

Sittingbourne War Memorials Project

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1. Heritage Lottery Fund Ref. FW-14-04140
2. Kent County Council Members Grant
3. Swale Borough Council WW1 Grant
4. Sittingbourne Society
5. Sittingbourne Invicta Rotary Club
6. Donations from members of the public

Non - Financial Project Funders

1. The Forum Shopping Centre
2. Sittingbourne Heritage Museum

1. Background:

- 1.1 Since 2012 the Historical Research Group of Sittingbourne (HRGS) spearheaded 'The Sittingbourne War Memorials Project' which was a research project to coincide with the centenary of World War One (WW1), aiming to investigate the names on the memorials to educate the local community. This project is still ongoing.
- 1.2 In 2014 HRGS applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund – 'Then and Now' funding scheme for £5,200 in order to help purchase an Interactive Touch-Screen on which to display the information from their research and to engage with the local community with regards to the impact of WW1.
- 1.3 The project has engaged with the community in various ways, which ranged from holding research sessions; conducting roadshows; holding talks; engaging with local schools; holding of commemorative events and linking into the arts and culture sectors.
- 1.4 In January 2015, HRGS were invited to take over a retail unit in the Forum shopping centre in Sittingbourne, as an exhibition space to display our historical and archaeological research which including our WW1 project. This is supplied free of rent and rates, and free to the community to visit. Funding for electricity, insurance and other costs are covered by the sale of local history books.

2 Output and engagement

- 2.1 The Sittingbourne War Memorials project started with Sittingbourne and Milton Regis, and grew **to cover 45 towns and villages across the whole of Swale**. These being: Bapchild, Bobbing, Borden, Boughton under Blean, Bredgar, Davington, Doddington, Dunkirk, Eastchurch, Eastling, Faversham, Frinsted, Goodnestone, Graveney, Hartlip, Hernhill, Iwade, Leaveland, Leysdown, Lower Halstow, Luddenham, Lynsted, Milstead, Milton Regis, Minster, Murston, Newington, Newnham, Norton Ash, Oare, Ospringe, Otterden, Queenborough, Rainham, Rodmersham, Selling, Sheerness, Sheldwich, Sittingbourne, Stalisfield, Teynham, Throwley, Tonge, Tunstall, Upchurch.
- 2.2 The project has attracted over **132 volunteer researchers** from across the Borough of Swale and further afield, and includes a variety of demographics. Only **43** of whom were or are, members of HRGS...it was in effect open to all who had an interest in studying WW1 locally.
- 2.3 The project started with identifying the various local memorials and recording the names on them, which we then researched. This has resulted **in 783 photos of memorials** now being available for all researchers and public to use. We have held **over 105 community research sessions**, each of which lasted for 2 hours, and an unrecorded amount of one-to-one sessions with individual researchers and relatives who called into the exhibition for information and training. **1418 newspaper** articles have been identified, logged transcribed and photographed. Over **8822 lines of data** have been collated, and **312** photographs of local fallen soldiers have been identified.

