

Written evidence submitted by the Tynemouth World War One Commemoration Project

Submission to Parliamentary Scrutiny Committee

1) Summary

The Tynemouth (latterly Northumbria) World War One Commemoration Project was formed in 2011. Funded thereafter principally by the Heritage Lottery Fund, it engaged the public, and volunteers from the local community and further afield, researching war casualties from the area of the modern borough of North Tyneside. The project was recognised in 2016 for its work with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS). Without the funding provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund a remarkable programme of public engagement, with multiple aspects, could not have been delivered. Several self-funded activities were developed that would not have occurred but for the existence of the HLF-funded activity.

Volunteers researched more than 4,000 casualties over seven years. The principal aim was the creation of a freely accessible online database record for each man or woman whose death was attributed to the war. The Tynemouth database (c1,800 casualties) was launched in June 2014 and the expanded database (43,000 views) has grown progressively since 2015.

(see www.northumbriaworldwarone.co.uk).

The Tynemouth project obtained a grant of £48,000 in 2012. In 2015 a further £72,000 was received for the Northumbria project. Grants covered variously, rent for the workspace, the IT costs of the database and public engagement – including work in schools, public exhibitions, commemorative events and commissioning a play.

164 volunteers were engaged on the Tynemouth and Northumbria projects.

Volunteers visited WWI heritage sites to improve research skills, knowledge and understanding of the importance and impact of the war. Volunteers also gained skills in collation of data and interviewing techniques, developing a deeper understanding of the area and its history. Volunteers received support, encouragement and expertise from external training. Trained mentors from the earlier Tynemouth project were assigned to later volunteers.

2) Database – the core of the project

Developed in 2012, the database has been freely accessible to the public since 2014. Family, employment, military service and burial details of more than 4000 casualties are recorded. Thousands of images are stored and accessible for private or educational use. Family memorabilia, correspondence, military records, images and relevant records can be viewed and downloaded.

3) Casualty mapping

A volunteer used information gathered in the Tynemouth project to create an overlay on a contemporary map of the district showing the addresses of casualties across the central area of Tynemouth Borough. Published widely in the press and on Twitter, it attracted worldwide attention and favourable comment from the Imperial War Museum and academic bodies for its impact showing the ubiquity of the loss experienced street-by-street.

4) Blue plaques and memorial garden

In 2014 a volunteer-led scheme was instigated to place small blue plaques on homes of WWI casualties if still standing. Three hundred have been placed and are seen daily by thousands of residents.

In 2012 a volunteer had conceived the idea of a memorial garden in an enclosed courtyard at the Linskill Centre which was restored with help from a group of Tynemouth Coast Explorer Scouts. As so many casualties' homes no longer exist, it was decided to place memorial boards in the garden showing the names of all the Tynemouth casualties. These were dedicated at a service with hundreds of living relatives in attendance (October 2015). Casualties are listed by street – a unique war memorial in the UK. Subsequently, hundreds of family relatives have visited the garden.

5) Play – Death at Dawn

Death at Dawn was written by Peter Mortimer, produced by Cloud Nine Theatre Company and performed at The Linskill Centre, in 2014. The story of the controversial execution for desertion of Private William Hunter was performed with a professional cast of six, plus four paid support actors from local performing arts courses. The production attracted full houses, a great deal of publicity and went on to win two awards. Audiences included hundreds of people not normally engaged with theatre. Its success was such that it was rerun two years later at venues in Wallsend and Newcastle.

6) Public event 2014

A community event with stalls, military parade and service was held in August 2014. Participants (2000+) included church groups, youth organisations and hundreds of descendants of casualties of the war. Planning for this event over 20 months involved a wide cross-section of the business, voluntary, cadet and reserve forces sectors together with strong support from our Council members, officers and staff.

7) Exhibitions

Major exhibitions of the project's work were mounted and viewed by hundreds of residents and toured around local libraries, schools and colleges. A retrospective display of all the project's smaller and larger exhibitions was staged in November 2018.

8) Oral history

Volunteers, trained by the Local Oral History Centre in Sunderland conducted interviews with relatives of casualties, telling the family history of men who had served and died.

Edited and placed on the men's database records the interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face, but sometimes done via Skype with relatives overseas.

Examples from interviews:

- Mr. Edward Smith admitted he now thinks differently about his father who eventually left his wife on her own to cope with the children. On his return from the war he was having difficulty coping with the memories of four years of trench warfare, plus the guilt of surviving his injuries, when his brothers-in-law Matthew Cranston and Daniel Cole had been killed.
- Volunteers recorded a grandfather's (survivor) memories of battles he was trying to come to terms with, related to his small granddaughter. Talking through this trauma was his way of coping with witnessing his younger brother's head being blown off on the first day of the Somme (01/07/1916).

