



Your Community at War

A Guide for Schools

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction: the Hemel at War project | 4 |
| What students say about the project | 5 |
| Getting started | 6 |
| Child protection | 6 |
| Pitfalls | 7 |
| Carrying out interviews | 8 |
| The website | 9 |
| Sources for the Home Front (in both world wars) | 10 |
| Sources for the First World War | 11 |
| <i>Records searchable by place</i> | 11 |
| <i>Individual records</i> | 12 |
| <i>Unit records</i> | 12 |
| <i>Other records</i> | 13 |
| <i>Visits</i> | 13 |
| <i>Telling an individual story</i> | 14 |
| Sources for the Second World War | 15 |
| <i>Official records</i> | 15 |
| <i>Other records</i> | 15 |
| <i>Telling an individual story</i> | 15 |
| Appendix 1: Informed consent form | 16 |
| Appendix 2: First World War biographies | 17 |
| <i>Second Lieutenant Henry Balderson</i> | 17 |
| <i>Private 40312 William Barber</i> | 18 |
| <i>Lieutenant Robert Masterman</i> | 19 |
| Appendix 3: Second World War webpages/interviews | 20 |
| <i>Ken Blake</i> | 20 |
| <i>Robert Duke</i> | 22 |
| <i>Hylde Maslen</i> | 25 |
| <i>Brian Slade</i> | 28 |
| <i>Jean Stevens</i> | 30 |

Introduction: *Hemel at War* Project

The *Hemel at War* project was launched by The Hemel Hempstead School in 2008. Its primary aim is to create, through recorded and transcribed interviews, an internet archive (www.hemelatwar.org) of memories of war which would otherwise be lost.

We want to start off by saying that nobody should be daunted by the scale of this project. Some of the things we have done can be achieved very quickly, easily and cheaply. Even a very basic version of what we have done would bring immense satisfaction and fantastic experiences for both students and staff. This publication is a guide to what is now a vast project, simply to show what can be achieved if you have time to put in to it. But a very basic webpage is cheap. Many people have the skills and software to post content online and will do so for free.

So we hope that readers of this guide will feel inspired to do some of what we have done, and perhaps even more, but don't feel that you have to do it all. It's also the kind of project that can be started, left for a while, and then returned to. With all the demands on teachers' time, that is probably how it is going to be if you start such a project – it certainly has been for us. Indeed, the maximum benefit will be obtained by working with successive year groups, so it is wise to plan to do a little bit each year so that as many students as possible can be engaged in it. Our own project is certainly ongoing. If you carry out a similar project and need help, we'd love to hear from you. We can be contacted by email at: hemelatwar@gmail.com

Our archive has been constructed primarily for local people, but we already have some evidence of it being put to use by academic researchers. We know that people as far afield as France, Australia, South Africa, Canada and the USA have used our material. The items in the archive are drawn from the town of Hemel Hempstead and the project has initially focused on interviewing those involved in the Second World War. There has also been close attention to finding out about ten former pupils who are listed on a memorial in the school as having lost their lives between 1939 and 1945. It is concerned with all aspects of wartime experience from fighting overseas to the Home Front.

In addition to creating an archive, the project has the following additional positive outcomes:

1. Students' knowledge and understanding of conflict are developed through engagement with those who have experienced it at first hand. They are able to engage directly with the personal experiences of those who lived through the Second World War and we believe that the local connections make this knowledge/understanding all the more tangible and relevant. Meanwhile, seemingly vast subjects such as the slaughter of the First World War can be understood through individual examples. This can have a particular effect on, for example, visits to First World War battlefields and cemeteries, where graves of local people or sites linked to local battalions can be visited.
2. The school is able to make a contribution to community cohesion. That happens by creating situations in which younger and older generations meet and talk in ways they would not otherwise do, which can help to challenge generational stereotypes. Furthermore, older people who might feel that their experiences are no longer of interest to society as a whole are able to see their lives recorded and given recognition.

The project has been led by staff at The Hemel Hempstead School, supported by a former pupil of the school who is now Professor of Twentieth Century History at Goldsmiths, University of London, Professor Richard Grayson. As such, it represents a partnership between secondary and higher education which allows an academic researcher to apply some of his research skills for community purposes, and also gives students some engagement with the higher education sector.

What students say about the project

The Hemel at War project provided me with a chance to ensure that my interest and enjoyment of history contributed to the wider historical community. I also had the opportunity to examine original archives on the First World War at the Kew Public Record Office. Interviewing past veterans and prisoners of war allowed me to recreate their experiences, and, rather than read about the majority of soldiers' lives and feel almost distanced from their suffering, I was able to fully connect with how life was.... Hemel at War also has meant that I have gained valuable skills as a historian in interviewing and talking to people, taking notes and then writing them up.

Sammi Rees

Hemel at War closes the gap between the ages. It shares and shows the experiences and knowledge of the older generation, in one place, from anywhere and at any time. It also gives the chance for young people to go and interview people, ask those questions, see reactions and hear the powerful stories. It can educate the younger generation; show them the past mistakes and the heroes of the past.

Matt Henton

Participating in the Hemel at War project is a great transitional step from history in the textbook to research in action. The experiences and memories we were able to assemble allow the sense of the personal to be attached to the dates and numbers that everyone is familiar with. Already some of those who we have been in touch with have passed away, highlighting just how important this project is to our understanding of the past.

Edward Gardner

Being part of the Hemel at War project was a truly rewarding experience. Personal accounts are something which students rarely get in today's educational system – and this, I believe, is one of the most important things to come out of the project. The personal accounts of the men and women I interviewed were both informative and incredibly moving.... The memories of the people who actually experienced life during war are so important, yet, sadly, are often forgotten. Due to this project these memories, which would otherwise have been lost in a matter of years, have been preserved, and it feels so special to have been a part of a project that means so much to so many.

Zoe Farrell

It was a unique and truly enjoyable experience, that I probably will not have the chance to experience again. It is because of the unique nature of the project that I found myself enthralled by the stories that I heard, and to hear them from the primary source made it even more harrowing and amazing. The tales from the British Legion will stay with me, and I will struggle to forget the horrors the men and women went through, and their ability to talk about it with such ease. I feel the Hemel at War Project gave me an insight into the wars that will never be matched in showing me detail and the reality of both conflicts.

Alex Brook

Getting started

To carry out a project such as *Hemel at War*, there are only a small number of basic requirements which need to be in place.

1. Appoint a co-ordinator who can have overall responsibility for the project. This will often be a history teacher, but the project could also be integrated into general studies or wider sixth form activities.
2. Arrange a website which can contain the material which is gathered. This could be part of an existing school website or have a dedicated address. If resources allow, we suggest that a special address will help the project have a community reach which goes beyond the school. A short address will also help to advertise the project, especially to those who are less familiar with web addresses. A section on structuring the website is included later in this guide. A website does not need to be expensive. Registering an address will cost well under £100, and you may be able to find that all the web design can be done by a member of staff or a student. However, we had our site designed by a company (www.ilettec.com) and that was funded by the school in conjunction with the Parents' Association.
3. Recruit student volunteers to carry out interviews. *Hemel at War* has involved students from years 10 to 13.
4. Ensure that all students are trained in conducting oral history interviews. This should include ethical issues and questions of data protection. A section on interviews is included later in this guide.
5. Make public requests for interviews. The two best places to start are your local newspaper(s) and your local branch of the Royal British Legion (RBL).
6. Ensure that somebody (ideally more than one person) has the skills and time to update the website.

Child protection

Child protection will obviously be an issue in a project such as this and schools will want to carry out risk assessments and abide by national guidelines. Some points to bear in mind are:

- Parents need to be fully informed and give consent for their children to take part in activities. In the case of interviews they particularly need to know where their children will be and when they can be expected home.
- Transporting pupils to the homes of interviewees can be a problem. We have found that parents are often willing to help.
- We made a point of stressing the children should not attempt to make contacts themselves and arrange interviews without a responsible adult present.
- There is also an issue with elderly people worrying about who is coming to their home. We always let them know in advance the names of the interviewers and exactly when they will arrive and expect to leave.

Pitfalls

Different projects will no doubt encounter different problems, but we flag ones we have faced so that anybody running a project can be forewarned and make contingency plans.

