

Staffordshire Regiment Museum

Friends Newsletter Issue 3 2020



A few words from our chairman

I am sometimes asked, "What's the purpose of the museum friends group". I usually start my answer with something about supporting and improving the museum, but from now on all I have to do is direct the questioner to the difference our group made to the museum site as it prepared to reopen this summer. Those who turned out for a month of onsite work are too many to list here, but thank you one and all. You didn't stop there though, when visitors came back so did the friends, helping to entertain and inform while keeping everyone safe and well.

It's been a difficult summer for the museum and events sector. One by one our own museums big signature events have fallen by the wayside, but I know that the decisions to postpone have not been taken lightly and that the health and welfare of visitors and our team have always been put first. It's been pleasing to see how, despite these disappointments, the friends have still managed to find so many ways to welcome and educate our visitors.

During all this the museum has dealt with staff changes at the top. We all wish Dani well in her new post and look forwards to working closely with the museum's new Operations Manager.

The C word continues to affect our daily lives in so many ways, but let us pay a real tribute to all those we have lost in 2020 by standing firm as we head into 2021.

Nick Williams

New Museum Head



Hello, I am Peter Collins and I am really looking forward to joining the Museum as the new Operations Manager. I live in Ilkeston with my wife, four daughters and our dog. My first museum job was with the Imperial War Museum, mainly based at Duxford, looking after collections and exhibitions of 'Big Stuff' as we called it, aircraft, tanks, engines etc. I then went on to work with British Waterways (now the Canal & River Trust) leaving them to work with the heritage collections of Rolls-Royce plc which also involved working with the volunteers of The Rolls-Royce Heritage Trust. I am joining the Museum from Derby Museums Trust. I am really passionate about military history and I am really looking forward to working with everyone involved at the Museum.

THE BIG PUSH

Friends Chairman Nick Williams reports on the huge effort made to get the museum site ready to reopen after its forced five month closure.

From the start of lock down I was one of the small team who carried on popping into the museum to check on the collection, carry out emergency repairs and ensure that all was safe and secure. I felt lucky to have somewhere to go out of the home to, as well as something constructive to do. It's odd that the small things can become such a relief at times like those, as every other week I looked forwards to my cycle ride up Hints Hill to visit the site.

Although as the weeks went by I became more and more concerned, as the grass grew, paint peeled and sections of trench roof were starting to collapse. The site was looking very sorry for itself and it became evident that it was going to take a lot of work to get the place ready for the public again.

The lock down restrictions began to be eased and the news came of the plan to reopen the site to the public on August 1st. Before this could happen the team needed to work out a way to ensure the safety of visitors and staff on site.

The plan included the four weeks of July when limited numbers of people would be allowed on site for general maintenance. The paid staff were being brought back from furlough, but they would be fully committed with administration and working through risk assessments based on government guidelines. As a result, the bulk of the work was going to have to be done by the volunteers and museum friends.

How would people react? There was an awful lot to do and a fairly tight time scale to work with. Would people have concerns about their safety on site, especially with so many of our members being in the more at risk age groups?

I created specific slots on identified days, with people allocated a particular job around the site. It all felt a bit too regimented to me and I was sure it would put people off. When the call went out I need not have worried, the response from our team was overwhelming, so many responded that the challenge became fending people off whilst not putting them off.



By the end of the first week we had pretty much brought the museum back to life and we were able to look at plans to improve what we had. All those little things that we had always wanted to get to. Many members of the group made some great suggestions for improvements, offering to get on with the task. As always we had a good range of volunteers with varied skills. Some of us did the heavy lifting while others excelled at the detail work and another team worked on a project to produce an interactive self-guided tour of the trench.

Some of the highlights of the work done are the spruced up trench network which takes more account of our Mercian links, new information signs in the WW2 area and a refreshed home front defense section.

We were also able to assist the staff in making the museum covid secure. The main reception desk has been redesigned, an outdoor hand wash area has been constructed and many other little safety measures have been put in place.



