

**Battles, Battalions & Papers: Access to Military Records
Local Studies Group South's Inaugural Study Day
Imperial War Museum Tuesday 29th April 2009**

Tony Pilmer & Miriam Farr, LSG South.

In a year which marks 70 years since the beginning of World War II and 90 years since the Treaty of Versailles concluded World War I, LSG South thought that it was fitting to hold its first study day on military material. The aim of the day was to help local studies and other information professionals refer their users to material outside their own collections.

Eager to help all those travelling from outside the South-East come to London, the official programme started at noon, though for those who could come in earlier, Foster Summerson, one of the museum's volunteers, gave us a tour of the main hall of the Imperial War Museum (IWM). Foster explained that the museum was originally the home of the Bethlem Hospital, before being converted to house a collection of post-1914 material from the armed forces from across what was then the British Empire.

Amongst the material Foster mentioned was 'Old Bill' which was one of the first of around 60 red London Buses that was used to transport troops around First World War Northern France. It is complete with battle honours and the adverts from pre-World War London. After the war it returned to the London streets and it is said to be the first bus ridden in by a British monarch.

Most of the IWM's tanks are at Duxford, though Foster pointed out Monty's command tank and a Sherman Tank. The museum also boasts a motorbike used by Lawrence of Arabia which was lent to the museum last year, and which the owner seems to have forgotten about. We were then taken to see the aircraft on the first floor, which included a photo-reconnaissance aircraft which had to be flown in a straight line in order for the photos to be of any use, and a Sopwith Camel whose gun fired through the propeller blades. We also saw a Zeppelin Cloud Car. Though the car was suspended below the Zeppelin, sitting in the car proved to be a popular job as not only were you paid more but it was the only place in a Zeppelin where you were allowed to smoke. We also saw the engine from the aeroplane used by Rudolf Hess to fly to England during the Second World War.

Family history research at the Imperial War Museum by Sarah Paterson

The first session of the day was delivered by our host, Sarah Paterson, from the IWM's Department of Printed Books.

Sarah started by outlining the history of IWM and its buildings. The Lambeth Road site was built in 1815 as a home for the Bethlem Hospital. In 1846 a dome was built to house a chapel and it is this room which is used as the reading room for the Departments of Documents and Printed Books. By 1929

the hospital had vacated the building and it became the permanent home of a collection of British Empire war material. Not only does the collection consist of material collected from the fields of France, but from the very early days it collected material relating to all aspects of war, including the home front, women and even those who did not want to fight at all. In recent years the IWM has diversified. The aircraft are at Duxford, while there is HMS Belfast on the River Thames, the Churchill Museum & Cabinet War Rooms in Westminster and IWM North in Manchester.

There are seven research departments housed in Lambeth Road.

- The Art department has the largest collection of British twentieth century art outside the Tate.
- Documents houses personal papers relating to war.
- Exhibitions and Firearms look after artefacts.
- Film and Video archive has 120 million feet of film and 6,500 hours of video.
- Photograph Archive has over 10 million images.
- Department of Printed Books is the national library for twentieth and twenty-first century conflict.
- Sound has 56,000 hours of interviews with those from the armed forces and home front.
- In addition, the UK National Infantry of War Memorials (UKNIWM) documents physical remembrances of war.

The IWM does not hold service records or military archives.

The IWM has produced a series of excellent books called Tracing your Family History; priced at £5.99 they are a must for all local studies collections. Advice on how researchers and family historians can use the IWM's collections can also be found in leaflets available from:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/server.php?show=nav.00100a>. Revamped family history pages are planned to be online before the end of the year.

The key to finding material is to know in which unit the person served. Once you have that, different types of resources become available, as well as regimental, divisional and campaign histories and autobiographies:

- Rolls of Honour – Lists of names of people who died and /or served, both local and institutional.
- Journals – these include regimental magazines; the “Cologne Post” which was written by the occupying forces in post-First World War Germany; and Railway staff magazines which often featured letters written by servicemen and other wartime reports.

