

The Devon Heritage Centre: A Guide to World War One Research

Table of Contents

Finding an individual	2
Parish records:.....	2
Online genealogy and service records:	2
National websites:.....	2
Armed Forces	3
Recruitment.....	3
Service	3
After the war	3
Local Communities	3
Creative and personal material	4
On the front line.....	4
Back at home.....	4
Pictures.....	4
Newspapers.....	5
Microfilm at the Heritage Centre	5
Beyond the Heritage Centre.....	5
Online	5
Useful private collections	5
The Fortescue Collection.....	6
Gribble family archive	6
Books	6
Further Research	6
The Imperial War Museum	6
UK Government.....	6
BBC website.....	7
The Cabinet War Papers.....	7

If you are interested in researching World War One and its effects on people and the community at large in your local area, the Devon Heritage Centre is a good place to start. This guide explains the vast amount of resources available and how to use them, as well as directing you towards avenues for further research within and beyond the county.

Unless otherwise stated, the collections or documents referred to below are to be found at the Devon Heritage Centre in Sowton, Exeter. The affiliated North Devon Record Office has a smaller collection with a similar range of materials. It contains the records, for example, of many of the northern parishes of Devon. The North Devon Record Office also contains a small number of letter collections which may be very interesting, such as the Gribble family archive and its letters from men at the front, and so may be worth a browsing visit if you have the time. You can do a search for materials at both centres online at Access to Archives: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/>

The Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, meanwhile, is operated by a different council and has separate arrangements. Its archives are, at least in part, catalogued online at Access to Archives, and it's worth a visit to find out more about the collections they hold if you have any connections to, or interest in, that part of Devon or the naval side of World War One.

Finding an individual

Parish records: As part of the commemoration project you may be starting with individuals, whether relatives or names on your local memorial. Thanks to rising interest in genealogy, there are many useful tools for finding out about people. The Heritage Centre holds extensive parish collections, often going back centuries, which contain baptism, marriage and burial records as well as other types of documents. This usually includes the Roll of Honour and papers relating to the war memorials themselves, which can come in a variety of forms. Some parishes, such as Tavistock and Lustleigh, retain copies of a "war book" or "book of remembrance", with lists of names and details of their lives and their place in the local community. Parish records are the best place to start your research, as you can find out about the men named on the memorial and the families they left behind. You just need to know a name and a parish: a rough estimate of dates helps but is not essential.

Online genealogy and service records: The Ancestry genealogy service at www.ancestry.co.uk can be used to trace people from the time of the war, and includes digital copies of a vast quantity of the National Archives' military records not currently available elsewhere. This site is comprehensive and contains medal cards. It requires a subscription at home, but you can use it for free on the computers in the Heritage Centre and all libraries in Devon. Similar information is available at www.findmypast.co.uk, which is also freely accessible at the Centre, and sometimes contains records which Ancestry does not. There may be additional service details at www.forces-war-records.co.uk, although this will require a home subscription.

National websites: The Royal British Legion's Roll of Honour website at <http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Devon/#Menus> has pages for many war memorials in Devon, with pictures, lists of names and details of the men named such as where they served, date of death, and even where they are buried. Meanwhile, you can find out the date of death and location of burial of a named soldier at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission online at <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx>. The London Gazette published casualty lists as well as lists of honours throughout the war and is now searchable online for free at <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/>

Armed Forces

Recruitment: At the Heritage Centre you can see recruiting posters such as Lord Kitchener's famous "Your Country Needs You", and a large set of booklets persuading young men to join up voluntarily – and their wives and mothers to let them go. Many of these are highly emotive and a few are specific to Devon. At the beginning, the war was portrayed as a glorious and exciting adventure, with the Voluntary Armies comprising nearly three million from a nation of forty million by the end of 1915. However, when the war was not over by Christmas 1914, and in fact dragged on through another year, it became clear that more men were needed. The recruitment material from this later date takes on a different tone. Then, in February 1916, the Military Service Act first brought in the compulsory enlistment of single and widowed men of ages 18-40. By May, married men were called up too. Parishes were ordered to send more men, and many still have lists of names and notes, as well as records of applications for exemption from military service, whether or not they were successful.

Service: Soldiers from rural Devon fought far across the world, from France to Egypt, the Dardanelles, and beyond into Mesopotamia and even India. Once you know where and when a man or a company fought, you could look for the Battalion war diaries at the National Archives or the account of a particular battle at the Heritage Centre if possible. You can see a brief summary of where a battalion served during the course of the war at <http://www.1914-1918.net/>, along with very useful information on battles, tactics and living conditions at the front. The Heritage Centre even holds some maps of the trenches in northern France where Devonian men fought and died. Other Devon men served in the Territorial Forces, whose records survive at the Heritage Centre.

