



Newsletter

No. 13, September 2017

From the Curator's Desk

This has been another very busy time for the Museum and our thanks once again are due to our dedicated team of volunteers without whose help we could achieve very little. We continue to respond to enquiries and to acquire new material for the museum, although, as we draw to the end of the First World War Centenary, the pace of these has slowed. Many of our volunteers are engaged in photographing, cataloguing and documenting both this new material and un-accessioned finds in the stores. The collection currently stands at over 11,906 objects. A group of 8 important prints depicting battles fought by the 29th and 36th Foot, which subsequently became battle honours, have now been conserved and returned to the museum. The significant costs associated with this work were funded by the Conservation Grant scheme of the Association of Independent Museums, of which the museum is a member.

The museum is also engaged in two exciting new projects both funded by the Army Museums Ogilby Trust. The first following the acquisition of the medals of John Freeman we have started an AMOT funded project on the Black Drummers of the 29th Foot Looking not only at ethnic minorities in the Army historically but exploring the current experience of soldiers serving in the armed forces. The museum is also taking part in a WWI digitisation project funded by AMOT using monies granted by the Chancellor of the exchequer from the Libor monies.

Editorial

In this issue we mark the major event of the latter part of 1917, the battle of Passchendaele, including the 4th Battalion's attack at Poelcappelle which resulted in the award of the VC to Frederick Dancox. Also featured is the final battle of the 1941 Eritrean campaign. The first of three articles on life in Malta in the 19th century, written from a soldier's perspective, is a valuable record of that period. More than that it highlights how different life was in those far-off days. Might it we wonder stimulate some of those readers who were serving 30-40 years ago to write about their early service, which in many respects was so different to the experience of the present generation? If so the new editorial team would be delighted to hear from you.

In the next two issues we plan to feature articles on Soviet watchers, so if anyone had contact with SOXMIS while serving in BAOR we would also be interested to learn of your experiences.

May we also mention our need for feedback. Those of us who write for this newsletter need to know which articles interest you and which do not so that we can tailor future issues accordingly.

Finally, in view of the impending reduction in the museum's income alluded to at the AGM we eagerly anticipate an update on the Trustees' future plans.

The Centenary of Passchendaele



*Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight
(Under Lord Derby's Scheme). I died in hell-
(They called it Passchendaele). My wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back, and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards; so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.*

Siegfried Sassoon

Passchendaele, also known as the Third Battle of Ypres, lasted from 31 July to mid-November 1917. All ten battalions of the Worcestershire Regiment then based in the France and Flanders theatre took part and earned the battle honour 'Ypres 1917'.

It was a major Allied offensive designed to drive deep into German-occupied Belgium and break the stalemate of trench warfare. It was preceded by a lengthy and thunderous artillery barrage designed to break down the German defences, but this and the unseasonal rain turned the battlefield into a shell-pocked quagmire. The Germans responded with artillery fire and withdrew into the many pill-boxes and blockhouses they had constructed across the battlefield to protect them from artillery fire, from which they were able to rake the battlefield with machine-gun fire.

The initial attack, in which the 1st Battalion took part, went well but subsequent advances were increasingly slowed by fierce enemy resistance, heavy rain and mud; and when the attackers dug in on the ground they had gained they suffered heavy casualties from enemy machine guns fired from the relative safety of the German bunkers. In the face of these conditions the original ambitious plans were gradually scaled back until the offensive was called off after the capture of the Passchendaele Ridge, some five miles from the original objective on 6 November.

The death toll of men from the Regiment, at over 1600, was approximately three times higher than the average for an equivalent period during the war.

Dancox VC and the 4th Battalion at Poelcappelle

The battalion had already been in action twice during the Passchendaele offensive, in August when they took part in the assault at the battle of Langemarck where they sustained 120 casualties, and in September when they received a mustard gas attack while holding the front line behind the Broenbeek stream.

On 7 October they moved back into the front line in order to lead the attack at Poelcappelle. In the dark shortly before the dawn attack the QM's staff struggled forward with hot tea and rum in packs stuffed with hay to keep the tea warm. The leading companies were able to cross the Broenbeek stream on bridges left by the enemy and through the muddy shell holes on the far bank, some of which were held by the enemy who were killed or captured. They then cleared the blockhouses, reached their first objective and dug in while a protective barrage of smoke and high explosive masked them from the enemy.