1. Time. As in so much else, this project takes time. As we said in the introduction, a very basic site and project need not be very time consuming and can still be very rewarding. However, it is worth flagging here what the main time-consuming activities have been:
 - a) Dealing with the number of offers of help. You need to make sure that everybody who offers help receives a reply. There is nothing worse than offering help and then being ignored. At the very least, it is good practice to acknowledge, say that the project has been inundated with offers, and that it may take a couple of months before the offer can be followed up.
 - b) Arranging interviews. Taking students out of school to meet people is time-consuming, especially when interviews are done on a one-off basis. There are several ways round this. Your RBL branch may be able to host a session, perhaps for half a day, where students and interviewees meet at the RBL. Alternatively, you might be able to host a similar session at school. We have also set a limit of about an hour for interviews. This reassures the interviewees, ensures that staff can get pupils home at a reasonable time and encourages the interviewee to get their main points across in good time. We have found that an hour is plenty of time to get the main story and it can be extended if both parties feel this is desirable. Despite these time issues, set against the demands on time is the fact that the interviews are the most enjoyable and rewarding part of the process.
 - c) Transcribing interviews. This is more time-consuming than most people realise. One way to tackle the problem is to ensure that those who interview also have the responsibility for transcribing it, and setting clear deadlines for that. It is also advisable to check transcripts with interviewees so that they can advise on any inaccuracies. We often found that names and places needed to be corrected.
2. Website security. At an early stage, our website was hacked by a malicious group which we believe to be based in Turkey. They were able to do this because our passwords were quite easy to guess and they did great damage to the site. Fortunately, our host had full backups, but it did take a significant amount of time to sort out, and the site was down for several days.
3. Verifying information. We have had one case where an interviewee made statements about war service which we had no reason for disbelieving at the time which, after his death, were challenged by relatives. We are still investigating the case. Where possible, ask interviewees if they can show documents and medals. This should not be done in any way that suggests doubt about what you have been told because that could create hostility. Rather it can be presented as part of wishing to obtain photographs for the website. If such items cannot be produced, and there is any reason for doubt, then caution can be exercised in using the material while further investigations are carried out. If at all possible, veterans can easily obtain their own record from the Ministry of Defence (see section 'Sources on Second World War' below). They may not realise this and may be very willing to obtain the record.

Carrying out interviews

Before any interview is carried out, the interviewee's 'informed consent' must be obtained. We sent a letter to each interviewee explaining the purpose of the project, exactly what will happen and the fact that the information they give will be in the public domain. They should give consent to this by completing a form along the lines of that contained in Appendix 1 of this guide. Further details of some of the issues around ensuring that research is ethical and legal, and on informed consent have been produced by the Oral History Society.¹

Interviews were carried out using simple voice recorders. We then transferred the recordings to audio files and burned them onto CDs which were then archived. The full text of the interview never appears on the website so this is an important means of making sure that it is preserved in full. After transcribing, we have given interviewees the chance to read the text and make corrections to ensure, for example, that the spellings of names and places are correct.

The fundamental principle of any oral history interview is that questions should not be leading. For example, if discussing with a veteran about how they felt going into battle it is not appropriate to say 'So you would have felt scared, what else were you thinking?', 'Presumably you felt scared?' or even 'Did you feel scared?' As far as possible, questions must not only avoid making assumptions, but must also avoid flagging certain possible answers above others. Consequently, an appropriate question about emotions on going into battle would simple be 'How did you feel?' or 'What were you thinking about?' If, for example, a veteran says that they felt 'excited' or 'exhilarated', or 'pleased to be getting at the enemy at last', one might follow that up with 'Was there anything else that you were feeling or thinking?' Only as a final question in such a discussion would it be appropriate to ask something like 'Did you feel frightened?' That would allow a very specific answer to a specific question after the points they remember have been drawn out without suggestion.

A particularly sensitive issue when interviewing veterans is their role in killing people. This can obviously be very traumatic for them to recall. Some veterans will talk about this, but many will not. We strongly advise not intending to ask questions such as 'Did you kill anyone?' or 'How many did you kill?' If a veteran begins to volunteer such information then it can be followed up on, but even then it needs to be done gently and sensitively. So, for example, if a veteran refers to having killed someone, you might ask a question such as 'How did that happen?' which allows them to say as much as they wish to say and might be limited only to the general situation, rather than a specific question such as 'How did you kill them?'

One of the key points about veterans is that they quite often do not offer very basic details about where they were living or how they came to enlist, and they rarely say exactly what unit they served in. This can make it difficult to verify information and can also limit the use of the archive for historians. We have therefore developed a range of categories of information which can be compiled, in addition to questions which might be asked to allow scope for whatever information the veteran may wish to offer. The answers could also, in time, be used to form a database of local veterans.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Full name | 11. Unit (to include regiment and battalion or other unit, ship, squadron or other – as specific as person can be) |
| 2. Date of birth | 12. Dates of service |
| 3. Address now | 13. Countries served in (and dates if possible) |
| 4. Address when enlisted | 14. Details of medals |
| 5. Address when leaving services | 15. Wounded? If so, where, when and how? |
| 6. Address(es) during war (if not in services) | 16. Time in military hospital? If so where? |
| 7. School or other educational institution attended and dates | 17. Involvement in any community group in advance of enlistment (such as sports club, church, charity) |
| 8. Employer when joining up (or during war) | |
| 9. Nature of work at employer | |
| 10. Branch of service (army, navy, RAF, other) | |

¹ <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/index.php> [accessed 7 July 2010].

The website

The website has a number of different sections. Our main address is www.hemelatwar.org which we deliberately kept simple.

The key pages for subject matter are 'World War One', 'World War Two' and 'Other Conflicts'. The first and third of these currently contain relatively little information. As regards 'Other Conflicts', we hope to expand this section soon. Interviews have been carried out with former pupils of the school who have served in Afghanistan. For the First World War, clearly, there are now no veterans to interview. However, there is plenty of information which can be found out fairly easily (see section in this guide on researching the First World War) and we have included some of that in a 'Roll of Honour' at:

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/thosewhodiedww1.asp>

This contains a basic listing and we are gradually adding further information which helps provided more background for each man killed. In some cases this is biographical, but in all cases it includes something about the activities of their unit at the time they were killed.

The bulk of the material we have relates to the Second World War. This is presented in eight sub-sections:

- The Home Front
- Women at War
- Bovingdon Airfield
- Evacuees
- The Hemel Hempstead School
- Overseas Battle Fronts
- Those Who Died
- VE Day

We have structured most of these sections on the principle that different people accessing it will want different amounts of information. Where we have carried out interviews, they will be included in the site in three levels of detail. The main page of each sub-section contains a short summary of each interview:

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/home%20front.asp>

Such pages have been drafted partly with students in years 7 to 9 in mind.

A longer version of the same page is then available at:

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/WWIIHomeLong.asp>

An interview transcription is then included in this form:

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/imagedbresultsfull.asp?productID=104>

Each sub-section also contains a link to display all the detailed resources linked to that section, as at:

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/imagedbresults.asp?collection=Home Front&conflict=World War Two>

Sources for the Home Front (in both world wars)

Pupils are usually interested in investigating the Home Front and in some respects this is an easier topic to tackle than the military issues because there is a wide range of source material close at hand. It is always worth starting by asking them to investigate their own family history and look for memorabilia. It is also easier to find people who lived through World War II as children simply because they are now younger than those who fought.

Some of our most interesting interviews have been with evacuees and ex-pupils who attended the school during the war years. In addition to this, rich sources of information can be found in:

- The local history section of the public library which will have secondary sources and which might also have an archive including local newspapers.
- Local History Societies.
- Larger shops and businesses often have an archive and some have detailed accounts and materials that can be used by schools.
- Museums, local archives and public records offices.
- Publicity in local newspapers often provides contacts.
- The Royal British Legion may well be able to put you in touch with people who experienced the Home Front, such as the wives of veterans or those who served the armed forces in a civilian capacity such as maintaining the grounds at airfields.