After the war: Those who survived did not face a life of ease once the war was over. The War Pensions Committee was set up to support discharged soldiers and to provide them with access to medical treatment and training, but trade and industries had been damaged and it was difficult to get jobs, especially for those badly wounded. Meanwhile soldiers' deaths left countless widows and orphans. It may be worth looking through parish collections for the pension records of old soldiers and the statements of allowances given to fatherless families in the aftermath of the war, as well as at diaries and memoirs, to find out about the enormous impact it had on society.

Local Communities

Above and beyond finding out the names and dates of individuals from your parish caught up in the war, parish records can tell you much more about the local community. Most parish collections in fact have a section marked "wartime" in which you can often find many valuable materials related to the wartime experience of the parish, including fundraising and work in support of the armies. Look out for the accounts of fundraising committees like the Devon Patriotic Fund, the activities of charitable organisations such as the Linen League, and correspondence on the maintenance of Belgian refugees. This can be enlightening as to the work that went on behind the scenes, maintaining the war effort from the pockets of ordinary people at home. The Red Cross organised a great deal of war work, and at <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/Museum-and-archives/Resources-for-researchers> you can find out about individual volunteers and their work during the war.

Rural Devon was a significant contributor to British food supplies during the war, and had to conform to a number of agricultural directives to produce what the government assessed as needed. This meant land use changes, a constant battle for workers being called up, and a shift towards female labour. These changes can be studied in parishes' war and agricultural papers.

Creative and personal material

On the front line: Detailed, expressive diaries are rare, but it may be possible to find out about the feelings and views on the war of soldiers from those that exist, as well as letters and memoirs. Ask around at home and in your local community just in case, and the Devon Heritage Centre has a number of works left by Devonshire men who fought. Some parish collections include postcards and letters home, often in thanks for presents sent to them in France, India, Egypt and beyond, and sometimes describing life in training or on active service. A collection of letters and telegrams sent to his family by George Fursdon, on active service in France, give an extremely vivid impression of the initial excitement and rush of war, the sense of duty, and conditions in the trenches. Poetry was a popular mode of expression at the time, and C.D. Whetham, an Ottery St Mary man who missed the "moorland magic" of his home county, wrote a series of "Occasional Verses in Wartime" which can be found in the Devon Heritage Centre.

Back at home: The war drastically changed life for those at home too, with changes in working patterns, living conditions and family life, as well as the pressures of war support work. Many women and other people not eligible for military service contributed to the war effort through organisations such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Often this meant working as a nurse in a temporary hospital, looking after soldiers who had been wounded and sent back to England. There were five temporary hospitals in Exeter alone, set up in mansions and other large buildings suitable for the purpose. Many nurses who worked in these have left notes, letters and, fascinatingly, autograph books, signed by soldiers they nursed. These men left notes of gratitude, often tender and serious, but surprisingly often in the forms of funny poems and jokes. These offer a wonderful window into the attitudes and sense of humour of people in the midst of the bloodiest war to date. Of course the war also acted as a catalyst for the cause of the suffragettes and other movements like the trade unions, and while England did not suffer a revolution as other European countries did during and after the war, its social make-up was changed forever by it. Diaries such as that of Ruth Whitaker, a VAD nurse during the war who wrote her memoirs of her whole life just before her death in 1975, show the abrupt change the war forced on societal and individual outlooks.

Pictures

Very few are lucky enough to have pictures of relatives from the time of the war. The Heritage Centre contains, spread through a range of private collections, a small number of photographs of Devon people and places during World War One. Most often these are photos of temporary hospitals, and therefore include local women as VAD nurses, as well as wounded soldiers from all over the country. Meanwhile, there are plenty of websites where you can find pictures of people, places and events in the First World War, to give you a vivid impression of the conditions and the attitudes of the people involved.

Newspapers

Most towns in Devon had a local newspaper during the First World War, and there were several papers which covered the whole of Devon, or a large portion of it, such as the Western Times. These newspapers contained news from the front and war-related happenings at home, as well as the normal events that went on throughout the war: it's often quite a vivid contrast. They contain obituaries and often pictures of local men who died, but there is also an abundance of local fact and gossip in each issue, on events and incidents involving hundreds of local people, from every level of the community. Newspapers can be an extremely good way of finding out what it was like for those living at home, waiting for news of loved ones, and carrying on with everyday life in the meantime.