One blockhouse within range opened up with machine gun fire, sent the leading companies to seek shelter in their shell scrapes and threatened to disrupt the attack, but, before it could be silenced by trench mortars the firing stopped and a group of some 40 Germans approached with their hands up, followed by Pte Dancox carrying their machine gun and shepherding them forward. He had become detached from his patrol which was seeking any pockets of enemy lurking in shell holes, had somehow worked his way round behind the blockhouse while dodging enemy machine gun fire and British artillery, and threatened the occupants of the blockhouse with grenades.



Gilbert Holiday's depiction of Private Dancox entering the blockhouse.

His award of the VC was gazetted in November but he never received it as he was killed on 30 November. He had been born in Worcester, had a wife and four children and had volunteered for service early in the war.

When the leading companies were secure on the first objective the rear companies took over the advance behind the barrage. As it lifted the attackers were fired on from another blockhouse which was silenced with four direct hits from a trench mortar.

Dancox was not the only one singled out for bravery that day. The CO, Lt Col CS Linton DSO MC was awarded a bar to his DSO for his able and inspiring leadership, two officers were awarded the MC and 4 men the DCM. They included Pte W Harding, who “seeing a blockhouse on his flank from which a machine gun was firing, worked his way round to the rear and captured the gun and 8 prisoners”, and L/Cpl W Pearse “when in charge of a mopping up party attacked a group of enemy with great courage and determination, shot the leader and captured the remainder.

The battalion was relieved late in the afternoon. The day’s casualties amounted to 8 officers and 167 men of whom 40 were posted missing. After receiving reinforcements, rest and training the battalion was next in action at the battle of Cambrai in mid-November.



Lt. Col. Charles Strangeways Linton DSO MC. Whilst commanding the 4th Battalion at Cambrai fell in action on November 20th 1917.



2nd Lt WW McNally MC was killed during the battle less than a month after being commissioned. He had enlisted as a bandsman aged 16 in 1906, went to France with the 3rd Battalion in 1914 and was a L/Cpl when wounded and Mentioned in Despatches in October that year as a stretcher bearer for rescuing wounded men under fire. By 1916 he was a CSM in the 10th Battalion when he was awarded the MC for gallantry before being commissioned a year later.

2/Lt William Wright McNally MC. Killed in action at the Battle of Poelcappelle, 8th October 1917.

A Recent Accession

The medals, death plaque and memorabilia of Private Frederick Hedges were recently donated to the museum by his granddaughter, Mrs Sheila Ward.

He was aged 35, married with three children, and working as a bricklayer on the Severn End Estate at Hanley Castle, Worcestershire when he was called up when conscription was introduced in 1916. Because of his trade his employer recommended him for service with the Royal Engineers, but he was drafted into the Worcestershire Regiment. After basic training with the 6th Battalion he joined the 1st Battalion in Flanders. On the 16th August 1917, as part of the battle of Passchendaele, the battalion occupied a position on the Westhoek Ridge to secure it against a counter attack. The regimental history records “Next day



Fred Hedges with his beloved wife and children.



Mrs Ward with her grandson at the service.

the battalion remained in position, suffering a few casualties from the enemy's intermittent fire". He was one of those killed, by a sniper's bullet. He has no known grave but is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial.

On 17 August 2017, before parting with his medals, Mrs Ward organised a service to mark the centenary of his death at the village war memorial which was attended by thirty of his relatives from three generations.

The AGM

This took place on 17 May with 23 members present. The museum chairman explained that the MOD had ceased to provide the annual grant of £20,000 with effect from April, but that the Mercian Council had agreed to support the museum with a similar amount for one year while it decided on its future policy towards its four museums. He said that the museum's annual expenditure was currently £53,000 against income of approximately £30,000 without the £20,000 grant.

The formal business of the meeting included a vote of thanks to Keith Jeavons and Brian Clarke on their retirement as chairman and event organiser respectively, the election of several new members to the committee, and approval of the accounts which showed a credit balance of £10322.

On conclusion of the AGM David Hallmark gave a fascinating talk on “Law and War” based on the start of his legal career in Thailand during which he obtained the acquittal of a British sailor on a charge of murder in Bangkok before spending some weeks living in the jungle with members of a primitive tribe. He displayed a number of items he had acquired during his stay in the jungle including a blowpipe and arrows with poisoned tips.

