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Museum of Liverpool – Reflecting on the First World War

The Challenges of “Talking War” in a Non-military Museum

Abstract This paper will look at how the Museum of Liverpool’s interpretation of the themes and stories of Liverpool and the First World War has reflected our ethos of being an inclusive museum, accessible for all.

Through exhibitions, projects and collaborative activities, we have investigated locally-based “untold” stories on subjects such as patriotism, women’s rights, BAME communities, political activism, fundraising and loss. We have engaged in local community collaborations on projects, activities and displays. We have worked on regional events with external partners and we have engaged in media-based activities, reaching considerably wider audiences. The paper will highlight the challenges and triumphs from our four-year rolling programme.

Keywords Liverpool; war; social history; community; access

About us

National Museums Liverpool (NML) is a group of museums and galleries based in Merseyside. The focus of each museum within the group differs, covering subjects as varied as Egyptology, maritime history, international slavery, creatures, costume and pre-Raphaelite paintings. Our remit is to appeal to local, national and international audiences of all ages and backgrounds. Entry into each of our buildings is free, but we do charge for some of our offer, such as temporary exhibitions and staffed school sessions.

As an organisation, we have committed to the following values which are at the core of all of our displays and activities:

1. We are an inclusive and democratic museum service. We aim to maximise social impact and educational benefit for all – museums change lives.
2. Museums are fundamentally educational in purpose.
3. Museums are places for ideas and dialogue that use collections to inspire people; we do not avoid contemporary issues or controversy.
4. Museums help promote good citizenship and act as agents of social change: NML believes in the concept of, and campaigns for, social justice.
5. We believe in sustainable development, and we have a role to play in the conservation and protection of the built and natural environment.
6. We believe in innovation to keep our public offer fresh and challenging, while behaving ethically, and working with partners who support our values.

Museum of Liverpool

Opened in 2011, the Museum of Liverpool (MoL) is our newest venue and tells the story of Liverpool and the surrounding region. The historical timeline for our displays starts with the formation of the local landscape and comes up to the present day. The majority of the visitors to our venue are

from the North West region of England and many are families visiting multiple times. At the time of writing, our offer is completely free.

The Museum of Liverpool is 8000 square feet (743m²) of public space divided into five permanent galleries, and several smaller temporary exhibition and display areas. We also have multi-purpose education and event spaces. Our permanent galleries also contain areas where we change out temporary displays. Where possible, our displays will offer a range of cased and open display objects (there approximately 7000 items in the building at the moment), graphic-based information, audio-visual footage and tactile material.

I was part of the team that began developing content for the Museum long before it was built. We knew that there were many key local stories that needed to be told which would provide the main narrative of Liverpool and the surrounding area. But we knew there were also numerous stories and aspects of the area that we needed to include which would highlight Liverpool's unique and quirky identity, and we wanted local people to have a say in what those would be. Over a period of around four years we consulted with more than 10,000 people, asking for their opinions on the content that we had already devised, but also asking them to contribute additional content or suggest topics they wanted to see. We met with groups at history fairs; we attended local music and sporting events; and we gave talks at church halls, in schools and in other museums. We invited groups to be stakeholders, including school teachers, parents, trade unionists, faith leaders, refugees and LGBT+ and access groups. All of their opinions were relevant and helped us to choose not only the displays that we installed for the day we opened, but also to create a list of future displays that could be swapped-in over time to refresh our offer.

The new museum had to be accessible to all and fully representative of our local population. We regularly carry out visitor profiling and review visitor feedback to ensure that we continue to maintain that representation.

Our First World War “rolling programme”

The Museum of Liverpool opened in 2011 with a First World War offer included. *From Waterfront to Western Front* comes under our temporary exhibition package, but is long-term “temporary” as the plan was for it to remain in place until at least 2019. At the moment there are no plans to change it out and it remains a popular exhibit. The basis of the exhibition is to tell

the First World War story of the local King's (Liverpool) Regiment, which expanded to one of the biggest city regiments in the UK during the 1914–1919 period.¹

The King's Regiment Collection is loaned to NML from the Regimental Trust on a long-term contract. As we are committed to representing their story, the collection is generally the focus of the military displays we stage in the museum. The layout of the *From Waterfront to Western Front* exhibition is broadly chronological, but also divided into themes of mobilisation, service on the Western Front, letters home and returning soldiers.

Although pleased with the display, I felt that of all of the exhibitions I had curated as part of the content development for the new museum, this one was farthest from our “core” values. The difficulty for me was that the Regimental story for the First World War is one of white middle class or working class males. We managed to include female stories through the letters home. In a city that, at the outbreak of the War, had one of the most diverse populations in the UK and a tradition of strong women bonding families together, where would I tell my “other” stories that didn't fit here?

