**Students, Service and Sacrifice: Wartime Education, Adolescent Experiences and Understandings of the First World War**

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**Introduction**

Young people under the age of military recruitment, who did not have service experiences, have tended to be marginalised in the dominant narratives constructed about the First World War, which pervade the cultural memory of the conflict. That memory, reflected and re-created in commemorative frameworks privileges front-line, male-military experiences, largely oriented to the Western Front, and anchored upon a service-sacrifice discourse.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therein ‘youth’ does appear as a recurring trope. Consider, for example, the notion of the ‘naïve’ youthfulness of recruits; of the ‘dysgenic’ effect of the war through the loss of young, highly educated, officers, creating a ‘Lost Generation’ of future ‘politicians, philosophers or poets’; or of virile young bodies shattered, disillusioned, indeed, aged, by the war.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is the very enthusiasm and values that young recruits were seen to embody that provide the origins for the subsequently pervasive ‘Myth of the War Experience’.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is epitomised in the phenomenon of boy soldiers, lying about their age to enlist, a portion of whom made a tragic sacrifice.[[4]](#footnote-4) Children, some 350,000 who lost their fathers in the conflict, also feature centrally amongst those bereaved in post-war commemorative practices.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Yet little historiography has focused on the lives of other young people, especially those on the home front.[[6]](#footnote-6) Histories of childhood often finish with the outbreak of war, while historians of education emphasise the absences and lost opportunities created by disrupted schooling.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nor do the young fit easily into debates about participation ratios and calculations of post-war gains and losses, which traditionally centre upon impacts on class or gender.[[8]](#footnote-8) The centenary, however, offered opportunities to explore previously overlooked aspects of the conflict.[[9]](#footnote-9) Although much of the national emphasis re-affirmed the preoccupation with military-male adults and, more specifically, with the war dead, there have been efforts to incorporate a wider set of experiences. These include those of conscientious objectors; of prisoners of war, internees and refugees; of the contribution made by people from the British empire; of the role of women; and of the home front. Community-based projects in particular helped to illuminate the war’s effect on previously overlooked sectors of British society, including the experiences, involvement and understandings of children. These have indicated ways in which young people were intimately caught up in the wartime situation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It was in this context that the ‘Beyond the War Memorial’ community-engagement project was conceived, as a conscious endeavour to undertake a First World War study that did not have death, loss or sacrifice as its anchor point.[[11]](#footnote-11) Instead, the principal focus was on younger students attending the Harris Institute in Preston during the war. We sought to identify who these students were; what they studied; changes and continuities during the war; and how their wartime studies fitted within their pre- and post-war life trajectories. By presenting a history that foregrounded young people, education and, by that token, potentially life-enhancing opportunities, the project was devised as one that could challenge dominant service-sacrifice narratives about the war and its impact. To that end, a team of volunteers were recruited to undertake the underpinning research, and, as part of our aims we were interested to test whether researching these apparently atypical wartime experiences would change the volunteers’ preconceptions about the war.

In this chapter we outline the nature, aims and methods of the project, placing these within the context of Preston’s centenary activities, before examining the project’s findings. Contrary to prevailing views, at the Harris Institute at least, the evidence reveals enhanced educational opportunities for young people during the war. More students, of younger ages, attended over the course of the war, making their youth a key factor in their wartime experiences. To assess the legacy of that change, we offer case studies of individual students, drawing on the work undertaken by the volunteers, which show how students’ educational activities at the Harris fitted into life trajectories extending before and, in many cases, well beyond the war. These biographies furnish a largely positive record of full lives lived and, in this way, present challenges to popular assumptions and expectations about wartime experiences based on death, loss and negative impacts. The volunteers’ responses to these findings, however, was to question whether such accounts should therefore be counted as stories of the First World War. Reflecting on this unexpected reaction in turn raises questions about the impact of the centenary on contemporary understandings of the conflict, and about the place of children and youth in such popular understandings.

**Commemorating the First World War in Preston**

The flagship for Preston’s First World War commemorative activity was the Heritage Lottery funded ‘Preston Remembers’ project, which revolved around the renovation of the Grade II\* listed war memorial, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and sited in the main town square.[[12]](#footnote-12) Several considerations motivated that emphasis. In a practical sense, the memorial needed restoration and the local authority was keen to mobilise external resources as a catalyst for improvement to the city centre. Preston also houses two operational barracks, and the council wanted to enhance its relationship with the local military presence, which had identified restoration of the monument as symbolic of respect for the armed forces.

