

THE MUSEUM OF THE MANCHESTERS

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The Museum of the Manchesters — a Social and Regimental History, opened in April 1987 in the former Town Hall in Ashton-under-Lyne, part of the expanding museum service of Tameside Libraries and Arts. But it is not only a new addition to the Greater Manchester museum scene — it is also a new type of museum.

Regimental and military museums rarely get a good press — they appeal to a small but enthusiastic section of the general museum public, the exhibits often have little interpretation, and because of the perceived importance of the regimental story the wider historical perspective is often ignored or over-simplified. Whereas levels of interpretation and ideas about the nature of history have changed dramatically in museums over the last twenty years (particularly in social history which has advanced well beyond the quaint folk life tradition), regimental history has been left relatively untouched. There are several reasons for this.

Nearly all regimental museums began as exhibitions in barracks (and some remain there) and were used more to foster *esprit de corps* than to state anything meaningful about the past. Medals, captured enemy trophies and the regimental colours became reverential icons, arousing the same loyalties and emotions as, for example, trade union banners do in quite a different context. From the 1930s onwards many regimental museums began to be integrated into local municipal museums, but even so the strictly regimental approach was always maintained, being displayed as a specialist collection in an isolated context. Social history curators have similarly shown a marked reluctance to interpret and display effectively these often very rich collections.¹ They are after all not as fashionably desirable as pre-war bakelite nor as popularly nostalgic as the 1920s chemist's shop in the local heritage centre.² But treated effectively they have a far more vivid, relevant and personal message than any amount of wooden mangles or clog irons.

Manchester Regiment Collections

As part of the re-organisation of the army in 1881, the Manchester Regiment was created through the amalgamation of the 63rd and 96th Foot, and had as its depot the old barracks on Mossley Road, Ashton-under-Lyne, later to be known as the Ladysmith Barracks after a Boer War battle honour commemorating the regiment's part in both the defence and the relief of the besieged town. The barracks themselves date from 1843, built (as so many were in the Northern manufacturing towns) as part of the government's response to increasingly organised working-class agitation for political and social reform. The cotton towns of Ashton, Stalybridge, Dukinfield and Hyde were important centres for Chartist activity to the east of Manchester. The Manchesters (as the regiment was always known locally) occupied the barracks from 1881 until 1958 when it amalgamated with the King's Regiment (Liverpool). A regimental museum was established in the former barracks gymnasium in May 1936 and remained there until final closure in 1965. The regiment then transferred the collections on loan to Manchester City Art Gallery, to be displayed at Queen's Park Museum, Harpurhey, there being no museum in the Ashton area.³ Unfortunately many interesting items from the collection were dispersed at this time. The more recent decision to close Queen's Park and convert it into a central workshop and conservation studio for the City Art Gallery required the museum collections to seek a new home again in 1985.

With the support of elected members, Tameside Libraries and Arts negotiated with the regimental museum committee to bring the collections back to Ashton. Suitable premises were located, a design brief was drawn up and funding was obtained from a variety of sources.⁴ Given that there was such a strong link between the Manchesters and Ashton, it seemed obvious that we



Ladysmith Barracks, Ashton-under-Lyne, c. 1935.

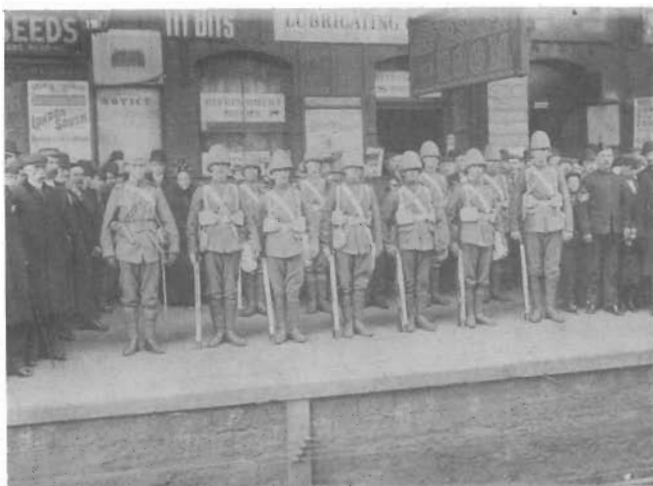
should attempt to interpret the history of the regiment in the context of the local community in which it was based — regimental history made more accessible by relevant local social history displays. This novel approach was approved by all involved in the project, although it could never please those with entrenched expectations of how regimental history should be presented. One anonymous local correspondent was to complain about the inclusion of