Microfilm at the Heritage Centre: The Heritage Centre has inherited the microfilm collections of the Westcountry Studies Library, which includes a small but important proportion of historic Devon newspapers. You can look through the list at <http://www.devon.gov.uk/localstudies/100206/1.html>. About ten of them, from the Crediton Chronicle to the Western Times, cover the period 1914-18. None are catalogued so it is not possible to look through a list and pick out editions or pages which look relevant and interesting, and browsing through the microfilm itself is very time-consuming. Therefore you will need to use other information to narrow down your selection; for example, if you know of a specific event in your local area, such as the death of a local man on the front line, search the month around it to find out more detail, context and contemporary comment.

Beyond the Heritage Centre: If you cannot find any newspapers for your local area in the Westcountry Studies Library catalogue, check out the historic newspapers for all of Devon in the Devon Newspaper Bibliography at <http://www.devon.gov.uk/localstudies/100204/1.html>, as they may be available at local museums and public libraries. If not there will be copies at the British Library, Colindale.

Online: The British Newspaper Archive is in the process of a massive digitisation project and you can use the website to search for historic newspapers from your local area, look at impressively clear, readable pages of them online, and even search the text of them to find specific subjects. As yet they only have the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, Western Times, and North Devon Journal, but they are a great guide to life in wartime Devon, and you may find it helpful to have a look at some of the national newspapers available anyway. Register and search at <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> and, although the website requires a subscription to view your search results, you can use that log-in at one of two computers at the Heritage Centre to view newspapers for free. You can also search the collection for specific names at <http://www.findmypast.co.uk/search/newspapers>, also free at the Heritage Centre.

Useful private collections

Private collections can show how specific Devon individuals or families were affected by the war, and this can be valuable to more than just their immediate relatives. The Fortescue Collection is an example of a particularly large and valuable private collection which may be worth a browse to give you a different perspective on Devon during World War One.

The Fortescue Collection: These are the Lord Lieutenant of Devon's papers from around the years of World War One, and have a wide variety of information to offer a researcher. The collection combines official paperwork, often from central government, with letters and diaries. There is fascinating information on preparations for defence and mobilisation, along with the processes of recruitment, training and the distribution of war honours, from the point of view of a commanding officer. As this covers the forces drawn from all over Devon to fight in the Devonshire Regiment, it can be extremely valuable for showing what soldiers from the county went through before, during and after the war. Lord Fortescue's own memoirs of wartime in his capacity as Lord Lieutenant of Devon are enlightening, giving the (often controversial) viewpoint of a man in an organisational, commanding capacity.

Gribble family archive: Held at the North Devon Record Office, this powerful little collection contains a number of letters and accounts of war from the front lines, including Gallipoli and the Dardanelles. As well as providing insight into the soldiers' attitudes to war (which clearly differed greatly from brother to brother) some letters also show the anguish of their relatives when they didn't return.

Books

The Westcountry Studies Library has recently been merged with the Devon Heritage Centre. Some of the books in its collection are relevant to the First World War, a particularly good one being Atkinson's *The Devonshire Regiment, 1914-1918*, in 2 volumes published in 1926. You can search for books at <http://www.devon.gov.uk/localstudies/100173/1.html>

Of course there may be many other books out there relevant to your research. One book worth looking at for this particular project is Clive Aslet, *War Memorial: The Story of One Village's Sacrifice from 1914-2003* (Penguin, 2012), which is about Lydford, in West Devon.

Further Research

The following list can lead you to information about the war beyond Devon, and includes online resources as well as places to visit. Most of them will be commemorating the centenary in some way, which will mean a greater volume of information and possibly easier access to it than before. Beyond this list there is a wealth of online interest in World War One; it's good to browse.

The Imperial War Museum in London has a vast collection of fascinating materials, with a special First World War exhibition being created for the centenary. It is creating a new online collection of materials relating to the experiences of servicemen, including recordings of interviews from the time, which you can find at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/centenary>. The Imperial War Museum is also organising events all over the country to engage with a wider range of people.

UK Government: The government has set out its plans for the commemoration of the First World War, including projects and events across the country, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/first-world-war-centenary>. This may be a good way of finding out what's going on in Devon and elsewhere, and could lead you to further research opportunities.

BBC website: The BBC's history pages at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/> are a great place to find comprehensive information about the causes, course and consequences of the war, as well as a certain amount of local history material.

The Cabinet War Papers are available online from the National Archives at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/total-war.htm?WT.ac=Total%20war>. These give very detailed accounts of the government's side of the story, its aims and objectives and the strategic reasons for its decisions.

Help and advice

Researching World War One in particular can be incredibly rewarding, and information is more easily available than ever before to help you delve into the experiences of the people who lived and died a hundred years ago. Don't hesitate to ask at the Heritage Centre for help or any further information, and email devrec@devon.gov.uk in advance of a visit if you would like advice.

Roisin Hannon