- 2.4 Many of the men researched had left the United Kingdom prior to the outbreak of WW1 and went to live in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and even the United States of America. They had then gone on to fight during the war and had died. Much of our research involved contacting those relatives and carrying out interviews. This necessitated our researchers utilising the services of archives from those countries.
- 2.5 The Imperial War Museum First World War Centenary Partnership proved to be a very useful tool for the group to refer to for photographs and preparing presentations.
- 2.6 This information was consolidated, from which over **3000 PowerPoint biographies** have been produced, which are accessible to view by the public on an Inter-Active touch-screen. This has been on display in the Heritage Hub in the Forum shopping centre in Sittingbourne.
- 2.7 The Heritage Hub exhibition and research room is run entirely **by volunteers who work as stewards five days a week – Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 4pm, 51 weeks a year**. Since opening in January 2015, the Heritage Hub has attracted **26,000 visitors**. To give some idea of the level of commitment made by our volunteers to the project, our conservative records reveal that during the project over **38,000 hours** have been provided by our volunteers specifically for WW1 centenary research and events.
- 2.8 More than **156 relatives** of the fallen from, locally, nationally and internationally have contacted us, many of whom have also visited the Heritage Hub. All those who visit have been extremely impressed that their relatives' story has been remembered and told. We have even been able to put long lost relatives in contact with each other.
- 2.9 A full-size (5 metres long by 2 metres tall model of a trench was obtained from Rochester Guildhall Museum who were about to dispose of it following their exhibition on WW1 in January 2015. This full-size model was made from a timber frame covered in plaster of Paris which had painted and depicted a life size side of a trench. It was a valuable addition to our WW1 display. We were also given a 2-metre-tall model of the Cenotaph, which we display periodically. They had initially been produced by students from the University for the Creative Arts in Rochester, Kent as part of their degree course. The trench has now been loaned to the Swingate Primary School in Lordswood, Chatham since November 2018 for a WW1 project that is ongoing at the school.
- 2.10 Over the 4 years of providing an exhibition, HRGS has had **15 WW1 themed window displays** in the Heritage Hub, including The Princess Irene explosion, the Battle of Jutland, the Battles of The Somme and Passchendaele. This on a daily basis attracts 30-40 people who stop to read the information displayed. We estimate this has reached over **50,000** members of the public.
- 2.11 The project has been instrumental in **assisting in the publication of 11 WW1 related books**: Bredhurst War Memorials, Borden at War, Newington Remembers,

Wartime Heroes of Borden Grammar School, A Town at War, Swale Remembered, Faversham in the Great War, Abide with Me (Lower Halstow), They Shall Grow Not Old (Lynstead), Swale War Memorials and A Child's War (Diary of Lilian Bellingham).

- 2.12 At least a further 3 books are being produced for publication: Peace Day 1919 Replica Newspaper, The Avenue of Remembrance - Sittingbourne, Crimes during WW1, together with a DVD – 'Swale's War - Faces and Stories from WW1', which will tell the stories of some of those researched. This will include the air cadets and other local young people narrating the stories of the fallen told in the first person.
- 2.13 Each November HRGS has assisted the Sittingbourne Retail and Business Association, by providing the names to enable a WW1 poster listing the fallen for Sittingbourne and the surrounding parishes, each centenary year for local display in retail premises around the town. This enabled local people to see the names of their relatives, showing that their community still cared about that loss, some of names are not listed on any memorials.
- 2.14 Throughout the centenary each month a list of that month's anniversary fallen was displayed on the HRGS website and in the exhibition window; additionally, the Sittingbourne and Milton men's stories, some with photos, were told in detail via our monthly magazine – The Archive.
- 2.15 Three members of the HRGS project team were selected to attend a Peace Conference in Arras France as the Swale contingent, with the Diocese of Canterbury for the International Peace Conference in April 2018 called 'Faites La Paix'.
<http://hrgs.co.uk/news/arras-peace-event/>
- 2.16 HRGS organised **9 WW1 themed** educational talks for Swale Borough Council as part of their education programme which were well attended. Respected WW1 speakers were engaged to fill the programme - Oct 2017 to Nov 2018. Additionally, HRGS has organised a further **4 WW1** themed talks throughout the centenary.
- 2.17 For each man's name where a photo was available, a story of his life and death was written in the first person, printed as an A4 poster, and displayed in two spare units in the shopping centre in Sittingbourne. This attracted more shares than any other event we have undertaken. These windows were photographed and added to our Facebook page and have been shared 57 times and caused a lot of interest by visitors and shoppers alike.
- 2.18 Richard Emmett attended quarterly meetings with Swale Borough Council Steering Group, to be a heritage representative from 2013 to November 2018. During this time, he recommended the VC commemoration stone for Donald Dean, commemorative benches and new poppy Avenue of Remembrance signs.
- 2.19 HRGS was instrumental in organising several events in Sittingbourne and on the Isle of Sheppey in conjunction with other local volunteer heritage partners and arts groups. The local authority supported the holding of community events by the award of small financial grants for the following events:–

