



SOMERSET Heritage Service

# First World War Centenary Project

Research Guide

May 2013



Somerset  
Remembers



The First World War

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# Introduction

The year 2014 will mark the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. Drawing on this poignant moment in national history the Somerset Remembers project is exploring the impact and long-term legacy of the conflict on the county of Somerset. The project is themed around 'remembering' and is looking at the many ways in which Somerset people and communities have remembered the Great War.

This guide gives advice on using resources at the Somerset Heritage Centre to research the First World War. It also includes details on other ways you can find information about the war's effect on your family or community.



# How to research First World War personnel

Many people interested in researching the First World War want to trace the experiences of an individual person – a relative or perhaps a name listed on a local war memorial. There are a range of useful sources for researching personnel who served with the military:

There is no comprehensive list of the 8 million men who served in the British Army during the First World War. Here are a number of ways to begin your research:

- Before you begin look at any **photographs, documents, medals, letters and diaries** you can access. These sources might help to determine in which force and unit a person served, together with other information such as rank or service number.
- If possible ask relatives for any information they may have relating to the person you are researching. They might be able to remember where an individual fought or which regiment they were in.
- Somerset **newspapers** contain numerous references to local men who served with the army, navy or air force and to women who served as nurses or with the Women's Auxiliary Corps. Photographs, letters from the front, accounts of combat actions and casualty lists can be found. Many newspapers are available to view on microfilm at the Somerset Heritage Centre and Somerset Libraries.
- **Absentee voter lists** (ref. Q/RER) provide service details of absent voters (both male and female) for 1918 and 1919. The lists are compiled by electoral constituency and reveal which individuals from a community were serving in the armed forces and in many cases the particular unit or regiment they served with.



# How to research First World War personnel

- **School records** for larger grammar schools and independent schools can contain in-depth information about First World War service personnel. Some of the larger independent school collections, such as Wellington School (ref. A\DKH) and Bruton School (ref. DD\BRU), include details on 'Old Boys' who served during the war. Log books of primary schools may also detail war related activities.
- The National Archives holds the **records of the War Office**, which include extensive records covering all areas of military service.
- If an individual was killed in action or died in service during the First World War they are likely to be listed on the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission database**. This resource can reveal important information such as the unit a person served with, date of death, age, service number and details of next of kin.



# How to research Army Service

There is no comprehensive list of the 8 million men who served in the British Army during the First World War. However, there are specific records relating to army service:

- Most soldiers who served during the First World War were awarded a campaign medal. **Medal Index Cards** were created to keep a record of the medals to which individuals were entitled. Researchers can use them to find out more about a person's service history including which unit they served with. Medal Index Card's can be searched and downloaded using Ancestry or The National Archives website.
- All First World War soldiers had an individual **service record**. Sadly the majority of these records were destroyed in 1940. The surviving records have been digitised by The National Archives and are available via Ancestry. Service records for officers have not been digitised, but are available from The National Archives.
- When using Ancestry remember to search **Army Pension Records**. These are the service records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks who were discharged from the Army and claimed disability pensions of service in the First World War.
- If a soldier was invalided out during the conflict, he would have received the **Silver War badge**. A roll of those in receipt of this badge is searchable on Ancestry.
- If the soldier was an officer then details on his commission and service will be shown in the published **Army Lists**. Those for the war years are held at the Heritage Centre.
- Details of awards, honours and promotions can be found on the **London Gazette** website. Citations for the Distinguished Conduct Medal can also be found on Ancestry.
- Records of **Prisoners of War** are held by the International Committee of the Red Cross, whilst The National Archives hold reports and interviews.



# How to research The County Regiments

The Somerset Heritage Centre holds the archives of the county regiments. These extensive collections are a valuable source for anyone researching soldiers who served in the Somerset Light Infantry (ref. DD\SLI) or the North Somerset Yeomanry (ref. DD\NSY). Below is a list of the key records in the collections.

