

The new Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum

The project, 'Oxfordshire Remembers 1914-18', consists of a range of exciting and engaging exhibitions and outreach programmes, combining SOFO’s previously unseen military heritage collections with a unique series of community projects and events.

The exhibitions will present SOFO's First World War collections to the people of Oxfordshire and beyond during the First World War Centenary commemorations 2014-18. The exhibitions will enable visitors to learn about the part played by individual soldiers, their communities and to understand the roles played by local units in the conflict.

The content and presentation of the exhibitions is informed by recent focus group research with audiences to ensure that displays are relevant, evocative and exciting for visitors, particularly children and families. Exhibits emphasise personal stories, powerful imagery and a distinctive selection of artefacts and incorporate a diverse range of interactive activities to engage for new and established audiences.

The projects and events will enable people from different backgrounds and age groups to participate in, and learn about their local military heritage: a First World War object collection day for the Woodstock community; a touring display created by Sikh students and museum workshops for families, are just some examples. New volunteers are supporting the development of research, outreach and exhibition activities.

Commenting on the award, Ian Inshaw Chairman of SOFO, said: "The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust are delighted that they are going to be able to commemorate the part played by the Soldiers of Oxfordshire in the First World War, in a special exhibition at their Museum later this year. This has been made possible by the grant generously given to the Trust by the Heritage Lottery Fund. I am sure that this will allow the Trust to tell the story and pay due homage to the sacrifice made by soldiers from Oxfordshire in the Great War, so that we may enjoy the freedoms that we do today. Soldiers of Oxfordshire are most grateful for the grant from the Fund. The exhibition is to cover the period from 1914 to 1918 and will be open to the public from August 2014."

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East, said: “The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum tells the important stories of local men and women who have been involved in or affected by numerous conflicts over hundreds of years. By vastly improving the displays, exhibitions and learning activities, the museum will be able to bring these moving stories to life for local people and visitors for many years to come. In the run-up to the centenary of the First World War, we at the HLF are particularly proud to be supporting projects like this one that will help to highlight for both young and old the great sacrifices made by the people of Oxfordshire in the first global conflict of the twentieth century."

The SOFO collection is unique to the county. Although the regiments themselves have been absorbed into larger regimental groups, family connections with many of the soldiers who served in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and the Oxfordshire Yeomanry persist. The number of people in the county with memories of and personal connections to conflict, both past and current, is huge. The heritage is important as a resource with which to increase people’s understanding of the nature of military conflict, and its effect on individuals both on the front and at home, with specific relevance to the local area. We are about to enter a new exciting phase as the construction of our new museum nears completion, with its opening expected in the summer of 2014.

Notes to editors

About the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum
The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust (SOFO) museum has been built in the grounds of the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock and will promote greater awareness of the history of conflict as it has affected the people of Oxfordshire through the ages.

It holds, protects and provides (currently limited) public access to the collections of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and the Queen’s Own Oxfordshire Hussars, who counted Sir Winston Churchill as an enthusiastic and influential member, and a growing collection of donated objects, oral history and photographs. These collections contain over 3,500 objects and 7,500 archive items. The regimental collections date back to the late 18th Century and reflect the local regiments’ involvement in major conflicts such as the War of American Independence, the Peninsula War, the Boer Wars, the Great War and World War II, together with less well known events such as the New Zealand war of 1864 and the Brunei emergency in the 1960s. They comprise weapons, equipment, clothing, flags, musical instruments and regimental silver as well as extensive personal memories, diaries, letters and photographs.

SOFO was founded by the Oxfordshire regiments and the Oxford University Officer Training Corps after a period of instability in the 1990s, when items from the regimental collections were disposed of or lost. The aims were threefold: to prevent further loss or dispersion of the collections; to conserve them; and above all to make the collections accessible to the public. We have been managing the museum collections since the Slade Park Barracks were demolished in 2008 and forced the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry museum to close. SOFO has since had to move them to different locations around the county whilst the mission to find a permanent home has continued.

The breadth of the collections allows us to present and contribute to a wide range of historical themes through targeted learning opportunities for new audiences and joint projects with other organisations such as the Oxfordshire Museums Service. Education is therefore one of our main activities, both in formal and informal settings.

Through the heritage we learn about people who have been affected by conflict in their own town or village, those who have served in countries around the world and those who have stayed at home supporting the war or campaigning for peace. It helps us to understand those who came to the county whilst serving at British or US air stations, or as prisoners of war, refugees or evacuees. The heritage is testament to those who served in the past and those who are currently involved in military operations, but is also a resource with which to increase people's understanding of conflict, the moral and ethical issues involved, and its effect on individuals, seen through the unique lens of the county.

Opportunities to interpret the collections in temporary exhibitions at the Oxfordshire Museum have proven successful. Increasingly they are proving SOFO's ability to engage with a variety of audiences through participation and outreach activities linked to the heritage.

Further information

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