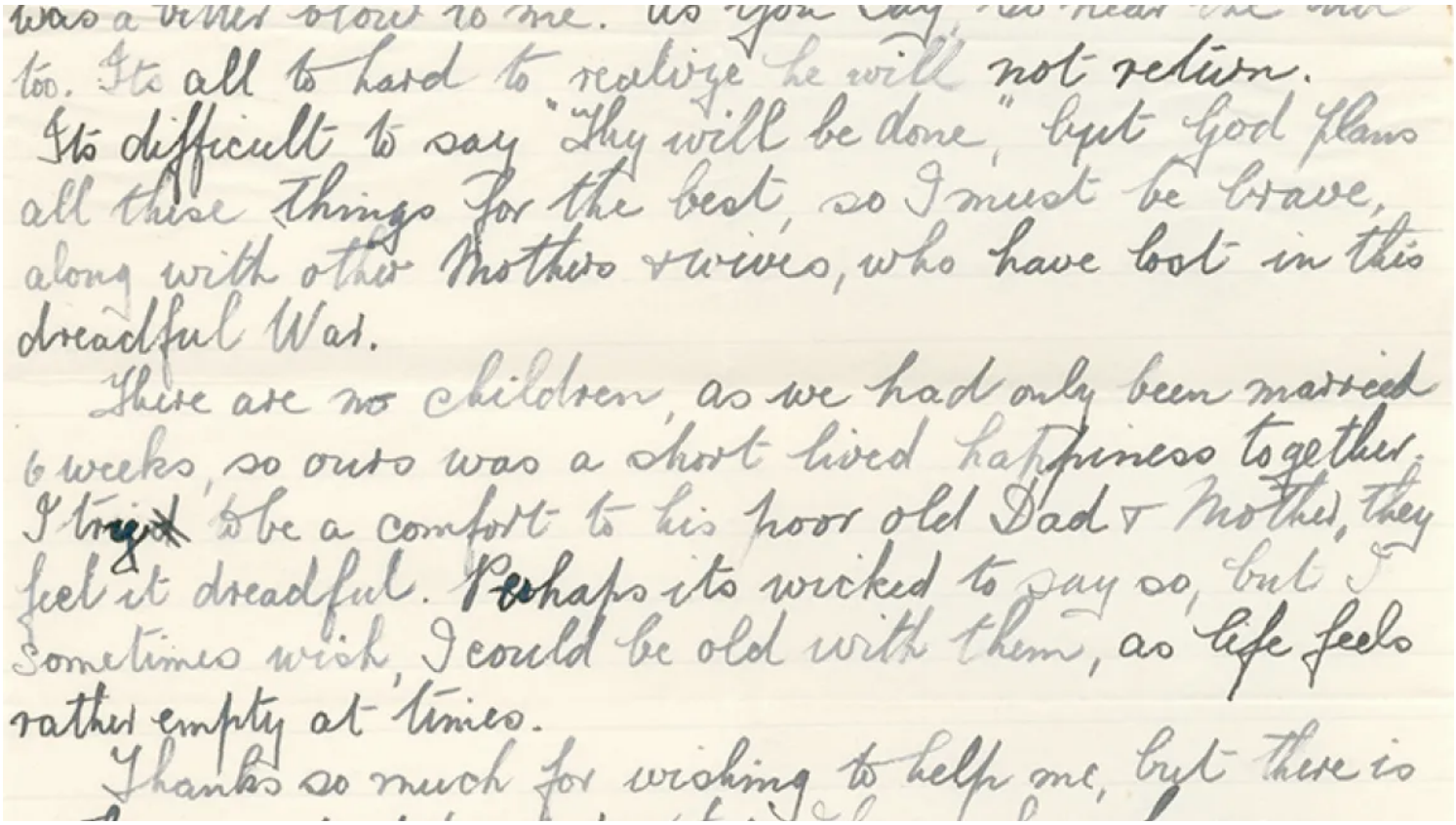

was a bitter blow to me. As you say
too. Its all to hard to realize he will not return.
Its difficult to say "Thy will be done" but God plans
all these things for the best, so I must be brave,
along with other Mothers & wives, who have lost in this
dreadful War.
There are no children, as we had only been married
6 weeks, so ours was a short lived happiness together.
I tried to be a comfort to his poor old Dad & Mother, they
feel it dreadful. Perhaps its wicked to say so, but I
sometimes wish, I could be old with them, as life feels
rather empty at times.
Thanks so much for wishing to help me, but there is

Letter from Bessie Walker, York Teesside Archives

Led by Teesside University with a grant of £9,700 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the project will make the letters available online and uncover the stories of the women who penned them.