*Labour Party posters... material about the Spanish Civil War...the rise of the Chartists, women at work, conscientious objectors and a CND poster. I don't think the name of Winston Churchill is mentioned once.*⁵

Interpretation

The sub-title of the museum — a social and regimental history — encompasses these two diverse elements which, although irreconcilable in a flowing thematic narrative, can be successfully placed in juxtaposition. So, for example, the early history of the regiment is seen in the context of local radical activity and the Manchesters in the First World War can be contrasted with local civilian experiences.

The regimental story begins with the history of the 63rd and 96th Foot, before their union, reviewing their areas of service (for example India, North America, the West Indies, Ireland) and why they were posted. Between them they served in all areas in which Britain had a commercial interest, including escorting prison ships to Australia and Tasmania. The 63rd in particular had a very active history, and saw service in the Crimean War, which through the incompetence of the army administration and the severe privations of the troops for the first time aroused great public sympathy for the welfare of the ordinary soldier. Conditions of service had greatly improved by the outbreak of the Boer War, to which the Manchester Regiment sent both 1st and 2nd Battalions and its 3rd (Volunteer) Battalion. Ironically, despite the great public fervour for the war, large numbers of Manchester volunteers were refused because of their poor physical condition.⁶ The Manchesters and the First World War is dealt with in some detail because of the considerable number of men raised. Forty-eight battalions of the regiment were raised and the Manchesters sustained over 45,000 casualties, of whom 14,122 died. Factories and warehouses formed their own Pals battalions (for example the Ashton Brothers Pals, Hyde — one of nine Manchester Pals raised) — a highly



Troops from the Manchester Regiment about to depart for South Africa from Clegg Street Station, Oldham.

In aid of the Crippled and Injured, caused by the ASHTON MUNITIONS EXPLOSION,

June 13th, 1917.

"RESCUE THE PERISHING."

THE merry, happy, laughing throng,
All going on their way;
Some never thought of danger,
On this, their fatal day.

Then came the fatal moment —
Then came that fatal roar;
Then a loving mother,
Would fall beside her door.

Some children coming home from school,
Each one a "mother's love,"
Whose loving souls have rested
In a home, far, far above.

Then each one sought their mother,
Their sweetheart, child or wife,
But some were disappointed
To find they had given their life.

'Twas a terrible blow to the people,
In history this will remain,
For Ashton has done its duty,
In which it has taken great pain.

So let not your hearts be laden,
But drive away dull care;
For you'll some day meet the dear one
Waiting, with open arms—there.

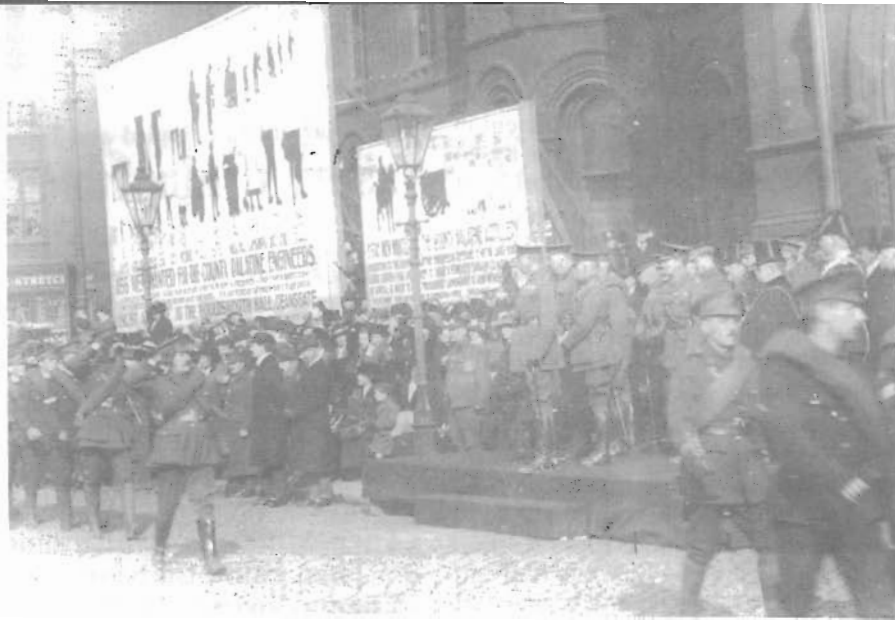
Written by—ARTHUR GRIMSHAW, 4 Duke-st., Ashton.

