First World War Home Front volunteers archive to



Among famous names included in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) indexes are author Agatha Christie, novelist and poet Naomi Mitchison and writer and feminist Vera Brittain.

This treasure trove, some 244,000 VAD paper index cards held by the British Red Cross, will now be digitised to create a free and publically available online archive, in time for this year's First World War centenary commemorations.

In keeping with the theme the British Red Cross will recruit 100 volunteers to work on the digitisation project. The indexes are currently stored in boxes in the organisation's headquarters in the City of London and are only publicly available at limited times. It can take weeks for staff to sift through the delicate records to answer any inquiry.

VADs were organised on a county basis allocating people to carry out a variety of wartime support roles from 1914 to 1918. These included nurses, ambulance drivers or seamstresses who sewed clothing and blankets. Their personal details, tasks and hours of work were all recorded on the index cards which form a valuable resource for studying the contribution and changing roles of women during the period.

Among the organisations at the time who provided work for the volunteers were the British Red Cross, the Order of St. John and the Friends Ambulance Association, set up by Quakers. The database and website created by the project will feature in a new history curriculum at Kingston University which will be providing training for the volunteers helping to

digitise the index cards.

Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, Sue Bowers, said: “The VAD indexes are a largely untapped source of information about the significant contribution made by women in particular to the Home Front. It is quite incredible that these records have survived in their original form for a century but now the information they contain can be saved to the benefit of historians, academics and people tracing family histories.”

Phil Talbot, Director of Communications for the British Red Cross, said: “We are delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund is generously supporting the digitisation of the personnel records of First World War volunteers which form one part of our internationally important archive. Whether they worked in auxiliary hospitals, convalescent homes or drove ambulances, all of our VADs played a vital humanitarian role during the war and their index cards provide a unique source of historical information.

"The database and website created by this project will be the first freely available resource for research into the civilian contribution to the Great War. As we approach the centenary, we believe this is a fitting way to commemorate and pay tribute to those who gave their time in non-military service."

Helen Grant, Minister for the First World War Centenary, said: “These records are both extremely valuable as a unique archive of the work done by nearly a quarter of a million volunteers during the war, but they are also incredibly fragile. So this grant is really important as a way of preserving forever records of what these wonderful people – mostly women, of course – did in vital support roles while the conflict took place. Thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund, a great deal of remarkable information about a sometimes forgotten part of the war story will be available for anyone and everyone to study forever.”

Notes to editors

Heritage Lottery Fund has already supported £36m of First World War related projects from across the United Kingdom and will continue to support as many applications as we can afford that want to commemorate the centenary. Follow us on Twitter @heritagelottery, #understandingWW1.

On 4 August 2014 it will be 100 years since Britain entered the First World War. Within government the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is leading plans to build a commemoration fitting of this significant milestone in world history. As the Prime Minister made clear when he launched the programme in October 2012, the main theme will be remembrance with a particular focus on bringing the centenary alive for young people. There will be a number of national events across the four years, as well as cross-Government programmes to help deliver this. Further details can be found at the First World War Centenary website; #WW1.

Further information

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