When duty called for Kiplin Hall

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Over the past months curator Dawn Webster has been preparing for a new exhibition, Duty Calls: Kiplin Hall in Times of War. Dawn has been moving things around the house and from out of store, which explains the ‘franking machine’ sword. "I was working on the Civil War period and remembered that there were some old swords in our large walk-in safe. One turned out to date to the 17th century and I put it down temporarily in front of the franking machine en route to cleaning and display in the exhibition!"

It has also been an opportunity to make some new discoveries about items in Kiplin’s collections. "Whilst working on research for the exhibition, I looked more closely at some of the military items we have at Kiplin, including portraits of family members. We have a number of paintings and photographs of Reginald Talbot, brother of Kiplin’s late 19th-century owner, Admiral Carpenter, in military dress. When I zoomed into the scanned images of Reginald to examine what he was wearing and holding, I saw the resemblance to a cavalry sword and a helmet of the 1st Life Guards which have been on display for some of the 12 years I have been at Kiplin, but without identification. Reginald served in the Zulu and Egyptian wars of the 1880s and the sword and the helmet were definitely his! Two more of Kiplin’s mysteries have been solved, which means I can put more detail into the records of these items in our inventory."

The Heritage Lottery funded exhibition, which opens on Good Friday, 26 March at 2pm, looks at the involvement of Kiplin, its owners and the local community when duty called. The 400-year old hall has links to the 17th-century Civil War through to the 1939-1945 Second World War, when the house was requisitioned by the RAF and used as a maintenance unit, storing and supplying bombs and ammunition to the local airfields – Croft, Middleton-St-George, Catterick and probably Scorton. Each of the airfields, the brave men who flew from them, and the women who worked tirelessly to support them, are represented in the exhibition. The period is brought to life through the recorded memories of local people who are witnesses to times spent in the shadow of the airfields during the war. Visitors will hear these in the Second World War Kitchen, part of one of the flats created for RAF officers in the hall which still survives today.

Kiplin Hall has also been a place of refuge from war. Some years after the victory at Trafalgar and Nelson’s death on board H.M.S. Victory, Dr. Alexander Scott, Nelson’s chaplain and friend, became Vicar of Catterick. He enjoyed the friendship of Kiplin’s owners, Lord and Lady Tyrconnel, and spent many hours reading in their 19th-century Gothic drawing room. Dr. Scott was present when Nelson died and the scenes of battle aboard Victory are described in Nelson’s Spy – the Life of Alexander Scott: "He [Scott] rushed up the companion ladder – now slippery with gore – the scene above was all noise, confusion and smoke – but he had hardly time to breathe there, when Lord Nelson himself fell…"; Scott gave Nelson’s library chair from Victory to the Tyrconnels and it is on display in the library at Kiplin today.

In the Second World War, Kiplin’s Library and Long Gallery provided a place of recovery for men from the 1st Battalion of the East Lancashire Regiment, who had been rescued from the beaches at Dunkirk. After Dunkirk, a regiment was given a rendezvous at the house; all day and all night straggling and exhausted men arrived. The owner did everything that was possible in the way of collecting food, blankets and cushions and by three the next afternoon every floor was covered with men sleeping as if dead. It was a sight never to be forgotten with the hot sun streaming in at the windows on to the pictures, old furniture, the walls of books and the floor a silent carpet of prostrate khaki figures. With the help of a little gardening, bathing in the river and sleeping these Dunkirk men gradually recovered from their weariness and mended their shattered nerves.

For people like the son of Kiplin's Head Gardener, Nathan Fawell, also called Nathan, there would be no return to the peace of the hall and its grounds, tranquilly sited close to the River Swale. He was born at Kiplin but died in France in April 1918, aged 33, and his name is recorded on the war memorials in Scorton village hall and at Arras. Or for Geoffrey Talbot, brother of Kiplin's last owner, Bridget Talbot, who was killed when his wooden and canvas aircraft was caught in a gust of wind and crashed when he was taking off from Dover on a sortie to France. Fortunately, many men who went off to war did survive, but lesser battles closer to home also had their casualties on both sides. Two of the local militia volunteers died when the hall's owner, Christopher Crowe the Younger, led them against rioting pitmen who were protesting at Hexham in 1761. 38 pitmen were also killed.

Many personal stories from these 300 years of conflicts are told through the Duty Calls exhibition, which opens at Kiplin Hall when the house re-opens on Good Friday at 2pm. The house and exhibition are then open Easter Saturday, and Sunday – Wednesday, from Easter Sunday until 30 October. The gardens and tea room are open from 10am – 5pm and the hall from 2 until 5pm.

Kiplin Hall received a grant of £42,500 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which has enabled staff and volunteers to undertake the 2-year project, which includes archival research, the exhibition and much needed conservation of the Second World War kitchen and bathroom, relics of the RAF's occupation of the Hall from December 1942 to December 1944. War-related events will be held this year and in 2014, including Trafalgar Day, a wartime afternoon tea and an evening of 40s music with Leyburn Brass Band.

Fiona Spiers, Head of HLF Yorkshire and the Humber, said: "The stories of war penetrate through all parts of society and country houses and their estates can be seen as a microcosm of what was happening within the country as a whole. The Duty Calls exhibition will open up a new perspective of Kiplin Hall, providing an opportunity for visitors to connect with the Hall on a different and often quite emotive level."

Notes to editors

Duty Calls: Kiplin Hall in Times of War from Civil War to Second World War is part of a series of exhibitions and activities exploring the impact of war on the country house and its communities, on show throughout Yorkshire in 2013 and 2014. Duty Calls is a Yorkshire Country House Partnership project.

Further information

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