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## Introduction to Children & War

Children: War. Two words that perhaps do not sit together comfortably in one's mind. What have children to do with war? What has war to do with children? Surely, children have to be protected from war, violence, horror, atrocities. Although in the simplest sense true, the comment ignores a whole aspect of children's lives and development which, during the twentieth century, was profoundly affected by two world wars and other, more recent, conflicts and civil unrest.

War changes lives for the better and the worse, for the unexpected and the unpredictable. For some children war has such a devastating effect on their homes and families that they never recover from the shock of it. For others it can be a positive experience. Evacuation during the Second World War offered some city children the opportunity for a better life, a chance of a

better education and for some, a place at university that would have been unattainable during their pre-war existence. For boys caught in the poverty trap at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a career in the Army or Navy could offer a life away from the streets and possible trouble. For Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, opportunities presented by the lack of those people who had been enlisted in the services and war work, were exciting. They worked as fire watchers and nursing assistants, couriers and stretcher bearers and some were even sent in support roles to the concentration camps in Europe in 1945.

Most of us, in one way or another, have some sort of experience of war; even if for children of today it is only what they see on the television. Today we think our children are distanced from conflict, and in terms of the comparison between now and the 1940s that is undoubtedly true. However, with 24 hours news coverage wars are almost played out in real time. For the children of serving soldiers war is very real and for those unlucky enough to lose a parent in a conflict the harsh reality of warfare remains life-changing.

The aim of the exhibition mounted at the Oxfordshire Museum is to encourage visitors to look at the subject of Children and War in its entirety. Where children experience war directly there can be no doubt that it changes their lives but certain aspects of war affect all our lives, even though we may not recognise them.



## Officer Training Corps

Officer Training Corps (OTCs) were created in the Haldane reforms in 1908 following the problem of finding sufficient officers in the Boer War. They were divided into senior and junior divisions. The senior were set up in the universities and the junior in the public schools. They replaced public school and university cadet forces such as the Eton Rifle Volunteers and their purpose was officer training for the Special Reserve and Regular services from the start.

Six years into the scheme, at the beginning of the First World War, after Mons and First Ypres, when the New Army was being built up by Kitchener, the boys from public schools who had served in their school OTC were usually granted commissions without further ado, for the most part in a unit of their choice. The commanding officer (CO) would have had a report from the school and it was assumed that the candidate would have had some training as a leader. Once commissioned, he would have received unit training, which would have included cadres for newly-commissioned officers.

As the Great War progressed, University OTCs were turned into officer factories. Oxford University OTC was changed in 1915 into two Officer Cadet Battalions (cadets were billeted in colleges) and you did not have to be an undergraduate to pass through. You had to be at least 18 ½ and have served

in the ranks or at a school OTC. 4,218 men were commissioned from London University OTC.

It was clear to the General Staff that after the early casualties there was a need for more and more experienced and better trained officers, and it is clear from contemporary sources, such as *Goodbye to All That*, that the class origins of the British officer changed radically in the latter half of the war after the introduction of conscription. Promotions from the ranks and from occupations in society from which military men were not usually drawn become acceptable. From time to time certain units such as the Artists' Rifles and Inns of Court were treated as specialist officer-training cadres - 10,256 men of the Artists' Rifles were granted commissions in the Great War, more than 11,000 from the Inns of Court.

The officers of the Territorial Force created by Haldane were usually drawn from the local bourgeoisie - solicitors, accountants, businessmen and bankers - and were equally chosen by their COs. Many would have been to public school and thus done some form of military training. The cloning of the TA battalions into 1/1 then 2/1 then 3/1 Battalions of the regiment brought more volunteers from the professions into the Army. The 2/1 Bucks was officered for example by railway managers, barristers and solicitors, printers and mercers. Volunteers who had served in the ranks in the Territorial Force were treated in much the same way, though they might be commissioned into a different regiment. Territorial units provided officers for the New Army.



## Evacuation

During the Second World War the government had a great concern: the safety of civilians. With the introduction of aerial warfare the civilian population was as likely to be targeted as military positions and the drive to put women and children beyond the reach of the Luftwaffe led to the greatest evacuation of civilians in British history. As 3,500,000 children moved from city to village, town to country, from Britain to America and the Dominions an upheaval was introduced that still has repercussions in the world today. It was described by one historian as the greatest social experiment of all times and by another as delivering social mobility in a way that no one in government could possibly have anticipated.

