

## A City Remembers

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### **Abstract:**

*As key component of the program to commemorate the Centenary of World War I in the Australian city of Orange, staff at the Orange City Library have developed a Blog and related Wiki where the stories of the men and women who served, and details of the impact of the War on the district have been recorded.*

*The online resource is a combination of official records and personal reminiscences and is intended as a permanent memorial to these men and women. The project has an active community engagement component and has helped to position the Library as a key as a key source of quality assured information and content creation.*

**Keywords:** First World War, Orange, Central West Libraries

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### **Background**

Orange is a provincial city in regional Australia situated on the land of the traditional owners, the Wiradjuri Nation. Located on the Central Tablelands, 250 kilometres to the west of Sydney, the City has a broad economic base, comprising manufacturing, mining, health and education, service industries, finance and agriculture. The urban area currently has a population of 40,000 people while the wider regional population is over 100,000. At 870 metres above sea level the City is known for its temperate climate and its rich cultural heritage.

In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, Orange had a population of 6,712 and was already a thriving centre for the surrounding area. Like many towns across Australia the citizens responded to the war with a:

...mix of jingoism, excitement, caution and fear. As the first rush of men left for the khaki, the town responded by raising money through appeals, button days, dances and carnivals. They also knitted blankets and made pyjamas and jam. Recruitment drives were held. Shop windows became plastered with war maps (Kimber 2004, p. 129).

The reality of war and the effect on the community soon became apparent, especially in the aftermath of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in 1915, and community sentiment about

Australia's role in the conflict gradually shifted. When the Armistice was announced in November 1918 the *Orange Leader* echoed public sentiment when it recorded:

Each and every-one felt as if a mighty weight had been lifted, and, from the tiniest tot to the aged and the maimed there came the one expression, 'It's all over!'(13 November, 1918).

As the centenary of the First World War approached, Orange City Council wanted to capture the stories associated with Orange and district during the period 1914 –1926. They also wanted to commemorate those who fought, those who paid the supreme sacrifice, those who remained at home, and the legacy of war. In March 2011 Council formed a Community Committee to advance these aims. The Committee comprises representatives from Orange City Council, Orange City Library (a member of Central West Libraries), the Orange and District Historical Society, the City of Orange RSL (Returned and Services League) Sub-Branch and interested individuals. The Committee's program is co-ordinated by Orange City Library.

### **Centenary of World War I in Orange Blog and Wiki**

From the outset it was agreed that a key component of the project would be the development of an information database for use by students, historians and the wider community. This resource, and the research that underpins it, is key to many of the other programs planned for the commemorative period 2014-2018.

The aim was:

- To record and commemorate the role of service men and women from Orange and district in the First World War I through detailed research which brings together accessible records and private stories
- To tell the story of the Orange community during the period 1914-1923
- To engage with the community and key stakeholders through a timely project

It was decided that the best way to make this material widely available was via the Web which would allow for stories to be shared 24/7 regardless of the enquirer's location. A web-based structure has the ability to be constantly refreshed and added to while encouraging community engagement. It honours the role of the people of Orange in an accessible and timely way, at the same time positioning the Library as a key source of quality assured information and content creation.

The result, [Centenary of World War I in Orange Blog](#) is an online resource of stories and memories about the role of Orange and its people during this period Particular attention was paid to the needs of:

- Students
- Local, family and social historians
- Media
- Decision makers (council, state and federal government representatives)
- Business houses
- Community organisations
- Orange residents current and past

Because of its on-line format the target audience can be widely dispersed and many visitors and contributors to the Blog come from across a wide geographic area. The Blog has received 73,000 hits to June 2016 with an average of 150 visits per day. The majority of visitors are from Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Ireland, France, Belgium, Netherlands and Germany. Using feedback we know that the majority of users are students and family historians.

The Blog identifies and documents service personnel with links to Orange and district. To date this contains the names of over 1,877 servicemen and women from the area. Research on these individuals is progressively being undertaken with an emphasis on those 231 individuals who appear on the Honour Roll (killed in action, died of wounds or died of disease).