The Worcestershire Cup

The 3rd Bn The Worcestershire Regiment was one of several regular battalions raised in 1900 because of the Boer War. On its formation Lt Allan Whitty, a noted marksman, was appointed quartermaster. Under his tutelage the battalion earned a high reputation for its shooting prowess. Amongst many other successes it won the Queen Victoria Cup on four occasions, in 1903-5 and 1913. When the battalion was disbanded in 1922 the balance in its shooting fund was donated to the Army Rifle Association and was spent on buying the Worcestershire Cup. Post WW2 this cup was presented to the winners of the machine gun pairs at the ARA meeting at Bisley. In 1955, because the Regiment had never won the cup, 'Porthos' wrote a 'Lament' in Firm, the regimental magazine, which included the following lines:

Is the firing of the Bren
Always left to lesser men?
Rifle shots we do extol
But who is on the Bren gun roll?

What a strange predicament
When years ago the Regiment
Presented an enormous Cup
To make our LA scores go up.
It bears the regimental name,
Yet to our temporary shame
We never seem to top the list
Because of all the targets missed.
So let us start a pyramid
Of Bren gun shots and make a bid
To save our disappointment when
We fail upon the trusty Bren.

In 1967, when the battalion were runners up at Bisley, Lt Joe Lynch and WO2 George Pepper won the Worcestershire Cup by a wide margin, and Porthos wrote an 'Envoi':

When Lynch and Pepper fired the Bren
They proved themselves outstanding men.
Twelve years have passed and now at last
They firmly have expunged the past.
The pyramid that we did seek
Has solidly produced its peak.

But now we have to start again
And go through all the teething pain.
For the Bren is obsolete.
In future shoots we must compete
With a faster firing gun
To keep the Cup that we have won.
But the maxims are the same
With Lewis, Bren or what's its name:
By trigger squeezing. not a pull,
One achieves the Peppered bull.
And if we train more men like Lynch
The future of the Cup's a cinch.



WO2 George Pepper



Lt. Joe Lynch



A further seven years elapsed before the Cup returned to the regiment when Mick Hammond and John Leighton won it with the GPMG. But alas nobody thought to ask Porthos to pen a few words to celebrate the occasion.

News in Brief

We say a reluctant farewell as a volunteer to Colonel Peter Lockyer who joined us four years ago after commanding the Armed Forces Medal Office. His knowledge, experience and practical skills as an ex-REME artificer have been of inestimable value. He leaves to manage SSAFA Worcestershire. Our loss is their gain.



Lt. Col. Peter Lockyer MBE



Gp. Capt. John Barker

Group Captain John Barker, who has done a prodigious amount of work researching the museum medal collection from scratch since 1988, has put his own fine collection of Regimental and RAF medals up for sale. Generously he allowed the museum to buy two groups mentioned in the last newsletter privately which enabled us to avoid the auctioneer's premium.

The death earlier this year of Worcestershire and England cricketer Peter Richardson prompted Alec Mackie to recall a couple of anecdotes about famous cricketers who served in the Regiment:

- A prisoner from the guardroom, escorted by a regimental policeman, would be positioned on the far side of the square at Norton, and when Richardson opened the batting for the Regiment he would hit the new ball onto the square to remove the shine. Under escort and at the double the prisoner would then retrieve the ball and return it to the bowler.
- Roly Jenkins was a relaxed PT instructor at Norton during World War Two. One of his duties was to supervise marches around the local lanes by recruits, who were normally encumbered with packs in full service marching order. Instead of being similarly equipped, as was the normal procedure, Roly would accompany them in his PTI uniform of sweater, trousers and PT shoes and riding a bicycle.

- Amba Alagi

In 1936 Italy invaded Abyssinia and replaced Haile Selassie with their nominee, the Duke of Aosta, a member of the Italian royal family, as their Governor General and CinC of Italian East Africa, which also included Eritrea. Early in 1941 South, East and West African troops advanced into Abyssinia from Kenya, and the 1st Bn The Worcestershire Regiment, as part of 5th Indian Division, entered Eritrea from the Sudan. In a short campaign, culminating in the hard fought Battle of Keren in May, 4th and 5th Indian Divisions defeated the Italians who withdrew to the mountain fortress of Amba Alagi in Abyssinia, where the Duke of Aosta had also sought refuge as the troops from Kenya advanced through Abyssinia.