The accompanying learning plan for ‘Preston Remembers’ was also oriented to war memorial work. Research was carried out on some of the men listed on the roll of honour, housed in the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, the results being uploaded to the Imperial War Museum’s ‘Lives of the First World War: WW1 Digital Memorial’.[[13]](#footnote-13) A ‘memorial challenge’ was also set-up, which sought to make an inventory of the city’s war memorials.[[14]](#footnote-14) Other activities furthered that emphasis, including the community-curated endeavour led by the Museum of Lancashire on ‘St Mary’s Men’. St Mary’s was formerly a parish church, since re-purposed as a conservation studio for Lancashire Museums Service. Prominently displayed in the building is a memorial roll of eighty men from the parish who were killed during the war and whom a team of volunteers set out to research.[[15]](#footnote-15) Given the flourishing interest in and accessibility of resources for genealogy, researching the backgrounds of names listed on memorials was a practical means of engaging a wider audience in the commemorations. It helped to humanise abstract monuments and provided geographical relevance and relatability for many researchers. Although there were activities that considered other aspects of the war, commemorative events in Preston, as elsewhere in the country, were thus dominated by a focus on the war dead, on local memorials, and thereby on the male-combat experience they largely represent.

The ‘Beyond the War Memorial’ project, devised in collaboration with the ‘Preston Remembers’ team, sought to move beyond such narratives by focusing on an alternative perspective. By looking at the Harris Institute, the principal provider of technical education in the area, catering substantially for younger people, it was felt that a contrasting, possibly life-enriching, context for First World War-related research could be generated.[[16]](#footnote-16) Evidence came from a series of class registers, which provided information on the students who attended during the war. This included name (from which gender could usually be deduced), age at the time of study, address, occupation or father’s occupation, previous education and course studied. The data for 1914/15 to 1918/19 had previously been digitised onto a searchable database. This enabled analysis of individual students, the cohorts to which they belonged and, through supplementary research, aspects of their backgrounds. The project aimed to construct an overview of those attending the institute in order to ascertain if, how and why this altered over the course of the war. We further sought to examine the lives of students before, during and after their studies, to assess the extent to which their wartime education at the Harris had longer-lasting impacts on their lives. The project therefore offered a case study of educational experience in war, placing adolescents centre stage, and offering new perspectives on both the short- and long-term impact of the war on British society.

Ten volunteer researchers were recruited to the project.[[17]](#footnote-17) Although not intended, most had previously worked on the ‘St Mary’s Men’, while others had contributed to the ‘memorial challenge’. Since there were over 5,000 names entered in the class register database, a smaller sub-set was needed, and the volunteers chose to identify a specific geographical area, known as Fishwick, broadly constituting the same orbit as St Mary’s church. Using the addresses given in the registers, a list of names was compiled of students living there, each volunteer being tasked with researching a number of students. Some looked at those enrolled in the academic year 1914-15, others focused on 1918-19. A sample was also taken from 1916-17. At the outset, the volunteers’ remit was to correlate the class register details with the 1911 Census to compile evidence of family backgrounds, thus allowing a profile of the Fishwick students attending the Harris to be built. Changes in that profile during the war would then be traced. As a supplementary aim, the volunteers were asked to find any evidence of what happened to ‘their’ students after their studies. Demonstrating considerable genealogical research skills, the volunteers generated material on the lives of some fifty students from the Fishwick area.

**The Harris Institute and Youth Education**

The Harris Institute was the principal provider of post-compulsory technical education in Preston, catering for the educational and diverse economic needs of the area. Like many Lancashire towns, Preston was dominated by cotton manufacture, with an important engineering industry.[[18]](#footnote-18) As the administrative seat of the county, there was also a substantial commercial and professional sector. In addition, it was the heart of a large agricultural area and the focus for an orbit of smaller towns. The curriculum reflected this diversity, although not in directly proportionate ways.[[19]](#footnote-19) Classes in various branches of engineering were the mainstay of technical instruction, with textiles as the secondary emphasis. Commercial subjects were almost as significant in terms of numbers taught. There was a small but thriving department for the building trades, and a fringe of miscellaneous tuition in pure sciences, humanities and languages. Funding came from disparate sources including fees, a grant-in-aid from the borough council, and central government grants. Income also came from the Harris bequest, a large sum donated by a wealthy local solicitor in the 1880s, which helped to endow the institute and from whom it derived its name.[[20]](#footnote-20) Several semi-autonomous departments also came under the auspices of the institute, but were largely self-governing, with specific sources of income from local and central government. These included agriculture, and substantial schools of art and of domestic science. In addition, a day-time Junior Technical School had been recognised under the Board of Education’s 1913 regulations, and a companion Junior Commercial School was authorised in the 1914-15 session.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The principal component of the Harris Institute’s work was evening classes, geared towards those already in employment.[[22]](#footnote-22) Individual subjects could be taken, from cotton spinning to shorthand, inorganic chemistry to Esperanto, in whatever pattern the student wished. Increasingly, however, students pursued an organised course, such as mechanical engineering or commerce, whereby a prescribed programme of connected subjects was taken, building progressively over several years of study. There was a stipulation that younger entrants to the organised courses should have completed two years of preliminary study in one of the town’s evening continuation schools, bridging the years between compulsory elementary schooling and higher-level education. Older students could be admitted based instead on their experience. The junior technical and commercial schools operated during the day and took students in their early teens direct from the elementary schools. Entrance was on a competitive basis and places, especially for the technical side, were highly sought after. Unusually, the junior schools were accommodated in the same premises, and under the same management as the evening classes, giving great prominence to younger people at the Harris whether as pupils in the day schools or workers attending evening classes.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The class registers provide evidence on students attending the technical and commercial subjects, divided into day-time and evening provision.[[24]](#footnote-24) At the outbreak of war, there were just over 900 students registered for the evening classes. Forty-six per cent of these were under 18, with an age profile clustered in the 16–18 bracket. Those under age 14 were predominantly studying art or music theory. Just over 87% of the total were male and 12% female.

