

Sheffield cares for the wounded

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The fascinating exhibition, which opens its doors to the public on Thursday 26 June 2014, will highlight the awe-inspiring work of the 3rd West Riding Field Ambulance on the Western Front in France and Flanders during the most horrific war the world has ever experienced.

The inspirational stories of the Sheffield doctors, nurses, stretcher bearers, nursing orderlies and chaplains will be told through intriguing medical artefacts, war-time journals, personal accounts, and traditional uniforms.

The exhibition has been funded by the generosity of the following sponsors; Heritage Lottery Fund, Westfield Charity, Sheffield Town Trust, Sheffield Grammar School Exhibition Foundation and the University of Sheffield Alumni Fund.

Visitors will learn how the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C) efficiently organised the evacuation pathways from the front line back to England and how more than 70,000 wounded and sick soldiers returning to Sheffield were cared for in the city's hospitals, halls, schools and even cricket pavilions by the territorial force of the 3rd Northern General Hospital.

Dr Derek Cullen, retired Consultant Physician and Exhibition Curator, said: "The exhibition will tell the story of the 3rd West Riding Field Ambulance, a mobile medical unit formed of doctors, stretcher bearers, nursing orderlies, chaplains and their supporters from Sheffield. Their heroism is

reflected in the numbers in the unit decorated with military medals, including William Barnsley Allen who received the Victoria Cross (VC), Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Military Cross (MC) and Bar. The spirit of camaraderie they exhibited is shown in a bivouac journal called the Lead Swinger which will be on display. It contains articles, poems, sketches and cartoons which entertained them and helped to lighten their spirits in such dire times.”

Dr Cullen added: “On a more personal level we have a number of war diaries which have been carefully preserved by their descendants which illustrate the carnage the Unit faced. For instance we will display records from Herbert Welsby in which he wrote ‘When will it all end? This war is making me an old man. In the midst of life, we are in death!’ Another member of the Unit, John Richardson, describes what it was like when 1,700 guns along a frontline of 15 miles started firing. ‘It was simply hell. No one can realise the number of shells fired. It was like a continuous role of bad thunder’. All of their stories show the dedication and bravery shown by the unarmed medical staff.”

One of the exhibition's most unique items on display will be the skull of Joe Clarke, who sustained a serious head injury in France and was brought back to Sheffield unconscious before undergoing one of the earliest neurosurgical operations.

During the pioneering procedure, a proportion of his skull (trephine) was removed and the hole was covered by a gold plate made by local Sheffield silversmiths Mappin and Webb. Joe survived the operation and went on to teach at the University for many years.

The free exhibition is open to the public Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm until 28 November 2014. The event coincides with the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War which is being commemorated across the country – but unlike other exhibitions this will uniquely focus on the medical effort.

“The exhibition will also give people a unique insight into the Territorial Army of volunteers who transformed Sheffield’s hospital provision by the establishment of two major emergency hospitals,” said Dr Cullen. “One was the 3rd Northern General Hospital on Ecclesall Road and the other at Wharnccliffe Hospital which were supported by convalescent units in schools, halls and even cricket pavilions. This incredible feat of organisation resulted in more than 70,000 service men being treated throughout the war. The exhibition will also show how the people of Sheffield played their part in the care of soldiers, long before the days of the NHS, by organising flag days to pay for soldier's treatment and comforts, establishing emergency rest centres and volunteering to convoy patients arriving in Sheffield from the front to the city's hospitals.”

Explaining the importance of the HLF support, Head of HLF Yorkshire and the Humber, Fiona Spiers, said: “The impact of the First World War was far reaching, touching and shaping every corner of the UK and beyond. The Heritage Lottery Fund has already invested more than £56million in projects – large and small - that are marking this global Centenary; with our new small grants programme, we are enabling even more communities like those involved in ‘The Story of Joe Clark’ project to explore the continuing legacy of this conflict and help local young people in particular to broaden their understanding of how it has shaped our modern world.”

The exhibition is complemented by a special edition book which describes many of the medical problems encountered in the war told through individual personal stories and illustrations. A unique

lecture series will also accompany the exhibition – topics include the general surgical and plastic surgical challenges which surgeons of the day had to confront. The final lecture will provide a contrasting picture with today's highly technological care of the wounded from the war in Afghanistan.

Notes to editors

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Sheffield has five Nobel Prize winners among former staff and students and its alumni go on to hold positions of great responsibility and influence all over the world, making significant contributions in their chosen fields.

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