York Oral History Society wins Heritage Lottery Fund support

24/08/2012

In the 1970s, acclaimed York historian Dr Alf Peacock recorded interviews with 231 people who experienced the First World War. The diverse recordings are with veterans of all ranks from privates to lieutenant colonels in the army, and cover many battles such as the Somme, Ypres, Loos and Arras.

They describe training, action in battle, being wounded and hospitalised, punishments for deserters, mentioning acts of great bravery and courage but also moments of brutality. There are stories of desertion, self inflicted wounds, the famous truce of Christmas 1914, the Friends Ambulance Unit and mutinies.

There are also interviews with women on the home front and with conscientious objectors. Many of the interviewees are from Yorkshire but there are a number from other parts of the country. There are some marvellous storytellers, and Dr Peacock describes the interviews as ‘moving…absorbing…touching…colourful…sometimes harrowing’ accounts of war.

This collection of 250 hours of recordings, believed to be the only one of its kind outside London, is to be made public for the first time. Beginning in July 2012, the society will digitise and transcribe the recordings and produce a book and CD. A programme of activities will take place from late next year with schools and other groups, culminating in a commemoration event in 2014 to mark the centenary of the war.

Fiona Spiers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Yorkshire and the Humber, said: “With the forthcoming commemorations of the First World War, the York Oral History Society ‘Voices of the First World War’ project will open up this fascinating collection of stories in time to mark these important anniversaries. It will help share ordinary people’s stories and hopefully engender a deeper understanding of the legacy of war.”

York Oral History Society was founded in 1982 to record and preserve the memories of York people and to create a sound archive for posterity. Previous projects have included oral histories of popular music in York and Terry’s chocolate factory. For this project the society will be recruiting and training volunteers to help with transcribing, specialised research, administration and running activities. Anyone wishing to get involved is welcome to contact yorkoralhistorysociety@live.co.uk.

Commenting on the award, Mike Race, Chairman of York Oral History Society, said: “We are thrilled to have received the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and look forward to sharing this wonderful resource with the people of York.”

Further information

Contact Mike Race, Chairman of York Oral History Society, on 01904 639 703 or mikerace@byron.fslife.co.uk.