Table 1 Age profile of evening students, 1914-15 session

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Number | Percentage |
| Under 12 | 3 | } |
| 12 | 8 | } 3 |
| 13 | 16 | } |
| 14 | 34 | 3.7 |
| 15 | 86 | 9.5 |
| 16 | 138 | 15 |
| 17 | 140 | 15 |
| 18 | 115 | 12.7 |
| 19 | 85 | 9.5 |
| 20+ | 276 | 30.5 |

By the final year of the war, the number of students enrolled on evening classes had increased to almost 1,000. There had been a shift towards a younger profile, with two thirds of students under 17, and the concentration now in the 15-16 age bracket. Unsurprisingly given wartime demands, students aged 18 and over declined sharply, yet did not disappear entirely. Similarly, with males of military age eligible to volunteer or, after 1916, being conscripted into military service, there was a shift in the gender split to 64% male and 36% female.

Table 2 Age profile of evening students, 1918-19 session

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Number | Percentage |
| Under 12 |  |  |
| 12 | 4 | } 2.6 |
| 13 | 22 |
| 14 | 48 | 4.8 |
| 15 | 176 | 17.6 |
| 16 | 256 | 25.7 |
| 17 | 162 | 16 |
| 18 | 70 | 7 |
| 19 | 30 | 3 |
| 20+ | 228 | 23 |

The day classes predominantly catered for younger people, primarily grouped around three organised courses in agriculture, commerce, and for the junior technical school.[[25]](#footnote-25) At the beginning of the 1914 session, there were 174 registered day students, with an expected younger profile than the evening classes. Those over 18 were mainly in agriculture, commerce or preparing for matriculation examinations. One hundred and twenty-one (almost 70%) were male and 48 (almost 28%) female.[[26]](#footnote-26) The agricultural course and technical school were exclusively male and the commercial school overwhelmingly female.

Table 3 Age profile of day-time students, 1914-15 session

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Number | Percentage |
| 13 | 32 | 18 |
| 14 | 41 | 23.5 |
| 15 | 23 | 13 |
| 16 | 17 | 9.7 |
| 17 | 21 | 12 |
| 18 | 15 | 8.6 |
| 19 | 10 | 5.7 |
| 20+ | 12 | 6.8 |

By the 1918-19 session, there had been a slight drop in the total numbers attending day classes to 168. The age profile was now even younger and there was also an identifiable increase of female students to 61 (just over 36%). Overall numbers, however, remained constant throughout the war; the decline of older students evidently being stemmed by the increase of younger ones.

Table 4 Age profile of day-time students, 1918-19 session

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Number | Percentage |
| 12 | 2 | 1 |
| 13 | 50 | 29.7 |
| 14 | 46 | 27 |
| 15 | 25 | 14.8 |
| 16 | 16 | 9.5 |
| 17 | 12 | 7 |
| 18 | 3 | 1.7 |
| 19 | 2 | 1 |
| 20+ | 3 | 1.7 |