In summary, I think that the friends have managed to take advantage of the forced closure to give the whole site an impressive makeover and I am proud of what's been achieved. I think that they had a great time doing it as well.

I am sure that our visitors will appreciate all those little improvements and additions. We are lucky in that many of our exhibits are outside and can be enjoyed in a relaxed way, with people knowing that the safety of their party has been considered.



HIDDEN EXPLOSIVES FOUND ON MUSEUM SITE



Well, the explosives were fake and they had been concealed as part of a training exercise, but it perked your interest didn't it?

Officers from the British Transport Polices dog section, based in Birmingham, took advantage of the museum's extended closure, to use the site to help with the training of specialist search dogs. The sessions, which started in July, involved the concealing of explosive substitute around the site so that the dogs and handlers could practice sniffing them out.



Our site is seen as being ideal for such training due to the varied terrain, access to vehicles, as well as indoor and outdoor spaces.



Museum admin assistant, Dawn Smyth, reported that, *"the dogs were very exuberant, clearly having a great time checking the museum and grounds out for explosive devices. Their handlers were pleased with the support we gave them and have credited the museum on the forces social media platforms."*

The team plan to continue the training sessions into the winter so museum visitors may get the extra treat of seeing specialist police dogs at work. It should be noted that only working and assistance dogs are normally allowed on site and the training is being undertaken under strictly controlled conditions.

Police dog Buddy



Buddy is a cross between a Springer Spaniel and a Labrador, he has a white stripe on his front, which makes him very distinctive. After a long day at work his favorite snack is carrots.

MERCIAANS BATTLE COVID

The Mercian regiment answered the call earlier in the year, as the country took on the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. Operation RESCRIPT, the name given to the MOD's part in the UK Government's first wave response to the pandemic, became active in late March during the time that 4 Mercian were undertaking Exercise WARHAMMER, the annual live firing and tactical training camp.



As the men and women of the Battalion were training for warfighting operations in line with their primary mission within 20th Armoured Infantry Brigade (The Iron Fist), planning was taking place to mobilise Reservists at short notice to deploy on Military Aid to the civilian authorities. Eventually the role as a COVID Support Force was confirmed, which saw 125 personnel operating in support of Cumbria and Lancashire regional authorities.



The troops took on the task of operating mobile testing stations, and undertook over 17,500 COVID tests of the general public. From July the team began to scale back their efforts as they conducted a handover of their responsibilities to the civilian authorities. Although the volunteer, 4 Mercian remain ready to deploy with Regular Army colleagues on operations and exercises around the world.

MUSEUM OPENS UP

Saturday 1st August saw the reopening of our long locked down museum to the general public. That weekend was seen very much as a test of the measures put in place to ensure the safety of all staff and visitors, and to bed in the revised opening times. As a result a small team of staff and volunteers were on site all weekend to assist the weekend manager.



The team helped to marshal, entertain and inform visitors as they arrived on site, as well as ensuring social distancing, often in novel ways. They also put on informative displays around the outside spaces, all safely distanced.



Around 200 people were onsite over the weekend but all restrictions were maintained throughout, despite an occasionally overflowing car park.



Friends education team lead Hillary Hinks, who was one of the volunteers present said, *"It was lovely to see the site come alive again and so pleasing to hear the positive feedback from our visitors, many of whom were visiting for the first time. Comments like, there is much more to see on site than they had expected and that the museum had done a great job of putting in place measures to make them feel safe."*



Facemasks were in use inside the main gallery and visitors made frequent use of the hand sanitizer stations that had been created all around the site. But none of this appears to have taken the edge off the visitor experience.

A review of the museum's covid risk assessment was undertaken at the end of the weekend and although minor amendments were made they all revolved around improvements to visitor access.



VJ DAY 75

The 75th anniversary of the end of WW2 was commemorated in subdued style by the SRM, for well documented reasons. Despite this, the museum hosted many visitors throughout the day and the friends brought the site to life by putting on a small display depicting the experience of a soldier of the 1st Battalion of the Staffordshire Regiment in Burma, during the Chindits campaigns.