The story of each individual has been constructed using official records, newspapers and personal papers. The majority of Australia's World War I service records have been digitised and are available free on line. Similarly Australian libraries have had a coordinated approach to digitising newspapers for the period providing ease of access.

The Blog is linked to the [Orange Wiki](#) which incorporates additional information on individuals including links to service records and other resources including on-line newspapers.

The Blog also incorporates a daily calendar which records events from a local, national and international perspective as it relates to the First World War.

Other war-related stories are also researched and incorporated into the Blog. These have included articles on: Indigenous servicemen; Australian nurses; the role of animals; afflictions suffered by soldiers; military honours and decorations awarded during WWI; and trench lingo.

The site was officially launched on 11 November 2013 with a focus on having a body of information available for 2015 which was a significant year for Orange's commemorative activities. This included the 100th anniversary of the ill-fated Gallipoli Campaign during which so many young Australians lost their lives, and the centenary of the Coo-ee Recruitment March which was re-enacted in October 2015. Work will continue on the Blog and Wiki until November 2018.

### **Community Engagement**

A key objective of the project is to engage with the community in collecting and telling stories of the men and women from the district and the impact of the First World War on their lives.

The Library has been contacted by individuals from around the world who have come forward with letters, diaries, photographs, objects and anecdotes. This has enriched the content available on the Blog and Wiki and given the official records 'life'.

A nurse, Gladys Elizabeth Clare Boon trained at Orange District Hospital before relocating to Sydney and then enlisting in April 1917. Nurse Boon served in Egypt and Salonika before going to London and then home to Australia. Francis William Sabey (1892-1987) was a Yorkshireman who served in the Motor Transport section in Salonika during WWI. In

September 1917 he was a patient of the 50th General Hospital, where he met Nurse Boon. An amateur artist, Sabey passed his time recovering from malaria painting landscapes and creating drawings, including one of Nurse Gladys Boon.

We were contacted by Saxby's granddaughter who had come to our site having done a web search using the details on the sketch. She wrote:

I am delighted you have used the sketch. As a Yorkshireman, it is interesting to note that when my grandfather left Salonica, he re-enlisted in the Motor Transport section at an Army Depot in Fulham, London in March 1919. Gladys Boon did a course in Battersea during this year which is only a couple of miles away. I wonder, was the move deliberate on his part or co-incidence? I wonder if they met up at all or if they even knew how close they were located? This drawing is the only one that I have with a name on it and the only one that is discoloured implying it may have been separated from the others at some point. I wonder why? Maybe the sketch was just a fleeting way to kill some time while bored in hospital. I shall never know. Thank you for enabling this sketch to be recorded for posterity (comment by a descendant of William Saxby 1892-1987).

The Blog has also facilitated contact between family members, many of whom were previously unknown to each other and provided families with valuable information about their ancestors:

Omg! Wow thank you so much. Reading all of that brought a tear to my eye and I know it will give my Nan peace. We never knew what happened to William and I know for such a long time my Nan and her family just wanted some clarity and thanks to you, you have done that and much more. Bless you (comment by a descendant of William Arthur Neal, 1896-1917).

Information from has also been used as the basis for temporary exhibitions in a number of venues including [memorate.com.au](http://memorate.com.au) an ANZAC installation at the Orange Regional Gallery by local artist Victor Gordon. From the Library's research included on the Blog Gordon first heard the story of Ernest Lachlan Powter, the youngest person from the Orange district to volunteer. He was 15 when he enlisted on 22 September 1915.

Seconded from being a bandsman in the 53rd Battalion, he was acting as a stretcher bearer on the front line at Flers in France when he was reportedly shot behind his left knee. Based on one Red Cross report his leg was amputated and he died shortly thereafter on 1 November 1916 aged 16. Gordon's haunting portrait of Ernest Powter is based on a photograph from the Australian War memorial which appears on the blog and reflects the description of a fellow soldier who remembered Ernest as "just a slight slip of a boy, with rather a girlish face."