- 2.20 **2016 - The Somme 100 (Whistle Stop at 7:30am and then 'Hope - Courage and Catastrophe' at 7:30pm)** – held in Sittingbourne. It is estimated that there were 250 people attended the morning event and about 300 for the evening event. Sittingbourne's morning event featured as a clip in a report by BBC Southeast television lunchtime broadcast on 1st July. The You Tube production by Sittingbourne.ME - <https://www.facebook.com/sittingbourneme/videos/1230094607022833/UzpfSTU4NTq4NjIzNzpWSzoXMDE1NDQ1MTc1NDMyOTQ3NA/> had 5320 views.
- 2.21 **2016 - The Ambulance Train Event**, held on the Isle of Sheppey and in Sittingbourne. It is estimated that there were 500 people that attended the event with a You Tube production - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH9A5Upodb4> – views unknown via YouTube. The Ambulance Train was a full day event and was organised in conjunction with Southeastern Rail, Kent Community Rail Partnerships. 21 community arts and heritage groups were involved which included young people, who were encouraged to role play casualties and dress up as WW1 soldiers whilst a singing group played the part of VAD nurses. This was to raise the awareness of the role played by the railways and ambulance trains in moving casualties during WW1. This event was awarded first place in the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) Community Engagement category in 2017.
- 2.22 **2017 - Passchendaele 100** – held in Sittingbourne. Approximately 300 attended: <https://brfm.net/swale-commemorates-battle-passchendaele/> This was a service of remembrance working with the Royal British Legion, and the 76 names of all those who died from around Sittingbourne.
- 2.23 **2018 - RAF 100** – held on the Isle of Sheppey at the site of the original RAF Eastchurch. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVgBJcniRDk> Approximately 500 people attended, commemorating the formation of the Royal Air Force.
- 2.24 **2018** - Additionally, the group designed and produced the **Wall of Reflection** (6 metres long x 2 metres tall) displaying **1149** fallen names from the area around Sittingbourne. The Wall of Reflection originally displayed in the atrium of the Forum shopping centre unveiled in November 2018 and is now displayed inside the Heritage Hub for posterity.
- 2.25 **2019** – In June and in conjunction with Armed Forces Day in Sittingbourne, the group will be organising a 'Peace Day Parade' to commemorate the signing of the Peace Treaty bringing about the end of WW1 100 years ago. This event will be supported by the Diocese of Canterbury and members of the local community.
- 2.26 Each of these events involved young people from the scouting movement and the cadet forces. For example, at The Somme 100 event, young people were encouraged to blow whistles at 7:30am as would have been sounded at the battle field. One young lad dressed in WW1 uniform dribbled a football which symbolised the role played by the 8th Battalion the East Surrey Regiment. Ex-service organisations also took part. Later that evening a very moving service was held to mark the end of the day. Where a visual montage was projected onto the War Memorial wall depicting images of individuals and aspects of the battle that had been prepared by local artist/photographer Karen Crosby. This created a very powerful and moving collage of images of the local fallen men superimposed on the buildings they had once lived in or visited. This proved so powerful and poignant, HRGS was requested to show this again indoors, which we were pleased to do, to mark the end of the Battle of the Somme. This has also been added to the touchscreen in the exhibition.

- 2.27 Funding for this six-year project totalled £18,025.51 so far, of which the Heritage Lottery Fund provided £5,200. Compare this to the number of hours (36,539) that have been matched with volunteer time, this would be less than 47 pence an hour. But the pride in the towns and all the surrounding villages is immeasurable!
- 2.28 Other research areas undertaken by HRGS and Sittingbourne War Memorials project included 20th century conflict archaeology in the recording of WW1 'Defence Lines' along the Stockbury valley, the role played by the Ministry of Munitions Salvage Depot at Ridham Dock, and the graffiti by WW1 soldiers still visible at Rodmersham.
- 2.29 Cadets from 2230 Squadron Air Training Corps participated in three research sessions at the Heritage Hub and were taught genealogical research techniques.
- 2.30 HRGS interacted with local schools with regarding WW1 topics including – Newington Primary School, Regis Manor Primary School, Minterne Primary School, South Avenue Primary School (after school club) and Meadowfields.
- 2.31 The HRGS project team members also found time to appear on BBC Southeast TV; Kent Messenger TV and have a monthly slot on Sittingbourne FM radio. In addition, we wrote articles for the local newspapers – Sittingbourne News Extra and Kent Messenger.
- 2.32 Four men who have been researched have required that we contact the Commonwealth War Grave Commission (CWGC), where details have been found to be missing or incorrect. Examples of these are Alec Grigg, where the record has now been updated to record that he was only 14 years old and a new headstone commissioned. Another man named John Rye a Distinguished Conduct Medal winner at the First Battle of Ypres has no CWGC record nor headstone...this matter is still outstanding and will be overseen until rectified.
- 2.33 Many of the churches that have been visited, or have been involved, or have seen the work the project has undertaken, have requested a file of the names researched for each church parish. Six files have been completed so far, and six in progress, with more planned.