Units of the 5th Indian Division captured the key features approaching Amba Alagi during May and the 1st Bn the Worcestershire Regiment was tasked with undertaking the final assault. Though they penetrated the wire protecting the

position they were defeated by machine gun fire. Capt. FE Baker, commanding D Coy, who led the assault, was one of those killed. But General Wavell was in a hurry to complete this campaign so he could deploy the troops involved to deal with his many other commitments in the Middle East. Fortunately at this juncture an artillery shell fired from the south by the South African Artillery ruptured an oil tank inside the position and the oil contaminated the water supply. The Italians, who were anxious to protect the dignity of the Duke, sought terms for an honourable surrender. After some negotiation the Allies agreed to allow the Italians to march out of the position with their arms before surrendering them a short distance away.

On 19 May the garrison started to march down the main road to a nearby village. The road was lined by detachments from every unit, British, Indian, Sudanese and South African, who had taken part in the campaign, who presented arms as each Italian unit passed. Major General Mayne (GOC 5 Div) took the salute, wearing service dress, and beside him the pipes of the Transvaal Scottish played *The Flowers of the Forest*. But the ceremony soon degenerated into farce despite the Italian officers' attempts to maintain the dignity of the occasion, the regulars saluting in military style, the blackshirts in the fascist. The troops however were "too busy coping with their luggage, which varied from bulging suitcases to cabin trunks, which all too often caused them to stumble on the steep descent. As one of the brigadiers announced 'a memorable and historic occasion. What a rabble they look.'185 officers and 4,592 other ranks marched down to pile their arms." They were then moved to a temporary prison camp apart from some who remained to clear the battlefield and assist the evacuation of wounded.

"The next morning the Duke of Aosta descended and inspected a guard of honour provided by the 1st Bn The Worcestershire Regiment, the senior regiment present. He was then sent to Khartoum and from there to captivity in Kenya. His aircraft was flown by two South African pilots suffering from severe hangovers. His escorting officer awoke from a short doze and saw to his horror that both pilots were sleeping on the floor while the princely prisoner piloted the aircraft."



Captain Frederick Baker



During his captivity in Kenya the Duke presented a Rolex watch which is now in the regimental museum to Major Jack Balders of the Regiment, who was serving with the King's African Rifles, inscribed with his signature and "Christmas 1941". He died of tuberculosis in Kenya in 1942.

**The quotes above and some of the other details are from 'An Improvised War' by Michael Glover.*

Captain Frederick Baker enlisted in the regiment as a boy aged 15 in 1921, served as a sargeant in Palestine in 1938/9, was commissioned in 1940, and promoted to command D Company in May 1941 after all four company commanders had become casualties at the battle of Keren.

Brian Sayers

We mentioned the "Sayers bequest" in the last newsletter and, had there been space we would have expanded on it. Brian enlisted in 1954 and by 1956 he was a highly regarded young sargeant whose smartness on parade led to him being selected as the quarter guard commander to greet General Gale when he came to Iserlohn to take the salute at the Trooping the Colour parade on the Glorious First of June. (This was incidentally a very impressive parade – The Band and Drums were over 100 strong, though some of the national service buglers were not yet proficient enough to blow their bugles when they raised them to their lips.)

Brian had been earmarked for posting as an instructor at Sandhurst but unfortunately left the army. During his subsequent career in banking he also rose through the ranks of the TA to major, and in retirement was a highly efficient volunteer accountant at RHQ. He left a bequest of £5,000 to the museum which contributed to the purchase of



Drummer George Whittaker and Sergeant Sayers.

several important items including the Peninsula medal to Pte Freeman, a black drummer, the Sikh War medals of Major Kneebone and the Naval and Military GS medals to Thomas Robson.

Soldiering in the 1890s – Organisation & Training

This is the first of three extracts from articles written by Colonel FP Dunlop CBE DSO based on his experiences as a soldier in Malta, and originally published in FIRM in 1937-8.