The IWM also has excellent material recording the work done by women, especially in the First World War. These include:

- Medal cards for women who served overseas. This collection is stored at Duxford and may include notes made on the reverse of the card. These cards are not available on Ancestry.
- Publicity material for fundraising events such as those for Belgian refugees and the Silver Thimble Fund.
- Magazines from munitions factories etc.
- Photos of women who were decorated or who died.

There is also material on the unveiling of war memorials, publications from the Ministry of Food and many other publications which give you a flavour of what war was like, both in the military and on the home front.

The IWM London is going through a period of refurbishment and some collections will be moving to Duxford until early 2011, so not all material will be available at the London reading room.

The staff at the IWM Collections are always more than happy to help offer advice on where material can be found, so do not hesitate to get in touch or refer readers to them. You can contact them on 020 7416 5342 or via their enquiry webpages at <http://iwm.altarama.com>, and more information can be found on their webpages at www.iwm.org.uk/collections.

Up and coming developments with military records at the National Archives, by William Spencer, Senior Military Specialist at the National Archives.

After a brief break for lunch, William Spencer spoke about the challenges confronting the release of government military records.

William explained that before 1995 The National Archives' (TNA) catalogues were hard copy, however over the last fifteen years ten million catalogue records have been created on the online catalogue (available via <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue>). These records describe the types of records held at the TNA, but the big question is what is inside the individual records?

Most of the First World War Army service records were destroyed during a bombing raid on 7-8 September 1940. Those that survived have been microfilmed and those microfilms have now been digitised and put onto www.Ancestry.co.uk and www.AncestryLibrary.com. They have not only been indexed by name, but also other details, so, for example, you can search for people born outside the UK, by regiment etc.

The digitisation process has brought some drawbacks. Ancestry is very bad at defining the contents of its records. For example, though it may say they have some pension records, they do not tell you what information is held in pension records. The records were also shuffled so that the first records Ancestry shows you might not be the first in the sequence, so it is always worth looking at the pages around the records too.

TNA is in the process of digitising the 1760-1913 discharge records and also looking at the 142.5 million pieces of paper which form the Ministry of Defence (MOD) service records from 1920-63.

There are a number of challenges connected to making the mid-twentieth century service records available to the public:

- Each of the services sorts their records differently. The Army sorted theirs by leaving date, the Navy sorted theirs by joining date and the RAF sorted theirs by numbers.
- When the material left the MOD's records office in Hayes, the material was catalogued in a database, but not by those whose first language was English.
- The numbering of records was inconsistent and the archives were taken out of order hence destroying the archival integrity of the records.
- The MOD has received one complaint about a medical record being included in the First World War service records and ever since has been very concerned about putting potentially sensitive information on the internet, such as medical records and conduct sheets that cover bad behaviour. Any sifting of the records would slow the digitisation process down and makes the process more expensive. The latter point is especially problematic in the current financial situation.
- Where to start? The Home Guard records seem to be logical as the vast majority of those men would have passed away, however there is some very embarrassing material in there. There is a concern that someone may have read on the Internet that their grandfather had a urinary problem or that he had accidentally shot someone dead, and then start litigation. On the other hand Courts Martial records hold the most controversial material and those records are in the public domain.
- The Canadians digitise on request. As long as each item was catalogued properly, this would be a cost-effective method. After all, Freedom of Information requests are a form of print on demand service.

These obstacles will be overcome and it should be possible to put this material into the public domain within the next five years. However, in the current financial situation, who will finance it?

As with all archives, there are problems with material that were "born digital". The MOD had a lot to learn about electronic records management at the time of the First Gulf War, errors were made but vast improvements have been made since those early days.

Tour of the Departments of Printed Books and Documents by Sarah Paterson.

After William's presentation, the group split in half and one group went on a tour of two of the IWM's Collections. Sarah first took us to the round reading room used by the Departments of Documents and Printed Books. Originally

used as a chapel, the room resembles a smaller version of the old British Museum Reading Room, with Documents and Printed Books enquiry desks sitting on platforms in front of the readers. General reference books line the walls. The Reading Room is open Monday - Saturday 10.00am - 5.00pm, however users are asked to make an appointment to ensure that there is a place available for them.

