Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FIRST WORLD WAR H90/A

The objects in this box tell the story of the First World War, which took place between 1914 and 1918.The Allies (Britain, France, Russia, Italy and the USA) defeated the Central Powers of Germany, the Ottoman Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Coins

These coins come from countries that took part in the First World War. Can you identify any of the countries?



The coin in the centre is a British halfpenny. It was pronounced 'hayp-nee' because it was easier and quicker to say. On one side it has a portrait of King George V, who reigned between 1910 and 1936. The Latin inscription around the outside says 'GEORGIVS V DEI GRA BRITT OMN REX FID DEF IND IMP' which means 'George V by the Grace of God: King and Emperor of India'. On the other side of the coin is Britannia. Britannia was a Roman goddess and was also the Latin name given to the British Isles. That is where we get the name Britain. Britannia is usually depicted sitting on a rock holding a trident, spear or shield depending on the year of the coin.
She has become a national symbol, especially in times of war. Today you can find her on the 50 pence coin.





King George V

The Allies Bible in Khaki



This miniscule Bible was produced in 1914 for serving soldiers. Can you read any of the tiny print? There is a magnifying glass tucked into the flap on the back cover, which helped the soldiers to see the text, although it was still very small! These Bibles were a popular gift to soldiers leaving home and heading for war. The national anthem and a poem called 'Evening Prayer of a People' by Neil Munro are printed at the beginning.

Reading Borough Council

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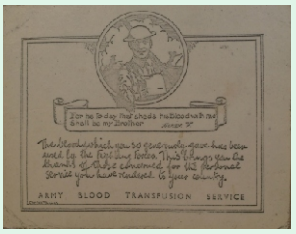
Blood Donor Card



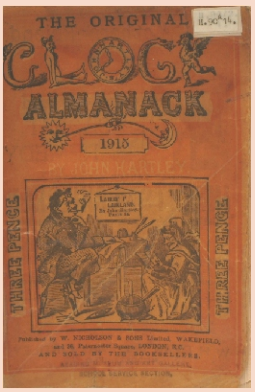
The First World War was, at the time, the bloodiest ever fought by British troops. Although thousands of men died, thousands more were saved as a result of a very important discovery. A Belgian surgeon called Hustin noticed that adding sodium citrate to blood stopped it from thickening and clotting. The blood could then be stored and used when needed. Before this discovery the donor had to lie next to the injured soldier whilst the blood was transferred directly.

This card was given to the donor as a thank you from the Army Blood Transfusion Service. The message written on the front shows just how important and valued blood donors were at that time of great need.

A red card is given to people who donate blood today. The card is a different colour depending on how many donations have been given.



Clock Almanac



Items that reminded soldiers of home were the most treasured of possessions. It must have been extremely difficult to be separated from your family whilst fighting in a foreign country. This book is written in a Yorkshire dialect and has many adverts and stories depicting ordinary civilian life back home. Imagine how much comfort this book brought to its owner.

Bovril Jar



Cigarettes, chocolate and food were greatly appreciated by soldiers on the front line. Bovril is a thick black paste made from beef extract, which can be turned into a hot drink or spread on toast and biscuits. It was popular with soldiers because it contained many vitamins and needed little preparation. You may have eaten Bovril or its relative Marmite, as it is still possible to buy it today.



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Beaker



This French aluminium beaker commemorates the Battle of the Somme, which took place in 1916 between 1 July and 18 November. The Allied forces tried to break through the German defences along the River Somme in northern France. It was a terrible battle in which approximately 125,000 British soldiers lost their lives and a further 300,000 were injured. It is difficult to say whether either side won that particular battle as the war continued for a further two years and only two miles of land were actually gained by the Allies. The picture above shows life in the trenches during the Battle of the Somme.



The beaker is decorated with a poppy.

Poppy

The poppy became the symbol of the First World War. These bright red flowers grew in abundance on battlefields where the earth had been trampled and the dead were buried. The poem below was written in 1915 by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae and describes the cornfields in a region of Belgium called Flanders. There are several other poems and songs included in this box, which tell different stories from the First World War.

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.



Paper poppies, like the one in the box, are worn every year on Remembrance Sunday in November to mark the anniversary of the end of the First World War.

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War Service Badge



Life was also tough for those men who stayed at home in Britain. They were thought of as cowards and were taunted in the streets for not being in uniform. These badges were given to men carrying out civilian work at home and stated 'on war service'. They could show this to anyone who criticised them for not serving their country. Jobs at home included working in a factory, in an office or on a farm.

Silver Brooch and Officer's Cap

The silver brooch shows the insignia of a machine gunner. It would have been made of brass if worn by a soldier, so it is likely that this silver one was a gift to a female friend or relative.



The little model of an officer's peaked cap is actually a jewellery box. It may have contained a commemorative piece of jewellery, like the silver brooch next to it.

Cartridge Cases



A bullet is placed into a cartridge case along with a primer, which is a small metal cup filled with a powder charge. It is then put into a gun. When the trigger is pulled a small hammer hits the primer causing the powder charge to explode and propel the bullet down the barrel of the gun. These brass cartridge cases were usually used with an Enfield rifle or a Vickers machine gun, both of which were used by British troops during the First World War. The picture on the right shows a Vickers machine gun being used by British soldiers.



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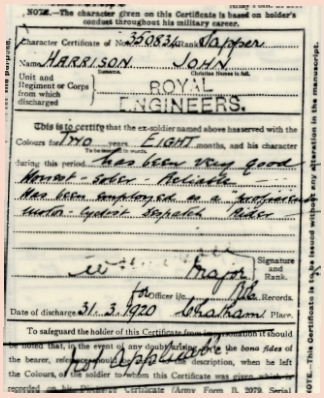
Postcard Album

The postcards in this album show the devastation caused to French towns as a result of the war. They show people clearing up rubble and starting to rebuild cities including Lille and Arras.



Certificate of Transfer to Reserve



It is difficult to read the information on this certificate, which belonged to Royal Engineer, John Harrison. When soldiers were released from active service they received such a certificate, which was like a report on their character. How is John Harrison described?

Photographs

Families cherished the photographs of their loved ones away at war. Imagine how hard it was to never know when you would see your father, husband or brother again.







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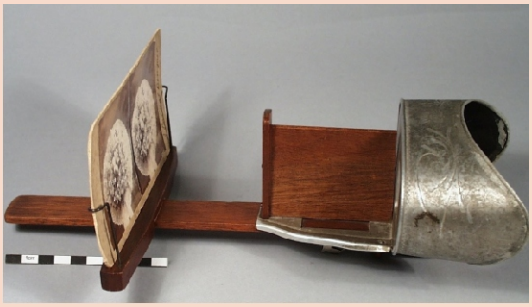
Stereoscope Slides

A stereoscope is a hand-held device with two eyepieces, which is used to look at a card with two pictures on it, like the examples in the box. The picture on the right shows a stereoscope on a stand. The two pictures merge and produce a 3D image when viewed through the stereoscope. These pictures show the success of the Allies and would have made the general public feel very proud to be on the winning side.





Victory Handkerchief

The Union Jack was printed on many souvenirs to celebrate the end of war. Most cities, towns and villages across the country held victory parades where handkerchiefs and flags were waved and the soldiers were welcomed home as heroes.