Ballad about Ashton Munitions Explosion, 1917.

successful recruiting scheme which was soon abandoned following the distressing effects on their home districts after the mass slaughter of the Somme in 1916. Some of the events of these years are told through the personal experiences of four ordinary soldiers who became involved through different routes: a soldier in the regular army, a territorial, and two soldiers from the Pals battalions.

Inter-war service in Iraq and Palestine leads up to the Second World War in which a major event was the capture of the 1st Battalion at Singapore by the Japanese in 1942. The 2nd Battalion fought in Europe from 1939, then later in India and Burma. This story ends with amalgamation of the Manchesters with the King's Regiment (Liverpool) in 1958 which followed the Manchesters service in the Malayan emergency — involving many National Servicemen of the region.

The complementary social context begins with the local social and political unrest which followed the end of the Napoleonic wars, through the Peterloo massacre of 1819, and culminating in the popular agitation of the Chartists in the early 1840s. The building and layout of the barracks is dealt with in some detail as is the general social history of soldiering in the nineteenth century, which before the army reforms of Cardwell in the 1870s was often a regime of fear and severe punishment.



Manchester Regiment in Albert Square, March 1915.

The atmosphere at the front in the First World War is portrayed by a reconstruction of a trench during a dawn bombardment. The visitor enters a very enclosed space to view the reconstruction which is made more authentic than most displays by deep swampy mud, rats and rusty barbed wire with the grim, dark scene suddenly illuminated by a flare followed by a loud barrage. An unpleasant smell completes the simulation. Have we got it reasonably authentic? Several Manchester veterans who were there have wept, yet a distinguished Colonel — who was not — criticised the soldiers sheltering in the reconstruction for being “undignified”.

The effects of the war on the local home front are examined through the changing role and experiences of women, and focus on the explosion at the Hooley Hill munitions factory in Ashton in June 1917 in which 47 people were killed and 350 injured. Problems faced by conscientious objectors and the effect of post-war unemployment are also examined. A major feature of this section is the poetry of Wilfred Owen, who served with the Manchesters throughout the war until he was killed

just seven days before armistice in 1918. His vivid and important series of war poems in many ways reflect the overall tone of the museum, which is somewhere between the early romantic idealism of Rupert Brooke and the more radical stance taken by Siegfried Sassoon:

*My subject is War, and the pity of War
The Poetry is in the Pity.⁷*

Local contributions made to the Spanish Civil War lead into the home front of the Second World War. Of interest here is the re-built Anderson shelter which is in its original condition since it was removed from the cellar of a house in Stockport and so did not find a use as a garden shed. The story continues by looking at post-war National Service and is brought up to date by looking at Tameside as a Nuclear Free Zone. There are also displays dealing with the volunteers, sport and leisure in the army, the regimental band and a magnificent stained glass memorial window to an officer who fell at Gallipoli in 1915. This was rescued from St. George's Church, Hyde, which is under threat of demolition and is thought to be one of the few church windows to feature a pair of binoculars and a service revolver.⁸



Captain Stewart at Ardwick Green in 1919 with the survivors of the 8th (Ardwick) Battalion, Manchester Regiment who left in 1914.