Sources for the First World War

Records searchable by place

In constructing a picture of those from a locality who served in the First World War, there are five principal sources. First, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission will provide data in an Excel file on CD of all those from a particular area who have an address recorded. The CWGC can be contacted by emailing feedback@cwgc.org The CWGC provides this information by carrying out a search of the 'Additional information' section of their individual records. That section of the record cannot be searched online. In order to ensure that as many records as possible for your area are found, you will need to think about how people described your area in the First World War period. For example, Apsley and Boxmoor which are now part of Hemel Hempstead, would have been seen as separate settlements at the time and so a simple search for 'Hemel Hempstead' will not always reveal them. Meanwhile, think about whether there are any common variations or misspellings relating to the name of your area.

Second, listings of all dead servicemen can be found in "Soldiers Died in the Great War" and "Officers Died in the Great War" which are published by the Naval and Military Press on CD-Rom (www.naval-militarypress.com). They are also available at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1543> Although these records do not contain home addresses, they do contain searchable fields including information on place of birth, residence and enlistment.

Third, pensions and service records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks can now be searched by place of residence and/or birth. These are available through www.ancestry.co.uk The site has records from the National Archives in Kew of those who were awarded (or applied for) a pension between 1914 and 1920 at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1114> Service records which survived the London Blitz in 1940 (around 25 per cent of records) are at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1219> There is a charge for viewing the original records unless the search is carried out at the National Archives.

Fourth, local newspapers contain different levels of information. These are all available at the British Library's Newspaper Division at Colindale. However, they are also available in many local records offices and libraries. In many cases, local newspapers contained very detailed information and pictures of those serving, especially the killed or wounded. In searching for information on an individual, bear in mind that details often did not appear for some months after what we now know to be a date of death.

Fifth, perhaps most obviously, local war memorials are an excellent source. They can usually be found in town centres or churches (usually the largest Anglican church), but can also be found in schools, workplaces and other public buildings such as specially built Memorial Halls.

In addition to these sources which cover the entire UK (and what is now the Republic of Ireland), there are some sources which relate to more specific areas. For example, for England, *The National Roll of Honour* covers:

- Bedford
- Birmingham
- Bradford
- Leeds
- London
- Luton and District
- Manchester
- Northampton
- Portsmouth
- Salford
- Southampton

Most of it can be accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1538>

Ireland is well-served with several sources. *Ireland's Memorial Records* are now available on CD at: www.eneclann.ie/acatalog/ENEC011.html It is widely regarded as a problematic source as it claims to contain the names of 49,000 'Irishmen' who died in the war. However, estimates of the 'Irish dead' now go as low as 25,000, with most academics agreed on around 35,000. The problem with this listing of 49,000 is that it includes all those who died in Irish regiments (many of whom would have been transferred from English, Scottish or Welsh regiments), and does not include the many Irishmen who died in non-Irish units. However, it is still a valuable source and is available online for a charge at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1633> Meanwhile, there is also a CD-Rom of Irish soldiers' wills available at: www.eneclann.ie/acatalog/ENEC016_-_World_War_1_Irish_Soldiers.html This is an index of over 9000 wills from across Ireland which are kept in the National Archive in Dublin.

Individual records

The records listed above are all searchable on an individual basis. However, there are other records which are useful if an individual rather than a geographic location is being searched for.

For a soldier who died, an excellent source is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site (www.cwgc.org) which allows free searching of records. This will always show where a soldier is buried or recorded on a memorial (if they have no known grave). There will sometimes be family information and there will always be a date of death and unit listed.

The starting point for records of all individual soldiers (the dead and survivors) is the National Archives at Kew: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk Their website contains a very useful user guide at: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/militaryhistory/ This takes you through the main sources available at Kew. The first place to go to find out about any individual who served in any branch of the armed forces is the individual medal rolls. These record both service and gallantry medals. For a charge, they can be viewed and downloaded at: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/medals.asp These rolls can also be viewed at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1262> again for a charge.

To go further into the individual career of a soldier, the service and pension records at www.ancestry.co.uk discussed above are available. Those for officers are held mainly in the WO 339 category (but also some in WO 374) at Kew. None of these are available online, but all records have, in theory, survived.

For those who served in the army, a little more information can sometimes be found out about individuals in the medal roll for a regiment. In particular, while individual rolls always record a regiment, they often do not include a battalion, and that information is necessary in order to find out the day-to-day movements of a soldier. The regimental rolls often reveal this but are highly varied in their ease of use. They are sometimes alphabetical, sometimes arranged by battalion, and sometimes appear to be random. But useful information can sometimes be gleaned. So, if you can visit Kew, then you can search the index for the WO 329 category to look for the relevant regiment. This is primarily of use in establishing a battalion if that is not known.

For further details on individuals serving in the Royal Flying Corps or Royal Air Force see:

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/militaryhistory/airforce/

For the Royal Navy see: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/militaryhistory/navy/

For the Merchant Navy see: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/militaryhistory/merchant/

For the Royal Marines see: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/militaryhistory/marines/

Unit records

If you do establish a specific battalion for a soldier who served in the army, it is unlikely that even their individual record (if it has survived) will tell you much about their experiences. However, for each battalion of the British army, a very detailed record is likely to exist which will tell you about the day-to-day activities of their battalion. These are War Diaries and are all in the WO 95 category at Kew. Many are available to view online and download (again for a charge) and you can check which ones are available at: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/war-diaries.asp These sources are increasingly popular and so more and more are being made available online. The most detailed War Diary for any one battalion will

always be the one for that battalion, but there can often be useful information in the diary for the brigade and/or division in which that battalion served. If you are not clear which brigade or division a battalion was in, then a very useful guide is at: www.1914-1918.net/regiments.htm Clicking on the relevant regiment will tell you the information you need.

To see all the war diaries relating to one battalion you need not only to look at the records for the battalion but also the brigade and division in which the battalion served. Details of the structure of the British army and its formations can be found at: <http://www.1914-1918.net/britdivs.htm> and <http://www.1914-1918.net/unithistories.htm> Examples of the necessary records for two battalions are:

6th Connaught Rangers

- WO 95/1970: 6th Connaught Rangers
- WO 95/1969: 47 Brigade
- WO 95/1955 & 1956: 16th Division

9th Royal Irish Rifles:

- WO 95/2503: 9th Royal Irish Rifles
- WO 95/2502: 107 Brigade
- WO 95/2491 & 2492: 36th Division

Occasionally, notes of individual operations can be found outside WO 95, such as records of the 16th Division at Messines: WO 158/416: 16th Division Operations, 7-9 June 1917

Other records

Many other records exist on a very localised basis, far too numerous to mention. These might include regimental rolls of honour or church memorial records. Asking about these at museums, churches, local history societies and local records offices is the best way to start to find them, as well as searching for relevant terms on the internet. There are also an increasing number of local memorial projects, sometimes web-based and sometimes involving published books. Much remains hidden in attics and drawers and one of the most rewarding parts of such a project can be encouraging people to go through long-forgotten papers and helping them to realise the significance and meaning of what they have in their possession.

One type of source which will have use in a very limited number of cases, but is incredibly helpful if it does exist, is the school magazine. Most current schools did not exist in 1914-18 but the large public schools generally did and they often produced detailed information on former pupils who were killed. We found out from the CWGC site that one local person had attended Harrow School so we contacted the librarian at the school who was able to provide a contemporary biography and photograph (see Appendix 2 of this guide: Lieutenant Robert Masterman).

Visits

Many schools organise visits to battlefields and cemeteries in France and Belgium. Many communities will find that one of the cemeteries on or close to their visit contains a grave or memorial relating to a local person. All are likely to find that someone from their area is recorded among the 34,796 names at Arras,² 34,927 at Tyne Cot,³ 54,389 on the Menin Gate,⁴ or the 72,195 at Thiepval.⁵ These are all large memorials within reach of short trips from the UK.

The most detailed guide to the cemeteries on the Western Front has for many years been: *Before Endeavours Fade: Guide to the Battlefields of the First World War* by Rose E.B. Coombs. First published in 1976, it is regularly updated. To help with visits, we have produced a guide to selected graves/memorials in the Somme area. This is available at: <http://www.hemelatwar.org/documents/SommeGuide.pdf> and could be adapted by schools using their own local information.