The initial access point for the Sound Archive is in a small room off the main reading room. A number of computers sit along one wall where users can search the catalogue of interviews with former servicemen and those on the home front. The majority of material is digitised and can be heard by clicking on a link on the catalogue.

We were next taken to the stacks which is a labyrinth of bound books on miles of shelving. Sarah showed us a sample of the collections. We saw some rolls of honour of those who died during the war, including the Rugby School volumes marking the death of poet Rupert Brooke and his brother, William. There were also a number of magazines written by servicemen and former servicemen and which give an amazing flavour of what life was like on active service.

The tour finished with a look at the documents store. Not only are there censored and uncensored personal letters, diaries, manuscripts, unpublished memoirs, foreign documents and war crimes trials records, but also documents collected by serving officers and which perhaps should be in the MOD archive rather than their private papers. There are also gems like a Prisoner of War magazine which contained cartoons by Ronald Searle of 'St. Trinian's' fame and an original script from 'Dad's Army'.

United Kingdom National Inventory of War Memorials Jane Furlong, Project Co-ordinator, Imperial War Museum

Whilst half the group visited the Departments of Printed Books & Documents, the other half of the group heard Jane Furlong's insight into the United Kingdom National Inventory of War Memorials. The project has been running since 1989 and its aim is to document all UK War Memorials including those that have been lost. The project relies heavily on the work of about 160 volunteers nationally as it has a modest staffing of two full-time posts. Volunteers do fieldwork and assist staff with the less glamorous desk research and data entry tasks.

Over the last twenty years the project has documented over 56,000 of the estimated 100,000 UK war memorials. Most of these monuments commemorate the two World Wars, but information on memorials for other periods and conflicts are also included. The Inventory reveals information about location, physical description and the conflicts commemorated. In some cases further information about unveiling or dedication ceremonies, the designer, builder or funding can be found. Users can access most of their

records online at www.ukniwm.org.uk and enquiries are always welcome, whether through the telephone, e-mail, letter or in person. You can also look at their blog at <http://ukniwm.wordpress.com/>. The project is still collecting material so all suggestions and pieces of information are always welcome, though it is always worth contacting the IWM before you do exhaustive research as there are about 7000 memorials that are waiting to be included onto the website.

The project collects information which includes location, appearance, inscription, names, historical background, funding, date of unveiling, sculptor, manufacture and photographs. The project does not collect information about War Graves.

War memorials can take diverse forms such as buildings (bus shelters, village halls, hospital wings etc), sculptures, milestones or windows. Some commemorate individuals, some regiments, some battalions, some Prisoners of War, civilian as well as military casualties, pacifist organisations and even animals (regimental mascots, pets or police horses),. Memorials in Britain that are dedicated to foreign forces are also recorded, whether it is for Commonwealth soldiers or German prisoners of war. They can be temporary (such as a street shrine) or a more permanent monument. The style and form of the memorials erected gives insight into the preoccupations of the communities and individuals who raised funds and paid for them.

Who is commemorated on war memorials has changed over time. Prior to the South African War memorials tend to commemorate officers as the rank and file were not generally regarded in a positive light. The status of soldiers only rose with the Cardwell reforms of the 1870s which linked regiments to geographic areas and stopped wide-spread purchasing of commissions. The First World War memorials tended to be the focus for commemorating the fallen but there are many instances where the names of those who served are listed, whether it is on the town memorials or those who belonged to clubs, associations or attended the same place of work. After the Second World War there was a feeling that the country was sinking under the weight of war memorials, so names were added to First World War memorials or money was given to create parks, gardens or swimming pools. The desire for memorials has returned, whether this is to commemorate the recently fallen, or to commemorate forgotten groups, such as Bomber Command or the Normandy Veterans.

Volunteers on the project research a wide variety of sources held in local studies collections and record offices including local committee records and local newspapers. Names that have been left off memorials can be traced through the Roll of Honour or casualty lists published during the First and Second World Wars by local newspapers. Information about fund raising and commissioning of a memorial may be found in committee records of local bodies as diverse as regimental associations, parish councils, companies, businesses, hospital trusts or educational establishments.

