Using local connections to enhance my teaching of the First World War

Faye Neave, one of our specialist leaders in First World War education describes how she used the story of the Staniland brothers, former students at her school in Boston, Lincolnshire, to add a local dimension to her teaching of the war...

About two years ago I decided to change my teaching of the First World War to include stories of some of the individual soldiers who fought in the war. I felt that just teaching statistics and generic issues did not always allow students to appreciate the significance of the war, especially its impact on people both fighting and those at home. I started off by using some more well-known stories of soldiers such as Harry Patch and Harry Farr but then realised that we had potential stories of our own on my school’s own war memorial. If I could uncover some of these I would have an incredibly powerful resource to use with my students.

Starting out felt a little daunting but I was lucky enough to have the help of the Old Bostonian Association (www.rosma.co.uk/joomla/index.php/oba-home) who had already done some research into the names on our memorial. In addition there is some really helpful guidance on the programme website (Historical Enquiry 4: How can we discover the world they went to and the world they left behind? which provides a step by step approach to carrying out research into the experiences of a local soldier in the First World War, starting with names from a local war memorial and using various commonly available sources to find out what happened to these individuals. (See also the Optional CPD module ‘Researching a Local Soldier’)

The Meaburn brothers

Of all the names on our local memorial, those of Geoffrey and Meaburn Staniland, two brothers who fought and died in Belgium in 1915, immediately stood out to me and I decided to make them the focus of my research. Although tragic, their story typified the experience of many soldiers and the families and communities during the war.

My research into Geoffrey and Meaburn Staniland culminated in a very moving visit with two of my students to Dranouter Churchyard Cemetery (pictured) in Northern Belgium where both brothers
are buried. We made the visit whilst on one of this programme’s battlefield tours and our guide was on hand to provide additional information about the fighting that took place there in 1915.

I now have a case study of two brothers, ex-students from my school, who fought and died in the First World War. Their stories have great resonance with my current students who, through learning about the experiences of the Staniland brothers, are able to begin to make personal connections to the war and appreciate the impact it has had on their own community. I also find that this local element provides a good starting point for helping my students explore some of the wider aspects of the war through enquiry questions such as:

*How typical of the experience of soldiers fighting in the Western Front is the story of the Staniland brothers?*

*What was the impact of the First World War on our own community?*

*How and why is the First World War remembered 100 years on?*

**Meaburn Staniland**

Meaburn Staniland attended Boston Grammar School in the 1890s, and joined the Old Bostonian Club when it was founded in 1900.

In the years following school, Meaburn engaged widely in sport. He rowed for Boston Rowing Club, was captain of Boston Cricket Club, enjoyed hunting and was a fine tennis player, winning many open tournaments. Meaburn followed in his father’s footsteps, succeeding him as Town Clerk.

Meaburn was in the army before the outbreak of First World War as a territorial soldier. The Territorial Force was basically a collection of part time, volunteer soldiers. Therefore, when war broke out he already had military experience. Both he and his brother were officers in the 4th Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment. Soon after war broke out in August 1914, the regiment was eventually posted to France where the soldiers were to see action for the first time.

Meaburn was a company commander with the rank of Captain. He and his men were in stationed in the front line trenches near Hooge in Belgium in July 1915, enduring constant shelling and trench mortar bombs. Casualties were heavy.
On the early morning of Thursday 29th July 1915, just after dawn, Meaburn made his customary round of his company’s sentry posts. At each position he peered across no-mans-land to assess the enemy positions. At three o’clock that morning, he stepped up and raised his head above the parapet. Within a second, a German sniper’s bullet struck him full in the face and he fell back on the sandbags behind. His men made great efforts to help him, but within a few minutes he had died. He was 35 years old. He was buried in the cemetery at Dranouter Churchyard about 8 miles away from where he died, close to the grave of his brother who had been killed a few months earlier. It is believed that he requested to be buried close to his brother when he was dying.

Meaburn left behind two children and his grieving widow. Unfortunately, his widow died within a year. Many said that she had died of a broken heart. This shows how terrible the consequences of war were on family life. The two children were now orphans and were put under the care of a Miss Wright of Skirbeck Road, Boston. It is tragic that two generations of the Staniland family witnessed the horror of war.

**Geoffrey Staniland**

Geoffrey Staniland, younger brother of Meaburn, also attended Boston Grammar School in the 1890s. Geoffrey joined the army as soon as war broke out in 1914 and was quickly made a platoon commander with the rank of lieutenant in the 4th Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment. By 1915 both brothers were fighting along different parts of the Western Front in Belgium, both as army officers.

After a tour of duty in the front line trenches, where they endured heavy shelling and mortar fire, he and his men were pulled back to a rest area behind the lines on 13th April 1915.

While they were there, the enemy’s long range artillery opened up, and shells fell around them. Geoffrey ordered everyone to take cover. He remained in the open, directing his men to safety. A shrapnel shell exploded near to him, and slivers of steel pierced his body. He was terribly wounded.

Even so he struggled to his feet, ran on for a dozen yards, then fell, never to rise again. His last words, uttered to one of his men who rushed to help him, were “Never mind me: see that the men get to a place of shelter”. He was 34 years old.