- **Battalion war diaries** are official records of a unit that were compiled during the war. They provide a daily account of a unit's actions and movements. The amount of information contained within war diaries varies considerably. War diaries sometimes mention officers, but rarely name soldiers from the ranks.
- **Muster rolls and enlistment registers** contain information on individual soldiers. The muster rolls are not complete, but those that survive have been digitised and are available to view at the Somerset Heritage Centre. Muster rolls can help piece together a soldier's story and include details of wounds, postings and promotions.
- **Casualty lists** survive for the North Somerset Yeomanry and for the 1st and 7th battalions of the Somerset Light Infantry, they contain details on wounded soldiers or those killed in action.
- **Photographs, scrapbooks, letters and diaries** are also contained within the collections.
- Although the regimental archive of the **West Somerset Yeomanry** is not known to have survived, the Somerset Light Infantry collection contains the battalion war diary and numerous photographs.
- A number of **publications** relate the history of the county regiments during the First World War. Some of these were published recently, whilst others date back to the 1920s. They contain additional research and information from contemporary sources. The **Regimental Histories** give a broad overview on a county regiment's involvement in the conflict. Written soon after the war they include accounts of particular battles and actions as well as lists of soldiers who received decorations. If you know which battalion an individual served with, use the regimental histories to learn about their experiences.



# How to research Naval, Air Force and Women's Service

People who were born and lived in Somerset did not just join the army; they also saw service with the Navy, the Royal Naval Air, the Royal Air Force, the Marines, or the Women's Auxiliary services. There are no service records held at the Heritage Centre relating to these services. However, there are records elsewhere which will be useful.

- **Royal Naval, Royal Marines and Royal Naval Air** original service records of men who signed up for 'hostilities only' service are held at the Fleet Air Arm Museum, and include engagement registers, record cards, crew books and pay and appointing registers.
- The National Archives hold service records for **Naval Personnel, Royal Naval Air Service, the Royal Marines, the Royal Flying Corps, the Royal Air Force, the Women's Royal Air Force, Women's Naval Service Personnel, Royal Naval Nurses and Women's Army Auxiliary Corps**. Many are available to view online, via the National Archives website.
- Medal rolls for all services are held at The National Archives: Those for **Naval Ratings and Royal Naval Reserve, British Army Nurses, Royal Air Force Nurses** are available through Ancestry, those for the Marines are available through the Find My Past website.
- Records of Service for the **Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)** are held by the International Red Cross. A catalogue of their holdings can be found on their website.



# How to research a Somerset community

Many people are interested in finding out how their community was affected by the First World War. There are a number of sources that can be used to research individual Somerset parishes or the wartime story of the wider county.

- Use information from the **1901 and 1911 census** to find information about individuals from a particular place. These can be accessed at the Heritage Centre or Somerset libraries via Ancestry, or online at Find My Past.
- The Somerset Heritage Centre holds the **ecclesiastical parish records** (ref. D\P\\*) for most of Somerset's parishes. Parish registers provide information about individuals from that parish. Details on the management of the parish during the war years can be found in the Vestry or Parochial Church Council minutes. Records of War Memorial committees survive for some parishes, as do faculties for the installation of memorial plaques or windows. Parish magazines can provide a wide range of relevant information, including those serving from the parish and appeals for war memorials.
- **Council records** provide information about administrative decisions made during the war years. The records of Somerset County Council (ref. C/\*) include the minutes of the council (ref. C/CC/M) and the War Agricultural Executive Committee (C/SH/WA), along with War Pension returns (C/EW). Before the introduction of the present day council's Somerset was divided up into Boroughs (ref. D\B\\*), Urban District Councils (ref, D\U\\*) and Rural District Councils (ref. D\R\\*). The **Council minute books** are a key source as they detail the decisions and actions of the individual council. These council collections can include planning applications for memorial halls, accounts of war memorial subscriptions, or in the case of Taunton, a return of the men of the borough who served with the Armed Forces.



# How to research a Somerset community

- Somerset Heritage Centre holds **parish council records** (ref. D\PC\\*) for about half of Somerset's parishes. Parish Council minute books detail the decisions and actions of the parish, including the building of war memorials and appeals for support for the county war memorial, along with accounts and correspondence.
- Somerset **newspapers** from 1914-1918 contain extensive accounts of daily life on the home front. You will be surprised at the level of information that can be found, even for the smallest of Somerset parishes. For information on the long-term impact of the war look at newspapers for the 1920s and 1930s which contain details of post-war activities such as the creation of war memorials.
- When military conscription was introduced in January 1916 a tribunal system was established to provide a means of appeal against conscription orders, based on employment, family circumstances or religious beliefs. Tribunals were held throughout the county, the **Military Tribunal registers** for Bath and Taunton have survived (ref. C/EW and DD\S\CL), and contain details about those appealing and the result of the tribunal.
- Minute books of societies, such as the **Women's Institute** (ref. DD\WI) provide details on home front activities to support the war effort, including knitting circles and War Bond initiatives.
- The **Historic Environment Records** are databases of the archaeological and historic landscape of Somerset, which includes details on the county war memorials and buildings which had an important use during the conflict. Somerset is covered by four different HER's: Somerset, North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset and Exmoor National Park.