² http://www.cwgc.org/search/cemetery_details.aspx?cemetery=82700&mode=1

³ http://www.cwgc.org/search/cemetery_details.aspx?cemetery=85900&mode=1

⁴ http://www.cwgc.org/search/cemetery_details.aspx?cemetery=91800&mode=1

⁵ http://www.cwgc.org/search/cemetery_details.aspx?cemetery=80800&mode=1

Telling an individual story

Using the WWI sources above could enable a student to build up a detailed picture of the life of a soldier. A possible project on an individual could include some or all of the following:

1. Start by finding a name on a local war memorial.
2. Use the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website to establish which unit the soldier was in and the date they died. Unit information can also be found on the medal rolls online or at Kew.
3. Look in a local newspaper to see if there is any family information and possibly a photo.
4. Try to access the individual records through www.ancestry.co.uk or at Kew.
5. Unit records such as battalion war diaries could be used to tell the story of roughly where the soldier had been and when.
6. Visit a grave or memorial and take a photograph for inclusion on the website.

Such work can lead to webpages such as these examples, which are linked from our WWI Roll of Honour (<http://www.hemelatwar.org/thosewhodiedww1.asp>):

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/BaldersonHLP.asp>

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/BarberWE.asp>

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/FreemanHW.asp>

<http://www.hemelatwar.org/MastermanRC.asp>

Some of these biographies are included in Appendix 2 of this guide.

Sources for the Second World War

Official records

The most useful source is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site (www.cwgc.org.uk) which covers WWII. Other than that, the main problem in locating information about those who served in the Second World War is that individual records are still closed. However, they can be accessed in full by the person concerned or their next-of-kin at: <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/WhatWeDo/Personnel/ServiceRecords/FurtherInformationAboutServiceRecordsHeldByMod.htm>

For deceased service personnel, anybody can (for a charge) obtain full information once 25 years has elapsed since their death. Details are at: <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/WhatWeDo/Personnel/ServiceRecords/MakingARequestForInformationHeldOnThePersonnelRecordsOfDeceasedServicePersonnel.htm> This link also contains information on how to obtain more limited information prior to the passing of 25 years.

However, there is still plenty that can be established about the movements of an individual by looking at unit records – just as one can do with records such as First World War battalion war diaries. The most useful records are held in the WO 166 category of records at the National Archives. A guide to the army sections of the WWII records at Kew has been produced by the National Archives and is available at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/RdLeaflet.asp?sLeafletID=161>

'Operations Record Books' for squadrons of the Royal Air Force are held (on microfilm) in the AIR 27 category of records at the National Archives.

Records of the Royal Navy are held in the ADM category of files at the National Archives. Material relating to specific ships is best found by searching for the name of the ship in the online catalogue at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/search.asp>

Other records

As with the First World War, much can be established about local service in WWII though the names on local war memorials. Indeed, the memorial will often be the same memorial for the two wars. Similar use can be made of newspapers, churches records and items available at local museums.

Telling an individual story

The great difference between telling the story of a WWII soldier compared to someone from WWI is that it is still possible to hear the personal testimony of many who served.

However, despite the limitations caused by some records being closed, it is still possible to use a range of materials. A possible WWII project for individuals could include some or all of the following:

1. Start by finding a name on a local war memorial.
2. Use the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website to establish which unit the person was in and the date they died.
3. Look in a local newspaper to see if there is any family information and possibly a photo.
4. Use unit records such as battalion war diaries could be used to tell the story of roughly where the soldier had been and when.
5. Visit a grave or memorial and take a photograph for inclusion on the website.
6. Apply to the Ministry of Defense for the full service record.

Appendix 1

HEMEL AT WAR PROJECT

Informed consent form

Material gathered during this research may be published on a website, and possibly in printed publications, which will be available to all. We will not in any circumstances publish your address, but other information you tell us may be available for all to see. Please answer each statement concerning the collection and use of the research data.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study. Yes ☐ No ☐

I have had my questions answered satisfactorily. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to give an explanation. Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to the interview being audiotaped and to its contents (except my address) being published. Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to being identified in this interview and in any subsequent publications or use. Yes ☐ No ☐

Name of interviewee (BLOCK CAPITALS):

.....

Address (BLOCK CAPITALS):

.....

.....

Signature Date

Feel free to contact us if you have any further questions.

Hemel at War

The Hemel Hempstead School
Heath Lane
Hemel Hempstead
HP1 1TX

Tel: 01442 390100

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Appendix 2: First World War biographies

Second Lieutenant Henry Balderson

Devonshire Regiment, attached 1/6 Gloucestershire Regiment

Killed in Action 23rd July 1916

Son of Robert Henry and Edith Balderson, of South Lea, Hemel Hempstead, Herts

Pozieres British Cemetery, Ovillers-La Boisselle: IV. G. 43

Henry Balderson enlisted as a part-time soldier, known as a Special Reservist, in 1911. He was then aged 18 and was training to be an accountant, working in Tower Hill in London. Being in the Special reserve meant attending training for as much as a month a year, at an army camp. It also meant joining the regular army as a full-time soldier if war broke out. So in August 1914, Balderson joined the 28th London Regiment, known as the Artists' Rifles. In little more than a month his officer potential had been recognised and he was transferred to the 8th Devonshire Regiment as a Second Lieutenant. Balderson's battalion was sent to France in July 1915, and he received a gun shot wound in action at Loos on 25th September 1915. As a result, Balderson was sent back to England. It was not until May 1916 that he was fit for service.

Balderson was sent back to France in late June 1916, and was soon transferred to the 1/6th Gloucestershire Regiment. When the battalion played its part in the battle of the Somme, at Ovillers, Balderson was reported missing on 23rd July 1916. The battalion attacked soon after midnight, and immediately faced very heavy German machine gun fire. Meanwhile, the Germans fired shells which made it difficult for the wounded to be brought back to British lines. The officer who wrote the battalion War Diary said, "The cause of the failure was in my opinion the lack of artillery preparation. None of the M.G.s [machine guns] ... had been knocked out and the enemy line had hardly been shelled at all."

When Balderson's mother received the notice of that she would have had no certainty over whether or not he was dead. A month later, 24th August, she received a telegram saying that her son was dead. In her efforts to try to find out more, she was told at one point by the 1/6th Gloucestershires that they did not have any record of him serving in the battalion. That can only have confused his mother who was waiting for news.

At the end of the war, as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission tried to establish where all graves were, Balderson's body was found to be near to Pozieres, but not with other British graves. So his body was moved to the Pozieres British Cemetery.

At the time of his death, Balderson's family had long been connected with St John's Church in Boxmoor. One of his grandfathers (also called Henry) had been Churchwarden there for fifty-two years from 1853 to 1905. So it was natural that his family would choose to commemorate him in some way in the Church, doing so through the provision of a window showing St George and St Alban.



Window at St John's, Boxmoor. The inscription reads: "TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND TO THE DEAR MEMORY OF HENRY LESLIE PAXTON BALDERSON KILLED IN ACTION JULY 23RD 1916 FROM HIS FATHER MOTHER AND SISTERS".

[Source: National Archive Kew, WO 95/2758, 1/6th Gloucestershire Regiment & WO 339/21495 File on H.L.P. Balderson; Boxmoor Parish Magazine, November 2010, pp. 25-7.]

Private 40312 William Barber

2nd Northamptonshire Regiment

Killed in Action 24th April 1918

Husband of Emily A. Barber, of 220, London Rd., Hemel Hempstead, Herts

Pozieres Memorial: Panels 54 to 56

Private William Edward Barber was killed at a stage of the war when the allies had just about held off a German advance which had, at one point, looked as if it might lead to a German victory. That was launched on 21st March 1918 and it was a month before the allies could truly claim to have stopped the Germans. However, even by 24th April, there was still heavy fighting on the front line.

There were two occasions that day when Private Barber could have been killed. The first, in the very early hours, was when his battalion was shelled with both gas and high explosives, while resting in a wood called the 'Bois de Blaney'. Several men were killed during this bombardment. Later in the day, at 9.15pm, the battalion was ordered to take part in an attack on German lines at Villers-Brettonneux. Two Australian battalions led the charge, with the 2nd Northamptonshires following behind. However, during the attack, the British and Australian soldiers became tangled in barbed wire (which had originally been set up by the allies). Before they found a gap in the line they suffered losses due to heavy German machine gun fire. Once free of the wire, Barber's battalion successfully gained some ground. It was dark by this time which might have helped them to advance, but the Germans fired flares into the sky and this enabled the German machine guns to pick out targets more easily.