It is not unexpected that the gender profile of the institution should become more female during the war. Broadly, with increased ‘manpower’ demands, the war brought increased social and economic opportunities for women, even if their nature, extent and longevity is debated. Much historiographical emphasis, however, is placed on the role of female munitions work. Our findings support those who have instead emphasised commerce as the most important new sector for female employment.[[27]](#footnote-27) It was commercial courses for which the great majority of female students registered at the Harris during the war. As marked as the changes in the gender balance, however, is the shift in the age profile, which became noticeably younger for both the evening classes and the day schools. Again, it is not surprising that those over the age of 18, as the age of military eligibility, dwindled but, rather than this causing a drop in overall student attendance, the numbers at the Harris remained constant. For the evening classes, the figures increased, with older students replaced by younger counterparts. This outcome indicates that there was a demand for higher-level education in Preston and that the institute was prepared to offer opportunities to different kinds of younger students. It might be argued that these young people may, in due course, have attended the Harris anyway. It is at least as plausible, and evidence below indicates, that these students were taking up places created because of the war, without which they might never have been able to do so. In any case, while those in their late teens may have suffered due to wartime demands, educational opportunities for all young people were not universally diminished by the conflict.

**Fishwick Life-stories**

The cohort analysis presented above offers an overview of changing educational opportunities at the Harris during the First World War. Yet a core objective of the ‘Beyond the War Memorial’ project was to enhance these statistical insights by investigating a portion of the student population in depth, profiling socio-economic backgrounds, and tracing the value of wartime study to individuals’ subsequent lives. As a pilot study, students living in the Fishwick area of Preston, who were enrolled on evening classes, were investigated. In the early twentieth century, Fishwick was a predominantly working-class part of Preston, with mixed quality terraced housing, a range of local commercial premises and industries, dominated by the Horrockses cotton works.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In the 1914-15 session, 81 students from the Fishwick area attended evening classes, including just two women, and 36 (44%) under age 18. Of the under-eighteens, 26 were registered for organised courses, almost evenly divided between the technical, commercial and textile areas. The other 10 studied individual subjects, including commerce, trade, English, French and music.

Table 5 Age profile of Fishwick students, 1914-15 session

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Number | Percentage |
| 14 | 2 | 2.4 |
| 15 | 8 | 9.8 |
| 16 | 14 | 17 |
| 17 | 12 | 14.8 |
| 18 | 12 | 14.8 |
| 19 | 6 | 7.4 |
| 20+ | 27 | 33 |

By the end of the war, total numbers of Fishwick students had risen to 109, of whom 27 were female, and 72 (66%) were under 18. This represents proportionately larger increases in total numbers, of females, and of young people compared to the institution as a whole. The data thus indicates that the war offered even greater opportunities for young people in this relatively poorer district of Preston. Similarly, among the under-eighteens, there was more interest in pursuing the more demanding organised courses, with 61 registered. The balance of subjects had also shifted, with those taking textile courses remaining about the same, probably sustained by the local importance of the industry, where nationally it struggled during the war. Other areas seemed more attractive, as the classes for commercial and technical subjects rose to 29 and 18 respectively.

Table 6 Age profile of Fishwick students, 1918-19 session

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Number | Percentage |
| 13 | 4 | 3.6 |
| 14 | 4 | 3.6 |
| 15 | 14 | 12.8 |
| 16 | 30 | 27.5 |
| 17 | 20 | 18 |
| 18 | 5 | 4.5 |
| 19 | 5 | 4.5 |
| 20+ | 27 | 24.7 |

The volunteers constructed biographies of a sample of these students in an attempt to trace the kinds of people studying at the Harris Institute, why they might have engaged in higher education, and how their educational experiences contributed to their life trajectories.[[29]](#footnote-29) Due to limitations of space, we will focus here on just a few examples, primarily of students under the age of 18, which indicate key features in the overall sample.

One of the clearest patterns in the sample was a correlation between the students’ occupation and the course they were studying, underscoring deliberate mobilisation of study to enhance career prospects. Archibald Garratt was 15 years old and employed as a clerk when he enrolled on the commerce course in 1914.[[30]](#footnote-30) He continued his course for the full three years, gaining first class marks in arithmetic, commerce and bookkeeping. Reaching the age of military service, he enlisted in the Royal Garrison Artillery. Garratt survived the war and in 1939 was living with his wife and daughter and working as a wages clerk at an engineering firm. Richard Dandy was 17 and working in his father’s decorating business when he enrolled for a course in painting and decorating in 1914.[[31]](#footnote-31) In 1926, he appears as a partner in the family firm. At age 17, Clifford Towler was working as an apprentice draughtsman at the Preston engineering firm Dick, Kerr & Co.[[32]](#footnote-32) The firm encouraged their apprentices to study and Clifford enrolled in 1914 on the mechanical engineering course. By 1930 he was employed by Wolseley Motors Ltd in Birmingham and had submitted several patents relating to improvements in internal combustion engines. In the early years of the Second World War he had moved onto aero-engine design at Pobjoy Airmotors and Aircraft Ltd.

