

Local history and the First World War

**Kate Tiller, founding fellow of Kellogg College, University of Oxford,
and education chair of the British Association for Local History**

As the centenaries of 1914-18 come upon us, the challenges facing historians to research and interpret the impact of the First World War multiply. One is the need to investigate and understand the war more widely, recognising the importance of perspectives not previously considered significant, and turning attention to the Home Front, to the wartime experiences of women and children, to the economic, social, cultural and political consequences of the war, to the Empire and dominion experience and to military events beyond the Western Front.

Another challenge is to revisit and scrutinise deep-rooted, existing assumptions about the war. David Reynolds, in a recent, cogent dissection (*The Long Shadow. The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, 2013), characterises the British view of the First World War as particular. Centred on the trenches, on military events and heavily influenced by literature and poetry it perpetuates a verdict on 1914-18 which was influential at the time of the fiftieth anniversary. This sees the war in hindsight as a futile sacrifice, a bitterly costly conflict which failed to end all wars and led to another, more clearly justifiable world war only 21 years later.



Belgian refugees leave Antwerp, October 1914
© Imperial War Museum

A third challenge is that posed by the growing demand for a popular and public history of 1914-18, a history to be shared between generations and places, disseminated by broadcasters, heritage professionals and teachers, in classrooms and on field trips. Amidst the growing hype, threatening at times to tip into unreflective cliché or even centenary 'celebration', local history has a special and important part to play. As the challenges point First World War studies away from single perspective, one narrative accounts local history offers a way to respond. Returning to the local experience and using and integrating the rich, direct contemporary evidence enables realities of wartime throughout British society to be re-discovered. We may unearth, preserve and record new evidence; generate fresh findings; pursue shared questions; encourage comparative thinking; and join up accounts of separate aspects of wartime and post-war experience within and between communities to move us on, as David Reynolds urges, to combine remembrance with greater historical understanding.

This is an ambitious agenda. Projects and publications are beginning to show how it can be fulfilled, and examples are reported here. More are promised, including events at Senate House and initiatives by the British Association for Local History (BALH), which aims to encourage and support the study of local history as an academic discipline and as a rewarding pursuit for grass roots historians, individuals and groups. The two organisations combined on 28 February for a joint Institute of Commonwealth Studies/BALH day on 'Experiences of World War One: strangers, differences and locality'. Keynote speaker, Dr Catriona Pennell, emphasised that, although a national narrative of the war's history had dominated earlier study, fuller understanding depended on adding local and international perspectives and being aware of the constant inter-connectedness of all three elements-

local, national and international. This theme was played out as the interaction of local people in Britain with black and Indian troops from the Empire and Dominions was discussed. A mixture of newspapers, diaries, letters, recollections, photos and official records provided the evidence. Wartime connections came through local camps and hospitals. Racial stereotyping, mixed marriages and outbreaks of violence all figured, but meetings of cultures were not just made by war, with some networks of family links operating before 1914 and after 1918. Nor were all ex-servicemen white, UK residents as several case studies of West Indian veterans returning to their homes in the Caribbean showed. There November rituals of remembrance were kept at local war memorials, whilst island economies struggled, not least because of continuing debt burdens linked to their support for the mother country's war effort. The local, national and international did indeed interact to form these experiences of the war.

Elsewhere increasing numbers of published Home Front studies are bringing the non-military experience in the UK to the fore. From 1914 every kind of neighbourhood, village, town and region was touched not only by the deaths and injuries of those going away to fight but also by the immediate demands and lasting changes felt by those who were 'left behind', and were willingly or unwillingly very directly effected by war. The whole economy was mobilized, whilst massive volunteer effort was forthcoming. Local histories of this experience are showing the illuminating balance to be struck between detail and generalisation, and the potential for both comparison and understanding the particular. The latest Victoria County History Essex volume (XI, on *Clacton, Walton and Frinton, North-East Essex Seaside Resorts*, published in 2012) brings home, in its chapter on the First World War, the threat of invasion, air raids and the black-out, and the loss of holiday business that made for a very specific east coast, seaside experience of 1914-18. Another recent study, *Local Aspects of the Great War. Coventry and Warwickshire 1914-1919* (2012), reflects a more general range of Home Front research topics in ten related studies. The canvas chosen is one county (for these purposes Coventry and Warwickshire, but not Birmingham). As the editor, local historian Chris Holland, argues this scale of study allows a balance between detail and generalisation and the possibility of challenging



