

AHRC/ WW1 National Call

Audio slide show transcription

The audio begins with music and the sound of WW1 aircraft

Narrator:

2014 marks a hundred years since the outbreak of the First World War. Plans to commemorate this powerful and significant period of history have led to the setting up of a project called 'Our Place in the First World War'. It involves the Arts and Humanities Research Council, in partnership with the BBC.

Academics within the arts and humanities will be working alongside BBC journalists to find and explore stories on places across the UK that have a special connection with this transformative part of our past.

A pilot scheme is already up and running in the BBC West Region, which covers Bristol, Bath, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. The two academics already taking part are Kent Fedorowich and Charles Booth who are both based at the University of the West of England.

Charles Booth:

The BBC are broadcasting next year a series of stories which have been generated in regional radio stations, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council decided to fund academic support for those stories, so our job as academic researchers involved in public engagement is to help the BBC to ensure that the stories that they broadcast are well researched, accurate and of abiding interest their local communities.

Kent Fedorowich:

The project involves looking at stories from all varieties and all walks of life, from men who fought in the trenches to women who served on the Home Front and children as well, their experiences of growing up during the First World War. But it's not just about the individual it's also about the place as the title suggests, so it could be a factory, it could be a dockyard, it could be a barracks, it could be a park or in the case of Bristol the zoo where a lot of wounded soldiers were taken on a weekly basis to see the sights of Bristol Zoo for example.

Narrator:

With the pilot scheme underway the AHRC is now looking for expressions of interest from researchers who would like to become Charles and Kent's counterparts as regional academic experts working alongside the BBC in other parts of the UK. The commitment involves two days a week for a period of thirteen weeks.

There is also the opportunity to initiate ideas for stories. In the case of Kent and Charles they cover the role between them which they feel works in a complementary way, as Kent specialises in British Imperial History and Charles concentrates on local and regional aspects. They explained more about the position and their experiences so far of working with the BBC.

Kent Fedorowich:

I see my role as an historical consultant. In many respects we are there to facilitate the BBC journalists and their researchers with regards to various stories. More importantly I think it's to give the proper context and to make sure that the stories or the ideas they have are first of all accurate and secondly whether we can help them develop those stories further with the knowledge that we have not just at the local level, my aspect is more bringing in the international and imperial aspects of the conflict and as a result this broadens out the remit of the project from the local and regional.

Charles Booth:

One of the things I've learnt is that it's intensely rewarding but also slightly frightening in the sense that one is necessarily involved in responding to questions from the BBC, sometimes with an immediate time frame. This means that sometimes I've had to operate slightly outside my comfort zone in that the standard academic answer to questions like that is 'if you will give me time I will check and get back to you' whereas the BBC journalists quite understandably are used to working more immediately.

Kent Fedorowich:

It's interesting to see how the journalists work and see how they ferret out a story and see how they try and develop a story. But it's also about giving you the opportunity to travel to some of these places to look at say local churches or graveyards or buildings or parks to get a better perspective of the story that is trying to be worked up. It also allows the academic to go to various record offices to work up some of the material for them.

Narrator:

The stories collected for the project will be used in a variety of ways including radio and television features, audio slide shows and web articles. Even at this early stage the work is leading to invaluable exchanges of knowledge between the academics and journalists. It's also hoped, of course, that the stories surrounding these special and significant places will very much capture the interest and imagination of the public.

Kent Fedorowich:

The thing with this project is that although we're talking about places we're talking about a wide variety of sources that can tell quite an interesting story. I think one of my favourite places with regards to this is the war memorial in Fishponds in Bristol, which sits in a park. Of course the statue's interesting in itself because it is a statue that has a man raising his tin hat and it looks like he's saluting his fallen comrades so it's not just the names on the war memorial it's the type of war memorial it is, where it's located and then it raises question about who raised the money to put that war memorial in the park, was there a controversy over what type of statue or what form that commemoration should take. That's why I think it's important to realise that it's not just about people it's about people and places and how they've interacted over the course of this conflict.

Charles Booth:

It is a way of ensuring that researchers have some impact outside the, it has to be said, narrow confines of academic publication. I would really encourage people who have an interest in public engagement and knowledge exchange to grasp this opportunity to make a difference as far as our understanding of the First World War is concerned.