In some cases, students seemed to use study to enable the transition to new occupations. Tom Seed’s father ran a business as an ironmonger and hardware dealer, but Tom was working as a creeler in a cotton factory when he enrolled to study commerce in 1914.[[33]](#footnote-33) He enlisted in 1915 but was subsequently discharged on medical grounds. Tom neither went back to working in the cotton factory nor entered his father’s business. Instead, and relatable to his course of study, he got a job as a clerk, and, by 1939, was working as an industrial insurance agent. By that time his family could afford a domestic servant, potentially indicative of socio-economic betterment that accompanied Seed’s career choices. Percy Addison, meanwhile, was working as a clerk in 1916, but signed up for a course in building trades before switching to cotton weaving.[[34]](#footnote-34) The following year, he enlisted with the newly created Royal Flying Corps. After the war, and again relatable to his chosen studies, he followed a career in the cotton industry, becoming a manager at Horrockses mill.

Evidence on the female students has been harder to find, their stories masked by marriage or employment absences. Yet there are examples illustrative of new opportunities for women from Fishwick with clear links to their wartime studies at the Harris. Ethel Williamson, for example, was 21 and working as a clerk when she enrolled to study commerce in the final year of the war.[[35]](#footnote-35) She was to establish a career in office work, qualifying as a writing assistant for the Ministry of Labour in 1920, and was still working as a clerk for the ministry in 1939. Elsie Guard was 23 and working as a weaver in 1914.[[36]](#footnote-36) She had studied at the Harris Institute before the war, taking dressmaking in 1910, and would later study millinery at Fleetwood Technical College. In 1939, she was working as a sewing machinist. As with Garratt, Dandy and Towler, Guard appears to have used education to help progress in her chosen career. Interestingly, however, we come across her in 1914 signed up to study an individual subject in English. The syllabus was a mixture of language and literature, with the emphasis on grammar and composition, but included study of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, for plot, character and use of language.[[37]](#footnote-37) It is difficult to tell whether Elsie was studying for vocational purposes, for pleasure, or a mixture of both. Perhaps more typical for women was Mary Helm, who was 24 in 1914 and working as a teacher when she enrolled for the evening class in art, presumably for leisure purposes.[[38]](#footnote-38) After marriage in 1916 and a daughter in 1926, by 1939, she is recorded as carrying out unpaid domestic duties.

Unsurprisingly, many male students enlisted for military service, the annual reports for the institute recording a creditable 400 volunteers from the student body in the first year of the war.[[39]](#footnote-39) Examples cited above show students who served and returned, but some Fishwick boys were not so fortunate. William Clarkson had overcome difficult circumstances before enrolling on the commercial course in 1914-15.[[40]](#footnote-40) When he was 13 years old, his father had died and, unable to manage, his mother admitted him to the Harris Orphanage. At the time of enrolment, he was living independently and working as a short-hand typist. William then served as a gunner with the 2nd West Lancashire Royal Artillery and was killed on 10 April 1915 at Givenchy. Fred Wilding, a 17-year old clerk studying commerce, had volunteered in October 1914 and served throughout the war, but is recorded in 1939 as being a totally disabled army pensioner.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Numerous other cases could be cited to substantiate, and add nuance to, the patterns revealed. More young people, and more women, from Fishwick went to the Harris Institute during the war to study organised courses in newer technical subjects and commerce. The evidence is not detailed enough to make definitive statements about why they did so; but the correlations indicate that they used their education to enhance their employment prospects, sometimes enabling them to change direction, and to benefit economically and socially as a result. Some women forged independent careers, others returned to home and family. In several cases, study seemed to have been primarily undertaken for enjoyment with no direct correlation to vocation. Meanwhile many male students served in the military during the war, and some did not come back. However, as was the case nationally, the great majority, amounting to around 88% of men who served from the British Isles, did return, going on to live full lives of economic, social, cultural and familial value.[[42]](#footnote-42) For the most part, our sample indicates that wartime studies provided life-enhancing opportunities for young people that helped to shape, or at least can be linked to the shape of, their futures. Youth, opportunity and enhanced life-arcs are not narratives traditionally associated with studies of wartime experience and offer an alternative to negative tropes of sacrifice and loss, based on the male-military service model through which perceptions of the conflict are usually filtered.