Casualties were very heavy and the attack was called off. Even during the retreat, the 2nd Northamptonshires lost men to more German machine gun fire. Overnight, the men dug new shallow trenches to allow them to hide from the machine guns. A British tank joined the battle the next day and this helped to push the Germans back in some areas. [Source: National Archives, Kew, WO 95/1722]

Lieutenant Robert Masterman

19th Lancashire Fusiliers

Killed in Action 1st July 1916

Son of the late Henry Chauncy Masterman and Alice May Masterman, of Rough Down, Boxmoor, Herts
Thiepval Memorial: Pier and Face 3 C and 3 D.



(Photo courtesy of Harrow School Library)

Robert Chauncy Masterman was born on 23rd January 1896 and enlisted as a Private in the Bedfordshire Regiment about a month after war broke out. His personal records show that he was relatively tall for the time at just under six feet, with dark hair and brown eyes.

After initial training he was sent first to the regiment's 7th battalion, and then the 6th, both of which were in England. When he had enlisted he was still at school, preparing for university entrance, but he had served in his school's Officer Training Corps (OTC). His school was Harrow, the famous public school, which would have meant that he came from a wealthy family. His background and his time in the OTC meant that he was soon picked out as being a potential officer. During his training he applied for university, winning a scholarship to Hertford College, Oxford, which would have been taken up after the war.

On being made a Lieutenant he joined the 9th Royal Lancashire Fusiliers which left Liverpool aboard a ship on 5th July 1915, headed for the Gallipoli Peninsula on the coast of Turkey where Britain was fighting the Turkish army. The battalion arrived there on 6th August

1915. Conditions were very tough there, with many men falling ill, and after nearly two months Masterman's time at Gallipoli was cut short as he caught dysentery, which led to serious diarrhoea. He was sent back to England on 3rd October 1915 on a ship called the *Carisbrook Castle*. The sea voyage lasted just over three weeks. Masterman was in hospital in Oxford until January 1916 when he was fit enough to join another battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, the 19th, which had been in France for two months. [Source: National Archives, Kew, WO 339/14147 File on Lt. R.C. Masterman; Harrow School Magazine.]

On 1st July 1916, the 19th Lancashire Fusiliers were part of the advance on the Somme, in the area of Authuille Wood, close to Thiepval. When they arrived in the wood they heard from another battalion (1st Dorsets) which had been in an earlier stage of the attack, that British losses were heavy, but there was no question of turning back. As the battalion left the wood they came under heavy German machine gun fire. On reaching the first line of German trench taken by the British they found that it was so crowded with men who had tried to advance earlier that it could take no more soldiers. They sent a message back to the Brigade headquarters and were told simply to wait and not to send any more men forwards. Masterman had already been killed in this initial advance.

The battalion held its position until being sent back behind the lines for rest later in the evening of 1st July. Of the 20 officers and 577 men who had gone into battle in the morning, about half were casualties of whom two officers and 38 men were dead. The battalion war diary noted, "Throughout the operation the Battalion behaved with the greatest steadiness, and the advance was carried out without hesitation on the part of the men – in spite of the intense artillery and machine gun enfilade fire." [Source: National Archives, Kew, WO 95/2394, War Diary of 19th Lancashire Fusiliers.]

Masterman's Captain sent a letter home to his sister which said, "He was killed when leading his men to attack the enemy trenches. The ground we had to cross was swept by heavy machine gun fire and I am sorry to say that your brother was hit just before he got up to the enemy's wire. He led his men with great dash and was such a brave fellow. He had not been with us long, but during that short time he had become most popular with us all." [Source: Harrow School Magazine.]

Appendix 3: Second World War webpages/interviews



Ken Blake

Ken Blake: Summary version

Ken Blake served in the 4th Battalion of the Royal East Kent Regiment at Dunkirk. He told us how only one quarter of his battalion of 800 managed to get away. Later, he served in Malta, and was part of 234 Commando Brigade in North Africa. At one point, a ship he was on hit a mine. He said, "Hundreds of the lads were drowned but I had had a tip that there were lots of mines in the sea and it was safest to stay at the stern of the boat so I survived." Later in the war, he was a Prisoner of War in Germany and was very ill with tuberculosis.

Ken Blake: Longer version

Dunkirk

Ken Blake was in action from very early in the war, in France, as part of the 4th Battalion of the Royal East Kent Regiment. This was part of the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) which was sent as part of the effort to hold back the advancing German army. As the British army fought the Germans, it was eventually forced back to the beaches at Dunkirk. Here, they waited for ships to rescue them to take them back to England. But some soldiers had to defend those on the beaches. Ken Blake was one of those and says:

My squad was one of the last out of France. As the troops came into Dunkirk some were appointed to the defensive shield round the outer perimeter of Dunkirk and I was one of them. This was to allow the troops to escape from the beaches. When the signal came for us to leave it was too late to get on the boats and we were told to get out the best way we could. We decided to go up the coast and came across a Renault car. We managed to get it going and all piled in. We finally escaped from the port of Le Havre on the last destroyer leaving occupied France. Only a quarter out of the 800 in my battalion got away.

Malta

Having escaped from France, Ken Blake was sent to Malta. It was crucial for the Allies to hold this island as it helped them to control shipping in the Mediterranean. Ken Blake had a job servicing Spitfires and received the George Cross.

Aegean Islands

After serving in Malta, Ken became part of 234 Commando Brigade in North Africa. They had a target of capturing the Aegean Islands just off the coast of Turkey. Ken says that he was on HMS Eclipse on the way there when it hit a mine which blew up the front end of the ship. He remembers:

Hundreds of the lads were drowned but I had had a tip that there were lots of mines in the sea and it was safest to stay at the stern of the boat so I survived. I took my heavy clothing off, climbed onto the railings and managed to get hold of a cork life belt. There was a young fellow sitting on the railings and he was screaming. He'd been blinded by the blast and I could do nothing for him. That haunts me even today. In those circumstances the golden rule is every man for himself; so I jumped. I didn't realise it was 60 feet above the water. I hit the sea with a wallop. There were hundreds and hundreds of lads around me badly burned. The whole sea was on fire. I had a bit of common sense and realised I had to get out of there as quick as I could so I swam and swam for 5 hours and was finally picked up just as dawn was breaking. I was in hospital for a bit and then rejoined my own unit.

Prisoner of War (PoW)

When he was next in action, Ken was captured by the Germans and put on a ship headed for Athens with other PoWs. He eventually reached a prison camp in Leipzig. He describes this as a hard labour camp, which meant that prisoners had to carry out very hard work, often lifting or digging, with little food and rest. The work involved tasks that the Germans needed done to help their war effort. In such a situation, many men decided to try to escape. Ken decided to do this with four others. The men chose their moment carefully:

It was a terrible night and the German guards didn't like standing out in the pouring rain. We got under the wire and made a run for it. The objective was to make it to the American 8th Army at Gera which was south of Leipzig. We travelled only at night sleeping during the day. Half way, we lost one of the fellows. He was so ill we had to leave him. We were almost at the end of our tethers. We had no food and our clothes were in rags, but then we came to a road and saw an American tank. A couple of G.I.s [American soldiers] came racing out thinking we were Germans so we put our hands up and started shouting that we were British POWs. They took us in charge. I was in a terrible state. I had tuberculosis and weighed 3½stone. They were so kind to us. They moved us to another American base and I was flown straight back to England.

Ken took a long time to recover from his experiences. He says that it was only when he met a girl called Ruby, whom he married within three months of meeting her, that he was nursed back to full health.

Ken Blake: Transcript

Interviewed by Alex Brook.

"I was in the army for 8 years and 256 days.

"I joined the Territorial Army with 7 comrades on the 1st March 1938 because my local army barracks had a very good billiard table and bar. When war was declared me and my comrades were alarmed because we had joined up mainly to play billiards!

"In 1939 I was sent to France with the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) as part of the 4th Battalion of the Royal East Kent Regiment to hold back the advancing German forces. It was the first battalion to land in France. The battle raged through France until we came to the episode of Dunkirk. My squad was one of the last out of France. As the troops came into Dunkirk some were appointed to the defensive shield round the outer perimeter of Dunkirk and I was one of them. This was to allow the troops to escape from the beaches. When the signal came for us to leave it was too late to get on the boats and we were told to get out the best way we could. We decided to go up the coast and came across a Renault car. We managed to get it going and all piled in. We finally escaped from the port of Le Havre on the last destroyer leaving occupied France. Only a quarter out of the 800 in my battalion got away.