Early visitors were treated to a poignant low level fly past by the RAFs Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, who overflew the museum reroute to the National Arboretum to mark the special two minutes silence at 11am. The flight consisted of three Spitfires, a Hurricane and a Lancaster bomber. The sound of eight iconic Rolls Royce Merlin engines ensured that all eyes were turned skyward.



KNOW WHO YOU ARE WORKING WITH

This issue we hear about two long term museum volunteers, Roger Harris and Sue Leighfield, who can often be seen dressed as various characters at museum events and open days. But as you will read here there is a lot more to this couple than that.

Lieutenant George Albert Cairns VC, Chindit



George Albert Cairns was born in London on 12th December 1913. He spent the early 1940s in Sidcup, Kent, where he met his future wife Ena and they were married in 1941; a year later he went to war.

He was attached to the South Staffordshire Regiment in Burma, part of the Chindit battalion, in turn part of 77th Indian Infantry Brigade. He was 30 years old when he performed the deed for which he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. On the evening of 16 March 1944, the South Staffords dug in near an area known as White City. Unbeknown to either side, they were adjacent to a small Japanese force and a bloody close quarters melee soon ensued. George was attacked by an enemy officer with a sword who caused grievous injuries to his arm. Despite this he killed the officer and wounded several more enemy, before collapsing and dying of his wounds the following day.



© Phil Tugwell Photography

Sue and Roger began volunteering at the Museum in 2005. Whilst exhibiting a display at a special weekend event someone remarked "Why don't you pop over one day and have a look round the Museum to see what we do" The rest is history as they say! No sooner had they casually dropped in one day, shortly after that invitation was extended. Roger was undergoing trench tour training.



The couples' involvement in wartime re-enactment began some years previously at the time of the Millennium in 2000 when they were

brushing up on their ballroom dancing skills. It was whilst quick stepping around Sutton Coldfield Town Hall Ballroom at a 1940's dance they met other wartime re-enactment enthusiasts and were invited to attend an event at Sandwell Valley. Roger's lifelong interest and extensive knowledge of British and German medals combined with Sue's enjoyment of public speaking and dressing up was all that was required to set the wheels in motion. It was not long before simply promenading round wearing a uniform evolved into putting on educational displays. Anything from the Royal Navy to the Home Guard, from 1930's washday to the Cold War, from the Land Army to an odd job man on a 1940's bicycle, even the German Police or a German P.O.W. Simultaneously building up a formidable array of equipment, weapons, uniforms, home front paraphernalia including an original Anderson Shelter in a 1940's back garden.

At the Museum during 2005-06, Roger spent considerable time shadowing the "old hands" on Trench Tours. Gaining knowledge and experience from Dave Shergold, Paul Hitchien, Phil Schofield, Ben Moore, plus the late Richard Quance and Mike Webley. By 2007 the couple were volunteering regularly until 2013 when everything came to an abrupt halt following Rogers surgery and chemotherapy for colon cancer.

Also in 2013 the Museum Volunteers were selected to receive the honour of the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. A Grand Presentation Ceremony at the Museum on Tuesday 3rd September 2013 caused much amusement among the education volunteers. From their table in the far corner of the marquee they noted dozens of guests in attendance who, it was remarked, had never been seen at any school visit or event conducting a trench tour, hammering in road pins or erecting any tents! Everyone had a wonderful day and enjoyed the cakes and drinks though. Roger wears his Award badge with pride on his Home Guard uniform to this day.

Another memorable occasion was the Family Open Day on Thursday 8th May 2014. HRH The

Duchess of Cornwall flew in by helicopter to grace the Celebration and Dedication of the Defence Medical Services (Whittington). The museum education team including Roger and Sue were on hand with a WW1 recruitment display tent. Many local organisations were also present with interesting displays and exhibitions. On parade also were Corporal Watchman the Staffordshire Bull Terrier and mascot of the Staffordshire Regiment accompanied by Private Derby the Swaledale Ram and mascot of the Mercian Regimental. What a grand day out!