**Volunteer Reflections**

In light of our findings, and in the context of its aims, a reflective exercise was built into the project’s evaluation, whereby volunteers were invited to discuss their research experiences, reflect on their findings, and consider what they felt they had learnt.[[43]](#footnote-43) Our intention was to discover if and how involvement in the project had affected their perceptions of the war. In turn, we hoped to generate evidence that could contribute to debates on how centenary commemorations have impacted upon popular understandings and cultural memory of the First World War in Britain.[[44]](#footnote-44)

A good deal of the discussion focussed on the research process and issues around source material. Volunteer 5 noted that it was much more difficult to find evidence about non-combatants and for those who had survived the war. It soon emerged that their findings through the life-histories they had constructed had countered initial assumptions. Volunteer 1 found it a revelation ‘how few got killed . . . a lot came back,’ adding that it was surprising how many children were born during the war. Further responses indicated that the project illuminated a lack of disruption caused by the war, volunteers referencing the stability of work, family and educational life as apparently experienced on the home front. Volunteer 1 commented that ‘education did not stop . . . the numbers [of students at the Harris] did not go down.’ Volunteer 4 was surprised at how little the war seemed to impinge on the families of the students, expecting to see more evidence of fathers serving and dying. This again underlines the under-appreciated national trend whereby most men who served did return after their service. Otherwise, the research reinforced volunteer assumptions about new opportunities and new freedoms for women. Volunteer 2, meanwhile, seized upon the importance of age, highlighting how the cohort studied seemed to have been a fortunate generation ‘in-between’: ‘a bit too young [to serve] and parents a bit too old . . . so they went through their education and came out the other side.’

Yet the discussion revealed a fundamental dialogue with the service-sacrifice discourse, through which the volunteers understood the findings and through the prism of which they continued to understand the conflict. In our case, many looked to their previous memorial research, especially upon ‘St Mary’s Men’ as the yardstick. Volunteer 2 commented that ‘it was interesting … the contrast with St Mary’s where, obviously, they all died . . . and this register where most of them came back and went on to have a full life.’ This led to the startling revelation that the volunteers did not in fact consider what they had discovered as a war history or war narrative, precisely because the project failed to conform to their prior perceptions of a war-experience. As Volunteer 5 put it, the biographies of people who went on to have long and fulfilling lives, were simply part of a socio-economic history of the North West in the early twentieth century. That history was seen as divorced from the war in both a historiographical and geographical sense. As Volunteer 1 put it, ‘[t]here didn’t appear to be any impact, what was going on over there, over-here’. These perceptions were further influenced by her understanding of the Second World War, referencing stories she had heard in her youth from older family members: ‘… the Second World War, what was happening at home was much more linked to what was happening abroad, because of the bombing. . . From what my grandmother said [the First World War] … didn’t have the same kind of impact.’ In this case the experience of working on the project had largely reinforced traditional notions of a separation of spheres, of experiences, and of histories, based on clear distinctions of battle/home front and military/civilian, with their implied age and gender dynamics: over-there as adult and male and a history of the First World War; over-here as the orbit of women and children and as *not* a war history but as part of Britain’s social and economic development.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Given the aims of the project, these conclusions were surprising; more so given recent trends in First World War historiography, which has indicated that the battle/home front, military/civilian divide was substantially diluted during that conflict.[[46]](#footnote-46) Scholars further agree how the home-front was inherently bound up with, and affected by, the battlefront; the solider and the civilian intimately connected.[[47]](#footnote-47) Indeed, such historiography has challenged post-war commemorative frameworks, which recreate a distinction between the privileged battlefield-male combatant experience, anchored around the dead, marginalising and excluding other narratives. For the volunteers on our project, however, while affirming the importance and interest of their findings, evidence of education, opportunity and life-enhancement could not be accepted as properly belonging to the history of the war, precisely because they did not conform to traditional narratives of service-sacrifice or to traditional, gendered, and age specific, orientations of the war.

**Conclusion**

The ‘Beyond the War Memorial’ project, as a centenary, collaborative and community-engagement initiative, set out to explore the effects of the First World War on students at the Harris Institute in Preston. In so doing, it sought to highlight an aspect of wartime history that potentially challenged dominant narratives of service-sacrifice which are based on adult male, military experiences. On the educational side, the cohort analyses show that, contrary to established views on the impact of the war on education, opportunities increased through the war years. Therein age was a central factor; a greater proportion of younger people took up higher education, with a more pronounced effect in the relatively poorer area of Fishwick. It follows that, since many of the students were younger, they were less likely to be called up for the war effort. The life histories suggest ways in which their studies had lifelong legacies, mainly to enhance established employment prospects, occasionally to enable new employment opportunities, and sometimes to foster interests and pleasures with much potential cultural value. Women, in increased numbers because of the war, shared in these opportunities to carve out a career, although many did return to domestic and familial roles. Taking these points together, if we are to admit the notion of a ‘Lost Generation’ resulting from the war, whose absence had the potential to damage post-war British society; then another ‘generation in-between’ can be identified in the class registers of the Harris Institute who took the places of those ‘lost’ to the war, with equally important implications for their own lives and for post-war Britain.