The following summer I began working on a rolling programme of temporary displays and events for the commemoration period. I wanted to look at some of the First World War themes that were frequently being told in the wider media, but to look beyond the main story and focus on the untold stories behind. We decided our main offer would be an exhibition, *First World War: Reflecting on Liverpool's Home Front*, that divided into themes and would be re-used (fig. 1, p. 49). Each time it was re-displayed it would reflect on local perspectives of the key stories, but it would be accompanied by an “in focus” display that looked at one of the themes in more detail. Themes included female emancipation; a patriotic society; a lost generation; and a country pulling together in the War. Our “in-focus” sections looked at the flip-side of the themes: women who didn't always enjoy a new-found freedom and struggled to cope with the independence and separation that was

1 See the following publications for further reading on the history of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment in the First World War: Giblin, H. et al. (2000) *Bravest of Hearts, the Biography of a Battalion, the Liverpool Scottish in the Great War*. Liverpool: Winordie Publications; Maddocks, G. (1993) *The Liverpool Pals: a History of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th (Service) Battalions. The King's (Liverpool Regiment) 1914–1919*. 2nd ed. London: Pen & Sword Books Ltd; Wyrall, E. (1935) *The History of the King's Regiment (Liverpool), 1914–1919* (3 vols). London: Edward Arnold & Co.



Fig. 1: The Quarless Family attending the opening of the *First World War: Reflecting on Liverpool's Home Front* exhibition. They are pictured in front of their family story. ©Museum of Liverpool, 2014

thrust upon them. Or how the national rush to enlist was reflected in city where 67,000 men attended review boards in an attempt to avoid service. We also looked at the concept of a country joining together to defeat the enemy, when in our region the press was reporting about striking workers, women defrauding the system and local businesses who were profiting from the War Effort.²

2 See for example: Aughton, P. (2008) *Liverpool: a People's History*. Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing; Liverpool's Part in the War (series of articles). *The Liverpool Courier*, 1919–1920. McGreal, S. (2014) *Liverpool in the Great War*. London: Pen & Sword Military; Smith, H.L. (1998) *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1866–1928*. Harlow: Longman.

Individual projects

Top of my list was an investigation into the diversity of Liverpool at the time of the war. The city had a Black population that spanned ten generations dating back to the early nineteenth century. It also had the oldest settled Chinese community in Europe. By 1914, 3000 BAME people were living in the city, mainly in an area just south of the city centre. In the most part, their stories had not been documented.³

Our first “in-focus” was called *Untold Stories: Black Families in the First World War*. In the decade prior to 2012, there had been an attempt nationally to address the history of British Colonial troops and I was aware of projects in the Midlands and around the south of England. In addition, specific stories such as those of the Indian and Sikh troops who served were reasonably well known. Up to this point, there was virtually nothing documenting the lives of British-born or domiciled Black soldiers.

I joined with local historian Dr Ray Costello, and with the help of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Heritage Fund) we launched our project in 2013. We asked local people who thought their families might have had a presence in the city in the First World War to come forward, and we offered to help them with their family history research. Initially this was a generic BAME project and the aim was to gather material for our collections. As the project progressed, it became apparent that the local Chinese community were not engaging with the project at all and that the members of the Black community we were working with were not ready to give up their family mementoes.

In fact, the project did not see people rushing to us to tell their stories at all; rather there was a slow trickle of people who made contact. The project began to evolve to fit the people we were engaging with. We decided to focus on the network of Black families who had a footprint in the south end of the city during the War, and who in most cases were still living in the same area. Speaking to one family would lead us to more contacts and so on, and

3 Key texts on this subject include: Costello, R. (2001) *Black Liverpool: the Early History of Britain's Oldest Black Community, 1730–1918*. Liverpool: Picton; May, R. and Cohen, R. (1974) The Interaction Between Race and Colonialism: a Case Study of the Liverpool Race Riots of 1919. *Race and Class* 16(2), pp. 111–126.

so the aim of the project changed organically. Over time we decided the most important thing was to tell the stories, both through an exhibition in the museum and through a publication authored by Dr Costello, and just get the stories out there.⁴

In the end we were able to produce an exhibition that told multiple family stories and was so popular that the run was extended from eight months to over a year. We hosted creative writing workshops and further family history workshops. Although similar projects have since addressed the subject, the Museum of Liverpool was the first to tell the story of Black British families in the First World War. Because of this, interest in the subject continued after the exhibition closed in 2015 and families were asked to participate in other cultural events both in the city and nationally – the last at the time of writing was the commemoration concert at the Royal Albert Hall for the 2018 Armistice anniversary.

After our *Untold Stories* project was launched, the museum then worked with a number of small groups to support projects, often not based around a museum display. These included a choral concert, a walking tour of the city connected to the Tower of London Poppy display and several conferences – sometimes in collaboration, sometimes by just providing information, but always with the city and the surrounding region at the core of the content.

In 2015 our next temporary exhibition in the rolling programme turned to the story of women and conflict. Our timeline was rooted in the First World War, but came up to present day. We looked at 30 women from around the world who had a connection to conflict. We included women who served in war zones, women who lost loved ones, refugees and anti-war campaigners. Of course we have to make a connection to Liverpool, and our most contemporary stories were the mother of the first soldier to die in Afghanistan with the local regiment and a Colonel who had completed two tours of duty with the local medical unit.