Then there was the occasion in September 2015 when the organisers of an advertised Regency Event pulled out at the 11th hour leaving Museum staff to hurriedly arrange something or other in its place! Wonderful volunteers from Harvington Hall got involved at the last minute with their Regency Dancing display. Some volunteers and Museum friends dressed up in whatever they could to give some atmosphere. Roger became a Highwayman and Sue an old crone with a begging bowl. The odd thing is museum visitors were actually putting donations in her wooden collecting bowl. Perhaps we should try this again sometime when the pandemic is ancient history??

After the illness in 2013 Roger was forced to reduce his attendance at the Museum to Discovery Days only. Then, in 2015 unfortunately the cancer returned in his liver involving extensive surgery and follow up treatment. A further reduction in workload became essential. However this did not stop him organising a complete refurbishment of the Pill box area of the Museum site.



Until then the Pillbox had been in poor condition. A large grey concrete box in the far right corner

with a distinctive unforgettable odor to anyone brave enough to peer through the doorway. Museum Director Danielle asked Roger if he could design, oversee and instruct a group of new recruits from the base next door who were available to do whatever was required to assist. Roger drew up plans not only for the Pillbox but also for an adjacent defensive fighting position as described in the 1940 Home Guard Manual. Roger was assisted by the museum's maintenance stalwart Dennis Smart who was only too happy to help in any way that he could. The recruits worked hard and did a really good job except for one day when neither Roger nor Dennis were able to attend and manage the project. On that day they got the concrete mix for some of the sandbags wrong which resulted in those bags collapsing after four years. Fortunately a small team of museum volunteers have recently replaced these sandbags so the slit trench, as it is more commonly referred to, is as good as new once more. Additionally Roger and Sue have repainted the Pill box internally and externally during the lockdown of 2020.

Over the years Roger and Sue have appeared in local newspapers representing the museum. Roger has numerous press cuttings including photographs from the Express and Star and the Lichfield Mercury. These create much amusement since at 74 he must surely be the oldest Great War Corporal defending a British front line trench. Another highlight was in 2018 when Sue, Hilary Hinks and Rob Wantling took part in a photoshoot with JCB arranged at the Defence Medical Services ground next door. This was a successful fund raising event auctioning a JCB "Lest We Forget" digger in aid of the Royal British Legion.

Apart from volunteering at the Museum, Roger and Sue formed their own Wartime British and German Home Front educational group some years ago. Like minded friends were turning up at events to assist and a group public liability insurance was required. The title "South Staffs Living History Group" was created to reflect the aims of the group and a popular Facebook account with videos and photos continues to draw interest from all quarters both home and

overseas. Apart from appearing at Staffordshire Regiment Museum Roger and Sue voluntarily arrange all sorts of displays for many organisations including Severn Valley Railway, Milton Keynes Museum, Castle Bromwich Hall Gardens, Hack Green Nuclear Bunker, Great Central Railway, Newhall Mill, Papplewick Pumping Station, Chasewater Railway and Tutbury Castle to name just a few.

These days Roger specialises in South Staffs 32nd Battalion Home Guard and will invariably be found at the Pill box talking to visitors about Nazi invasion plans, stop lines, manning a defensive fighting position, and the various types of pillbox. However he can also be found in a German Home Guard uniform when there is a call for the pill box to be disguised as the "Seigfried Line" as happened in 2019 at the "Bridge Too Far – Arnhem" event.



Roger and Sue also have great fun at the Wartime Christmas Events where Peggy Skivvy and Dolly Duster produce the ultimate wartime Christmas lunch display whilst Roger and his Commanding Officer Phil together with Corporal Terry Copper fill two tables with the contents of a Home Guard kitbag and weapons.



Here's looking forward to the future with the museum site currently in great condition thanks to all the work completed by volunteers during the lockdown period. Roger and Sue and their assorted characters are 100% ready for the next Discovery Day or Wartime Weekend Event.