9) Case studies – relatives and volunteers

The workroom at Linskill became a volunteers' hub and 'drop in' centre for relatives to bring information and learn about men for whom they had scant knowledge. Many emotional scenes occurred as relatives learned of men and sometimes saw a first image of him.

Anne Bosanko (relative)

"I always knew I had a great uncle who had died in WWI. As a child in the '40s I could remember seeing his name on the war memorial in Smith's Docks Park. Since my visit [to the project] last week, I now know where Peter Strasshine Case lived, the date he died and where he died, and the memorial in France where he is remembered. I am beginning to get an idea of how he lived and where he lived in North Shields. The most wonderful thing for me is that I [now] have a photograph of my great uncle Peter, a handsome young man of 20. This is the only picture our family has of him."

Andrew Neil – died of war injuries May 1919

Through experience gained by involvement with the project a volunteer realised that her husband's grandfather, Serjeant Andrew Neil, should have been recognised by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. She took the case forward and it was subsequently approved. In October 2016 the CWGC erected a headstone on Serjeant Neil's previously unmarked grave in Wallsend. An event was held to mark the occasion, attended by the Lord Lieutenant, civic dignitaries and, most importantly, descendants of Andrew Neil from far and wide – some of whom had never met before. As a result, many of those family members are still now in close contact.

Eddie and Eva Bell

The couple came to the project after reading an article in the local newspaper. They had been completing their family history and had a query with a relative which the project may have been able to resolve. Recognising their existing abilities, it was suggested they might wish to become volunteers.

Between them Eddie and Eva have clocked up hundreds of hours researching casualties, improving IT skills and meeting new friends. Eddie says: "I just can't stop researching, love it". Both have attended field trips to museums, exhibitions and other social events held by the project."

10) Public engagement – Cullercoats

A volunteer and Marden High School pupils researched names on a local war memorial. A public information day was held at the church hall nearby. Fourteen blue plaques were installed in June 2015, attended by pupils and family relatives of local casualties. Nine plaques were placed in one street -Eleanor Street - where subsequently a street party was organised by the residents.

11) Work with schools

A creative practitioner/licensed teacher worked with pupils exploring interesting stories of local men. This included the writing of performance poetry, painting and the creation of short video presentations, with pupils' narration. More than 1,000 pupils in schools across the borough were engaged in understanding the consequences of the war for their communities. In addition, many short presentations were made to pupils in schools at all levels (Year 2 - Year 13).

12) Schools' commemorative book

Volunteers wrote a 36-page review of the work of the Tynemouth project distributed free of charge to more than 28,000 pupils across the borough to take home and share with their families (July 2014). Costing £7,500, this was funded from advertising and donations from more than 48 businesses, social groups, churches and individuals.

13) Media coverage

The project enjoyed substantial support from our local weekly newspaper, the News Guardian. Weekly lists of names of casualties published for over two years stimulated a massive response. Family members coming with information or to enquire about relatives lost in the war. The project coordinator and research coordinator shared a weekly column for seven years featuring stories about some of the casualties and their part in important issues or campaigns.

Newcastle Journal – Tony Henderson, heritage and environment editor

"The Tynemouth project provided a constant stream of material for a regular series of articles in The Journal, a Newcastle-based North East morning regional newspaper, and its sister evening paper the Chronicle. There are many, many examples to choose from, but stand-out candidates include poignant tales of individuals who served - the stories behind the names, the placing of plaques, the memorial garden, the casualty map.

"A hugely successful and inspirational project which left the local and regional readers vastly better informed about the many aspects of the conflict."

BBC – Chris Jackson, producer director, 'Despatches from Tyneside'

"The project was a remarkable community undertaking that unearthed hundreds of personal stories that together painted a compelling picture of how the war played out on home soil.

"The work of the project and some of the stories they revealed formed a fundamental part of a BBC Documentary about the impact of the First World War on the home front. The programme was shown regionally and nationally on several occasions to great acclaim. The project was instrumental to this. It's hard to imagine any other way that these stories would have seen the light of day and be told."

It has been repeated often on network channels since, producing contact and information from descendants across the country.

14) @NorthumbriaWW1

Twitter was used to great effect throughout the lifespan of the project, its own handle @NorthumbriaWW1 gaining more than 3,000 followers. Not only used for advertising upcoming events, the feed offered followers regular information about the war at a local, national and international level, regularly marking significant dates and anniversaries.

15) Lectures and Talks

Northumbria University

Over winter 2013/14 the project presented eight public lectures in conjunction with the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. More than 1,000 members of the public attended one or more of the lectures. The first was given by Professor Sir Hew Strachan a member of the DCMS advisory body for First World War commemoration.

Low Lights Tavern, North Shields

From December 2013 to October 2018 in a room at the pub, more than 50 free informal talks were given on a wide range of FWW related topics, from literature, art and poetry through campaigns, medical issues and the chaplaincy services. Up to 35 people of all ages attended individual talks from across the area.

Comment from Alison and Graham Telfer

We quickly became dedicated followers of the project, rarely missing talks or events. Talks were delivered by a spectrum of informative professors to eloquent members of the public, covering technical and artistic aspects, to people's own stories about family or special interests. This led to visiting war graves including those in France, walks to Tynemouth blue plaques, poppy displays and the talks at Northumbria University. Our interest continues. A further bonus has been meeting like-minded people some of whom have become friends.

16) Public events, local history days and talks

From 2011 the project was actively involved in local and regional events focused on the Great War. Numerous talks and presentations were also given to social and community groups.

17) Tynemouth shop

A small vacant retail unit on a busy high street frontage was made available by North Tyneside Council in 2014. Over four years the project staffed this with volunteers at weekends and during school holidays. Thousands of residents and visitors to the seaside resort called in, viewed small exhibitions and learned about the project.

18) Comments from local public leaders

Statement from the Lord Lieutenant's Office (Tyne and Wear)

"The Tynemouth WWI Project was awarded The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2016 in recognition of their outstanding voluntary achievement in demonstrating the exceptional and overwhelming impact that the war had on the local community. The project continues to provide a permanent and expanding record which preserves an important part of our national heritage."

Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Campbell MP (Tynemouth)

"The Northumbria WWI Project, formerly the Tynemouth Project, has been an outstanding example of community engagement. Well organised, well led, it was driven by local volunteers and supported by hundreds of local people."

"At the outset, the First World War seemed like someone else's war. For the residents and descendants of Tynemouth Borough this project made it seem like our war."

Cllr Tommy Mulvenna, Chair of Council – 2014/15 and 2018/19

"Having been involved with the project since its conception I have been part of a vast array of work which has engaged residents across the Borough. However, I feel the most impressive piece of work is the online database. Residents can access this resource and view the casualty map illustrating at a quick glance the horrific impact of the Great War on our community."

"A particularly poignant element of the project is the blue plaques scheme rolled out to identify the remaining properties in Tynemouth where casualties lived. For years to come these plaques will be in place and will raise interest and stimulate discussion amongst residents and visitors."

Mrs Norma Redfearn CBE – Elected Mayor

"The project has been at the forefront in bringing to public attention the tragic, yet uplifting story of the Great War for our communities. I have had the privilege as our Elected Mayor to represent the Council at many of the large and smaller events the project has organised."

"From the amazing display at our public cemeteries in November 2018 of more than 5,000 poppies knitted by local groups and individuals, to the touching family event (June 2015) when I met 97 years old Mr George Wales who came from Cambridge to witness the installation of a blue plaque at his father's home (his own birthplace), the project has engaged our communities with the human cost of the war."

19) Tyneside Tommy Ale

A local real ale brewery was recruited to produce a commemorative ale – Tyneside Tommy – which has no label glued to the bottle but instead carries a small folded label with string attaching it to the neck of the bottle like a soldier's 'dog tag'. Thirty different labels tell a small story of a casualty. Popular as a drink, it also has a local following who collect the labels.

20) Knitted poppy initiative

One of several engagement activities the project planned to mark the centenary of the Armistice it was initially intended only to cover the impressive Victorian cemetery gates in North Shields.

We approached several local groups asking for help in making poppies and were met with great enthusiasm. Word of mouth, social media and visiting more groups brought a huge amount of support – not only in knitting poppies but also in engaging wider community interest in our project's research and the impact of the war on the borough.

The number of poppies being handed in forced a rethink and expanded our ambitions to include all seven of our municipal cemeteries. Whilst we were overwhelmed with the support and interest in making the poppies, the reaction when we put them all up was also fantastic. We included on each display information about the project and the origin of poppies for remembrance. A volunteer member living opposite the largest cemetery saw first-hand the reaction as people took photos and images, with favourable comments posted on social media. Members of the community approached us asking about relatives who had died in WW1. We were able to provide information – and sometimes photographic images never previously seen by them.

The community spirit this initiative evinced seemed so tangible.

21) Carville School – John Collinson

The project was made aware of a local casualty from Wallsend – John Collinson – whilst working in collaboration with Northumbria University. His journey, following emigration to Australia, injury in France in 1916, hospitalisation in London and a remarkable life changing opportunity involving Sir Henry Wood, resulted in a career as an operatic tenor in the 1920s.

Children at Carville Primary School, assisted by a volunteer project, researched his story.

The children performed at the centenary events in November 2018, singing the famous Australian song – Waltzing Matilda – first recorded in 1926 by John Collinson.

22) Centenary of the Armistice – Memorial Hall Wallsend, November 2018

Staged in the Swan Hunter Shipbuilders (WWI) Memorial Hall, a week-long programme of exhibitions, talks, information day and a commemorative concert attracted more than a thousand people. A resident commented:

“A wonderful and fitting tribute to both those of the borough who made the ultimate sacrifice and, 100 years on, the men and women who made sure they will never be forgotten.”

March 2019