In the summer of 2016 we brought the *First World War: Reflecting on Liverpool's Home Front* exhibition back again. This time the focus was on

4 For details of the exhibition, see website: www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/mol/exhibitions/first-world-war-untold-stories [Accessed: 11 September 2019]. Publication details: Costello, R. (2015) *Black Tommies: British Soldiers of African Descent in the First World War*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.



Fig. 2: Cadets and veterans from the *Memories Lost* project discussing their House of Memories dementia suitcase. ©Museum of Liverpool, 2017

“Memories Lost”, and the project divided into three parts. The first part of the project was the exhibition, examining the aftermath of trauma and loss – specifically the charities that developed on Merseyside around the time of the First World War and still had a footprint there today. In each case we made a connection between the charity and local people who were involved in the First World War period, but we also worked with each charity to tell the stories of people working there, and the people they support, in 2016.

The second part of the project was an Armed Forces thread of an existing programme based at the Museum of Liverpool called *House of Memories*. This is a museum-led dementia awareness programme which offers training, access to resources and museum-based activities to enable carers to provide person-centred care for people living with dementia. The Armed Forces strand of the programme is a useful tool for connecting with veterans and their families, and is particularly relevant in the North West of the UK where we have a large ex-Services population (fig. 2).

The third part of the project was a cross-generational oral history collecting programme. We trained and supported teenage cadets in interviewing veterans and recording their stories. The veterans were connected to local veteran support charities, and in many cases had experienced difficulties in their lives after service. Being aware of this, we included training in mental health first aid and had PTSD counsellors on site for each of the events. We also ensured that we had staff trained in safeguarding awareness present at each interview. We collected 18 oral histories, covering topics such as addiction, PTSD, boy soldiers and female service. The legacy of the project was the Armed Forces House of Memories strand which is now permanently included in our offer. It means that a veteran's carer can participate in a training day at the Museum of Liverpool and gain skills in managing a veteran's dementia. They can use the museum as a giant memory box, with access to our memory tours, or they can lend, free of charge, a memory suitcase packed full of Armed Forces memorabilia that could help them to re-connect to the person for whom they are caring.⁵

Also in 2016 we staged a display looking at the role of the Catholic, Liverpool Irish community during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. This involved looking at the 50 to 70 people who travelled from Liverpool to Ireland to fight against the British during the First World War period. In a city where religious tension still exists between some of the Catholic and Protestant communities, it was a contentious subject for us to cover, but one that we felt needed to be told.⁶

5 This is an ongoing programme, the details of which can be accessed at <http://houseofmemories.co.uk>.

6 Key texts on this general subject include: Foy, M.T. and Barton, B. (1999) *The Easter Rising*. Cheltenham: The History Press; for a more local insight, see Belchem, J. (2007) *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: the History of the Liverpool-Irish, 1800-1939*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press; Quiery, G. (2017) *In Hardship and Hope: A History of the Liverpool Irish*. Surrey: G&K Publishing.

Representing these hidden histories as an exhibition or a display was not always an option. With a busy exhibition and display schedule that is currently booked up to 2021–22 we often had to find creative responses to people or groups who wanted to tell their First World War story in the museum. Often when approached to put on an exhibition, the outcome has actually been an event or a digital response. Sometimes we have acted as advisors, such as in the case of our three Royal de Luxe Giant events. Sometimes we have contributed content for off-site activities, and in the case of local cultural partners, provided support and introductions to our ever growing network of “friends”.

An example of a partner who came to us with a plan for an exhibition, but instead ended up working with us on a series of events, was the Meridian Society. Their plan was to tell the story of the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) in connection to the British participation in the First World War. Liverpool was a prime location as there are five CLC graves in the city. Unfortunately, we could not host an exhibition in the museum which would coincide with the society's commemoration activities, so instead we offered the activity space in our venue. We were able to stage a private civic reception and film showing, and then provide the same offer as part of our public programme. As with all of the projects we work on, this also involved activity on social media sites, and interaction with mainstream press and media.

In conclusion

As one of the largest cultural organisations based in Merseyside, we knew that we were expected to take the lead and be at the centre of First World War commemorations and activities in the region. As curator of the local regiment's collection, a considerable amount of my time over the last five years has been spent, and continues to be spent, on the commemoration of the lost and wounded men of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment. However that is only one aspect of my role, and as a curator based in a city history museum I was always going to investigate the Home Front stories too. Maintaining the right balance of stories to accurately reflect the local population, and appeal to all of our visitors, while also maintaining relationships with our cultural partners was an immensely difficult balancing act. Ultimately, along the way there were groups and individuals who we did not manage to represent. Indeed there were groups who specifically came to us with a project or a plan

that we just could not implement within the restrictions of our time and resources. In the end we just had to do the best we could.

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