# How to research online

- **Somerset Heritage Centre** ([www.somerset.gov.uk/archives](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/archives)) has catalogues for the archive holdings held at the Heritage Centre, along with research guides and details on visiting the Centre. The library catalogue is available via Galaxy on Libraries West ([www.librarieswest.org.uk](http://www.librarieswest.org.uk)).
- **The National Archives** ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)) formerly the Public Record Office, TNA holds the records of central government. Use the Discovery catalogue to search their holdings and view many of their records online.
- **Ancestry** ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)) is a genealogy website, which includes records of births, marriages and burials, census records and military service records. This is a subscription site, but can be accessed for free at the Heritage Centre or at libraries throughout Somerset.
- **Find My Past** ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)) is a genealogy website, which includes records of births, marriages and burials, census records and some military records. This is a subscription service.
- **Military Genealogy** ([www.military-genealogy.com](http://www.military-genealogy.com)) is a genealogy website dedicated to military research, with searchable databases of Prisoners of War, Rolls of Honour, Citation records and lists of Naval casualties. This is a pay-per-view/subscription service.
- **The London Gazette** ([www.london-gazette.co.uk/search](http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/search)) has a searchable database of the British Government's official newspaper, which details Officer's commissions, promotions and awards for gallantry.
- **Commonwealth War Graves Commission** ([www.cegc.org](http://www.cegc.org)) maintains a searchable database of military personnel who lost their lives in the two World War, providing details on the location of their grave or citation on a monument to the missing.
- **International Committee of the Red Cross** ([www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)) has an online catalogue to their holdings, which include records for Prisoners of War, Civilian Internees and Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurses. The First World War records are being digitised, for release during 2014.
- **Imperial War Museum** ([www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)) has online guides and catalogues for researching all aspects of military conflict during the First World War.
- **National Army Museum** ([www.nam.ac.uk](http://www.nam.ac.uk)) is one of the key places for researching the British Army, they hold a vast library of regimental histories, along with published Army Lists and numerous small personnel collections.
- **National Museum of the Royal Navy** (Portsmouth) ([www.royalnavalmuseum.org](http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org)) website contains many helpful information sheets and reading lists.
- **Fleet Air Arm Museum** ([www.fleetairarm.com](http://www.fleetairarm.com)) is a Museum covering British aviation history. The Museum holds the service records of the Royal Naval, Royal Marines and Royal Naval Air.
- **The Great War Forum** ([www.1914-1918.invisionzone.com](http://www.1914-1918.invisionzone.com)) is a good place to share research and ask questions to the First World War research community.
- **The Long Long Trail** ([www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net)) provides details on the British Army during the First World War and further advice on research.
- **Army Museums Ogilby Trust** ([www.armymuseus.org.uk](http://www.armymuseus.org.uk)) hold records and histories of units that fought in the First World War. Contact them for further information on the history of a particular battalion, individual or unit.
- **Historic Environment Records** include details of war memorials and buildings which had an important use during the conflict. They are available on the following websites.
  - **Somerset (excluding Exmoor National Park)** ([www.somerset.gov.uk/HER](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/HER))
  - **North Somerset** ([www.n-somerset.gov.uk/HER](http://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/HER))
  - **Bath and North East Somerset** (<http://www.bathnes.gov.uk>)
  - **Exmoor National Park** (<http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk>)

# Visiting the Somerset Heritage Centre

**Somerset Heritage Centre,  
Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, TA2 6SF**

**Enquiries: 01823 278805 (Monday to Friday 9:00am to 5:00pm)**

**Appointments: 01823 337600  
(we advise making an appointment before visiting the Centre)**

## *Opening Times:*

Mondays: 1:00pm to 5:00pm

Tuesday-Friday: 9:00am to 5:00pm

Alternate Saturdays: 9:00am to 1:00pm

The Heritage Centre is closed on Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday and Bank Holidays.

