Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

FIRST WORLD WAR H 90

Puttee



A puttee (from the Hindi word *patti*, meaning bandage) is a strip of cloth that was worn around the leg by soldiers to provide waterproofing, ankle support and to stop the trousers flapping about and grit entering footwear. In combat they were sometimes used as improvised bandages/slings. Puttees can be seen being worn on the group photograph included in this box.

To wear puttees, the tapeless end was placed against the inside of the ankle and unwound, finishing about two inches (4cm) below the knee. The tapes were then wrapped round the leg with the ends tucked in. The tapes were not tied, as knots were difficult to unfasten when wet.

German Helmet



This kind of helmet is called, in German, a Pickelhaube (Pickel = point and Haube = hat). The pickelhaube was originally designed by the Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm, in 1842. The tallness of the original design made it disliked by its wearers, but the King had a great attachment to his creation. In 1856 the King was judged to be insane, however his helmet remained in use, gradually being reduced in height up to 1895, when the helmet reached the appearance it maintained up to the outbreak of the First World War.



The basic design of the helmet is shown in the illustration on the right. There are three main leather parts of the helmet; a basic shell with a front and rear visor, that are sewn on. The shell was formed by pressing a piece of steamed leather through a large mould. The helmet was then covered in many layers of black lacquer until it could be polished to a bright finish. The helmet had two brass reinforcing trim pieces, at the front visor and a brass spine at the rear of the helmet. The front of the helmet is covered with a large gilded brass helmet plate. Each German Kingdom, Dukedom, Earldom, Free City, and so on, had its own helmet plate.

Continued on next page.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

The gilded brass plate on this example bears the Bavarian State coat of arms supported by two lions, and the State motto, 'In Treue Fest' (*In Loyalty Steadfast*). Bavaria adopted the Pickelhaube, the last German State to do so, in 1886. Various bits are missing, as can be seen by comparing it with the illustration above. There are, for example, no kokades. The kokade on the right side would have been coloured black, white, red - the national colours of Germany at that time. The kokade on the left would have been blue and white, which were the State colours of Bavaria.

All helmets produced for the infantry before and during 1914 were made of leather. As the war progressed, however, Germany's leather stockpiles dwindled. After extensive imports from South America, particularly Argentina, the German government began producing ersatz (a German word meaning 'imitation') helmets. Eventually some were made from pressurised felt and even paper. Whatever they were made from, however, it was found that the leather helmet offered little protection for troops in the trenches. In 1916, the Pickelhaube was slowly replaced by the Stahlhelm, or 'steel helmet', that in modified forms would continue to be worn by German troops in the Second World War. After the adoption of the Stahlhelm, the Pickelhaube was reduced to ceremonial wear and after the end of the war the Pickelhaube was completely abandoned.



Cartridge Cases



Before being fired these cartridge cases would have had a bullet attached to them (see picture below right). The bullet is a solid lump of metal in a case which flies through the air with the purpose of killing someone. The cartridge case contains the propellant. When the trigger of the rifle is pulled a firing-pin strikes the percussion cap at the end of the cartridge and a tiny amount of mercury fulminate explodes, setting off the propellant, which drives the bullet out of the rifle. After the shot has been fired the cartridge case has to be ejected from the rifle.

Continued on next page.

These cartridge cases are from a German Mauser rifle. The German industrialist Paul von Mauser (1838-1914) was responsible for many changes in rifle design. Most significantly he was responsible for the stripper clip reloading system. Typically, the Mauser magazine would hold five cartridges. When these had been exhausted, the shooter could either load cartridges one at a time into the magazine or use a stack of five cartridges secured by a metal strip, called a stripper clip, that attached to the cartridge rims. The strip was inserted into a slot cut at the top rear of the receiver where it was held secure while the stack of cartridges was pressed downward with the thumb reloading the magazine with essentially one action. The empty strip was then discarded.

This development meant that Mauser rifles could be reloaded much more rapidly than with rifles where each cartridge had to be loaded individually. At first the British army dismissed such an innovation, believing that slower shooting was more accurate (and cheaper!) and that clips of rounds would be easily dropped by the average soldier. However, after the British Army received a mauling in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) from Mauser rifles they soon changed their mind. The British developed the Lee-Enfield rifle in 1895 which used a box magazine case containing 10 rounds.

Poppy



Many countries have a special day to remember those that fell in their wars; America has Veterans Day, while France has Armistice Day. The British commemorate those who fought, and are still fighting, in wars for their country on Remembrance Day. In Britain, Remembrance Day is always held on the 11 November. This is the day that World War One ended in 1918, when the armistice was signed in Compiègne, Northern France, at 5 a.m. Six hours later, the fighting stopped, and to commemorate this there is a two minute silence in the UK at 11 a.m., every 11 November.

