

Researching Together

Without its volunteers and placements, the museum would not be able to function. Volunteers play an important role in recording oral histories, supporting the collection, and assisting with educational workshops. One important role of the volunteers is carrying out research. They assist with research requests, build up an understanding of the museum's collection and contribute new stories and material.



"In 2016 I responded to an appeal to the Museum by the authority responsible for the identification of military remains for help with naming the body of an officer of the Ox and Bucks apparently killed in the Battle of Arras in April 1917. After prolonged research with another volunteer using a wide range of sources, we successfully established that the remains were of Lieutenant Osmond Wordsworth, who had transferred to the Machinegun Corps before being killed in action. This was confirmed by DNA matching. Lieutenant Wordsworth was the great-nephew of the Lakeland Poet, William Wordsworth."

Ingram Murray, SOFO volunteer

The Unknown Soldier

In 2013, a French farmer discovered the remains of a body in the village of Hénin-sur-Cojeul, who was deemed to be an officer of the Ox and Bucks. His belongings were given to the museum to help research his identity. Unfortunately, no officer of the Ox and Bucks Regiment at the time matched up. Until one day, Research Volunteer, Ingram Murray, discovered that an officer serving in the 21st Company, Machine Gun Corps had transferred in 1916 from the Ox and Bucks before he was killed, it was possible that the young officer may have continued to wear his original Ox and Bucks uniform.

That officer was identified as Osmond Bartle Wordsworth, a collateral descendent of the poet. Murray presented a detailed submission to the Joint Compassionate Case Centre (JCCC) to re-open the case with the Museum trustees, staff and volunteers rewarded for their efforts after they received the report that a DNA comparison with a relative had resulted in a match with the remains.

After collaborative work with the Ministry of Defence, JCCC, the human remains found near Arras in the last decade were finally confirmed to be of Second Lieutenant Osmond Bartle Wordsworth, missing since 1917.

The museum hosts different placements throughout the year, from Year 10 students seeking their first-ever work experience, to university students and graduates wanting to gain experience in the industry to veterans building up new skills. Collaborative research projects have expanded the museum's research in new areas, such as 'The Indian Army in the First World War: an Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire perspective' project.



Photograph by John Cairns.

Dr Priya Atwal's Story

How did you become involved with the museum?

"In 2017-18, I was a joint project coordinator on an AHRCA/Oxford University funded project called 'The Indian Army in the First World War: an Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire perspective'."

Can you describe what this project involved?

"The project explored the shared history of service by regiments from the British Indian Army and the Ox and Bucks in Mesopotamia during the First World War. The campaign that was fought there against the Ottomans on the 'Eastern Front' is a little-discussed part of the First World War history in Britain, particularly because the role of the Indian Army and the Ox and Bucks initially culminated in disaster with the siege of Kut-al-Amara.

These events were largely sidelined from military propaganda and subsequent history due to them being regarded at the time as an embarrassing and painful failure, especially as many Indian and British lives were lost. However, in 2017, Stephen Barker and I managed to gain some funding from the AHRC to launch a project exploring this forgotten history using previously little-used archives from SOFO, and to bring together an intergenerational team of British Asian volunteers to research the subject and produce a new touring exhibition. Our team consisted of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim volunteers from the local community – and was one of the first projects of its kind to include multi-faith participants of South Asian heritage to work on a military history project."

What was the most enjoyable aspect of the project?

"Working with our group of volunteers was so enjoyable, and I learnt loads from them! It was really wonderful how we were able to come together as a team, agree on a set of shared objectives and goals for the project, and then work together on producing some incredibly rich research and a well-received exhibition. For many of us, it was a completely new way of collaborative working, but we produced an exhibition that we were all really proud of and which garnered a lot of positive attention from local communities in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire who otherwise knew nothing about the links between India, the British Army and WW1, or who rarely visited local museums in the two counties."

What was the most challenging aspect of the project?

"Finding objects to go in our exhibition! We were particularly keen to crowd-source artefacts that gave an insight into the experiences and stories of the Asian soldiers involved in the Eastern Front of the First World War, but these were very hard to come by, even in museum collections. I had to undertake a media campaign in order to raise awareness of the history being explored in our project - which was quite a significant learning experience for me as a young, postdoctoral researcher, but a really valuable one. Fortunately, our project gained coverage from outlets such as BBC Radio Oxford, BBC Asian Network and Asian-run newspapers such as Eastern Eye, which helped to spread the word. We were eventually able to connect with a small number of Punjabi antiques collectors, as well as some private individuals; who very kindly shared precious war medals, family photographs and fascinating stories with us. Building trust with these individuals was the most important job of all, so that they could be certain that we would take good care of their treasured artefacts and tell their stories with sensitivity and honesty."

Open from 1st to 30th April 2018

Mini-exhibition at The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum

The Indian Army in the First World War:

An Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Perspective



Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the First World War for Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire

