our local context. We ran three sessions for around 40 families in total.

The sessions were planned by a teaching professional, who enlisted three other teachers to help. There were four areas of learning for the children and their adult to move around in small groups; a wall game and quiz, ‘dress a soldier’ (while learning about the uniform, medals and what life was like in the trenches), a school room set up for a lesson of the time (to learn what life was like for the children at school at the time of the war. This included writing on slates, some handwriting exercises and playing games that were around at the time), and ‘make a poppy’ to lay in an Act of Remembrance at the end of the session.

From a few of the children …

“Today was a very good day. I’m glad we came!”

“I loved this amazing visit. I learnt a lot (sic) about the Schools in World War 1. This is the best thing and I liked the games it was interesting!”

“This will help people like children understand who fought in world war one and we should appreciate them very much.”
“Even as an adult there was so much to learn.”

“Very educational for young and older adults alike. Activities were well thought out and appealed to kids of all ages. A wonderful way to remember those to who we owe so much. Thank you to all involved.”

“Very informative and brilliantly organised. Very structured and fun which made a brilliant way to learn about WW1. Thank you.”
We held one workshop for adults with learning disabilities, which was run by a specialist teacher. Those attending looked at maps and pictures and handled medals, found about the role of animals in the war - from glow worms to elephants, what life was like for the soldiers, music of the time and what sort of food was eaten back at home. This included tasting chocolate that was available at the time. The participants also made poppies to lay at the war memorial in the church, in a short act of remembrance.

Those who participated in the workshop, were fully engaged in discussing and finding out about the war. They appreciated the activities, which included making poppies that they later laid at the war memorial in a short Act of Remembrance. It was a privilege to share this project with the adults who attended.” Dennis O’Keefe, ADLD Teacher
Working with Bexley Heritage Trust

Before the project Bexley Heritage Trust had agreed to hold our exhibition at Hall Place. After the project started we added another activity for our volunteers to view and learn how to handle and catalogue the First World War artefacts held by the borough. Bexley Heritage Trust also took a selection of the artefacts into Foster’s Primary School.

Bexley Heritage Trust also invited us to Poppy Planting at Hall Place, as part of their First World War Commemorations.
Our Exhibition

"As the main heritage site in the borough it was important to us to participate in the centenary of 1914 and your exhibition conveyed an important story for the borough. We thought that the exhibition was well put together and feedback from visitors was very positive. The interpretation was clearly well researched and nicely presented."

Caroline Worthington, Chief Executive, Bexley Heritage Trust

Three volunteers worked with the project manager to write and put the exhibition together. We had had no experience of writing an exhibition but undertook research and sought some general advice from two local museums.

We spent many meetings deciding what should go on each banner and how we wanted to relate our chosen topics to the local context and the men who died. Each person took one banner and researched and drafted some text. The group then worked to finalise the text and find pictures for each banner, and two copies of the six-panel exhibition were produced. One toured around the borough and was shown in churches, schools, libraries and community groups. The other exhibition was placed at Hall Place to complement their main exhibition on the Second World War. Over 2,500 people visited our exhibition at Hall Place.
“Members were very enthusiastic and careful whilst handling the original material. They understood that it is a long process when creating an exhibition and there are many factors to consider including how you display objects, environmental factors, physical display including mounts and supports, and interpretation to name but a few.”

Kirsty Macklen, Collections Manager, Bexley Heritage Trust

Five volunteers took up the opportunity to act as guides at Hall Place

“We also helped with the exhibition at Hall Place and this gave us the chance to meet visitors and explain to them the work that had been done. Most of them were impressed by the depth of the research compared to the relatively small size of the Welling community.”

“Although I have had many a late night it has been thoroughly enjoyable and focused. I have also never met such a pleasant group of like-minded people who I can say that I am exceedingly proud to call friends.”
Talks in the Community

We gave a number of talks in to groups in the local community about the history we had uncovered, including to the Women’s Institute, the Mother’s Union, St Michael’s Church, a local Almshouse, the Sidcup Supper Club, the Conservative Ladies Lunch Club, Cancer Research Lunch Club, Barrington School and Dartford Grammar School. We are booked for a number of talks to community groups next year.

“A really interesting insight into our local history. It’s given me a different view of the community we live in.”

“I didn’t realise so much could be found out about the men who died such a long time ago.”
The Book

“It is a fascinating read and a great way to ensure that there is a lasting record of all of the hard work which has been put in over the last three years … I hope it will provide an important educational resource for local school history projects.”

James Brokenshire, Member of Parliament

Our original plan had been for a local professional historian to put the book together. However, when we realised that this would mean taking the stories off the website and copying them into a book, we changed our plans to produce a local history book, which would be of much wider interest and a resource for the community.

The project manager and one volunteer, both amateurs, worked together to summarise the stories of the men, whilst adding local context and a picture of what life was like for those living at home whilst the men were fighting. We have produced a substantial book of over two hundred pages.

2,000 copies of the book have been printed and will be distributed, including to all those involved in our project, people who attend our Festival of Remembrance, local libraries, local schools, family members of the soldiers who died.

“I had some reservations as to how well this would work as a book, but I was hugely impressed by the outcome. The diary format gives a really cohesive structure, and the narrative gives a good historical and geographical context to the memorial stories. I really found the book informative and interesting… I think the book can only reflect well on the Trust, and you should be justifiably proud of this.”

