

Case Study: Leicester Schools' Great War Trail

Background

Originally started in 2014 for the WW1 centenary and involving mostly Primary Schools, the Leicester Schools' Great War Trail has since evolved; in the last two years the multi-activity day has been offered to Secondary Schools and their KS3 pupils.

The day is intended to supplement and add to their classroom studies of the Great War, with a very local focus on the impacts on Leicester.

The day has been developed by and organised by Historic England's Local Heritage Education Manager [LHEM] who commissions the re-enactors, arranges the venues and promotes the day to local Secondary schools.

This year six separate Secondary schools from the city were involved, with one school requesting their own day so their entire Year 9 could attend, and the other five schools all involved on the next day. Over 300 pupils take part over the two days.

The purpose of the day is to experience how the people in Leicester were affected by the Great War. It links the local, to the national and to international events, covering the bigger picture through individual stories and personal experiences.

Attendance for the schools is free for their pupils, with the re-enactors and venue hire paid for by Heritage Schools.

It is a popular trip, which is usually limited to 25-30 pupils per school. Some schools allocate places to those who are first to hand back the permission letter, others get their pupils to write a submission explaining why they want to take part, selecting pupils on the basis of their written reasons.

The carousel of activities

All students start at the Y Theatre in Leicester city centre where they watch a short play set in 1918 which explores the impacts of the war on those fighting at the front and those left at home and asks is it time to call an end to the killing and 'seek peace at any price' or should Britain 'hold fast' and endure the sacrifice for those who have already lost their lives?

The play is performed by costumed characters and takes students back to the Great War.

"They seemed to really enjoy the first session in the Y theatre, I think it's a combination of everything. The actors were very good and performance was good. I think it's setting the scene really and for all of the students in the theatre, putting them back into that time of the war years. It brings them up to speed and sets the theme for the day. Some of our students even said "I didn't think I'd enjoy that but it was really good" – Teacher school 1

"A lot of them really enjoyed the beginning of the day, which was the presentation in the theatre, I think they enjoyed the elements of story within it and how it contrasted different views of the war" – Teacher school 2

For the rest of day each group of students circulate around several heritage buildings which have a historical connection with the Great War and participate in different activities, these cover:



Recruitment and conscription – at The Town Hall where these events actually took place during the Great War. Pupils are taken by a drill sergeant and fill in replica volunteer forms to join the Royal Leicestershire Regiment.



The role of women at home – in a room in Leicester Museum where local women ran campaigns to help support Belgian refugees. Magda, an Edwardian lady, explained to the students what it was like to be on the home front with letters to and from the front, recalling a Zeppelin raid on nearby Loughborough and discussing how the suffragettes put their protests on hold during the Great War.



The importance of memorials - delivered by volunteers from the Leicester City, County & Rutland At Risk War Memorials Project in All Saints Church, who highlighted and talked about a variety of different memorials and the stories of the people behind these names.

"Every Memorial has a story to tell" - Presenter

The life of a soldier – stories and experiences of a first aid medic, are recalled in a hands-on session at the Newarke Museum which also houses the Tigers Regiment Museum. This talk involved a lot of questions and answers, along with passing around and handling different artefacts to tell the stories of soldiers and convey their experiences at the front.

"They also really enjoyed meeting the soldier because of all the personal artefacts, they could look at things and pass them around, also the fact that he was just he was good, acting like a World War One soldier" – Teacher school 1



Questions from and to a soldier in the medical corps & artefacts handed round

Drilling and marching exercise – undertaken outside by The Magazine (a 15th century gateway). The in-character costumed Drill Sergeant’s job is to turn an often-reluctant group into a professional fighting force. Through doing this, pupils get a sense of what it must have been like for a civilian to become a soldier and how alien this must have been to most new recruits.

“They enjoyed the marching activity. He was really good, the manner he has with the students, I think that's what gets them engaged and they all took part, everyone seemed to enjoy that bit” – Teacher school 1

The students and their teachers walked from one activity to another, as they all took place relatively close together in the city centre.

The range of different activities provides a holistic view of the Great War from why young men volunteered, to the life of a soldier, through to the home front and remembering those who died. The theatre performance starts at 9:30am and the final carousel activity finishes at 2:30pm, with pupils being actively engaged throughout this time.

Reactions to the day

For most schools involved, they have just finished their teaching modules on WW1, so the day fits in well with their curriculum.

The range of re-enactors, dressed in costume and playing different characters helps bring their stories and the impact of the Great War to life.

“I think the actors also really make it” – Teacher school 1

“I think it did help that the presenters were dressed as they would have been” – Teacher school 2

Having a well organised day which is free for schools to attend and easy for many of them to walk into the city centre from their schools (so incurring no travel costs) were all mentioned by teachers as making it feasible for them to take part.