Mortar Platoon of Manchester Regiment on patrol in Malaya, 1951.

Archives and research

As well as the museum objects on display and in store there is also a large collection of archive material which relates to the history and operation of the regiment over the period 1758-1958. This includes historical records of the regiment, including digests of services (from 1758) and war diaries (both world wars). Operational records — reports, orders, trench maps, plans and photographs — have also been preserved. A number of printed histories (from 1884) of regular and other battalions are available. These may be studied, alongside the many personal accounts and diaries of the Boer War, and the First and Second World Wars, in the archive. An interesting collection of letters from the Crimea (Ensign Clutterbuck, 63rd Foot), and a smaller collection from the Boer War also provide fascinating insights into the regiment's history. Many hundreds of loose photographs and a collection of important albums from the 1880s onwards help provide a visual record. A particular strength is the coverage of the regiment's service in South Africa. Some records relating to the organisation and training of battalions — mainly nineteenth and twentieth century training manuals — are also kept. The archive also holds the official lists of soldiers who died in the Great War, medal lists, and some casualty returns

(Second World War). Records relating to officers include records of officers' service (1758-1937) and 50 original commissions (1760-1912). There is also a large collection of newspaper cuttings relating to the service of the regiment, at home and abroad from the Boer War to 1958. We are also fortunate that personal documents such as pocket books and certificates have been deposited by ex-members of the regiment.

The archive is a rich one and research opportunities abound for individuals interested in almost any aspect of the regiment's past. A full catalogue of the archive material is available from the Archivist, Wendy Chandley (who has kindly supplied the above information), Stalybridge Library, Trinity Street, Stalybridge, SK15 2BN (061-338 2708/3831). Enquiries about the museum collections should be addressed to the Museums Officer, Geoff Preece, Tameside Libraries and Arts, Stamford House, Jowett's Walk, Ashton-under-Lyne, OL7 0BB (061-343 1414).

The Museum of the Manchesters is located in Ashton Town Hall, The Market Place, Ashton-under-Lyne. It is open to the public Monday-Saturday 10.00 - 4.00 and it is closed on Sundays and Bank Holidays. There is full disabled access and admission is free. For further details please telephone the museum, 061-344 3078.

NOTES

1. Though, of course, much can be made of them. See for example, J.M.W. Hichberger, *Images of the Army — the Military in British Art 1815-1914*, Manchester (1988) which was related to the recent exhibition, *From Waterloo to the Somme* at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.
2. For a challenging critique of the current growth of the heritage industry, see R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* (1987)
3. The former Highfield House Museum in Stamford Park, Ashton, was demolished in 1955.
4. G. Preece, 'The Museum of the Manchesters: a Social and Regimental History', *Museums Journal* 87 (1987) 71-2
5. *Ashton Reporter*, 8 May 1987
6. "Of 11,000 men who had volunteered from the Manchester district for service in South Africa, 8,000 were rejected as unfit to carry a rifle and endure the fatigues and privations of a campaign; and that of the 3,000 who were accepted only 1,200 were pronounced by the Military Authorities to be up to the standard of what a soldier ought to be". Earl Grey, 1901. Quoted in T.S. Ashton, *Economic and Social Investigations in Manchester 1833-1933* (1934) p.117
7. Wilfred Owen, preface to his first collection, *Poems* (1920)
8. A local group is fighting to retain this magnificent building. For further details contact The Friends of St. George's Church, c/o 64 Chapel Street, Hyde.

FURTHER READING

- H.C. Wylly, *History of the Manchester Regiment* Vol.I 1758-1883 (1923); Vol.II 1883-1922 (1925)
 A.C. Bell, *History of the Manchester Regiment 1922-48* (1954)
 F.P. Gibbon, *The 42nd (East Lancashire) Division 1914-1918* (1920)
 F. Kempster and H.C.E. Westropp, *Manchester City Battalions of the 90th and 91st Infantry Brigades Roll of Honour* (1916)
 A.W. Andrews, *Orders are Orders: A Manchester Pal on the Somme* (1987)