

The Merseyside Branch Western Front Association Great War Exhibition at The Birkenhead Park Visitors Centre.

This year's exhibition for the branch focused on the last year of the Great War – "The War To End All Wars" – 1918. A lot of hard work was put in by the members of the branch to make this event happen, and to make it the success that it has become, and I am forever grateful for what they have done.

As per normal, the planning for the exhibition began way back in February, 2018, with those that had wanted to get involved, meeting at Judith's house. Subjects were discussed, and said members went away and worked their magic and produced a yet again outstanding array of subjects to display on the boards at the BPVC. Such was the confidence I had in the members to produce such high standards with their research, that we actually had very few subsequent meetings. I normally would contribute to the boards, but owing to an on-going loft conversion, and a house that resembles the shelled interior of Cloth Hall, Ypres, in 1917, I have not been able to do so.

Once the boards were handed into Karen O'Rourke and Judith Beastall, they tirelessly began the laborious and arduous task of editing, arranging, and laying out each board prior to being displayed, working until silly o'clock times doing so! As Chairman, I owe them massively, because if it wasn't for their hard work which both ladies put in, the boards would not be displayed to the very high standard that we are accustomed to.

Things then began to fall in to place quite rapidly once the boards had been completely finished. 500 leaflets were ordered from Vistaprint, and Judith and myself then went on a whistle-stop tour of the Wirral, stopping at libraries and shops to ask if they would display them. We also spent some time liaising with the staff at the BPVC.

On a point of the staff at the BPVC, I would like to say that they have simply been outstanding. Paul Davies (the Park Manager) and his team: Chris, Lorna, Hannah, Simon, and Heather, could not do enough to help us, and would drop anything to help us to make the exhibition work, and I cannot sing all of their praises high enough. Their enthusiasm makes it such a nice environment to work in, and from their enthusiasm solid friendships have developed. Such is the relationship between the staff of the BPVC and Merseyside WFA with regards the exhibition, that now they are asking us to come back, as opposed to us asking them.

For a number of years we have been educating school groups in how the Great War began, and the equipment worn predominantly by the British soldier of 1914-1918. However, this year we had the add-on of some 125 Cubs, Beavers, and Scouts. This was hard work, but work which I got a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction from, aided by my "Officer Commanding" (Major) Paul Knight, who, like me, was dressed up in Great War uniform. Some of the school parties have been coming back to the exhibition since we began teaching school parties, which assures us that we are

doing the right thing. However, two schools did let us down. One never had the common courtesy to phone us and tell us they were cancelling, and another phoned and initially told us they could not come owing to a gas leak in the school, then phoned back to re-arrange a date, and then phoned back and told us that it was too much to arrange!

The members of the Merseyside Branch Western Front Association involved in the exhibition met on 2nd November, 2018, at the BPVC, and began the task of setting everything up for the event. One member – Don Rustage – totally humbled me in that following very personal tragedy, along with his close friend Norman Parsons, delivered, as always, a truly spectacular diorama model of the events of the last few months of the Great War. Both gentlemen have ceaselessly never failed to amaze me at the quality and ingenuity in producing such high class vistas of the battlefields of France and Belgium. Their diorama became one of the main focal points for the exhibition, and was definitely a crowd puller. On a personal note, I am indebted to both Don and Norm for all their hard work.

Once the exhibition was set up, and the “class room” set up in the Conference Room, the exhibition opened its doors to the general public at 10 am 3rd November, 2018. Both myself and Paul Knight were more or less put straight to work in the Conference Room, with two groups of the Scout/Cub/Beaver movement. At close of play of the first day, the footfall over the door was extremely encouraging, with an amazing 145 people visiting. Most of the subsequent day’s footfall went over the 100 people through the door mark. Two of our most auspicious visitors were firstly Dame Patricia Routledge (of Madame Bouquet fame on TV), and the Mayor of Birkenhead. Dame Patricia was genuinely amazed at the hard work put in by my members at the exhibition, and was very interested – to the point where she wanted to hold my 303 Lee Enfield Rifle! The teams of members manning the exhibition were run on a rota scheme, with some doing more than I would have asked them to do. On this score, I would particularly like to thank my old friend Con Heede, who was always prepared to drop everything at the drop of a hat and come down. This came to the fore when one member did let me down, and never phoned, and Con filled the gap.

Last year’s grand total for adults and school parties alike through the exhibition door was an amazing 946 people visiting. At a meeting for the planning for this exhibition, I said to all members concerned that I would like to beat that number, and try and reach 1000. Well, thanks to the efforts of the members of the Merseyside Branch Western Front Association, we exceeded this figure by reaching 1152! This was absolutely superb!

On a final note, it would be remiss of me not to thank the members involved in making the 2018 Great War Exhibition at the BPVC personally by name (in no particular order): Judith Beastall, Karen O’Rourke, Don Rustage, Norman Parsons, Charley Southern, Dave Horne, Ian Kearvell, Graham Gathercole, Paul Knight, Con Heede, Roly Renner, Frank Sherrett, Bruce Hubbard, Margaret Hubbard, Simon Thelwell, Jeff Clare, Kim Clare, John Storey, Roger Mitchell, and Mike Carty.

A very special thanks goes out to the staff of the Birkenhead Park Visitors Centre, namely Paul Davies, Chris Osbourne, Lorna, Hannah, Simon Sim, and Heather. Without you all, the Merseyside Branch Western Front Association would not have an exhibition. Thank you.

Peter Threlfall
Chairman
Merseyside Branch
Western Front Association