Trustee of East Wickham and Welling War Memorial Trust
The End of the Project

The end date of the project was extended twice, so that we could complete our project outcomes to the highest quality we could achieve. We finished the project on a high with our end of project celebration, held at Bexley Civic Office. It was attended by around 60 guests, including the Mayor, two Members of Parliament, our volunteers and others who were involved in the project. We were played in with bagpipes and the Last Post and Reveille were sounded on a 1914 bugle that had played in the trenches throughout the war. A slideshow of the project was shown, alongside speeches by the Trust Chairman, the Mayor and local Member of Parliament. A highlight of the evening was a talk on Victoria Crosses by Mark Smith, a leading world authority on medals and the resident military expert on the Antiques Roadshow.
Overview - What went especially well:

The volunteers bonded really well. Although ages and backgrounds were different, friendships were formed and everyone was mutually supportive and worked as a real team. Much of the research was done individually and volunteers could have had very isolated experiences of the project. The group will keep in touch.

We added more that hadn’t been originally planned to the project as it progressed which included artefact handling, visits to museums and the British Library, trips to Ypres and the Somme, work with local primary schools and a secondary school and film and picture viewings.

We achieved a professional website, exhibition and book, even though we were all amateurs (apart from the graphic and web designers).

The workshops were all very well received by those who attended them.

What was challenging:

We significantly underestimated the number of hours needed to project manage when putting in the application. What was estimated to be around one day a week for two years turned out to be a full-time job for almost three years.
## Some Final Words

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<th>Mark Smith, Curator of Firepower, Royal Artillery Museum</th>
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<td>“All your work was truly amazing and one of the best HLF funded WW1 projects that I have come across during this 100th anniversary era. All praise to you.”</td>
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<th>A Research Volunteer:</th>
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<td>“Although I have for a long time had an interest in all things military, this project has taken my interest to stratospheric levels and given me the confidence to start a degree in Military history. I would never have believed this to be so as I only volunteered to help out and give something back to the community that I grew up in.”</td>
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<th>Bexley Local Archives and Studies</th>
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<td>“It’s always good for us to work in partnership with local groups and societies, and the EWT has been one of the best to work with.”</td>
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<th>Nigel Betts, Chairman, East Wickham and Welling War Memorial Trust</th>
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<td>“We have been so lucky to have found volunteers whose dedication and enthusiasm have enabled us to dig deep in the histories of the men from East Wickham and Welling. This project has drawn members of the community together and recorded history for the local and wider community.”</td>
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<th>Reverend Peter Organ, Vicar of St Michael’s Church, East Wickham</th>
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<td>“It’s been great to see how this project has brought people of all ages together to explore their local history.”</td>
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<th>Caroline Watkinson, University Lecturer in History</th>
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<td>“A masterclass in how to run a community project.”</td>
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<th>James Brokenshire, Member of Parliament</th>
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<td>“Many congratulations on the successful completion of the ‘Welling Will Remember Them’ project. It has provided an important way to bring home the reality of the impact of the Great War on the local community and remind future generations of the lives of the men behind the names recorded on the East Wickham &amp; Welling War Memorial. The way you have approached this with meticulous research has reminded us that they were ordinary people with normal lives who were swept up into the unimaginable horrors of war. Everyone involved should be very proud at what has been achieved.”</td>
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Postscript 2021 – The Project’s Legacy

The Evaluation written above was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2015 following the official end of the funded project.

In recognition of the contribution the project made to the borough of Bexley, the Trust was awarded the Bexley Civic Recognition Award for Outstanding Achievement in 2016.

The Trust continued to mark the Centenary period, using the knowledge, resources and skills gained over the project, with most of the volunteers staying on to help.

Further activities included:

- visits and activities with local primary and secondary schools;
- stalls at community events;
- poppy seeds distributed to all local primary age children;
- a centenary uniform badge for all local scout and guide groups;
- a grant towards a new tractor for our local community farm to mark farming in the First World War with a ‘Tommies and Tractors’ family activity day at the farm;
- a Peace Concert;
- a tree planting scheme in Welling community spaces, including Danson Park;
- a ‘Green and Pleasant Land’ litter picking partnership with Bexley Council and local schools;
- the gift of children’s First World War books to all local primary schools;
- the presentation of a display case to house the Memorial Visitors’ book at Danson House open on the page of the Queen’s signature on her visit;
- the restoration of the Welling War Memorial.
We will remember them.

Plant your poppies in memory of the men from East Wickham and Welling who died in the First World War.

East Wickham and Welling War Memorial Trust
This tree was planted by Her Majesty’s Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London Sir Kenneth Olisa OBE CSJ
On 15th November 2018
The tree was presented to Danson House by the Trust To commemorate the Centenary of the end of the First World War.
The Trust was formed after the First World War after a memorial hall was built in Welling to remember the men from East Wickham and Welling who gave their lives in the war. Today the Trust makes grants to the local community from funds that originate from the memorial hall. We also hold a Festival of Remembrance each year to remember the men.

At our Festival of Remembrance we are no longer reading just a list of names from a memorial, but are remembering the actual men who died. We are continually building on these stories as more information comes to light. For more information about the men, or the Trust, please visit our website www.ewt.org.uk or contact admin@ewt.org.uk