

Immediately after the First World War the then British Government announced a programme called Homes Fit For Heroes, which later became the 1919 (Sailors and Soldiers) Land Act. It was designed to help those returning troops, many physically and mentally scarred by the horrors of the trenches, to settle back into civilian life. Schemes were developed the length and breadth of the UK.

Today Heritage Lottery Fund is providing Bellanaleck Local History Group with a £10,000 grant to unravel the forgotten story of how and why a group of these ex-soldiers came to be re-housed on an island in County Fermanagh, with no bridge to the mainland, and no gas, electricity, shops or other utilities.

Each of the 12 veterans was allocated 30 to 40 acres and a house, and left to survive off the land. Of these 12, only one lived out his days there and his son and daughter are the sole inhabitants of the island. The stone built houses, lie abandoned and decaying, the only remaining evidence of this extraordinary resettlement scheme. So who were these troops, why were they allocated homes in such a remote place? What was life like on the island? Why did almost all of them leave, and where did they go to?

Marion Maxwell of Bellanaleck Local History Group is determined to find out. She said: “Cleenish is a remarkable, beautiful and mysterious island. We are delighted to have got this funding, so that we can, once and for all, capture the story of what happened there, and record something of the lives of the ex soldiers who set out to create new lives for themselves in such a remote and beautiful place. ”

Yesterday Marion visited the island and went to see Bella and Sammy Balfour, aged 79 and 84 who still live there to ask them about their memories of their father Johnny, who was the last of the veterans to stay on the island. Island life did Johnny no harm whatsoever – he died aged 102.

Paul Mullan, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland, added: “We have funded many projects relating to the First World War, as we mark its centenary. This is one is intriguing and fascinating. We’re really looking forward to finding out what Marion and her team uncover."