'For England, Home and Beauty': contemplating the parish war memorial at Clipston, Northamptonshire in the 1940s © Northamptonshire Record Office

commonly-held views. It is an aim impressively achieved through studies of an area including large and small towns, major industries, artisan and labouring families and rural, agricultural communities. The topics covered represent an agenda that will be useful to others looking to undertake local studies spanning the war years. The themes are the outbreak of war, Belgian refugees, recruitment, billeting, caring for the wounded, wartime industrial production, food, local tribunals for exemptions from military service, the 'Spanish' flu epidemic of 1918-19, and responses to the Armistice.

These are discussed with a telling and humane attention to the stories of individuals and families, whilst at the same time reminding the reader of how these experiences were a direct part of wider determinants and trends, from DORA (the Defence of the Realm Acts), to the formation of the Women's Land Army, to the rise in the cost of living by nearly 50% between 1914 and 1916, to the addition of 3 million acres of land under cultivation. Alongside this are some equally striking local facts and figures. Kenilworth found land for, and established 104 new allotments in one month. In Coventry White and Poppe, a light engineering company employing 350 people in 1914, rapidly became one of the largest munitions factories in the country having employed 30,000 by the war's end. Its workers, including large numbers of women, filled 30 million fuses and 31 million detonators, whilst the firm also produced War Office vehicle engines. The whole operation included housing and hostels, canteens, allotments, a swimming pool, library and cinema. By 1917 VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachment) were running 17

hospitals in Warwickshire, that in rural Kineton growing to provide 82 beds.

The work of the eight different contributors highlights many realities, amongst them the degree of pre-war preparation of military and civil organisations; the enormous practical complexity of coping with war conditions, from transport, to telegrams and post, to civilian medical services with large numbers of doctors and nurses on war service, to labour in shops, factories and fields. The role of women, with some resistance to their growing employment, and the degree of class tensions, from a strike at White and Poppe to apparently seamless assumptions of local leadership by traditional elites, is observed. A legion of committees and activities were organised, with an outpouring of voluntary effort aimed at 'doing our bit'. How this was turned to effective action, and how far controlled locally or subsumed in centrally-directed government initiatives is another recurrent theme.

Local studies also allow us to look afresh at the familiar. The main war memorial at Colchester, unveiled in 1923, is one of tens of thousands of local memorials in the British Isles. They are telling subjects for local research into the relationship between remembrance and community, as each place made its local decisions as to how to memorialise. Most war memorials took the form of permanent monuments, sometimes collective, sometimes to groups or individuals. Some favoured practical projects and buildings looking to the better future secured by the sacrifice of the dead. Whilst the creation of fitting memorials was a near universal response, the memorials themselves are far from uniform. Many record the names of individual combatants (presented in a significant variety of ways), but they also reflect the circumstances, attitudes, funds, tastes and sometimes disagreements of families and comrades, of influential local individuals and institutions, and of others in the wider circles of connection and remembrance which influenced the making of each memorial.

The main memorial in Colchester is just one of some forty First World War memorials in the town, a vivid reflection of the many belongings - school, work, church, sport, voluntary organisation - of which the dead of 1914-18 might have been part.