If you have a First World War object or archive, such as a set of medals, service papers or a bundle of photographs, which you would like more information on, or wish to deposit with the Heritage Centre, please contact us on 01823 278805.

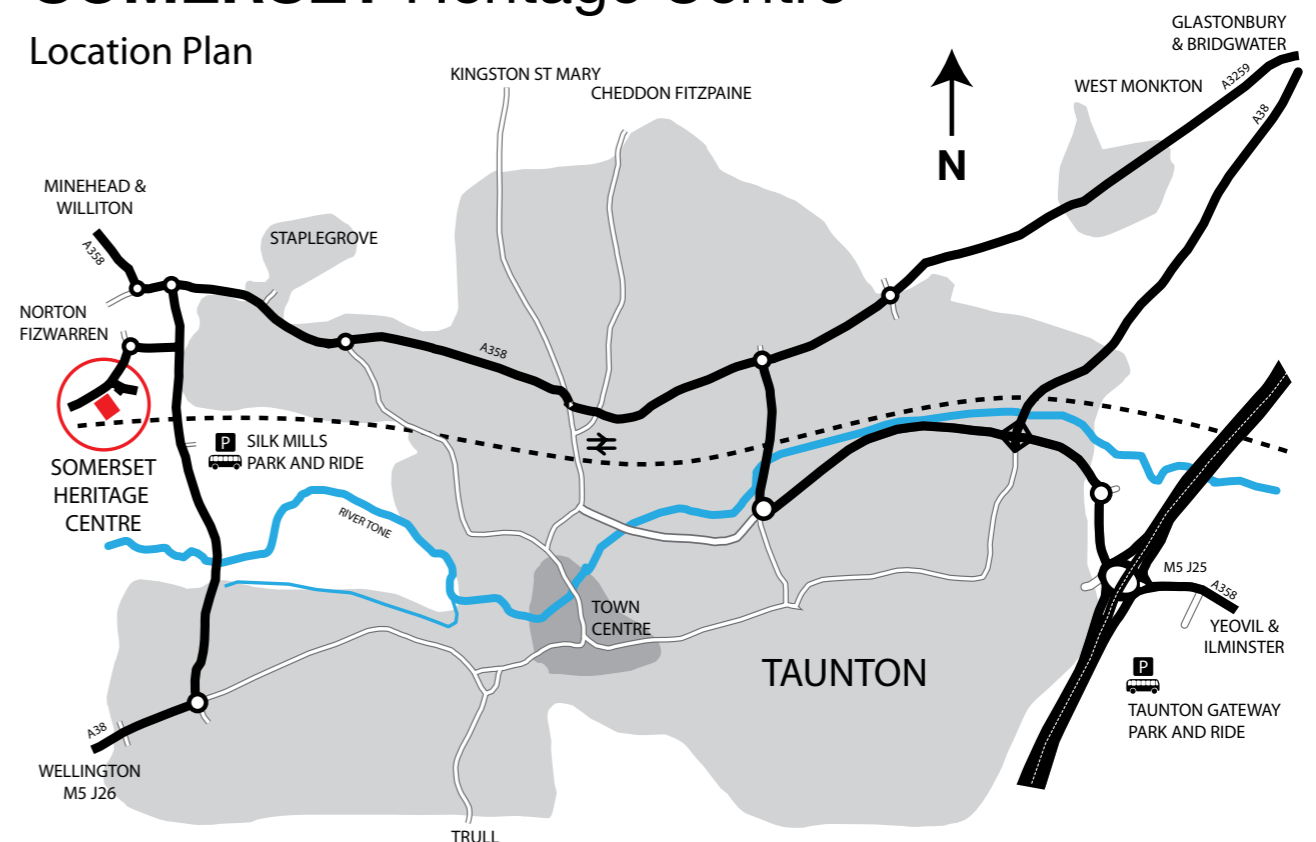
**Visit the Somerset Remembers project blog:**

<http://somersetremembers.wordpress.com>



## SOMERSET Heritage Centre

### Location Plan



# Project partners



Heritage Lottery Fund



The Friends of the Museum of Somerset



The Friends of Somerset Archives



Somerset Military Museum Trust

Taunton Branch of the Rifles and Light Infantry Association



The Western Front Association