Most teachers had taken part in the similar event put on by Heritage Schools the year before. They were keen to come again and are very likely to take part if the same event was organised next year. It is viewed as an engaging and informative day for their pupils, adding to their understanding of the Great War and history of Leicester.

The impact on pupils

The impacts of the Great War are conveyed to pupils through the stories told by the costumed characters, the objects and artefacts pupils are shown and can touch meaning they can put themselves in the shoes of young conscripts signing up to join the army. The carousel of activities gets them to think about real life historical experiences and to understand the experiences of different people at the time and empathise with those involved.

"Getting a hands on experience, getting outside the classroom, seeing history in the real world and experiencing what it might have been like. It brought history to life for the students that were on the trip. It is memorable" – Teacher school 1

Either during or at the end of each activity pupils had the opportunity to ask questions, with many taking the opportunity to do this.

Pupils were actively engaged and involved in the different activities.

Even though the schools involved are located relatively close to the city centre, some pupils rarely walk around the city centre and even more do not appreciate the architecture, history or historical significance of many of the places they visit during the Great War Trail. The event exposes and informs pupils about the depth of history that surrounds anyone coming to the city centre.

The day provides a local Leicester perspective on the Great War, something which many pupils may not have otherwise fully appreciated.

"I think for them to see that history happened here. It didn't happen in London or elsewhere. It happened in their local area, it's local to them. Part of our curriculum and something that is quite important to us is showing that history happened here and that is that is what the day is about for us" – Teacher school 1

"What I'm hoping for is they get more of a connection, that WW1 happened here and affected everybody, that's what I want them to realise" – LHEM

"Just to make that local connection, World War One is something that becomes more and more distant, it's fading out of living memory. So this is something that brings that connection to people who would have lived where they live, that would have signed up and where they would have gone and what they would have done. And that interactive element was really useful for us" – Teacher school 2

Teachers felt it can be much more impactful when their pupils hear or experience 'history' through the viewpoint of a single person, with objects they can see and touch and personal stories they are likely to remember.

"I think it builds interest and engagement because it's experienced in a different way. I think it embeds the memory of some of those things in a more significant way than maybe some of the things that we do in the classroom and it also supports what we're doing in the classroom as well, so it helps to reinforce it" – Teacher school 2

The activities they took part were in the same locations as used in the Great War itself, which the pupils were told whilst doing the different activities.

"When it comes from a real person it's more powerful, when it is told as a story and they are in role, they [the pupils] can really imagine it. To hear the story from a person and it is linked to the place they are actually visiting I think it is more powerful" – LHEM

"As we were walking from venue to venue, there was a chance to talk to some of the students about how it is linked to what they've learned. Moving from space to space, they got to see several different areas in Leicester. So for example, when we went to the recruitment station, we went to the Town Hall, pictures had been shared about what that would have looked like at the time, what soldiers would have experienced as they went to sign-up, so it made it feel a little bit more real" – Teacher school 2

In addition to the day itself, which is limited to a smaller number of pupils from each school (typically 25-30) rather than the whole year group, Heritage Schools provides each school with a pack of information and historic photographs of various WW1 events taking place in Leicester in the spots that they visit during the day of the event. These resources can be used by teachers to help reinforce that history has and does occur in local areas and affected people like themselves and their families.

Teachers are also aware that by going to the different venues, many pupils are exposed to different historical or cultural places they might not otherwise go to in the city centre.

"Even just to see the museums and see what they are like because a lot of them haven't been or haven't been there since primary school to any of these museums" – Teacher school 1



Uniformed recruiters outside the Town Hall c1914



Year 9 pupils from English Martyrs School meeting the drill sergeant outside the Town Hall before going inside to join up



45th Battalion Leicester Regiment Parade, Magazine Square



Year 9 pupils parading by the Magazine

Even the talk on memorials, which was the least tangible activity, still took pupils from seeing these objects as an inanimate plaque or just a list of names, to appreciating that they all had interesting stories to tell about real people who had come from Leicester and who had died in the Great War.

Summary

Much of the teaching about World War One in the classroom is focussed on national or international events such as the causes, the experiences from the Battle of the Somme, Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles. The Heritage Schools event helps provide a local Leicester focus which is tangible and relatable. Pupils not only get to reinforce what they have already learnt but see this through a very local lens, appreciating that history is not just something that occurs elsewhere and to other people but happens where they live and impacted those like themselves.

"It really makes students understand that history affected people and not just countries" – Teacher school 2

The Great War Trail, with the types of activities and the number of venues and re-enactors involved, let alone the planning could not be put on by schools themselves. The size and scale of the day would not happen without the funding from Heritage Schools and the work of the LHEM [Local Heritage Education Manager] to organise and plan such a large-scale event.

"It gives the students an opportunity. It provides something that we can't really do on our own, with the actors, with the venues, both of those things logistically and the cost of it we couldn't do ourselves. So what is offered [by Heritage Schools] is quite unique" – Teacher school 1