The first Remembrance Day was marked in 1919. Paper poppies, made by disabled soldiers to raise money for their welfare, were first sold in 1921. The poppy became a symbol of the bloodshed of the war largely because of the Canadian military doctor John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*. Although melancholy, this is far from being a poem which urges peace - the last section suggests the hope of continued war!

Continued on next page.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.



We are the Dead.
Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die.

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

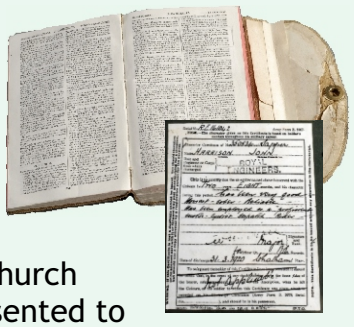
Ring

The memento ring is inscribed with the name Ypres, a town in Flanders, Belgium.



The red corn poppy naturally grows in ground that has been freshly ploughed. In the battlefields of France the soil became churned up not by the plough, but by bombs. So much soil was disturbed that the poppies bloomed as never before. The most famous bloom of poppies in the war was in Ypres, which was crucial to the Allied defence. There were three battles there, but it was the second (1915), which was calamitous for the allies since it heralded the first use of the new chlorine gas the Germans were experimenting with, which brought forth the poppies in greatest abundance. It was this battle that inspired the Canadian soldier, Major John McCrae, to write *In Flanders Fields*. Some images of the ruined town of Ypres can be seen in the book of postcards also in this box.

Bible

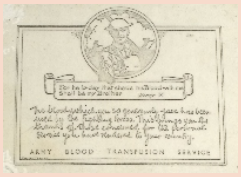


This pocket Bible, with its khaki cover was given to John Harrison by members of the Providence United Methodist chapel at Sheriff Hill, near Gateshead, on 21 October 1915. The cover has been signed by the chapel's steward (the person who organises the running of each service) and Sunday School Superintendent, and the best wishes of the choir and church members are also given. Presumably the Bible was presented to him at a service before he set off to join the army.

A few verses have been marked, including Isaiah 31.5: 'As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also he will deliver it; and passing over he will preserve it'. Was John Harrison looking for assurance of God's protection?

In fact he seems to have survived the war. The box also includes a character certificate given to him when he was demobilised on 31 March 1920. This certificate attests that he served for two years and eight months, which means that although he must have volunteered in 1915 (the date on the Bible), he was not actually called up until February 1917. We also learn from this certificate that he had the rank of sapper (private) in the Royal Engineers and that he served as a motor-cyclist despatch rider. The certificate credits him with being 'good - honest - sober - reliable'. The members of Sheriff Hill chapel would no doubt have been pleased that he had remained true to their values.

Blood Donors Card



The first successful transfusion of blood from one person to another took place in 1818. However the first transfusion from stored blood only took place in 1914. The new technique was used during the First World War, but was still very much an experimental procedure. The use of preserved blood was introduced into a casualty clearing station in the British Third Army during the battle of Cambrai in November 1917 by an American doctor Captain Oswald H. Robertson. Only group O blood was used. There was no difficulty in procuring blood donors. Up to the middle of 1918, the spirit of comradeship was sufficient to supply them. Later, a 3-week leave in England after the donation secured many offers from lightly wounded men. Dental patients and soldiers with minor injuries, sprains, and flat feet were also used as donors.

Continued on next page.

It is probable, however, that this card dates from World War Two. The British Army Blood Transfusion Service (BATS) was formed in 1938. The back of the card states that 'Your blood is now either dried and sent to the Middle East Force, or used for plasma store at home'. Dried plasma was developed and first used during World War Two.

Bovril Jar

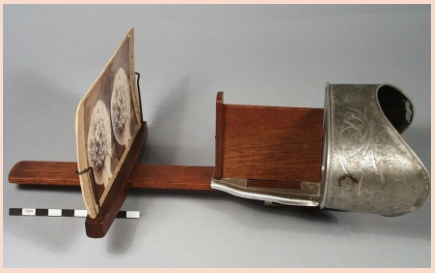




Bovril is a semi-liquid beef extract which, when mixed in hot water, made a savoury drink. The name, like many late nineteenth and early twentieth century tradenames, comes from the Latin word *bos*, meaning ox. The vril component of the name comes from Bulwer-Lytton's 1870 novel, *The Coming Race*, in which a subterranean humanoid race have mental control over, and devastating powers from, an energy fluid named Vril.

Bovril was first concocted in 1870 (as 'Johnston's Fluid Beef') by a Scot called John Lawson Johnston for the benefit of the French army in their war against the Germans. The Bovril company was formed in 1889. It continued to be popular among troops, as it was believed to be very nutritious, and during the First World War Bovril were keen to associate themselves with the fight against the Germans. The illustration to the right, for example, shows the cover of the *Bovril Book of War Facts* (1915).