Hence, the research findings do offer a new perspective on the history of the First World War and upon its impact. The volunteers’ response, however, was to reject the challenges posed because they failed to conform to their preconceptions. Admittedly, though not by design, the volunteers had previously been engaged on war memorial research, and so were particularly steeped in tropes of death and loss. Nevertheless, it was surprising that the established narratives were so powerful that life-affirming stories could not be regarded as properly belonging to the history of the conflict. A further interesting insight was how the volunteers, largely themselves from a post-war generation, interpreted the home front experiences they had found through the prism of their understanding of the Second World War. Indeed, perceptions of the First World War are inevitably shaped by the subsequent history of the second, though this is not usually examined in terms of how those who were young and grew up in the shadow of the Second World War interpret the experiences of those who were young and grew up in the shadow of the First.

We concede here that we are discussing a small number of volunteers working on one centenary project, yet their responses must give us pause for thought. Is there a sense in which they are correct to question whether histories of educational opportunity, of the home front, and of the young, are not relevant to understanding the First World War? Is it just social history that happens to take place during the war years? Indeed, is judging this history in the war years a misrepresentation of its longer trends, which pre-dated and out-lived the conflict? What are the implications of such centenary projects, which may reinforce traditional conceptions, for future understanding of the First World War? Though perhaps disconcerting, these questions ought to be addressed and, we feel, should be countered. Harris students were affected by the war, not least through opportunities for study that became available to some and which they might not otherwise have been afforded. We know that many were affected in various ways; there are multiple other possible impacts about which we are ignorant. It should also be affirmed that the experiences of all people who went through the war, whatever their nature or significance, are proper for inclusion in the study of the war years. We do not need a calculus of the extent of the impact to decide if it is worthy of consideration. At this point, at least as far as this project shows, the bastion of dominant cultural constructions based on the war dead, and thus on the male service-sacrifice narrative, remains unshaken. Yet that should not dissuade from studies aiming to tease out the diversity of experiences of myriad social constellations, in which age is a crucial factor, that can create nuanced accounts and which, in a new century, may begin to filter into popular consciousness and cultural memory.

