

## The Great War in Worcester and Birmingham

The first flush of Great War commemorations is finally drawing to a close. There will be more to come, of course, when Ypres and the Somme and Passchendaele reach their respective centenaries, but for the time being the lights on the exhibition cases are going out.

I've visited a hatful of shows across the Midlands over the past six months, from those that examine the role of a particular family in the war (at Shugborough and Dudmaston) to ones which chart the impact of the conflict on a particular locality. The latter was done especially well at Bromyard.

One last hoorah, then, to draw attention to a couple of recommended exhibitions, one at Worcester Museum & Art Gallery, and the other at the Library of Birmingham. Birmingham and Worcestershire could easily be seen as chalk and cheese in this regard. One supplied mostly military hardware for the Front, while the other was chiefly a producer of food and livestock for home consumption.

Yet both had their human resources to offer as well; young men and women ready to take their place on both the Western and the Home Front. And, however eye-watering the statistics of the dead and wounded, and of those re-directed to war work, it is the individual stories that reach out most forcefully.

Take Arthur Mountain, for example, a private in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment. Arthur's was surely one of the worst of jobs of all those who crawled through the Flanders mud. He was a wire-cutter, sent out in advance of an offensive to cut a path through the mesh.

The enemy usually knew he was there, and a hail of bullets whizzed by each time he lifted his head. At least those who later piled over the top had the camaraderie of numbers; the wire-cutter was on his own. And the enemy usually got him in the end. Arthur Mountain's own thread was cut at Gallipoli in April 1915.

Cutting through metal could have a very different outcome. Close to the account of Arthur Mountain in the Worcester exhibition stands a most surprising piece of metal-ware. Not a shell or a Lee Enfield, but an old oil can, welded and cut to form a cello.

This remarkably mellifluous instrument (there's a recording of it playing) was the work of Reginald Paul Quelch, fashioned in one of those interminable lulls in the action. And, unlike Arthur, Reginald and his trench cello survived the war. He went on to work for the GWR and died ripe into his nineties at Pershore.

What strange and exotic souvenirs the trenches sometimes threw up. Joe Irwin was a private in the machine gun section of the 1 / 6<sup>th</sup> South Staffordshires. Letters he sent back from the Front to his sisters Gert and Olive (in Wolverhampton and Sparkhill) are displayed in the Library of Birmingham exhibition.

In May 1915 Olive opened one of Joe's letters to find a most unexpected inclusion. The letter had a postscript, explaining "a little forget-me-not from out of the front line. They grew in a garden of a farm right by the trenches we are in." And to Gert he sent a pansy, a symbol of loving thoughts. Unlike in the song, not all the flowers have gone.

And, when the war ended, Joe returned home.

Not all sisters were so lucky. At Worcester there is a painting of two young girls in their white dresses, about to play a game of badminton. Painted in 1908, it speaks volumes of a world soon to be torn asunder, the lost summer of Edwardian England. The picture is by the Herefordshire artist, Brian Hatton, who regularly drew and painted the two girls. Brian was 27 years old when he joined the Worcestershire Yeomanry, and already well on his way to a career as a professional artist. Although portrait painting was his bread and butter, it is Hatton's studies of rural life and of the Herefordshire gypsies which stand out.

In the war Hatton served with the Yeomanry in Egypt, a country he already knew well. Back in 1908 - the same year he had painted Ailsa and Marjorie Hatton playing - Brian had accompanied an archaeological expedition there, led by Flinders Petrie. And it was in Egypt, on Easter Sunday 1916, that Brian Hatton's promising career came to a premature end.

No doubt the Hatton family received one of those field service postcards, similar to the one displayed in the Library of Birmingham, sent by Howard Harrison to his wife back in Acocks Green. The words on the card were already printed; all the soldier had to do was delete those which were not applicable.

I am quite well / I have been admitted into hospital / sick / wounded / and am going on well / and hope to be discharged soon / I am being sent down to the base / I have received your letter / telegram / parcel / letter follows at the first opportunity /  
Howard

Howard was a private in the Machine Gun Corps.

The same day the card was sent - September 2 1918 - Howard Harrison was killed in action. He is buried in the British cemetery at Vis-en-arts, south-east of Arras.