"When I came home there was no stopping. We were re-trained and re-equipped and were then sent to Malta where I was part of the defence of the island during the siege. If we had lost Malta we would have lost control of the whole of the Mediterranean. It was a wonderful combined effort by the navy, army and air force. I had a job servicing Spitfires. For my efforts during this campaign I received the Maltese George Cross. The George Cross is the highest medal in the land except for the Victoria Cross.

"The Battle of Malta was over and we moved on again to North Africa where, to my surprise, I became part of Sir Winston Churchill's 234 commando brigade. Our objective was to capture the Aegean Islands just off the coast of Turkey. I was on HMS Eclipse on the way to the Aegean Islands when it struck a mine and the front end of the ship was blown up. Hundreds of the lads were drowned but I had had a tip that there were lots of mines in the sea and it was safest to stay at the stern of the boat so I survived. I took my heavy clothing off, climbed onto the railings and managed to get hold of a cork life belt. There was a young fellow sitting on the railings and he was screaming. He'd been blinded by the blast and I could do nothing for him. That haunts me even today. In those circumstances the golden rule is every man for himself; so I jumped. I didn't realise it was 60 feet above the water. I hit the sea with a wallop. There were hundreds and hundreds of lads around me badly burned. The whole sea was on fire. I had a bit of common sense and realised I had

to get out of there as quick as I could so I swam and swam for 5 hours and was finally picked up just as dawn was breaking. I was in hospital for a bit and then rejoined my own unit.

"A powerful battle took place and I was captured by a German commando and put on a ship bound for Athens. From there we were loaded onto a cattle truck and transported right across Europe to Germany and a hard labour camp in Leipzig. On that journey, 3,000 of the lads died.

"I survived the labour camp right through to the end of the war. At this point myself and 4 of my comrades decided to escape. It was a terrible night and the German guards didn't like standing out in the pouring rain. We got under the wire and made a run for it. The objective was to make it to the American 8th Army at Gera which was south of Leipzig. We travelled only at night sleeping during the day. Half way, we lost one of the fellows. He was so ill we had to leave him. We were almost at the end of our tethers. We had no food and our clothes were in rags, but then we came to a road and saw an American tank. A couple of G.I.s came racing out thinking we were Germans so we put our hands up and started shouting that we were British POWs. They took us in charge. I was in a terrible state. I had tuberculosis and weighed 3½ stone. They were so kind to us. They moved us to another American base and I was flown straight back to England.

"On arrival in England I was placed immediately into an army hospital to recover. However I did not. My injuries and experiences, such as the labour camp, were severe and preventing a full recovery. So the doctors decided to take a sample from my lung to investigate why. When they did this they found diesel oil from the boat that sunk in the bottom of my lung! After intensive treatment I made a recovery back to full health. I had 8 years in hospital altogether.

"I was discharged from the forces in Dover Castle in Kent, and was given a pension of £2 a week to live on, so I came home but was still very ill. After a few days my mother suggested that I go and visit relations in London, so I did. I went and stayed with them for a few days and whilst I was there I met a girl called Ruby. Ruby worked in Sainsbury's and everybody knew her. Within 3 months of meeting her we were married. She cared for me and got me back to full health."

Lance Corporal Robert Duke

6th Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regiment

21st June 1944

Son of Charley Frederick and Annie Roberta Duke; husband of Joyce Ethel Duke, of Bushey Heath, Hertfordshire

Tilly-sur-Seulles War Cemetery, XI. B. 12



(Left) Bob Duke as a child (Right) and in his army uniform

Robert Duke: Summary version

Robert was known as Bob. He was born in 1923 and died in Normandy on 21st June 1944. His widow, Joyce, was interviewed by Zoe Farrell and Sophie Horwood in 2010. She remembered, "In no way did he want to go into the services. His father had had a very bad experience in the First World War and could not work after the age of 45 because of his wounds. But then there was the call up for the big push on D-Day and he was drafted into the Herts and Beds Regiment. He took his Latin and Italian books with him to continue his studies but they were soon returned home! We discovered that Bob had been transferred to the [6th battalion of the] Duke of Wellington's Regiment on 20th June 1944 on a draft of reinforcements. He travelled during the

night in a landing craft to France and at first light on the 21st the regiment suffered heavy casualties from enemy fire some distance away. He must have died at this point.... Instead of having that lovely boy, I have a medal. It was an absolute waste of a life. We had been married less than 6 months. It was also a very sad thing for his parents. Bob was an only child."

Robert Duke: Longer version

Robert Duke was known as Bob. He was born in 1923 and died in Normandy on 21st June 1944. His widow, Joyce, was interviewed by Zoe Farrell and Sophie Horwood in 2010.

At Hemel Hempstead Grammar School

Mrs Duke remembered:

Bob joined Hemel Hempstead Grammar School as a fee paying student [prior to Grammar Schools becoming free from 1944]. His parents wanted him to go to a co-ed school and most grammar schools at this time were single sex so he went to Hemel despite the fact that he lived in Bushey Heath. His father worked in the ticket office of Bushey and Oxhey station. He loved cycling so his main method of getting to school was by bicycle. He had grandparents in Kings Langley and sometimes stayed with them. Bob was a very gentle person. Everything about him was lovely and he was handsome as well! He had rosy cheeks, a fair complexion and dark, curly, unruly hair.

Mrs Duke continued:

He very much enjoyed his time at the school and stayed on an extra year because he did not matriculate (reach a required standard in 5 subjects) at the first attempt. However, when he left he continued his education and studied to be a surveyor.

Called up

Mrs Duke said:

His studies reserved him from call up for 3 years. In no way did he want to go into the services. His father had had a very bad experience in the First World War and could not work after the age of 45 because of his wounds. But then there was the call up for the big push on D-Day and he was drafted into the Herts

and Beds Regiment. He took his Latin and Italian books with him to continue his studies but they were soon returned home! He was bothered about his cycle being left at home and I was in charge of looking after it. I had to oil the gear chain and clean it so it would be alright for when he came back.

He very soon became a corporal and hoped to take a commission. He told us not to worry about him. The army badly wanted infantry men and they were faced with problems at the Falaise Gap in Normandy following the D-Day landings. Then letters home ceased and the War Office did not communicate or even know what was happening.

Death

Mrs Duke told us:

We were so lucky to find out what had happened to Bob through a school boy friend of his called Len Lee who went to Normandy in 1945 and discovered his grave. We would never have known otherwise. We kept writing to the War Office but they didn't know where he was.

We discovered that Bob had been transferred to the [6th battalion of the] Duke of Wellington's Regiment on 20th June 1944 on a draft of reinforcements. He travelled during the night in a landing craft to France and at first light on the 21st the regiment suffered heavy casualties from enemy fire some distance away. He must have died at this point. To be killed in such a way when he had just arrived seemed so inhuman and impersonal.

Sophie and Zoe carried out research at the National Archives in Kew and found the following entries in the War Diary for the 6th Duke of Wellington's Regiment:

20th June 1944 pm - First reinforcements arrive in strength of 10; 10 other ranks 180

21st June 5.35 - Heavy concentration of 21cm rocket projectiles in Battalion area.

a.m. Issues of equipment and arms began,

9.15 - Memorial service held in grounds of Chateau Bronay

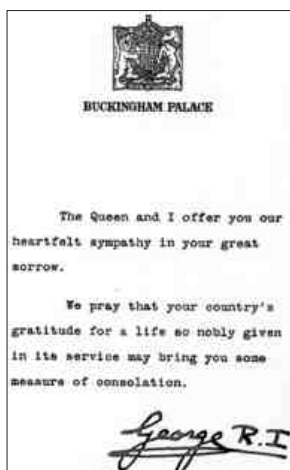
Robert probably died during the bombardment on 21st. However, his death is not recorded in the war diary and it is also possible that he died on this date from wounds gained during a previous attack.

