

Changing lives: nursing duo hits history big time

18/05/2016



Two former nurses from North Yorkshire have been catapulted to fame as local experts on First World War Red Cross Hospitals.

Anne Wall and Eileen Brereton hadn't planned to become celebrated historians but now, as published authors and with more than 50 public lectures behind them, they have discovered new interests and talents in equal measure.

It all came about thanks to getting involved in a HLF-supported project launched by North Yorkshire County Records Office. The aim was to mark the centenary of the First World War by researching the Red Cross Auxiliary Hospitals set up in the North Riding.

Anne, 63, and Eileen, 68, were working as Red Cross volunteers training others in First Aid when they were asked by a local village hall committee to help recreate a First World War hospital ward as part of the Hall's centenary. The idea piqued their interest and then they heard about the HLF-supported investigation which would look at the 32 hospitals established between 1914 and 1919 to care for the war wounded.

"We started to find out about the history of the temporary hospitals in the North Riding. As former nurses the stories particularly captured our imagination and we began to delve deeper," says Anne.

They discovered that hospitals were set up in all sorts of properties throughout the district with more than 10,000 patients being treated in 1918 alone.

Sharing their findings with a wider audience was a key part of the project. They did a first presentation to a local history group – a completely new experience for them - and things blossomed from there. “It became clear that there was a wealth of information and memorabilia being held by individuals and organisations,” says Eileen. “Nowhere was it collected together to create a complete picture of the work of the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses in the auxiliary hospitals and their communities in the North Riding.”

“We want to thank National Lottery players as without them we wouldn’t have had this wonderful new experience in the first place.”

- Anne Wall, project participant]

Anne adds: “Little did we know that our research would develop into a consuming interest about such a fascinating time in local history.”

The pair, who describe themselves as a double act, were also amazed at how much hitherto unknown information could be gathered from their audiences. “We were staggered by the number of people coming forward with their own stories, photographs and artefacts.”

But things didn’t stop there.

“We were discovering some extraordinary stories,” explains Anne. “Advances in medical treatments, the efforts of local children to collect sphagnum moss for dressings, the importance of nutrition and secure food supplies for the wounded.”

What to do with this wealth of detail became clear. “The obvious next step was for us to tackle the daunting task of collating what we had gleaned into a book which would ensure that there would be a lasting record for everyone to share.” She adds: “Writing the book was a life-changing experience for both of us, bringing with it so much that was new.

“We want to thank National Lottery players as without them we wouldn’t have had this wonderful new experience in the first place.”

Demand for the book, *Home Comforts: The Role of Red Cross Auxiliary Hospitals in North Riding of Yorkshire 1914-1919*, was so great that a second edition was published. At the same time, Anne and Eileen were in demand for their talks, with more than 50 having been delivered so far, reaching more than 1,000 people. They are now looking into the possibility of a second book focusing on their favourite First World War objects collected during their popular road show.

And there’s more to come. “HLF’s grant allowed us to produce professional-standard exhibition materials which have opened the doors to larger venues,” says Eileen. “To our delight, we’ve been accepted to exhibit at York Castle Museum in 2017.”

Glass medicine bottles from the Heritage Day Exhibition in Northallerton in March 2016

First World War artefacts from the Heritage Day Exhibition

Red Cross Society training manual

Embroidered cards sent during the conflict

First World War artefacts from the Heritage Day Exhibition

The book that helped kickstart the project - the Red Cross Society War Reports book, as displayed at the Heritage Day Exhibition in Northallerton

You might also be interested in...

Changing lives: love of ospreys leads to new life for GP

Changing lives: volunteering helps teacher rebuild his life after a stroke

Helping to tell the story of Edith Cavell