Colonel FP Dunlop CBE DSO

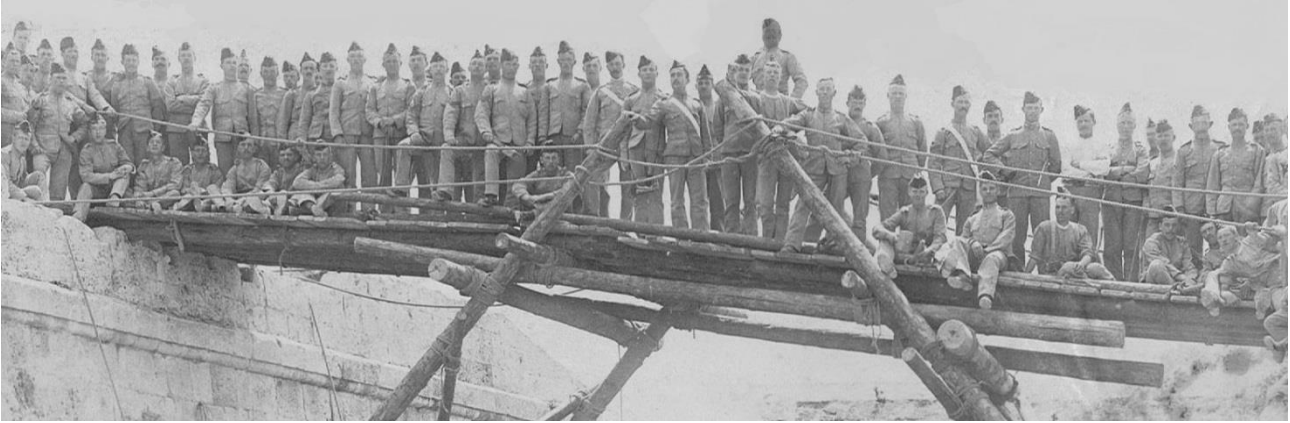
The next war to be fought was for the re-conquest of the Sudan; it would be fought in open country against spearmen who wanted to get home with the spear, and it was to be won by the old and tried method of bringing every rifle to bear from the most compact formation which would enable every rifle to be used. That formation was line, two deep.

So the whole army was training to form line, two deep with the greatest promptitude, in any possible direction. This could only be done by good drill. Thus close order drill and battle training were still one and the same thing.

Having formed line, the next thing was to open fire. For several reasons the method employed was volley firing. First, because the commander could make himself heard between volleys; second, because it choked off a rush more surely if fifty men went down in the twinkling of an eye than if they fell one by one; third, because men standing and kneeling shoulder to shoulder actually fired straighter if they all fired together, than if your

neighbour pooped off in your ear just as you were going to press the trigger; and fourth, because the officer could keep a check on the number of rounds fired, and not find half his men short of ammunition when the next rush came.

So our training consisted chiefly of close order drill – getting in and out of line, with steady volleys every time we found ourselves in line. The most curious thing about it all was that, as soon as you went on parade, you broke up the companies. Off parade you had eight companies, each with its own pay list, ration return and barrack rooms. In theory you had a company commander, two subalterns as half company commanders, and four serjeants as section commanders. In practice there was seldom more than one officer present with his company. The company at colonial establishment was about 120 rank and file but there was no headquarter wing, so the company for pay included bandsmen, pioneers, tailors, shoemakers and boys who never fell in with it. What with one thing and another you might get 80 men on a strong as possible parade. But duties and detachments meant that some companies would be much weaker on today's parade than others. This wouldn't do at all for manoeuvres like forming square; for how could a square have one side longer than the other? So, when reporting present (or otherwise) to the Serjeant Major, orderly serjeants gave in the number of files on parade. A rapid calculation on the back of a parade state—“March A company on to B, nine files of G on to E, four and a half files on to H, and the remainder on to C company”. So there you were, with six companies each of about forty files. The six senior officers took command of companies, numbered, told them off into half companies and four sections, and proved. Proving might be a long job, if a dull-witted fellow who belonged to number two section in his own company found himself in number three section in somebody else's company. Subalterns and serjeants were distributed as half company and section commanders; most corporals would find themselves in the ranks.



Then the CO would prove the battalion – right half battalion, left half; odd right companies, even companies. This proving was not a matter of form but of importance, for, in certain evolutions odd companies had to go one way and even companies another.

But the result of it was that the battalion was the unit, and not the company. Even the NCOs had a divided allegiance. They, the band, drums and pioneers attended staff parade and were inspected by the adjutant before the battalion fell in. Company commanders did not inspect the supernumerary rank. The special training of NCOs was carried out under the adjutant and the serjeant major approved their passes.