Information from the project was also used to inform the 2015 Coo-ee March re-enactment which commemorated 100 years since the original Coo-ee Recruitment March travelled from Gilgandra to Sydney in October and November 1915, and the 263 men who answered the call of 'Coo-ee! Come and join us'.

During World War I, recruitment marches or snowball marches to Sydney were a feature of volunteer recruiting drives for the Australian Imperial Force in rural New South Wales, Australia. Between October 1915 and February 1916, nine marches were held starting from

various points in the state; the most notable was the first march from Gilgandra, known as the Cooee march.

The marches were called "snowball marches" in the hope that like a snowball rolling down a hill will pick up more snow, gaining more mass and surface area, and picking up even more snow as it rolls along, the marchers would also collect more marchers as they progressed to the recruiting depot.

As part of the re-enactment parades and memorial ceremonies were held at the villages and towns where the original Coo-ees stopped and recruited men to join up and enlist in the AIF. Twenty six men left Gilgandra on 10 October 1915 and by the time they reached Sydney just over one month later on 12 November, the numbers had swelled to 263 recruits, marching a total of 320 miles and being welcomed by large crowds along the way. A total of 20 men were recruited in Orange.

In 2015 the Coo-ee Re-enactment arrived in Orange on Tuesday 27 October. They followed in the footsteps of the original Coo-ees, with a street parade travelling down the main street to Robertson Park where a memorial service was held at the Cenotaph. When the original Coo-ees marched down Summer Street a huge crowd lined the route and the marchers were accompanied by townspeople including the Orange Town Band, Boy Scouts, Cadets and School Children. Flags flew everywhere and there were 'cheers galore'. Through our research we were able to re-create this scene in 2015 and to identify and engage descendants of the original Coo-ees in the event.

### **Positioning the Library**

All of these initiatives have helped to position the Library as central to research and heritage through strong community interest in commemorating the centenary of the First World War. This interest has been extended to Council (which is the governing and funding body for our library service) with recognition given for the breadth, depth and value of the research.

In particular the story of John Patrick Hamilton VC has attracted the interest of the Mayor and Councillors eventuating in plans to build a memorial in his honour. Hamilton was born in Orange in 1896 and enlisted soon after the outbreak of war in September 1914. At age 19 he took part in the Battle of Lone in August 1915 for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) the highest military decoration awarded for valour "in the face of the enemy" to members of the armed forces of various Commonwealth countries, and previous British Empire territories.

After his return to Australia, Hamilton lived in Sydney and so his story and his links to his home town were lost until researched and retold by the Library with additional material supplied by descendant.

Promotion of the project has been achieved through regular media stories (print and electronic), the use of social media, presentations to community groups, participation in conferences and seminars, links and referrals from other sites and special events. During 2015 one of these was a visit by curatorial staff from the State Library of New South Wales who bought war diaries of Orange residents to share with the community. Blog stories also form the basis of an ongoing series of articles in the Orange based newspaper, the *Central Western Daily* with the Library acknowledged as the author.

The project has also been the basis for other promotional and commemorative initiatives such as the Central West Libraries poppy project where members of the community were invited to knit, crochet or felt a handmade poppy for each service man or women from the district who served in World War I. In excess of 2,000 poppies were received far exceeding our target.

### **Conclusion**

The Centenary of World War I in Orange initiative was developed to create a lasting memorial to the men and women of the district whose lives were changed for ever by the 'war to end all wars'. From previous experience of other commemorative occasions we recognised that community organisations, schools etc would all interpret this in different ways and that the best way in which to assist them was to provide a database of quality assured information to which they could contribute.

The Blog and the Wiki have been successful in realising this aim, at the same time ensuring that the stories that have been told will be recorded for posterity. As one of our readers commenting on the Blog remarked 'Thank you very much for keeping the memory of our WW1 veterans in the public eye'

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