HEADING IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS

Life moves on for all of us and this has resulted in us saying farewell to two key members of the museum team in recent months. Museum director Dani Crozier and Museum friend's photographic lead Terry Fidgeion have both been with us for around ten years, but left at the end of the summer heading to opposite ends of the country.



Terry and his wife are moving to Devon to be closer to their family, whilst Dani is moving to Lincolnshire to take up an exciting post with the International Bomber Command Centre. Both were given a warm send off, all be it fairly low profile, with best wishes and gifts from the friends.



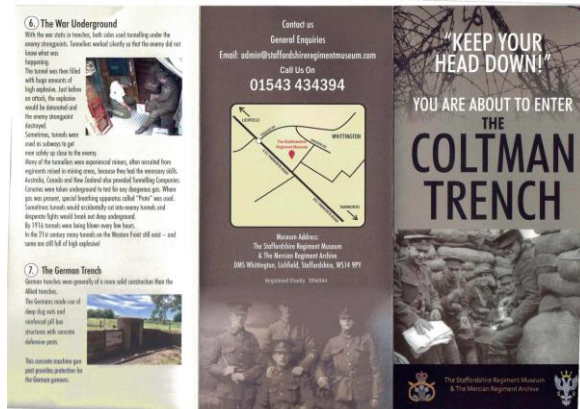
Both have made a huge contribution to the museum's work. Terry has kept a photographic record of museum events and activities, often seen hanging around in no man's land looking for that perfect photo opportunity. Dani has seen through big changes, everything from developing links with other Mercian and Airborne museums, to creating the World's only Warrior AFV themed children's playground.

It's pleasing to hear that both have committed to help and support our friends group from afar. So we wish them well and give notice that *we will no doubt be in touch*.

EDUCATION TEAM FLYING TO THE RESCUE

As soon as the members of the museum's education team realised that School visits would be severely curtailed due to corona virus restrictions, they formed a small working party to explore ways in which they could contribute to the visitor experience.

Given that it was obvious that close quarter guided groups were going to be impractical they immediately focused on ways to create self-guided trench tours.



These included re-recording voice commentaries for the Coltman Trench, exploring options for a QR code system and work on downloadable updated schools packages. They quickly moved onto the production of glossy flyers which give visitors a step by step tour of both the trench and our WW2 themed Smart Street. All of the work has been funded by the museum itself, allowing the friends group to focus its funding on the ongoing friends projects.

Alpha Graphics again assisted us with the artwork and production of the flyers. Our education team lead Hillary Hinks, even managed to pay tribute to her uncle who served on the Western Front, by including a photograph of him and his comrades in the Coltman Trench guide. Given the amazing job done by Hillary and the team, we think that she wholeheartedly deserves that small indulgence.



MICRO MEETING FOR FRIENDS

You will be aware that our scheduled friends meetings for this year were canceled due to lockdown measures. But as restrictions were eased the friend's officials were hopeful of holding a meeting for thirty people in October. To this end the offer of a large local function room was secured so that those attending could maintain a safe social distance.

However as the weeks rolled by the limit for group gatherings was reduced to six and this resulted in a re think. It has been decided to hold a micro meeting between the friend's officials, the head of the trustees and the new head of the museum.

This meeting will take place on Wednesday 21st October and friends are urged to contact our secretary Juliet Davies with any questions or points they would like to see raised prior to the event. Formal minutes will be produced and circulated to all of the friends after the meeting.





**YOUR MUSEUM
NEEDS YOU!**

Tempted to become a volunteer at the Staffordshire Regiment Museum, or to join the friends group?

There are so many ways to get involved, and your skills are sure to be of use no matter what they are. You can put in as much time and commitment into the museum as you want, as they say every little helps. Clearly a lot of work is done on site at Whittington, but it's also possible to do research, administration, and promotional work remotely or from home.

If you want to volunteer or just talk about options pop into the museum or contact-
Steve Hemming Museum Attendant on Attendant@staffordshireregimentmuseum.com
Or Juliet Davies Friends Secretary on FriendsSecretary@Yahoo.com