Remembrance

Mrs Duke has visited her late husband's grave every year from 1945 until 2008 when she was not well enough to go. She told us:

Bob was put in a temporary cemetery in the woods in the grounds of a chateau at Brouay between Bayeux and Caen. When we received the telegram I knew it was wrong because he wasn't in the Duke of Wellington's so that gave us hope but then there was a letter from the King and Queen. Instead of having that lovely boy, I have a medal. It was an absolute waste of a life. We had been married less

than 6 months. It was also a very sad thing for his parents. Bob was an only child. In the early days after the war we visited the chateau and became friends with the Baron and Baroness The owners of the chateau said his grave could stay where it was if that was what we wanted and that would have been our choice but eventually the War Graves Commission insisted that he be moved to Tilly-sur-Seulles.



(Left) The letter Mrs Duke received from the King (Right) Bob's grave in the grounds of the chateau at Brouay, taken by his friend Len Lee in 1945. Bob's grave is the one on the left of the picture.



Hylda Maslen's WAAF Flight. Hylda is in the centre row, second from the left.

Hylda Maslen: Summary version

Hylda Maslen was a telephonist in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). She told us: "It was quite a big job. Actually, it was a very busy switchboard I was on, taking all these calls. It was very interesting. I didn't go overseas because you had to have permission to go overseas and I was underage. My parents wouldn't let me. My brother was out there and he said no. I chose the WAAFs because my brother Bill was in the RAF."

Hylda Maslen: Longer version

Hylda Maslen was a telephonist in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). She told us:

It was quite a big job. Actually, it was a very busy switchboard I was on, taking all these calls. It was very interesting. I didn't go overseas because you had to have permission to go overseas and I was underage. My parents wouldn't let me. My brother was out there and he said no. I chose the WAAFs because my brother Bill was in the RAF.

Hylda was 18 when she volunteered, and she did that rather than be called compulsorily. She said that she knew she "had to go in the forces or into munitions or something but I wanted to go in and get the job I wanted." Hylda has fond memories of camp life:

...the atmosphere was great there. You had some good times at the camp. We went to the cinema – it was good times really. Then the Americans came over and we had dances and invites when they let us out.

If there had been an invasion, it would have been important to make it as difficult for the Germans to maintain communications across the country. That would mean destroying the telephone systems. Hylda remembers:

We were threatened once that there would be an invasion. I was at the switchboard. We had to break all the machinery up and destroy everything. I thought, "What if I do that and it's a false alarm?" So I didn't. It was a bit scary.

Hylda Maslen: Transcript

Interviewed by Fiona Wright, Edward Gardiner and Sarah Kay at the British Legion, Hemel Hempstead November 2008.

Hylda - I was a telephonist in the WAAF*. It was quite a big job. Actually, it was a very busy switchboard I was on, taking all these calls. It was very interesting. I didn't go overseas because you had to have permission to go overseas and I was underage. My parents wouldn't let me. My brother was out there and he said no. I chose the WAAFs because my brother Bill was in the RAF. He became a flight lieutenant in the end.

* WAAF – Women's Auxiliary Air Force

Fiona - How old were you?

Hylde - I was 18 when I went in. I volunteered because I knew I had to go in the forces or into munitions or something but I wanted to go in and get the job I wanted. I was in 3 camps really. I was in Harrogate for my telephonist training and then I was sent to Melksham in Wiltshire where I met my husband Maurice.

Maurice - Yes, she used to pass along this path with this other girl and I used to look out of the window with a pint mug and say, "Bring us back some tea Taffy". And that's how it all started.

Hylde - Yes, they called me Taffy because I was Welsh.

Fiona - But at that point you weren't married?

Maurice - No, no! In fact it wasn't until I was on the troopship to India (it used to take a month to get to India from Liverpool in those days) that I thought I might not see her again so I wrote to my mother and we got engaged by proxy.

Hylde - I had an engagement ring on and everyone said, "how did you manage to get engaged?"

Marvellous!

Maurice - We were married in 1947. I was still in uniform.

Hylde - We did the same square - what we call square bashing** for 6 weeks, the same as the men you see.

We were in wooden billets. How many people were there in each one, Maurice, 8, 10?

Maurice - No. More than that; more like 30 - about 15 in each side - we had that in ours. You had it soft, didn't you? You used to get pyjamas. We didn't.

Hylde - We had sheets. You didn't.

Maurice - No, we didn't have sheets, we only had blankets.

Hylde - Everybody was so friendly and they'd do anything for anyone, it was great: the atmosphere was great there. You had some good times at the camp. We went to the cinema - it was good times really. Then the Americans came over and we had dances and invites when they let us out.

Maurice - You had a pass didn't you?

Hylde - Yes, it's to say you'd come in at a certain time.

Fiona - How long were you allowed out for?

Hylde - 23.59 at the latest and of course, if you were out and the police stopped you, you had to show your pass. The only time you'd get away with it was during an air raid. It was funny because on the RAF camp we were out in the country and of course there were no air-raid shelters out there because we weren't expecting it. The first time I went into one, it was when I came up to London for the weekend from my camp and I got in an air-raid shelter. It was the first time, with all this going on and it was the first time I'd been in an air-raid shelter.

One thing you did learn was discipline though, which was good. You couldn't, say, like they do at work now, take a "sicky". If you were sick you had to go on sick parade.

Hylde - Women were plotting the course taken by planes, which was a responsible job. I mean, they all had responsible jobs but they all needed one another, and as I say I was on the switchboard.

Fiona - So where was the switchboard that you worked on? Hylde - It was in the headquarters of the RAF in Melksham. Oh yes, it was a busy time and it was quite stressful. You could only do so long on there. One girl had a funny turn once. She pulled all the plugs out, and I had to go on and try and reconnect her. They were exciting times

Edward - When you were working there did you ever get anyone important ringing up? Anyone famous?

Hylde - If ever anyone rang you had to give a number. Like I'd say, "Melksham 321" and then she'd say, "Is that the RAF camp?" You'd say, "I'm sorry, it's Melksham 321". You didn't dare say it was the RAF camp because everything was high security. We'd field all sorts of important calls from Fighter Command or something, or we'd put him through on a hotline, which means it wouldn't go through any other kind of operator and we knew it was something important. And I had to ring the Royal Arthur once where Prince Philip was.

** square bashing - marching and learning to follow orders.

Hylde - We were threatened once that there would be an invasion. I was at the switchboard. We had to break all the machinery up and destroy everything. I thought, "What if I do that and it's a false alarm?" So I didn't. It was a bit scary. Then it (the war) stopped. It had been going on for 6 years and everybody went mad. No-one could believe it, that the war was over. They were bashing frying pans, banging and shouting – it was great.

Fiona – So was that VE Day?

Hylde – That was the first one, because of course, it still carried on.*** The next day it was back to normal as if nothing had happened.

Edward - I was just looking at your medals. What are they for?

Hylde - I've got the Veteran's Badge and the War Medal.

*** The war in the Far East continued until VJ Day in August 1945.

Flight Lieutenant Brian Slade DFC

Royal Air Force, 83 Squadron

Killed in Action 24th August 1943

Son of Horace Bernard and Emily Caroline Slade, of Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire

Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery Coll. grave 8. D. 22-27



(Left) Brian Slade at school (Right) Brian Slade's grave in Berlin

Brian Slade: Summary version

Brian Slade was a former pupil of Hemel Hempstead Grammar School who served as a pilot in the Royal Air Force. He trained at RAF Halton and was promoted quickly to become a Flight Commander in 83 Squadron. He was killed on his 59th operation when his Lancaster was hit by flak over Berlin on 24th August 1943. He was only 19 years old. He was remembered as a daring and outgoing person. There is a story, not confirmed, that on one occasion he flew a Wellington bomber in a tight, low circuit around the pointed spire of St Mary's church in Hemel Hempstead to say "hello" to his parents and sister who lived close-by.

Brian Slade: Longer version

Training

Brian Slade (full name Ivor Charles Brian Slade) was a pupil at Hemel Hempstead School when war broke out. A contemporary, D.R.S. Collier remembers, "Brian, not a big chap but a clever little footballer, sat his School Certificate examination in 1940 and that year, at the age of 16, left school. Immediately – without his parents' permission – falsified his age as being 18 and volunteered for flying duties with the Royal Air Force."

He became a pilot in the RAF. His first posting was at RAF Halton near Tring, where the pilots became known as "the Halton Brats". D.R.S. Collier remembered, "There is a story, not confirmed, that on one occasion he flew a Wellington bomber in a tight, low circuit around the pointed spire of St Mary's church in Hemel Hempstead to say "hello" to his parents and sister who lived close-by."

