Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FIRST WORLD WAR H90/B

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.

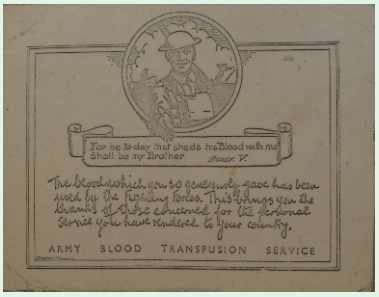
Bovril Jar





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.

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.



This red card is given to people who donate blood today. The card is a different colour depending on the number of donations.

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Embroidered Postcard





Colourful embroidered postcards, known as silks, were very popular during the First World War. Some of them were patriotic and promoted liberty and unity. Others were decorated with regimental badges and crests, like this one from the Royal Berkshire Regiment. Many others were embroidered with personal messages such as 'to my dear mother'. An example of this is shown in the picture on the right. They were not usually sent openly in the mail as we would send a postcard today. Instead, they were either enclosed in envelopes or taken back home by soldiers returning on leave.

These postcards were originally made by women in France and Belgium, who made a good income from selling them to soldiers. As their popularity increased, Paris postcard houses employed women and girls to produce the silks on an assembly line. The stitching was of a lower standard than those made previously.

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.

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 used with an Enfield rifle and a Vickers machine gun, both of which were used by British troops during the First World War.

Ring



When soldiers weren't fighting they tried to create a sense of normality in their lives. They washed clothes, wrote letters home and made things. This ring was made to commemorate the destruction of an enemy camp on Messines Ridge near Ypres, Belgium. The word 'Messines' has been inscribed on the brass diamond.

Leather Purse



This small purse has a very simple fastening and a strap on the back so that it could be slipped onto a belt. The leather is very worn around the fastening and where the flap folds over. It might have been used by a soldier to hold a small amount of money.

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Shell Cap



A shell is a cylinder-shaped object filled with an explosive and fired from a large weapon on a warship, tank or from land-based artillery. This cap, or fuse, was screwed onto the shell and acted as a timer. The soldier estimated how far away the enemy was and twisted the sections at the top of the cap to set the timer accordingly. Gunpowder was packed into a groove on the inside, which lined up with the number of seconds the timer was set for. The trail of gunpowder started to burn once the shell had been launched like the fuse on a stick of dynamite. It would then trigger the shell to explode above the enemy position inflicting the maximum damage. Of course, it only worked if the soldier had got the measurements right. During the First World War the job of setting the timers belonged to an officer known as the Fuse Setter.

Different types of shell where used during the First World War. Armour-piercing shells, for example, had a solid tip to batter their way through hard surfaces. This cap is from a shrapnel shell, which contained an explosive and many small steel balls (the shrapnel). These balls scattered like hundreds of bullets when the shell exploded over the enemy.

This object has been very carefully and beautifully made, considering it had such a deadly purpose.

Soldier's Belt



The British Army traditionally wore bright colours on the battlefield. This was daunting for the enemy and also helped to identify comrades amidst the cannon smoke. But warfare changed and so did the uniform.

Khaki colours were first worn in the late nineteenth century by soldiers serving in India. They realised that blending into their surroundings was a great method of protection. It was soon adopted by all sections of the armed forces and was the uniform of the British Army during the First World War. Khaki can range from a dull brownish yellow to a dirty olive green colour - in fact the word is originally taken from the Urdu language and means 'dust-coloured'.

This leather belt with its brass buckle would have been worn with a Khaki tunic. The holes are very irregular! Perhaps the belt had originally belonged to a smaller person and so new holes were made for the new owner.

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Gas Rattle

Gas was used as a weapon during the First World War with devastating effects. There were three main types. *Tear gas* created temporary blindness and irritated the nose and throat. It caused great confusion and disorientation amongst soldiers but a gas mask offered good protection from this type of gas. *Asphyxiants* were poisonous gases that attacked the respiratory system. The victim usually died, as doctors couldn't find a cure. *Blistering agents,* including the dreaded mustard gas, attacked the skin and so was virtually impossible to defend against. The victim was left badly blistered and burnt after contact. The picture on the right shows a soldier in a First World War army hospital recovering after suffering a mustard gas attack.





A wooden rattle provided a simple warning of a gas attack in the trenches. The rattle was rotated a few times and then soldiers had seconds to protect themselves in the best way they could. A gas rattle similar to this one belonging to the 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment has the inscription 'If you see's it rotate it, if you smells it you's too late mate'.

In 1925 the use of gas as a weapon was banned - a few years too late for the soldiers of the First World War.

Button Slide



This simple device was an essential part of a soldier's equipment. The brass buttons on the army uniforms had to be kept bright and shining at all times. Soldiers used Brasso - a brown liquid polish that is still extremely popular today. But it would be terrible if you got Brasso on the clean material of the uniform. To solve this problem the buttons were fed into the slit of this button slide. The soldier's name and number are stamped onto the metal.



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White Soap



Conditions in the trenches of the First World War were often appalling - especially during the freezing winter months. Imagine living in a muddy trench surrounded by rats, lice and disease. Soldiers made great efforts to wash their clothes and bodies, despite these unhygienic living conditions.

A bar of soap sent from home was a very welcome gift as it helped to raise morale as well as fend off germs and infections. Trench foot, nits and trench fever caused by lice bites were just some of the illnesses soldiers might contract whilst living and fighting in the trenches.



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.







Silk Handkerchief

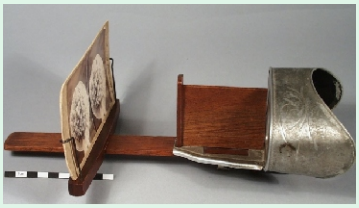
Handkerchiefs were a popular gift during the war, particularly those with a patriotic message. They could be folded easily and sent abroad in an envelope. This one has the flag and arms of Italy, one of Britain's allies.



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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 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.



Cushion Cover

The embroidered message in the middle of this cushion cover tells us that it was made to mark the end of the war. A rose has been used here as an emblem of peace and the square pictures show four towns, which were severely damaged during the war. This cushion cover is made from silk and lace - both very delicate materials.



Autograph Book

This little book provides a fascinating insight into the life of a soldier during the First World War. It contains pictures of friends and drawings made by the owner. In several photographs groups of soldiers are carrying out training exercises. It is rare to find such a personal account.