1. For on overview see: Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory: Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier’s Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jay Winter, ‘Britain’s “Lost Generation” of the First World War’, *Population Studies,* 31:3 (1977), p. 449. Hynes, *The Soldier’s Tale*, p. x. Oliver Wilkinson, *British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers,* p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Van Emden, *Boy Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adrian Gregory, *Silence of Memory*, p. 51; Richard Van Emden, *The Quick & The Dead. Fallen Soldiers & Their Families in the Great War* (London; Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Exceptions include Rosie Kennedy, *The Children’s War: Britain, 1914-1918* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Mike Brown, *Children in the First World War* (Stroud; Amberley, 2017); David Smith, ‘Juvenile Delinquency in Britain in the First World War’, Criminal Justice History, 11 (1990), pp. 119-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See for example: J. Walvin, *A Child’s World: A Social History of English Childhood 1800 – 1914* (London: Penguin, 1982). G. Sherrington, *English Education, Social Change and War 1911-20* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973); L. Andrews, *The Education Act 1918* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This implies the canon of work on war and social change beginning with Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Bodley Head, 1965); Arthur Marwick, *Britain in the Century of Total War: War, Peace and Social Change, 1900-1967* (London: Bodley Head, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. M. Andrews, ‘Poppies, Tommies and Remembrance’, *Soundings,* 58 (2014): 104 – 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See for example the lead taken by the AHRC First World War Public Engagement Centre ‘Everyday Lives in War’ on the theme of ‘Children’: Rachel Duffett, ‘Children’s Lives. Children & the First World War’, <<https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/childrens-lives/>> [accessed 1 September 2018]; Sue Mann, ‘Children’s Working Experiences in the First World War’, *Everyday Lives in War, AHRC Public Engagement Centre Blog* (24 October 2017) < <https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/2017/10/childrens-working-experiences-in-the-first-world-war/>> [accessed 1 September 2018]. Also see The Army Children Archive (TACA), <<http://www.archhistory.co.uk/taca/1914-18.html>> [accessed 1 September 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The project was funded by the AHRC and supported by the ‘Everyday Lives in War’ Public Engagement Centre, based at the University of Hertfordshire. For the specific project pages, see <<https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/category/uclan-project/>> [accessed 1 September 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For Preston Remembers see <<http://www.prestonremembers.org.uk/>> [accessed 10 September 2018]. Background to the project is provided in the Activity Plan 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Lives of The First World War: WW1 Digital Memorial’<<https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/>> [accessed 29 September 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For the Memorial Challenge see <<http://www.prestonremembers.org.uk/explore/prestons-memorials/>> [accessed 10 September, 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. D. Casserly (ed.), *St Mary’s Men. Remembering Preston’s First World War Heroes* (Preston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R. Pope and K. Phillips, *The University of Central Lancashire. A history of the development of the institution since 1828* (Preston: University of Central Lancashire, 1995) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There were eight female and two male volunteers. Four who provided their information were aged 48 – 65. This broadly captures the age range of the volunteers. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. D. Hunt, *A History of Preston* (Preston: Carnegie, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Harris Institute Preston, *Prospectus 1914 – 1915*. A useful summary of the condition of the institute is provided in the report of the HMIs’ visit for 1914, inserted in the Harris Institute Council Minutes of Meetings, 11th November, 1914. Institutional records are housed at the University of Central Lancashire’s Special Collections which, unfortunately, are uncatalogued. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pope and Phillips, *University of Central Lancashire*; Harris*, Prospectus 1914 – 1915*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. HMI report. Many technical institutes in the early twentieth century functioned in similar ways, see M. Sanderson, *Missing Stratum. Technical school education in England, 1900 – 1990s* (London: Athlone, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Harris, *Prospectus 1914 – 1915*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. How to define ‘young’, and the boundaries between childhood, youth and adulthood, especially in industrial towns is debateable. A pragmatic decision, appropriate to the period, was taken to focus on students under the age of 18 being the threshold for military recruitment. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. No information is provided on students enrolled for the Art School or School of Domestic Science. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Harris Institute, *Prospectus 1914 – 1915.* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Plus 5 whose gender was unclear from their forename. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See for example Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); Gail Braybon & Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women’s Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora, 1987). Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munition Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hunt, *History of Preston*; N. Morgan, *Deadly Dwellings. Housing and Health in a Lancashire Cotton Town* (Preston: Mullion, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. All the life histories have been compiled from locally available records, local newspaper material, and on-line resources accessed on ‘Ancestry’ or ‘Find My Past’ websites. Some of the stories have been uploaded to ‘Beyond the War Memorial’, Historypin, <<https://www.historypin.org/en/first-world-war-centenary/beyond-the-war-memorial/geo/53.761792,-2.708329,14/bounds/53.739284,-2.73442,53.784289,-2.682238/paging/1>> [accessed 2 October, 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Life history compiled by Volunteer 3 using *Lancashire Evening Post*; Service records, Marriage Registers and the 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Life history compiled by Volunteer 3 using Preston Trade Directories and Marriage Registers. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Life history compiled by Volunteer 2 using *Lancashire Evening Post* and Patents records. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Life history compiled by Volunteer 2 using Service Records, *Lancashire Evening Post*, Passenger Lists, Marriage Register, 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Life history compiled by Volunteer 4 using Marriage Registers, 1939 Register. Percy Addison’s RFC uniform was donated to Harris Museum and Art Gallery with additional information provided by the family [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Life history compiled by Volunteer 1 using *London Gazette*, 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Life history compiled by Volunteer 2 using *Lancashire Evening Post*, and 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Harris, *Prospectus 1914 – 1915*. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Life history compiled by Volunteer 2 using *Lancashire Evening Post*, Marriage Register, 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Annual Report 1914 – 15*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Life history compiled by Volunteer 3 using 1911 Census, Preston Roll of Honour records. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Life history compiled by Volunteer 2 using Service Records, 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Approximately 6 million men from the British Isles served during the war; of these 702,410 were killed. Hence approximately 11.7 per cent were killed; 88.3 per cent survived and returned. These calculations are based on *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914–1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), Part. IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Reflective Meeting, 28 November 2016, University of Central Lancashire. Reflections were recorded and held by Keith Vernon. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. On this agenda see AHRC Funded Project ‘Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning & Legacies for the Future’, University of Brighton (Principal Investigator Lucy Noakes) <[<https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FR001375%2F1>> [Accessed 1 September 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. On this traditional, gendered, understanding of war see Margaret R Higgonet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Rose and Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Roger Chickering, ‘World War I & the Theory of Total War. Reflections on the British & German Cases, 1814-1915’, in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds), *Great War, Total War. Combat & Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp, 35 & 37; Also see, Roger Chickering & Stig Förster, ‘Are We There Yet? World War II & The Theory of Total War’, in Roger Chickering & Stig Förster (eds), *A World at War: Global Politics & the Politics of Destruction, 1937-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2 & 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Kennedy, *Children’s War.* [↑](#footnote-ref-47)