First World War soldiers' stories from railway



Soldiers leaving by train from Peterborough

These documents and the stories of the men within them will be transcribed and researched over the next three years, and the information gleaned will be released a hundred years to the day after each soldier passed through the city.

Within the Archive Collections cared for by Vivacity are two visitor's books from the tea stall which was run by the Women's United Total Abstinence Council on Peterborough East Railway station during 1916 and 1917. These were filled in by soldiers from across the country passing through on their way to the front or home on leave. The books will be digitised, transcribed and researched using a team of volunteers from the local community, who will receive training in research skills. The information gained will then be released on a new website which will explore the wider story of the First World War in Peterborough.

The story of each serviceman who wrote in the books will be researched, and the results released a century to the day after they wrote in them via a website, social media, and by screens at selected sites in Peterborough city centre. The research will then be brought together for a final exhibition to be held at Peterborough Museum in the spring of 2018. The project will have other elements including special events, a touring display and the development of associated materials and sessions for schools.

Richard Hunt, Vivacity's Archives Manager, said of the visitor's books: "These slim volumes are a unique snapshot of servicemen passing through Peterborough during two years of the Great War, highlighting the city's importance as a railway hub in this period. The men who were waiting for their refreshments wrote little messages, poems, cartoons, even smutty comments about the ladies serving them their tea! Because they were travelling to or from the front these men came from right across the country, meaning these documents have significance well beyond this city".

Stuart Orme, Vivacity's Heritage Events and Programmes Manager, added: "We're extremely grateful to HLF for agreeing to support this project, not only to help us research and reveal the very human stories behind the men concerned, but to then help us release this information in such a poignant way, using the latest technology, a hundred years to the day that they passed through Peterborough East Station. The project will be designed to highlight Peterborough's importance historically and get more people in touch with these stories through new media, exhibitions or volunteering to assist in the project."

Notes to editors

About the 'Peterborough in the Great War' Project

The project, funded by HLF, and administered by Vivacity's Museums, Libraries and Archives Service, will have a number of aims:

- During the project, specially recruited and trained volunteers will digitise, transcribe and digitally mount the two volumes of the Women's United Total Abstinence Council guest books on a fully interactive website. This information will then be used to exhibit in real time biographical information, photographs and excerpts from the guest books, one hundred years to the date that the servicemen travelled through Peterborough. This will be online, via social media and on video screens at relevant sites in the city centre.
- The project will also create a touring exhibition to promote locally relevant stories, which will tour around locations within the Greater Peterborough area, tailored to each location that it visits.
- There will also be a programme of complementary events at Vivacity's Heritage sites, libraries, the city's Heritage Festival and other locations to engage with different audiences and promote the project.
- It will also create a set of resources and sessions for schools and other learning organisations based on the Guest Books and research to look at case studies of servicemen who passed through Peterborough.
- The project will conclude with an exhibition to open at Peterborough Museum in January 2018, to bring together and display the research and information that has been gained, using a variety of media including creative writing, recorded performance, audio and digital projection.

About Vivacity

Vivacity is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with charitable status that manages many of Peterborough's most popular culture and leisure facilities on behalf of Peterborough City Council.

Further information

For more information about the project, and to register interest in volunteering, please visit the Vivacity website.