Photograph and Stereoscope Slides



The photograph shows four soldiers whose hat badges indicate that they are from the Royal West Kent regiment. The one sitting at the front is a corporal. Many such photographs were taken to be left with the soldier's families while they were away on active service.

The slides are from a set of stereoscopic slides which were made to be looked at through a viewer (see photograph) which created a 3D effect. Some of the scenes are clearly staged after the event. The sets were often housed in boxes that looked like books when placed on a shelf.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FIRST WORLD WAR H 90

War Map



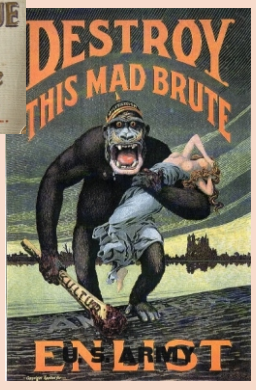
The progress of the war was eagerly followed by civilians at home and many families charted the Allies' progress by attaching pins or flags to a wall hung map. This example dates from the early part of the war as it records Italy as having an ambiguous position. It had been allied to the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires since 1882, however it refused to join the 'Triple Alliance' when war actually broke out. In May 1915 it entered the war on the side of the 'Triple Entente' (Britain, France and Russia). In all probability this map dates from 1914.

A large area of the map is given over to recording the comparative strength of the various countries involved in the conflict. The tiny size of Britain's standing army is noticeable - only 380,000 men against 4 million in France and 5 million in Germany. The small size of the British army led to it being described as 'contemptible' by the German Kaiser. This derogatory description was later taken up with pride by the British troops themselves, who enjoyed the nickname the 'Old Contemptibles'.

On the other hand, the chart also shows that the British Navy was far bigger than that of any other country involved in the conflict.

Postcard Book





Another souvenir of the war, this time Belgian. This example is strongly anti-German. The title of the book could be translated as *Heroic Belgium in Ruins the work of German 'Culture'*. Many anti-German posters made similar sneering comments about German claims to cultural superiority. The famous United States recruitment poster on the right, for example, shows a German beast (note the Pickelhaube on its head!), carrying off a lady in one hand and wielding a club inscribed with the word 'Kultur' in the other.

Paper Sack



Brown paper has been used in place of Hessian to produce this small sack. This was an economy measure. It is suitable for sandbags which were used in the trenches.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FIRST WORLD WAR H 90

Three Medals and Acknowledgement Letters



The two letters were sent to the family of Private Reginald Reeves along with the appropriate medals. The family were meant to acknowledge the receipt of the medals by returning the tear-off slip at the bottom, although they didn't do this with one of the letters!

Private Reeves died on 24 October 1918, less than a month before the Armistice was signed. He was a member of a battalion of the Black Watch which had been attached to the 2nd Highland Brigade in 1915. He is buried in Thiant cemetery, a village in the Department du Nord, 8 kilometres south-west of Valenciennes, France. Thirty-eight members of the Black Watch are buried there, the largest group in the cemetery. They were killed battling for control of the village in the final stages of the war.

The three medals which Private Reeves was awarded were the all-purpose tokens given to most of the soldiers and sailors who fought in the war. The government issued approximately 2,366,000 1914-15 Star Medals, 6,500,000 silver British War Medals and 5,725,000 British Victory Medals. The three medals were often sarcastically referred to as 'Pip, Squeak and Wilfred' who were three cartoon characters popular in a newspaper of the time.

Christmas Card



Colourful embroidered postcards, known as Silks, were a phenomenon of the First World War. Paris postcard houses employed women and girls to produce the silks on a rough assembly line basis. Sometimes individual women turned out their own designs. They could take from four to eight hours to complete. The maker might sell the card direct to a soldier for as little as a few francs.

Several genres established themselves. Some of them emphasised themes such as liberty, unity and right or were decorated with regimental badges and crests. Others were embroidered with personal messages - ‘To my dear Mother’ or ‘To my dear Sister’ or, like this one, were for special occasions. They were seldom sent openly in the mail and franked. They were either enclosed in envelopes or taken back home by soldiers returning on leave.

Continued on next page.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FIRST WORLD WAR H 90

This example was originally enclosed in the envelope which can also be seen. The small printed card with the words 'To my dear Sister' was placed inside the embroidered organdie panel of the card. The envelope bears a 1917 postmark.

Silk Flag

This is the flag of the Lancashire Fusiliers. It was issued by B.D.V. cigarettes. At this date silk 'cards' like this one were issued, as well as the more familiar cardboard cards. B.D.V. cigarettes issued a series which celebrated various regiments of the British army. Many companies produced similar items to cash-in on the patriotism and interest in the events of the war.



Beaker

Many commemorative items were produced to celebrate the end of the war and this one proclaims 'Peace' across the world with a symbolic dove and the flags of the allies. This beaker must have been made soon after the armistice was signed at Compiègne on 11 November 1918.





Daily Mail War Map