Found at Ormesby Hall, Middlesbrough by volunteers, the 120 letters from women across the UK were written to Mrs Mary Pennyman, whose husband's family had lived at the hall for nearly 400 years. As Secretary of the King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB) Widows and Orphan Fund, 26 year-old Mary was tasked with writing to the mothers and wives of the men who lost their lives while serving with the regiment in battles including the Somme and Gallipoli.

As well as offering financial and practical advice, Mary, whose own husband was fighting in the war, offered the women comfort and the chance to speak about their sons and husbands.

From a woman who lost her husband of only six weeks to the parents whose three sons died on the Western Front, the letters she received in return serve as a stark and very personal insight into the loss they experienced and the struggles they were faced with.

First World War Minster, Tracey Crouch, said: "Mrs Pennyman's collection of letters to bereaved women are a poignant reminder of the heartbreaking challenges faced by the women and families left behind during the First World War. Unearthing tragic but inspiring stories of strength and unity, these letters will preserve the legacy of these extraordinary women who sacrificed so much. I'm thrilled HLF grants are being used to support projects like this."

Dr Roisín Higgins, Senior Lecturer in History at Teesside University is leading the project, she said: “The letters to Mary Pennyman provide a window into the thoughts and feelings of women who would otherwise remain unnoticed by history. Researching the lives of the women who wrote them is a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon the cost of war and to build a picture of the challenges faced at the time and the strength it took to survive. Many commemorative projects focus on the dead but this one will focus on those who had to live on.”

Ivor Crowther, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund North East, said: “The Pennyman letters are an extraordinary discovery and provide an incredibly personal insight into the ultimate cost of the First World War. They convey a huge sense of loss, often jarring with practical concerns about pensions and the price of provisions – but this was the stark reality the writers faced. We also get a glimpse into the strength of the human character and the places the women turned to for comfort – their faith, their pride in their loved ones, even the advice of a kind stranger. Their stories deserve to be heard.”

The letters are currently housed at Teesside Archives but the three-year project will create an online platform so people can see the letters first hand and discover the stories behind them. A team of volunteers and two interns will gain valuable training and the opportunity to build skills as they help to catalogue, annotate and transcribe the letters as well as research the lives of the women who wrote them. A series of talks and exhibitions will also be held throughout the project.

Letter excerpts

- “It’s difficult to say ‘Thy will be done’ but God plans all these things for the best, so I must be brave, along with other mothers and wives who have also lost in this dreadful war.” Bessie Walker, York, 1918
- “There is only one thing that comforts me. That is he died for his country.” Myna Thompson, Shipley
- The war doesn’t seem to get any nearer the end, does it? If only it were, tho to be candid & I know it is selfish, I’m not quite so anxious as I was previous to our brother’s death. You’ll understand this won’t you. We shall have no one coming home.” Ada Thornton, Sheffield, 1917
- “Charlie was my third and last son to give his life for his country.” Helen Rhoddon, Roxburgh, 1916
- “I have two children both girls one 3 years and the other 1 year & six months. I am quite able to work but my children being so young prevents me from doing so. I have a struggle to make ends meet and I don’t know what it will be when I go on the Widow’s Pension as you know provisions are such a terrible price.” Mrs Agnes Ritchie, Edinburgh
- “I had a very nice letter from France from the Chaplain of the KOSB telling me he was at my son’s funeral in the British Cemetery at the back of the lines which is a great comfort to know that someone see him laid to rest.” Eggie Watters, Belfast, 1918
- “I think you are quite splendid in the way you face your trouble. I cannot say how I admire you for it. I feel sure you will be rewarded by becoming much happier than those who give way under their trouble.” Letter from Mrs Pennyman to Myna Thompson

Further information

For further information contact Rebecca Lamm, HLF press office, 020 7591 6245 or email: Rebecca.Lamm@hlf.org.uk.