Brian Slade was a bright and intelligent young man and quickly gained promotion to become a Flight Commander in 83 Squadron, which was part of No 8 Group Pathfinder Force, based at Operation Wyton. The job of a pathfinder was to pinpoint targets and mark them with flares to indicate where bombers should drop their loads.

As a pilot

Peter Hodgson, an ex-pupil at Hemel Hempstead Grammar School knew Brian. He supplied the following information:

Some years ago Joan and I attended a local lecture on the Peenemünde raid [17/18 August 1943]. The first slide that came up showed Group Captain Searby and his two (un-named) flight commanders. We immediately recognized Brian as one of them. I also wrote to Walter Thompson who served with Brian and told him what I remembered of Brian from his school days. He replied that he did not know that Brian was a Halton 'brat' as the apprentices were known, but went on to say that that would have explained his closeness to Searby, also a 'brat'.

The following is an extract from the book *Lancaster to Berlin* (1985) by Walter R. Thompson DFC & Bar, where Thompson remembered:

Slade ... always sang the loudest, drank the most and told the funniest jokes on the nights out. I think too that he was loved by most of the WAAFs for he was another who refused to obey the non fraternisation rule.

He also wrote of a night out in Cambridge with Slade when they came across:

Clark Gable, a gunner with a nearby Fortress Squadron, with his foot up on a brass rail of a pub near King's Parade, his hat bent correctly at the peak and olive green trench coat turned up at the collar; we were impressed to find a movie star who actually flew on operations, he flew about 5 of them and of course was not alone.

Death

Brian Slade's was a most tragic death because he was killed on the 59th operation out of the 60 he had volunteered to do. He had undertaken a double tour of duty rather than the 30 flights that were the norm. His plane was hit by flack over Berlin on 24th August 1943 and exploded. James Moss from Hemel Hempstead School studied the operations book for Brian's squadron on microfilm at the National Archives in Kew in 2010. It shows that Brian was based at RAF Wyton and had only spent a few months with Lancaster "A". The record states simply that he took part in a bombing raid over Berlin and did not return. The planes involved in this raid began their flight at 20.21 hours and the last one to return arrived back at 3.27am.

Walter Thompson recalled in his book:

Brian was a good friend and I felt his loss keenly.... We called Brian "The Boy Slade" because he was our youngest pilot... It was probably Slade whom we saw hit as we entered Berlin because we saw an aircraft far to the north of us, coned in searchlights; it blew up in a shower of red Target Indicators. This, after the long flight across Germany, and after we reached the bomb - run I couldn't understand what this aircraft was doing so far north of track. He should have seen Brandenburg on his H2S [radar system used by the RAF], but perhaps it was not working. Slade, having once attacked Berlin on three engines, would have gone on without an H2S.

In his book, *The Berlin Raids* (1988), Martin Middlebrook wrote:

Another Pathfinder loss was Flight Lieutenant Brian Slade, DFC, a courageous young pilot known on 83 Squadron as "The Boy Slade", who had set himself the task of flying the "double Pathfinder tour" of 60 consecutive operations. He died flying his 59th, just starting his bombing run.

Jean Stevens

Jean Stevens: Summary version

Jean Stevens was Jean Baxter when she started at Hemel School in September 1939. She remembers the war bringing new pupils from across Europe:

There were many refugees from Austria, Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the school. One girl had long hair, despite the school rule that hair should not touch the collar of your blouse. She was gently asked to wear it shorter but she said that her father, who had been left behind in Germany wanted her to have long hair. She was allowed to keep it long but wear it tied back in a bow. The staff were very understanding and sympathetic.

Jean Stevens: Longer version

Jean Stevens was Jean Baxter when she started at Hemel School in September 1939. She remembers how the outbreak of war made an immediate impact on the school:

The start of school was postponed for 3 weeks that year whilst the girls' cycle sheds were made into an air raid shelter. Sticky tape was criss-crossed over the windows to prevent damage in case of a bomb blast. Parents were concerned that the school might be a target for bombing as the tower was painted white and stood out so it was painted grey. We had to carry a gas mask in a box and a box of rations in case we were kept at school for any length of time. Mine contained nuts, raisins and chocolate.

With many materials in great shortage during the war, school life could be affected in the most basic ways:

Paper was rationed and we had a rough book to do some of our work. We went through it with pencil first and then with ink. When it was full you had to take it to the school secretary who signed and stamped it before you could get another. If there was even a quarter page that was unused you had to take it back.

Jean Stevens also remembers new pupils from across Europe:

There were many refugees from Austria, Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the school. One girl had long hair, despite the school rule that hair should not touch the collar of your blouse. She was gently asked to wear it shorter but she said that her father, who had been left behind in Germany wanted her to have long hair. She was allowed to keep it long but wear it tied back in a bow. The staff were very understanding and sympathetic.

Jean Stevens: Transcript

Interviewed by Polly Taylor and Harriet Bullock.

Mrs Stevens first went to Hemel Hempstead Grammar School in September 1939 just as the war began.

"The start of school was postponed for 3 weeks that year whilst the girls' cycle sheds were made into an air raid shelter. Sticky tape was criss-crossed over the windows to prevent damage in case of a bomb blast. Parents were concerned that the school might be a target for bombing as the tower was painted white and stood out so it was painted grey. We had to carry a gas mask in a box and a box of rations in case we were kept at school for any length of time. Mine contained nuts, raisins and chocolate.

"Paper was rationed and we had a rough book to do some of our work. We went through it with pencil first and then with ink. When it was full you had to take it to the school secretary who signed and stamped it before you could get another. If there was even a quarter page that was unused you had to take it back.

"There were no after school activities because we had to get home before the blackout and air raids started.

"The number of pupils at the school increased due to the war. Many of these new children had suffered traumatic experiences and must have found it difficult to adjust to life in England.

"There were many refugees from Austria, Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the school. One girl had long hair, despite the school rule that hair should not touch the collar of your blouse. She was gently asked to wear it shorter but she said that her father, who had been left behind in Germany wanted her to have long hair. She was allowed to keep it long but wear it tied back in a bow. The staff were very understanding and sympathetic.

"Another refugee pupil, a boy from Poland irritated the French teacher by standing up, clicking his heels and bowing when she spoke to him. One day she snapped. "For goodness sake sit down boy". She was immediately remorseful when she realised that this was his way of showing respect and said to the rest of the class, "If you had half the good manners that he has you would get on much better". Many of these children remained in Britain after the war ended.

"St Ignatius College, a Roman Catholic Boys' School, was evacuated to Hemel Hempstead and had their lessons in our school. We did not see them during the day but did get to know some of them after school. They were billeted with local families and had their own teachers."

Some of the staff were also badly affected by the war.

"Our French teacher had friends in Paris and had lived there for a while. One day she said, "Would you take out a book, I'm sorry I can't teach you today. The Germans have just entered Paris". We had such feeling for her that we read in silence for 45 minutes."

Home life also changed.

"We had to be very careful with food because of rationing. We had a "pig club" in our road. We saved vegetable peelings and other waste food that was used to fatten a pig. When the pig was killed everyone got a share of the meat.

"Our road had a group of people responsible for fire watching. My mother did it and managed to read the whole of "Gone With The Wind" whilst doing it. The person on duty had a notebook, a stirrup pump, a bucket and a whistle. You signed the book to say that you had done your duty and transported the equipment to the next person on the rota.

We did not have an air raid shelter as my mother was terrified of spiders. At first we sat in the hall on deck chairs but after a while put mattresses downstairs on the floor in the best room* and slept there. We could hear the bombers overhead. I sometimes woke up and saw my mother sitting on the end of the bed just watching. Parents had a terrific responsibility".

Despite all the difficulties at school and at home Mrs Stevens feels that she had a happy childhood.

"I particularly remember that each classroom had a painting in it from a particular era and this helped you to learn a lot about art. In spite of all the problems we had a very good education. We were taught well and learned a lot."

* A room that was often better furnished than other rooms in the house and was used on special occasions.

Have you carried out research using the methods set out in the Hemel at War guide?

If so, we'd really like to hear from you about what you are doing and how it is going. In particular, we'd like to know if you have any suggestions for improving our Guide.

Please get in touch:

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