Sharing your WW1 research: Choosing the right story

Research into the experiences of people and communities during WW1 will probably generate lots of stories. We might uncover examples of bravery and loss, strength and survival, community and isolation in places as diverse as trenches, hospitals, churches or schools but there's no way we can share everything we've learned.

We need to decide which stories are the most important to us, and tell them first. We can return to other stories later.

Communicating with others to share stories about our heritage is called interpretation. This guide will help you decide what stories to share, and help you start interpreting them for your audience.

Finding your story

Let's imagine that our research has focused on Private Henry James, a member of the 5th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment, who served on the Western Front until his death in Autumn 1917. We know something of his family life, from old photographs and letters, and we know of his death as he's commemorated on the local war memorial. We have copies of some of Henry's correspondence with his old school friend and fellow rugby player Charlie, who appealed against conscription on religious grounds. We also have letters written to Henry's wife Susan by her sister Mary, who worked in the munitions factory.

There are many stories we could tell from this research. We could tell people about the role Henry's Regiment played on the Western front or problems with wartime correspondence. We could look at the lives of soldiers in the trenches, or the numerous challenges for families left behind. We could even explore the lives of men who didn't fight, or the changing roles of women during the war. We could also tell Henry's story, as a whole.

Even with the help of colleagues, friends and family, turning our research into stories for others is not always easy. So where should we start?

There are lots of ways to choose which theme or thread to explore, and we'll all have different reasons for the choices we make. We could go with whichever theme we've got the most information about – Henry's life story, probably – so we wouldn't need to do much more research before we start sharing.

If we know there's a lot of local interest in something (like soldiers who played rugby, for example, or conscientious objectors) we could look at that first because we know there will be an audience. We could also choose a theme simply because we think it's interesting – maybe something Mary wrote to her sister captured our imagination?

If you're not sure where to start you could always ask friends and family for their thoughts. You could also try asking yourself 'what would I want to know?'

Shaping your story

Think about a time when you've learned about your heritage. Wherever you were and whenever it was, you probably remember reacting to something.

You may have watched a film that made you laugh, or read a diary that made you wonder about something. You may have seen a photograph that gave you a new perspective. All of these are reactions to an experience, an object or another kind of sensory input that influenced you in some way. For many people it's that reaction that helps them to remember where they were and what they did.

Attracting people's attention and sparking their curiosity is the first stage in successful interpretation, whatever story you choose to tell. To help you with this stage of your plan try asking 'why would anyone want to know this?' Do you want to tell a story about a building or place? People that have been there before might be interested in how it's changed. Is your story about a WW1 soldier or perhaps the family he left behind? Their relatives, colleagues or community might want to know more.

This leads us to the second stage: making your story meaningful to anyone who might read, see or hear it. Most people find it easiest to learn about things that relate to their own lives in some way. Connecting your story to the lives of your audience will help them understand your story better. For example, children might not understand why Mary's job in munitions was so important, but could relate to Susan's children getting a day away from classes to pick berries. Ask yourself 'why should anyone want to learn more about this?'

The third stage looks at the very end of your story – what do you want them to take away? By this stage you'll have guided your audience through every step of your story. You'll have captured their interest and kept them focused on what you're telling them. What would you like them to have learned from this experience? How do you want them to feel at the end of your story?

Whether it's one page in a book, one activity at an event, or one image in an online exhibition, each piece must fit together. Every part should contribute to the overall story you want to tell.

It's also helpful to think about the design you will use to tell your story. We'll look at where and how we share stories in our guide to choosing the right location, but it's useful to think about the experience of your story at this stage as well. Can you present it in a way that

matches the tone of the story you're trying to tell? What kind of colours, shapes, images, sounds, and textures might be appropriate for the themes of your story?

Who is your audience?

You've probably gathered by now that it's important we know who our audience is. We can't make a final decision about what story we're going to tell, and how we're going to tell it, until we know who we're telling the story to.

We also need to think about what they might know already, so we can make sure the story we're telling is suitable for them. For example, a story about developments in aerospace technology during the First World War will probably be easy for trained engineers to understand, but may not be accessible to the general public.

Children might also need stories to be told in different ways, or for care to be taken about the details that are included. It's a good idea to get specialist advice on telling stories for children, if you choose them as your target audience. Talking to staff at your local school, museum or library might be a good place to start.

We'll be looking at ways of making stories accessible and finding the best ways to tell them in our 'Sharing your WW1 research: Choosing the right location' guide.

Other resources

The BBC's 'Hands on History' website explores the interpretation of historical artefacts. There's a video (downloads.bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory/a_guide_to_interpreting.pdf) to watch or you can download their guide to historical interpretation, to read through yourself (downloads.bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory/a_guide_to_interpreting.pdf).

Scottish Natural Heritage have created guidance for heritage groups that explores interpretive planning further. You can visit their website at www.snh.gov.uk/policy-and-guidance/heritage-interpretation/.

Fáilte Ireland has written a manual to help heritage sites use interpretation to improve visitors' experiences. It's a large and detailed document with a focus on Ireland specifically, but there are some good ideas for those telling stories about a particular place. You can download the manual at www.heritageweek.ie/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Heritage-Interpretation-Manual.pdf.

These resources may also help you to think about how to reach your audience. We'll cover this in our next guide – 'Sharing your WW1 research: Choosing the right location'.