Once a year the company broke loose for twelve or eighteen days company training, or, as it was officially called, field training. There wasn't any 'field' about it, as it took place on the glacis of St Clement's bastion, except for an advanced guard exercise up the lanes to Zeitun village. All I can remember of it is three things – skirmishing drill in case you had no light infantry, bridge building in case you had no sappers, and the rudiments of map reading for anybody who had a school certificate, in case you went to war without maps.

Skirmishing was fun. The great idea was that a line of skirmishers preceded the majestic squares and columns by a couple of hundred yards, to give warning of the enemy's approach or to dislodge any low fellows who wanted to play the bumble bee. Skirmishers had been employed with success at the Alma, and with no success at Abu Klea in the Sudan campaign of 1884-5 because they fell back on the main body and masked its fire. On the command "company will skirmish" you stood smartly at ease, to show you were no longer a volley-firing automaton, but had become an independent sort of chap. You were then extended to one, two or three paces. Further movements were then conducted to the sound of the bugle: 'Advance,' 'retire,' 'right or left incline,' 'right or left wheel.' 'commence firing' 'cease firing,' or 'prepare to receive cavalry.' On the last named command NCOs came to the recover and the skirmishers formed rallying squares round them, fixing bayonets, opening cut-offs and firing to all points of the compass. Some shemozzle! The bugle calls were each a yard long, and the enemy would know what you meant to do long before the skirmisher might move on the last sound of the bugle. The calls were also rather alike, and men with little ear for music got muddled between them. However please God, the bugler might get shot, and then you skirmished by whistle call and signal.

After several days of knotting and lashing, field training always ended in the construction of a single lock or double lock bridge. The company sat on it, to show how strong it was and got photographed. The colour serjeant put you down for a copy, and that put you in debt.

Events & Activities

31st July – 31st October 2017 – Temporary Display on the Worcestershire Regiment at the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), Worcestershire Soldier Gallery, Worcester City Museum & Art Gallery Foregate St, Worcester, Worcestershire WR1 1DT. Open Monday to Saturday 10.30am - 4.30am and there is no charge for admission.

Saturday 21st October – Activities to mark the centenary of the award of the Victoria Cross to Private Frederick Dancox of the Worcestershire Regiment & the tenth anniversary of the Mercian Regiment.

11.00am - Freedom March by the Mercian Regiment through the City of Worcester, starts from Worcester Cathedral.

11.30am - Unveiling of the Memorial Plaque at Dancox House, St. Martins Quarter.

7.00pm - Dinner at the Guildhall, Worcester.

PLEASE NOTE REVISED DATE!!

Wednesday 25th October - Talk by Museum Chairman, Lt Col Mark Jackson OBE, 'A personal view of his first and last tour of Northern Ireland with 1WFR in 1972 and 1994'.

Venue: St Richard's Hospice Foundation, Wildwood Drive, Worcester WR5 2QT
6.30pm, for 7.00pm start.

Saturday 4th November – Passchendaele Remembered, One day event to commemorate the centenary of the end of the battle of Passchendaele.

10.00am – 3.30pm. St. Helen's Church, Fish Street, Worcester. Entry is free. Organised by Worcestershire Remember the Fallen.

Read the stories, listen to short talks relating to 1917, listen to readings of original letters home from soldiers and nurses at the front, and visit the various stands and exhibitions. A rare chance to see inside the ancient church of St. Helen's, believed to be the oldest site of Christian worship in the city.

Light refreshments available in support of Worcester Foodbank.



Private Fred Dancox VC

Wednesday 7th February 2018 TBC -Talk by Alan Cowpe, Safety in MADness, Confessions of a Nuclear Warmonger.

A former MOD Civil Servant offers some reflections on the controversy surrounding the deployment of US nuclear armed ground launched cruise missiles in the UK in the 1980s. Details to be confirmed.

This newsletter is published by the Friends of *The Mercian Regiment Museum (Worcestershire)*, registered charity no. 276510. Neither the whole newsletter nor extracts from it may be published or posted on the internet without permission.

'The Worcestershire Soldier', The Mercian Regiment Museum (Worcestershire)

Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum, 40 Foregate St, Worcester, WR1 1DT.

Tel. 01905 25381. 10.30am – 4.30pm Mon-Sat (closed Sun and Bank Holidays)

"The Friends exists to help the museum to record, preserve and display the history and traditions of The Worcestershire Regiment, its predecessors and successors from 1694 to the present day including the deeds and sacrifices of those who have and are serving in it", to join, or for further information please email museummercian@btconnect.com or call 01905 721982.