The shake-up caused by the mass movement of civilians was felt to an even greater extent on the continent where children were fleeing not just from the threat of aerial bombardment but from a far greater menace, which was the threat of genocide and systematic annihilation. England offered children shelter long before the Second World War. In 1915 a quarter of a million Belgians, including tens of thousands of children, came to Britain. In 1937 4,000 Basque children arrived in Southampton to seek shelter from the Civil War that was tearing their country apart. And then there was the threat from the Nazis for Jews, Gypsies, Sintis and other so-called 'Undesirables'. For these children the flight from terror often meant that almost everything

they had had prior to the war was lost. One Jewish refugee child, fleeing from Germany, was told she could bring one item with her on her journey to safety. What should she choose from her array of clothes, toys, books and treasures? In the end she brought her half-size violin. The only vestige of her old life. Today, children still come to Britain, fleeing persecution in some of the world's worst trouble spots. Like the children before them, they often have nothing to connect them to their past and similarly they have to start over to build a new life.



## The Holley/Cornelius Collection at Bletchley Park

(David) Mark Cornelius and Irene Holley married in 1959 at a time when their domestic circumstances made buying all manner of personal and household items at jumble sales a necessity. Necessity turned to passion, and even Irene's parents, Mary and Charles Holley, as well as their three children, collected whatever treasures appealed to them from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, while Mark and Irene assembled items specifically reminding them of their wartime childhood. The vast assortment of artefacts from that period now forms the Holley/Cornelius Collection.

Whilst seeking a permanent exhibition site, Irene and Mark were invited by the Trustees of Bletchley Park at its opening in 1994, to display all the artefacts which were relevant to life covering a 30 year period before, during and immediately after WW2, in order to help visitors understand the daily life of the people who worked there in the Second World War, whatever their role. The collection is now a very valuable learning resource for students of all ages, and is supported by an extensive archive of related ephemera, printed material and photographs.

Certain pieces are temporarily loaned to museums and galleries and much of

the material has also been utilized in reminiscence therapy sessions with groups of local elderly people.

Currently, Mark and Irene have a permanent Victorian Nanny's parlour and a Second World War toy-shop exhibition at the Royal Gunpowder Mills Museum at Waltham Abbey in Essex, and several pieces at 'Stitch for Victory', at the Redoubt Military Museum, Eastbourne.

*The exhibition organisers are enormously grateful to Irene and Mark for their generous loans to the Children and War exhibition.*



Oh what a lovely war!

While for most people caught up in the direct line of fire, in persecution, in bombings, war is terrifying and destructive, for those on the periphery it can be thrilling and exciting. How many seventy year olds can remember seeing a German aircraft being shot down? How many collected shrapnel, unexploded bombs, fragments and war trophies? Some children saw opportunities. One evacuee child explained that he had spent all his pocket money buying fish and chips, which were not rationed, and selling them on to the Americans at his local airbase. He made a tidy profit by the end of the war. Others put their skills to broader use, helping with paper salvage, fruit collection, harvesting potatoes for farmers. The Boy Scout movement had as its wartime motto 'The Boy Scouts are Carrying On'. Not only were they responsible for any number of activities that helped the civilian community but they were also runners for the police and for the super-secret British Resistance, the Auxiliary Units.



## Toys and Books

War is so deeply embedded in our lives that it is part of children's entertainment. Some of the best children's books are set in wartime or deal with the effect, either direct or indirect, of war. From tales of daring-do in John Buchan and C S Forster's Hornblower novels to the post Second World War novels such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which use evacuation as a conceit for getting parents out of the way so that children can run independent lives without interference. More recently the children's author, Michael Morpurgo, has addressed stories from the First World War in his moving books *Private Peaceful* and *War Horse*. The latter has been picked up by no less a director than Steven Spielberg who will be giving it the Hollywood treatment. Toys, too, often have their origins in war or battles: strategy games, tin soldiers, model aircraft to name a few. Even many modern games for computer consoles have their origins in warfare.



## Commemoration

The 1914-18 war resulted in deaths on a hitherto unimagined scale. The result was a huge outpouring of public grief and the founding in May 1917 of one of the most remarkable organisations of the 20th century, the Imperial (Commonwealth) War Graves Commission.

