

How 1,000 First World War medals were restored to glory after the devastating Clandon Park fire



Clandon Park, an 18th Century manor, was gutted by fire in 2015. It was the worst ever disaster to befall the National Trust CREDIT: PETER MACDIARMID/ GETTY IMAGES

Stephen Johnson remembers the moment he discovered the fire. He was in the basement of Clandon Park, the 18th Century National Trust manor near Guildford, Surrey. Johnson was one year into his job as manager of the Surrey Infantry Museum, which was housed in the building's basement. Opening the fuse box cupboard to reset a trip switch, he saw flames "leaping up into the void above it", and quickly raised the alarm. The building was evacuated, and fire officers arrived to douse out the flames. The building appeared to be safe.

But standing with his colleagues on the estate's North Courtyard, they soon saw smoke billowing from the roof of the Grade I-listed Palladian mansion. On the night of 29th April 2015, Johnson watched as the building was completely gutted by fire, in the worst disaster ever to befall the National Trust. Firefighters were given evacuation orders at 7.30pm.

"The place was going up like a tinderbox," he says from the museum's new base in Woking, Surrey. "If it could have burnt, it did burn."

With 85 firefighters sent to the scene, paintings were cut from their frames, antique furniture carried out onto the lawns, and military colours grabbed from the walls. Among the lost items was a leather football kicked around the trenches by British soldiers in 1916, just before they met their deaths at the Battle of the Somme.

The museum feared the loss of centuries-old memorabilia donated by families of troops who served in the Queen's Royal West Surrey and East Surrey Regiments, including notebooks, photographs, and letters. Most devastating for Johnson was the potential loss of nearly 2,300 war medals collected by his museum.



Clandon Park, pictured here in 2016, housed centuries-old memorabilia from the First World War. Much of it was destroyed in the fire CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY

These medals, some of them awarded by King George V, were the jewel in the museum's crown, and Johnson had become well-acquainted with the stories behind them. He can recite many of the county's First World War veterans by name, recounting tales of one soldier who worked alongside crocodiles while serving in Mesopotamia.

The medals had been hanging from a wall which had collapsed during the fire, sending the priceless artefacts "down into the clinker", Johnson says. Even as firefighters were still dampening out the smouldering wreckage, some thought to scoop their remains from the museum's floor. He remembers firefighters emerging from the building and dropping flame-charred medals into a plastic bucket. "On the day after the fire we pretty despondent, because we thought we'd lost absolutely everything."

But there was hope. The medals were blackened with soot and, in some cases, coated in a thick layer of aluminium that had melted onto them during the fire - but they were not destroyed. Johnson and his colleagues embarked on 'Operation Phoenix', a gargantuan clean-and-repair task led by restoration specialists Farcroft, funded by the museum's insurers, Ecclesiastical.



Stephen Johnson, the museum's manager, has overseen the restoration of around 1,000 war medals
CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

The medals were first 'freed' from the aluminum, before being painstakingly cleaned and re-ribboned, leaving them broadly in-tact. Over three years, around 1,000 of the original 2,300 medals have been placed back on display, Johnson says, with some 500 still missing.

Among the most treasured of the rescued artefacts was a rare set of Victoria Cross medals, awarded to the very bravest of soldiers. One was given to Corporal John McNamara, from Preston, Lancashire, who was standing in a seized German trench when he realised the enemy was gaining ground during a counter-attack.

Armed with a single revolver taken from a wounded comrade, he was praised for keeping enemy soldiers at bay. McNamara was killed in action near Solesmes, France, just three weeks before the end of the war, and his wife was awarded the medal by King George V at Buckingham Palace in 1920.



John McNamara was killed in action before he was able to collect his Victoria Cross medal. It was given to his wife by George V in 1920 CREDIT: SURREY INFANTRY MUSEUM

His great-granddaughter, Sonya Wilson, is delighted that McNamara's medal survived the fire, and recently attended a ceremony to honour the 100th anniversary of his award in Bamber Bridge, Lancashire, where a garden has now been named after McNamara. "I'm honoured to call him my great-grandfather," she says. "My one wish is to take my dad to France to visit his grave. Seeing as he didn't come home from the war, at least we can go and take home to him to pay our respects."

Moving across the county to its temporary location at the Surrey History Centre, Johnson was forced to reconsider the vulnerability of wartime artefacts; in basements and attics across the country, he thinks, exist medals, photographs, and wartime notebooks at risk of being forgotten. The fire reminded him of how easily they can vanish. "It sharpens your focus on the fact these things are relatively rare - there's a finite stock of regimental memorabilia out there."

He shows me an item they received just that day: a second lieutenant's scratch book from 1918, filled with notes and scribbles. "Of itself it's probably pretty mundane ... he probably only saw about six months of service, [but] it would be of interest to a professional historian. It would give a good insight into late Great War infantry tactics, which are completely different from what was happening in 1914."



VC John McNamara, pictured standing up, recently had a garden named in his honour in Bamber Bridge, Lancashire CREDIT: SURREY INFANTRY MUSEUM

He says the mammoth restoration task has also made him think more deeply about what wartime medals really signify. In a country where the vast majority of people now have no experience of living through war, how can commemoration be kept fresh and relevant?

"Medals are on their own are not particularly interesting, we've got hundreds of them - it's only when you link them to the person's story, and what they did during the war [that it becomes interesting]," he says. "I think the day of having a military museum which consists of display cases with 100 different sorts of bayonets are long gone, and I'm old enough to remember what the Imperial War Museum was like back in the 1960s. If you go to a modern military museum, it's now inevitably much more story-based."

The museum has also moved with the times in another important respect, now highlighting the stories of soldiers who were shot at dawn for desertion, a fate that befell 306 British soldiers during the First World War, including five from the two regiments represented by the museum. Johnson has noticed much more attention given to these soldiers since Tony Blair announced their blanket pardon in 2006, and the museum now includes one of their stories in a lesson they teach to local primary schools.



Some of the medals had to be freed from wreckage after the fire CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

Three years after the devastating fire, Johnson is optimistic. They hope eventually to move into a new office in Guildford Museum, but sadly it will not be ready by next month, which marks 100 years since the guns of the Western Front fell silent. He thinks the fire is now part of the museum's history, and they display photographs of burnt and missing artefacts.

“It’s obviously an event that we would have preferred not to have gone through, but we’re determined to make the best of a bad job. It’s part of the museum’s history, and would be almost perverse to ignore.”