Colchester's main war memorial (1923)

The collective and apparently democratic nature of the process of making Colchester's main memorial is reflected in the forty different groups, from the Scouts, to 'Married Women', to religious denominations, political parties, Freemasons, friendly societies, secondary schools, local employers and utility companies represented on the War Memorial Selection Committee. Formed as early as January 1919, it energetically debated six alternative forms of memorial- public baths, school of art, purchasing Colchester castle, a memorial hall, a hospital wing, and a monument. It was the last which won out, and the minutes of the committee detail the deliberations, fundraising, the purchase and gift of the site, choice and commissioning of the memorial with its statues of Victory, Peace and St George, the composition of the wording (referring to both the military dead and the other men and women 'who stood for King and country & bearing arms or by their work helped to win the war'), and finally the elaborate unveiling ceremony. The memorial became the focus of regular remembrance, those public rituals intended to ensure that the dead and what they died for remain in local consciousness. This too is rich ground for research. In November 1938 the mayor of Colchester, speaking at the war memorial, 'invited his listeners to ask themselves whether or not the concept of remembrance had become meaningless and sentimental, and whether the sacrifices of the Fallen had been in vain'. Now the memorial has added plaques to commemorate the

dead of the (in a curiously understated phrase) 'further war' of 1939-45, and- in this army town- to soldiers killed since 1945 on service or by terrorist acts.

BALH AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War centenary is prompting unprecedented interest and participation in local history and BALH is taking a lead in making ideas, information, approaches and news of ongoing and completed projects as widely available and accessible as possible.

Initiatives include publication of a guide to researching local memorials and their significance (*Remembrance and Community: War memorials and Local History* by Kate Tiller, 2013). BALH's quarterly newsletter, *Local History News*, is carrying a series of short articles on researching different themes, which can now be read via www.balh.org.uk. Topics are:

- Memorials of war (Gill Draper) LHN103, spring 2012.
- Community responses to the outbreak of war, August 1914 (Catriona Pennell) LHN 104, summer 2012.
- The agricultural community at war, 1914-1918 (Bonnie White), LHN 105, autumn 2012.
- Soldiers' letters and the First World War (Rachel Duffett), LHN 106, winter 2013.
- Women and work in the First World War (Deborah Thom), LHN 107, Spring 2013.
- Schools in the First World War (Tim Lomas), LHN 108, Summer 2013.
- The railwaymen who went to war: stories held at the National Railway Museum (Alison Kay), LHN 109, Autumn 2013.
- Service and Sources: Compiling Local Narratives of WW1 Military History. (Richard S. Grayson), LHN 110, Winter 2014.
- War Resisters in Britain during the First World War: an opportunity for new research. (Cyril Pearce), LHN 111, Spring 2014.
- The Country House, Estate and Community during the Great War (Allen Warren), LHN 112, summer 2014.
- London in the First World War (Jerry White), LHN 113, autumn 2014.

Future themes will include: Researching a local exhibition; Children's experiences of the First World War; The Impact and Legacy of the war for women; Medical care-giving in First World War Britain; Local responses to food shortages; and Tracing the history of Belgian refugees on the home front, from local archives.

A dedicated First World War section of BALH's new website has been developed. In addition to these articles it will carry a rolling listing of publications, in print or web form, based on local studies. The aim is to give recognition and access to new work, whether generally or locally published, and to help assess the contribution local history is making. This will be complemented by in-depth reviews of selected titles in BALH's journal, *The Local Historian*.

A flagship event of 2014 has been the Anglo-American Conference of Historians, on 'The Great War at Home', held at the IHR on 3-4 July. Jointly presented by the IHR, BALH, the American Society of State and Local History (AASLH) and the VCH, its theme was the impact of the war on the locality and local institutions, the family and social life, and in the memories, remembrance and memorials found in the built environment and in the lives of survivors. Some 280 local and community historians, academics and graduate students gathered to present and exchange ideas and findings on all aspects of the theme, in the UK and worldwide, with some 70 papers based on local studies. During and since the conference BALH, the Family and Community Historical Research Society and AASLH have explored possibilities to share interests via an online network of local researchers, and BALH and AASLH have established a formal link and information exchange between the two organisations.

During 2014-18, and beyond, BALH aims to build on and add to these first steps towards realising the great potential for local studies to contribute to the fuller and wider understanding of the First World War and its significance.

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