The Inventory is now beginning to provide a useful insight into the social history of commemoration and localities in the UK, as well as providing information about individuals commemorated.

In the future, historic and modern photographs will be linked to the record and will also be available.

The project has exciting plans for the future:

- An online interactive map so you can click on the areas you want.
- Learning activities such as talks and online resources.
- Developing the volunteer base.
- Adding the names of all those commemorated and linking to online databases like the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, IWM and other related websites.

**Regimental Museums and Archives – Firepower, The Royal Artillery Museum, Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, SE18 6ST
Paul Evans, Librarian and Mark Smith, Curator**

Our final session of the afternoon was a highly entertaining and informative joint presentation by Paul Evans and Mark Smith of the Royal Artillery Museum and covered the different types of resources that they look after and the type of information that they can help researchers find.

Paul started by explaining that history and tradition is everything to the British Army. So much so that each regiment has its own historical section and that includes the regimental museums.

Regimental museums do not hold service records. The personnel records from the formation of the regiment in 1716 up to 1921 are held at National Archives (WO69 and for Boer War WO67). Records for those who served from the 1920s are held at the Army Personnel Centre. You can obtain a record of service from the National Archives (Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU) or from the Army Personnel Centre, (HQ Secretariat, Historical Disclosures, Mail Point 450, Kentigern House, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow G2 8EX or via www.veterans-uk). The National Archive also hold medal cards which also give you regiments and regimental numbers for those fought in the First World War.

Once you have found the regiment and regimental number, the world of army museums opens up to the reader. Inside the museum are not just artefacts, but mounds of military material and people who are the experts in their regiments, and the printed and archive material particular to their part of the armed forces. Even if you do not have a regimental number, the guys at the museums may have cunning ways to find them for you.

The Royal Artillery is one of the biggest regiments in the British Army and, at its peak during the Second World War there were more serving Gunners than

people serving in the whole of the Royal Navy, it is more than likely you have an ancestor who served in this regiment. The collection at the Royal Artillery Museum like other regimental museums and archives include many published regimental histories these can be useful in providing accounts of actions undertaken by battalions, brigades and units.

Highlights of the collection include:

- Brigade record books from the late 1860s to 70s
- *Distribution Lists of the Royal Artillery* cover battery locations and were published quarterly from 1877-1914
- Annual Historical Reports 1882-1914, 1947 to date
- *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery*, 1877-1898 volume 3, Major Denis Rollo, unpublished typescript
- War Diaries (also held at National Archives)
- Soldiers papers, letters, diaries and photographs
- *Regimental War Diaries* hold copies for every Royal Artillery unit deployed to Korea and majority of those for Malaya and Borneo
- *Regimental locations list of the Royal Artillery* covers location of Regiment, Commanding Officers' names, Armaments and Component Batteries 1947 to date
- *Monthly Officers Nominal rolls (Strength Returns)* 1952-1970
- Regimental scrapbooks and albums
- Death cards for Second World War
- Honours and awards cards for the Second World War
- Some Ministry of Defence Archives: Though military museums do not hold service records, archive material from the Ministry of Defence which is not wanted by the National Archives often find homes in regimental museums

Anyone can visit the Royal Artillery Library to undertake research - currently a half day ticket will set you back £5.00 and a day ticket £10.00. Alternatively you can pay someone else to do your research for you charges start at £15.00. Further details on this and other useful information is available on their website www.firepower.org.uk Military Museums do generally charge before they accept an enquiry.

Mark and Paul have recently written a very useful guide *Is there a Gunner in your Family Tree?* Packed with useful tips and information on researching family history at Firepower, Royal Artillery Museum for further information email info@firepower.or.uk

Mark & Paul's session was followed by LSG South's inaugural AGM and reception.

The study day proved to be a great success and our thanks go to all our speakers who gave us such fascinating, informative and entertaining sessions, and especially to Sarah Paterson who do such a wonderful job hosting the event.

We hope that this will be the first of an annual series of LSG South study days. If you have any suggestions for topics for future events please e-mail us at tony.pilmer@slough.gov.uk. We are always looking for new committee members too, so if you fancy giving us a hand, please get in touch. We are especially keen to get members from London and the South-west.