3 Summary

- 3.1 The Sittingbourne War Memorials project certainly became the flagship project of HRGS throughout the centenary of WW1 whilst still maintaining other research areas and archaeology activities.
- 3.2 Receiving the grant from the 'Then and Now' lottery funds certainly was the genesis for the whole Sittingbourne War Memorials project. The 'project team' became so involved with their various aspects of the research that they did not wish to stop after one year. So, whilst the duration of the HLF funded project was for just one year, it soon became obvious that there was more interest in the local WW1 stories and more to be researched and told.

- 3.3 In terms of measuring public engagement and awareness, we can only cite the 26,000 recorded visitors to the Heritage Hub and only estimate that many thousands we have personally met with and those who have seen our events and articles in the newspapers and on TV. And additionally, the thousands who have seen their community remembered via social media and our website. What is difficult to evidence is the huge amount of good will and pride that our WW1 project has produced both locally and dare I say, globally.
- 3.4 Working with other partners has shown that collaboration produces a more inclusive event...with something for everybody. Whilst the public has a thirst for information which can be provided by research societies, having the performing arts aids to visually broadcast the message. Hence the tremendous success of The Somme 100 and Ambulance Train events.
- 3.5 HRGS has recorded many thousands of hours spent on the research of this project and names researched some of which are not commemorated locally on any parish memorials and are therefore completely new...but all have a local connection.
- 3.6 Funding for this six year project totalled £18,025.51 so far, of which the heritage lottery fund provided £5,200. Compare this to the number of hours (38,539) that have been matched with volunteer time, would be 22 years of one's working life. (38,539 divide by 7 hours = 5,506 working days, which is 1,101 working weeks, which equals 22 years (allowing for a 50 working week year). This shows the commitment and pride in the towns and all the surrounding villages, which is immeasurable!
- 3.7 I am very proud to have led this project...and of the work undertaken by the project team. We are grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund and the other funders for supporting our splendid worthwhile project...much has been achieved in terms of understanding the impact that WW1 had locally but also the social history of the local area 100 years ago. Our work continues....

Appendices

Just a few of the comments recorded in our visitor's book relating to our WW1 exhibition from January 2015 – to date.

No.	Name	Location	Comment
1.	Lauryn aged 10	No location given	I think the information was interesting WW1
2.	J M	London	Fantastic project! Trench looks amazing and so does the touch screen.
3.	N & T S	Milton Regis	Very interesting and got us interested in family history and WW1.
4.	GC	Sittingbourne	A young lad fascinated by WW1 display of trench (written by parent)
5.	C H	Accrington	Excellent project, very informative. The touch screen is a wonderful idea to get younger children involved. My daughter who is eight really enjoyed herself learning about WW1. Thank you!!
6.	J F	Herne Bay	A great project – promoting interest in family descendants particularly and the touch screen being a great asset.
7.	R E	Sittingbourne	Brilliant, especially touch screen.
8.	N M	Bromley	Great photographs of WW1. Love the touch screen.
9.	M & R K	ME9	We thank you for the WW1 exhibition and for the local knowledge that you show us on your doorstep.
10.	D R	Trowbridge	Very interesting display of 1 st World War history.
11.	N L	Sheerness	Theresa was most helpful and enlightening as to how to find out more, will rummage around and try to find out about my Great Grandad, Oliver.
12.	K T	Ashford	Excellent!