The man with the vision to create permanent resting places for the dead of the Great War was Sir Fabian Ware. Neither a soldier nor a politician, from 1914 to his death in 1949, Ware devoted his life to the commemoration of the Commonwealth war dead. Too old to fight, in 1914 he volunteered to command a fleet of volunteer drivers for the Red Cross in France. One of his jobs was to take the wounded and stragglers to field hospitals, and while on these journeys he became aware of the haphazard nature of service burials. As the war progressed his work to record all the burial sites became officially recognised and valued by the High Command.

After the Armistice, the systematic job of clearing the battlefields of human remains began. This grim but vital task was undertaken by special units formed within the Army, called Graves Concentration Units. Barely half the dead on the Western Front had been given a proper burial in a designated military cemetery and the landscape was strewn with hundreds of hastily made soldiers' cemeteries which were often little more than clusters of graves beside a road or canal.

During these years Ware's vision of commemoration took shape. He gathered a group of experts from various fields, including Sir Edwin Lutyens, Reginald Blomfield and Herbert Baker, who were appointed leading architects on the Western Front, Sir Robert Lorimer responsible for Italy and Greece, and Sir John James Burnet for Palestine and Gallipoli. Gertrude Jekyll and Arthur Hill, Assistant Director at Kew Gardens, advised on horticulture, while Sir William Garstin, the engineer of the Aswan Dam, was appointed a Commissioner. He had lost a son in the early years of the War, as had Rudyard Kipling, literary adviser to the Commission. Kipling chose the expressions for Lutyens' great Stone of Remembrance: 'Their Name Liveth For Evermore', and for the headstones of soldiers who could not be identified: 'Known Unto God'.

By February 1921 the Commission had responsibility for 2,400 cemeteries on the Western Front alone, but it was not until the summer of 1938 that the last of the Commission's First World War Memorials was unveiled at Thiepval on the Somme. It honours the 72,000 men who died but whose bodies were never found.

After 1945 the Commission extended its work to include new and far flung countries, and the 67,000 civilian dead who are commemorated in a book of Remembrance in St George's Chapel in Westminster Abbey. Today the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible for 23,000 burial sites in 150 countries.



## Oxfordshire's Commemoration Story

In Oxfordshire there are now 167 CWGC sites containing 2,114 burials based on the post 1974 county boundary changes<sup>1</sup>, including 6 in Oxford itself. Woodstock Cemetery has 14 burials, five from the First World War and nine from the Second World War. The youngest boy in this group is Ronald Peter Hoare from Woodstock who died at the age of sixteen. He had joined the Navy as a 'boy' and was at HMS St George, a Royal Navy shore establishment in the early months of 1940.

A small number of Commission burials are spread throughout Woodstock Cemetery, so that it does not have the appearance of a large CWGC cemetery such as one might see in Oxford (Botley) Cemetery or in the burial plot in Kidlington Burial Ground. But each headstone is cared for and the maintenance of the graves has been subcontracted by the Commission to the Marlborough School. Thus the link with the community is kept.

The exact number of boy soldiers buried in Oxfordshire cemeteries is impossible to establish since the Commission only has ages at death if the family completed the relevant forms giving such details. Where boys had lied about their ages or families had moved on the Commission was not in a position to make assumptions or guess.

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<sup>1</sup> Before 1974 a significant number of CWGC sites south and west of Oxford, such as the Vale of the White Horse District were in Berkshire

One of many moving stories from the Second World War is that of ATC Cadets Leslie Shearwood who was killed on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1944, in a training flight along with a 19 year old Australian pupil pilot, Flying Officer Norman Davies (buried in Botley) and 28 year old RAF Flight Lieutenant John Patrickson. They were practising low level flying over Steeple Aston when the plane hit trees and crashed. Shearwood's epitaph reads: 'He wanted to fly/ God gave him wings'.

Eighteen year old Air Cadet Sergeant William Albert Hughes from Wallingford Grammar School cycled to RAF Harwell with a 16 year old friend, Richard Ayres to attend air experience flying. They made up the crew of seven men in a Wellington Bomber (HF855). The flight ended in disaster when the pilot missed the runway and all seven, including the two boys, were killed. Hughes is buried next to his younger brother, Vivien who was killed in 1945, in All Saints Churchyard, Didcot. The two boys have the rare distinction of a double Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone. Richard Ayres is buried in Wallingford Cemetery.

The Commission cares for hundreds of thousands of names on memorials and headstones worldwide but every name is an individual. The Commission is a very human organisation with a remarkable ethos and at its heart very real care for and pride in its work.